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Research Through Design 2013

# Praxis and Poetics: Quest for the Esteem Engine

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## Abstract

Tradesman's Wedges and Desktop Empires are the start of a body of research investigating how we gain appreciation of everyday utilitarian objects and the industrial craft knowledge that has been handed down, set against the advancement of technological mystery. The pieces were made to interrogate thinking around Industrial Craft whereby the Craftsman uses an inherited archive of knowledge and skills as he makes instinctive decisions to manipulate tools and materials. The research argues that in our post attention economy, we have a legacy of undervaluing the worth of craft skill and the natural world, where there is no appreciation for artifact or artisan.

The research investigates and examines conversations with tools and materials in the act of making, in order to explore applied value and worth. The pieces serve as counter propositions to our current culture, which focuses on digital devices and social networks.

Within the industrial craft disciplines, there exist overlooked props and aids used within the fabrication and manufacture of artefacts, one such group of objects consists of engineering holding and clamping devices, these items are not regarded with any great value, yet are essential to the fundamentals of mechanics. I revisited these artefacts in order to reveal their potential and worth within a new context focused on aesthetic and tacit value that would draw attention through material and process to reveal beauty, proportion and aesthetic value. An overriding rule of the design process was that first and foremost the objects themselves must be 100% fit for purpose as tools and also challenge perceptions and confront preconceptions of how we understand

and appreciate the world of Product manufacture. The artefacts were manufactured through regional engagement with specialist master craftsmen forming a network of industrial craft collaborators, each bringing specialist knowledge and influence to the final outcome.

## Author Keywords

Industrial Craft Knowledge; Making; Appreciation of Artefacts; Digital Culture.

## Research Imperatives

This paper is part of a map that outlines the start of my journey of contemplation around how we gain appreciation of objects and the role of industrial craft knowledge within this set against the backdrop of advancements in digital technology. Tradesman's Wedges and Desktop Empires are the start of a body of work that enables me to explore this terrain and develop positions within it. As such this paper acts as my first tentative step in articulating the terrain and my opinions informed by my 30 or so years' experience of being a designer and maker. I do not set out to offer any final conclusion, for as yet I have not travelled far...

## A Quest(ion)

A knight-errant sets out upon a quest... to explore why our appreciation for the world around us and the things in it has dwindled. I assert this claim from my own experiences as a maker and educator, but also recognize that this is not a new phenomenon it has been rampant since the start of the industrial revolution and the move away from artisan production.

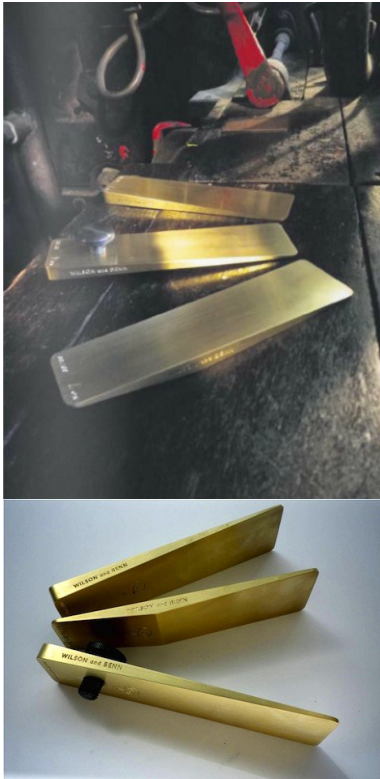


Figure group 1. Tradesman's Wedges. The wedge is one of six simple machines; a simple machine is a mechanical device that changes the direction and magnitude of a force and has been used for millennia.

The series consists of; Plain Wedge, Adjustable Wedge and Pivot Wedge. They are wrought from Brass, Phosphor Bronze and Gunmetal.

Why today in the world of new multi social media technologies are we becoming more insular? What is it that this new world order holds in esteem? Have we become so engorged on ease and comfort facilitated by a culture of reliance on digital technologies that we no longer value devoting ourselves to an endeavor such as developing a craft skill in order to produce artefacts and instead live a more passive life where the effort and skill involved in the production of artefacts is missed?

This is not an anti-digital polemic. There is nothing wrong with new technologies or the products and services that surround them per se and it would seem to be an act of human nature to want ease and comfort, but what I want to question is at what cost? At this moment it would appear that we are out of balance "In the UK, we are raising the unhappiest kids in the developed world" UNICEF (2007). One aspect contributing to this effect could be the lack of appreciation for the act of making and the art of craftsmanship, which has been eroded to such a point that our view of the world has been skewed; we demand and dam the consequences, digital technology will overcome.

Are we suffering from mass "Nature deficit disorder"? American author and journalist Richard Louv believes that "The future will belong to the nature-smart—those individuals, families, businesses, and political leaders who develop a deeper understanding of the transformative power of the natural world and who balance the virtual with the real. The more high-tech we become, the more nature we need." Louv 2010. When we take this world for granted on mass, the consequences are shocking and far-reaching. One of the best visualisations of how this manifests itself is in the photographic work of Chris Jordan whose art works present us with the magnitude of our consumerism and a sense of the consequences of our mass consumption and action. Yale scholar Stephen Kellert asserts that "When (in America) 300,000,000 people do unconscious behavior it can add up to a catastrophic consequence that nobody wants and no one intended" (2002).

Considering the implications of passive attitudes to the things around us, not only relating to consumerism, but to the modes of production, skill and craft necessary to develop the artefacts that surround us it is my opinion that we need to eliminate the word JUST from our common vocabulary, as in can you 'JUST do this' or, 'It's JUST a.....'. The word cheapens the respect of experience in the ability to do things, in this instance making things, it means that an artisan can JUST make a chair, a boat, a kettle, a knife... and ignores the fact that he/she can only do so by drawing on the generations of inherited knowledge and years of experience that underpin their craft and ability.

Now, for example, if an artefact is broken or damaged, even in the slightest, we are encouraged to JUST get another one. Our consumer culture driven by smart media devices, invites us to upgrade or replace; to move on rather than to live with. We are encouraged to feel a sense of smug satisfaction in the knowledge that we have the *latest* the *greatest* the *smartest* and the *coolest* .....and it's insured.....so if needs be, you can just get, another clone and be like all the other individuals. As Killert (2002) argues society today has become so estranged from its natural origins it has failed to recognise our species' basic dependence on nature as a condition of growth and development.

## Research Process

Do we have a built in primordial sense that allows us to appreciate things without understanding them, why are some things immediately nice, how do we know? In order to explore this I considered that a test would be to create objects that have a niche within an industry but to present them out of context so that the observer would have little understanding of their use. Tradesman's Wedges (Fig.1) are an example of such objects. The objects would be implicit in their nature. On exploring the language of making we find that every vocation has within it, its own dialects and sets of jargon. From my own experience within industrial design and manufacture and engineering I selected a set of objects/tools that



Figure group 2. Desk Top Empires.

*A series of wedges, vee blocks, shims and packing blocks that can be used in a machine shop or can be transformed into your own Desktop Empire. These devices are important in holding work steady for accurate precise machining of engineered and designed product. The Blocks are wrought from Iron, Mild Steel and Brass with design skill.*

are in daily use and commonplace, but to an onlooker they may not register as familiar, and therefore create an air of mystery as how they may be first approached.

The tools to help on this quest were chosen for their anonymity, in an industrial sense they are aides to fabrication, artifacts that have been developed within industrial craft and have generations of inherited knowledge (Figs 2 and 3). In their own context they have little intrinsic value, but are essential to the fundamentals of mechanics, they are knowledge that enables the manufacture of such items that is held in esteem rather than the objects themselves. An overriding rule of the design process was that first and foremost the objects themselves must be 100% fit for purpose as tools and also challenge perceptions and confront preconceptions of how we understand and appreciate the world of Product manufacture. The intention of this research was to design and create artifacts so they would reflect the esteem given to the knowledge of 'how to'.

The objects are recognisable to the mind's eye as miniature architectural building blocks that encourage the imagination and promote the act of play. My hope was that on perceiving the objects for the first time individuals may not understand the context of use, but would understand the harmonies of material weight and proportion in a designed object, and foster a belief that what they are handling has a greater value and worth.

In order to appreciate manmade objects it is commonly understood in design education, that an understanding of the proportions of nature are perceived to be beautiful; after all it's how we measure beauty, to find beauty in another creature we look for symmetry and proportion. The further we are removed from contact with nature, our ability to see beauty within things dwindles. Pride in the practical is being replaced, leading to the "extinction of experience" (Pyle 1993) which breeds apathy towards environmental concerns.

This might sound like an introduction to a neo-Luddite manifesto, but the fact is we are moving backwards in our knowledge and understanding of how things work and are produced, whilst technological advancement and development has built up so much momentum that it could leave the majority of users like battery chickens, being fed but having no understanding of where they fit in to the world that surrounds them. Intrinsically there is nothing wrong with the technologies or how they are applied, they are not created to be bad things, and the upgrades and new devices are being developed to satisfy a need. But there is a cost and we are yet to fully appreciate what this will be.

As the Italian philosopher Franco 'Bifo' Berardi has argued we now live in the tension between the infinity of cyberspace and the vulnerable finitude of the body and the nervous system. He asserts that the acceleration of information exchange has produced an effect of a pathological type on the individual human mind and even more on the collective mind. Berardi writes in *Precarious Rhapsody* "Individuals are not in a position to consciously process the immense and always growing mass of information that enters their computers, their cell phones, their television screens, their electronic diaries and their heads. However, it seems indispensable to follow, recognise, evaluate, process all this information if you want to be efficient, competitive, victorious." (Berardi, 2009, p41)

The tradesman no longer puts down his tools at the end of the day in the satisfaction that he has done a good job and his money well made. Close of business is now extended, internet and smart media don't sleep, and you are expected to respond, to search, to keep up in order to get on. "Where love rules there is no will to power; and where power predominates, there love is lacking, the one is the shadow of the other" (Jung 1912).

## Research Outcomes

So back to the toolbox – Tradesman's Wedges and Desktop Empires have been exhibited at ICFF (International Contemporary Furniture Fair, New York) and at London Design Festival. I have



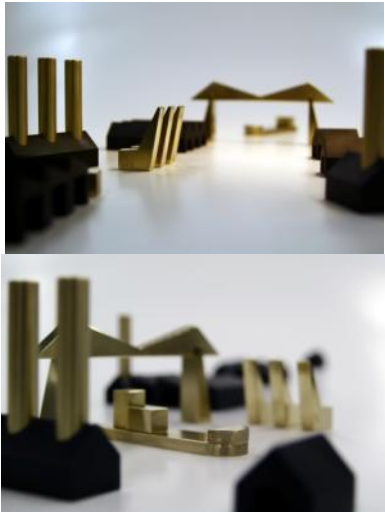


Figure group 3. Desk Top Empires made within the 'Tools for Everyday Life' project which is an on-going initiative to investigate the role and relevancy of materials and processes knowledge in the design of functional products. The project is run from Northumbria University's Design Department and draws its designers from the community of practice that surrounds BA(hons) 3D Design and the post graduate Designers in Residence scheme.

The project results in both commercially viable artefacts and opportunities for designers to articulate their positions on the creation of things in general and the relationship between craft knowledge and product design more specifically.

used these opportunities to view how an audience of designers and laypersons of all ages interact with the objects, how long they handle them for and explore them and how they relate to them. The feedback strongly supports a case that an involvement with the natural world creates ability for esteem to exist in objects. There would appear to be a generational split, the general opinion of an audience now in their late twenty's that, although at first they have no understanding of the objects, there persists an enquiring willingness and playful understanding. Counter to that is the younger generation in viewing the objects who seem to lack the ability of persistence, their attention threshold is very low, if they don't get it they walk away, the effort to find out is too great, there is no immediate gratification. Perhaps an indication that bears out the premise that in an attention economy the objects are of little value and worth and there is no appreciation for artifact or artisan.

As I stated in introducing this work this is my first step into considering these notions and the objects that I have made have served mainly as a way for me to think through these issues through making. I intend to develop this work to explore these issues and this polemic further.

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