Designing through Planetary Breakdown

Locating Material Knowledge and Practical Skill

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Chapter 3

Craft skills as enablers of care

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CRAFT SKILLS AS ENABLERS OF CARE

Susan Luckman

Introduction

> I look around and I go 'we're getting dumber,' and I use the word dumber as [we're losing] the ability to solve the most basic problems. So as our society no longer has the ability to start to build things or repair things, there'll be a certain point where all we can do is throw it away and … I find I often look at the things on the side of the road and we no longer have the ability to go 'how does that work,' the box and the thing in it has no relevance to a person [who can] pull it apart. [Ask] how does it join together? What does it do? At that point you're a consumer, society's based purely on consumerism.
>
> — *De-identified research participant*

Today, craft skills enable both niche and mass production. They are implicated in everything from small-scale, high-end custom bicycles to larger-scale textile manufacturing, as well as practices of repair and maintenance. However, across much of the Global North, and Anglosphere countries in particular, the future of material production remains under threat on multiple fronts. Key among these threats is the loss, or simply a lack of, skilled making expertise. That is, there is a loss of the kinds of embodied knowledge that will assist in the essential task of transforming "how we connect a sense of stewardship to the ordinary things in our lives: our appliances, furniture, clothes, toys, electronics."[1] The reasons for this are complex and multiple,[2] but it is against this larger backdrop that the capacity to realise a more sustainable prosperity[3] is hampered by a narrow and diminishing material skills base in many of the countries contributing the most per capita to the climate crisis.

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Foregrounding their central role as the key point of contact, and impact, between humans and the environment, this chapter focuses on craft skills (including those of "industrial craft"[4]) as enablers of *care*. The chapter contributes to wider debates that challenge the growth narratives driving not only our economic but also socio-political lives[5] by highlighting the importance of craft skills in facilitating "ways of living more thoughtfully within a framework of already-existing materials, technologies and social relations."[6] In so doing, the chapter argues for the contemporary importance of sustaining craft skills beyond their all-too-easily dismissed heritage value. Rather than being a relic of the past, the chapter argues that diverse skilled craft ecosystems are central to our capacity to care for the planet, both through innovative new modes of production, as well as the re-imagining of more traditional practices in an age of climate crisis.

Craft skills, material production and care

The Care Collective's *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* was released during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, while much media coverage was finding silver linings in lockdown-induced household-scale turns to cooking, craft and other domestic making activity. The manifesto argues that communal structures of care are central to our communities and polities. Echoing calls from broader critiques of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, it observed: "as neoliberal growth policies have become dominant in so many countries, the inherently careless practice of 'growing the economy' has taken priority over ensuring the well-being of citizens."[7] Instead, the Care Collective called for a greater centring of care across individual and collective thought and action: "'caring for,' which includes the physical aspects of hands-on care, 'caring about,' which describes our emotional investment in and attachment to others, and 'caring with,' which describes how we mobilise politically in order to transform our world."[8]

In 2020, the amount of anthropogenic mass, that is, human-made mass, exceeded the weight of all global living biomass.[9] In the Global North, we are living materially beyond our means, but some are more engaged in this narrative than others, as rising demand for off-site household storage attests to.[10] Fashion sustainability scholar Kate Fletcher identifies Western consumer practices as grounded in "a disconnection from supply chains, material and manufacturing processes, from time frames and geographies, and contexts of use."[11] Drawing upon the work of Richard Sennett, she argues "modern society is de-skilling people in the conduct of daily life,"[12] and a key consequence of this particular "de-skilling" is precisely this profusion of excess. After all, "waste" has to be made, and therefore it is not a stable ontological category.[13] Such wasteful attitudes to consumption can, therefore, be understood in part as a direct outcome of the loss of the visibility of manufacturing, its inputs and impacts, across much of the Global North. Consumer "waste" in this context is also, clearly, the antithesis of "care."

Yet, at the heart of both common-sense and more formal definitions of craft, crafting and craftsperson is a sense of respect for materials, and skilled knowledge in their use. Over the last half century, there has been a strong and largely successful push across the Global North to connect craft practice more strongly to arts practice. But occurring alongside the offshoring of manufacturing, this has arguably come at the cost of a loss of more established links between craft, design and the making of everyday objects. In the future, humans will still need "stuff" in our lives; but deciding what forms this takes and how this moment of use by any individual or group can be located in a more integrated material economy are clearly among the pressing challenges of our time. Yet, despite this, as design historian Jesse Adams Stein has written, "[t]oday in the Global North, industrial craftspeople are almost invisible" even as they become increasingly valued in niche contexts,[14] including as part of the artisanal economy.[15] For this reason, it is necessary for us to reimagine the connection between craft skills and production, including by more strongly (re-)connecting cultural, manufacturing and innovation policies.[16]

Approach and methods

The data informing this chapter come from the Australian Research Council Discovery Project "The Value of Crafts Skills to the Future of Making in Australia" (DP190100349), which examined craft skills across the whole Australian paid making economy. This mixed-methods project employed a two-part approach to understanding the value of craft skills to current and future making in Australia. First, it undertook a quantitative mapping of the economic and employment size, scale and location of craft workers within the Australian workforce. Second, over 50 semi-structured interviews with a broad range of skilled tradespeople, craftspeople, designers, engineers and manufacturers across Australia were undertaken in order to articulate the capacities, and thus meanings, attached to being able to make things, beyond the financial value of production.[17] The project employed the same broad definition of craft skills as that used by the UK Crafts Council in its multi-year study "Defining and Measuring Craft."[18] Both national studies sought to identify those working in what we might see as conventional craft occupations within the creative industries (glassblowing, furniture making, ceramics, etc.), as well as skilled workers employing craft skills beyond the creative industries (manufacturing, building and construction, boat building, etc.). In defining what counts as skilled craft work, the emphasis is more on the process of production rather than the specific end-product. The mode of interaction with a material is crucial to identifying craft activity, as this enables us to value tacit and/or advanced formal training as prerequisites for ways of working with materials that incorporate problem-solving, creativity and innovation. Working with the ANZSCO (Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations)

classifications, 114 occupational categories were identified that have at least some workers engaging in skilled craft work, across 18 production sectors (see Figure 3.1).[19] Defined this way, craft skills extend beyond the more common association with arts and crafts, reaching into our wider understandings of "craftsmanship," which include trades crafts and thus also skilled manual labour, but also engineering, architecture and design. It is about what it means to say something is "crafted," and the skills needed to turn ideas into functional, workable actual things in the world. These are precisely the kinds of skills essential to "modes of living thoughtfully with materials."[20]

In Australia, reflecting a pattern found in comparable economies across the Global North, we found the "making ecosystem" that had historically supported the development of craft skills was mostly in decline. This decline

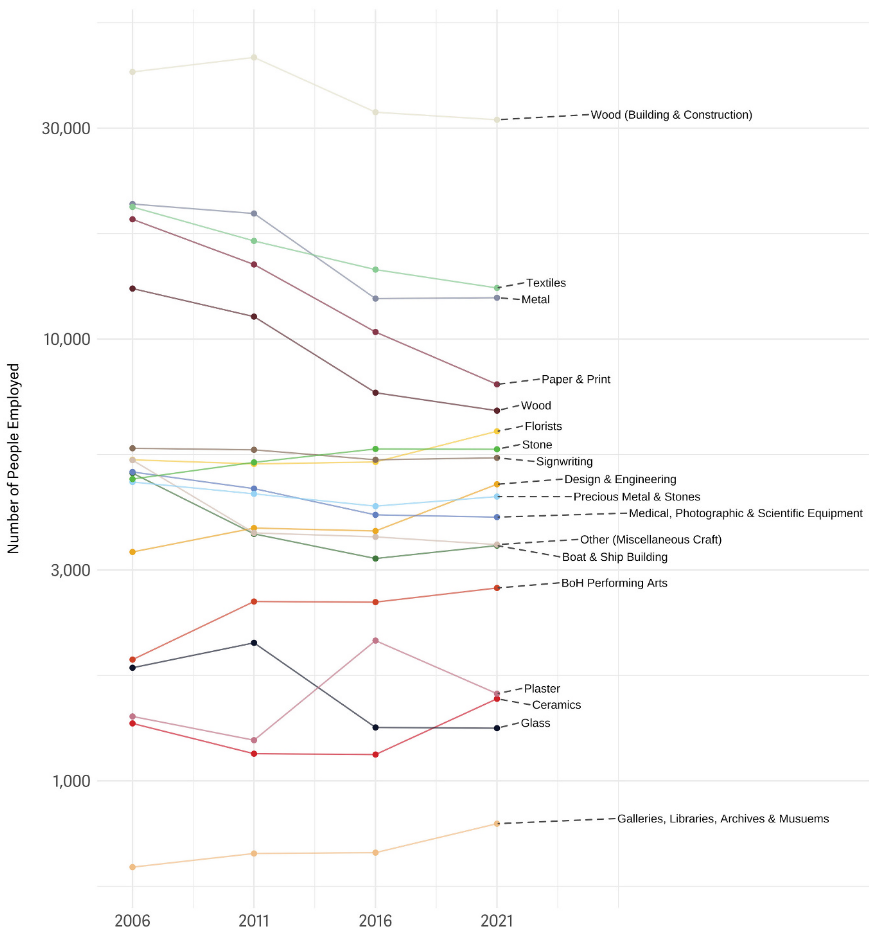

FIGURE 3.1 Craft employment in Australia 2006–2021 by craft segment. By the author.

has only now started to slow down, which has led to new challenges for the reinvigoration and re-valuation of craft skills. In the 2021 Australian national Census data, pandemic-heightened awareness of supply chain vulnerability was coupled with declining numbers of skilled makers onshore and increased demand for locally made goods, leading to generally higher incomes for those skilled craft workers who were still employed.[21] Notably however, this skills base is grounded in an ageing population of skilled workers (see Figure 3.2). Many of these people aspire to retire shortly, and as they do skilled Australian craft workers will become even further rarefied and pushed to the margins of affordability. With them goes access to modes of production based on material stewardship and deep knowledge, which are often more sustainable but almost certainly less affordable than buying cheaper products with an uncertain provenance from a big box retailer.

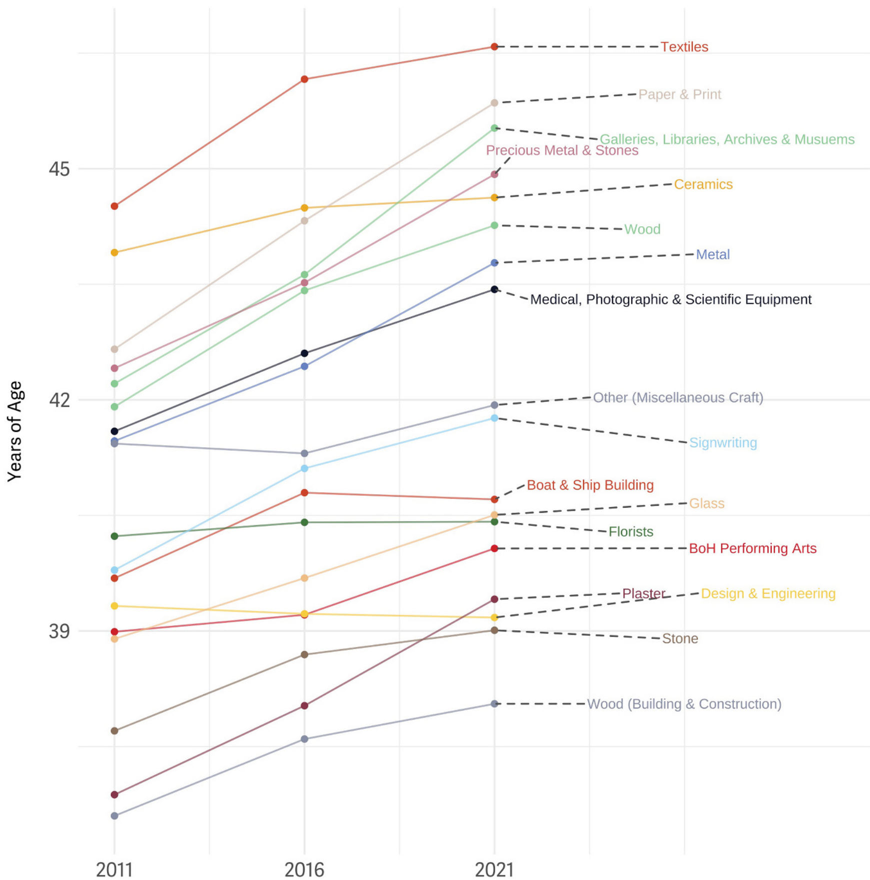

FIGURE 3.2 Age of the Australian craft skills workforce by sector (using Australian Census Data 2011, 2016 and 2021). By the author.

Losing touch with where our stuff comes from: How the Global North became less materially careful

The offshoring of manufacturing, which began across many economies of the Global North in the late 1970s as a direct result of the neoliberal economic policies of the time, means that today many of us are now completely separated from the realities of what goes into the making of our everyday material world. This lack of direct, in-your-face familiarity with the impacts and realities of different production scales and ethics remains a challenge for skilled Australian craft workers who go to market with more expensive offerings than those available from elsewhere:

> With [globalised] mass manufacturing we've lost the connection to understanding the real cost of something. We've been buying fashion accessories under $100 because of mass manufacturing and then not realising the true cost of that. But when you're taught the skill and the more people that understand how things are actually produced, it's going to help people understand why a leather bag might cost $1000, because we're enabling them to see the full process and to see the care that we take through that process, and to also give them the skills to repair it at the end of it as well. Because our bags can really last forever if it's well looked after, if it's cared for … Fast fashion has really done the world a disservice for making things so cheap that it's easier to buy a new one than to repair the old one.
>
> —*Simone Agius, simétrie; see Figure 3.3*

FIGURE 3.3 Simone Agius, simétrie, 14 July 2022. Photograph: Rosina Possingham, reproduced with permission.

> It's been a part of our story that we've done everything in-house. It's Australian manufacturing, it's all Australian made, and I think that's a big part of the story. We just need to make sure people want to pay for Australian made, because it does cost more … Early during Covid a lot of people were really supportive of Australian made, particularly over Chinese made … But I think that the Australian made thing – some people just cannot get their head around not buying at Chinese prices … where it costs us $130 to make a desk, we've had prices to land desks here for $50, so we're up against that.
>
> —*Jeremy Fleming*

While acknowledging that the price point for Australian-made goods can be a barrier to access for some, these participants noted this is a particular problem in a marketplace where the availability of cheap, high-turnover, often lower-quality items shapes the expectations of many consumers. As such, the internationalised free-trade environment, which led to offshoring and thus the decline in craft skills in countries like Australia, now offers up cultural as well as economic barriers to the adoption of more careful ways of engaging with our everyday material worlds.

However, despite this, although the initial barrier to entry may be higher, buying with attention to care and material stewardship is becoming steadily more desirable as an idea if not a reality in the face of the climate crisis. As is now well-established, the increasing alienation from manufacturing practices has been a key driver of the renewed interest in modes of artisanal craft and making.[22] This third wave of interest in craft and the artisanal is marked by its white, middle-class-ness and this reality needs to be acknowledged.[23] But it also potentially offers a vector of hope or opportunity, given it is a clear indication that some feel too much has been lost and needs to be sustained (or reclaimed). These are the people often willing (and able) to pay a premium for things made with care:

> as a woodworker … I feel it's my job to make something out of that tree that's going to last longer than the tree took to grow if the planet is going to go forward. I sleep really well at night using 3000-year-old wood because I know with a little bit of care these tools will last forever.
>
> —*Colin Clenton*

There is also a parallel awareness among producers themselves that buying Australian-made items, even if it means paying more, is a necessary act of caring that maintains the viability of local production:

> Because of the way China has done things for maybe 20–30 years the same product hasn't gone up in price, where common sense would tell you over time it should do. So to make a flannelette shirt now in Australia, the jump

> from the one from China is going to be huge, but it's just that people aren't used to it. I follow a group on Facebook, *Australian Owned* I think it's called, and it's amazing the amount of products that are popping up. There's a company that have started making like t-shirts and things again right in the middle of this virus thing. They are made out of merino wool and I jumped on it and ordered some just to support it. I think there is enough swing of people out there [to support this, but] there is always going to be that majority of people [whereby] whatever is the cheapest is what they are going to buy.
>
> —*Colin Clenton*

In this way, economically supporting (other) Australian-based producers is one direct way craft workers are able to support and sustain the ongoing presence of craft skills in Australia.

But while the still fairly niche emphasis on buying Australian made will render more visible the processes and hence impacts of manufacturing to some, this alone will not address the challenges we face. Rebuilding a skilled craft ecosystem without the kind of manufacturing environment Australia had in the mid-twentieth century will be difficult. Indeed, even where entry-level opportunities such as apprenticeships exist, the demand for trades workers means there is little reason to learn something deeply, to master a craft, when well-paying jobs are on offer to those with even minimal skills. Such job opportunities exist notably in building and construction, and in the highly paid FIFO (fly-in, fly-out) jobs in Australia's economically powerful mining sector:

> We find that, certainly here, all of our tradespeople are old. And I know that the definition of old for people changes. But they would be almost without exception, apart from our apprentice, 50 plus, and it's kind of been that way since I first worked here in 2011. [So] in terms of the kind of craftsman, the tradesman, they've retained that same demographic. So we don't have people who are coming up out of apprenticeships, or with five to ten years' experience who are wanting to do this kind of work. Which is kind of explicable in WA [Western Australia], because people come out of apprenticeships and go, 'Well, I want to go up north and make bank, and then be able to relax.'
>
> —*James Boyle*

This finding was further reinforced in our interview data where older or more senior employers were clearly frustrated by the more recent workforce entrants' lack of skills. However, with strong labour demand creating jobs for young entrants before they are fully trained, the capacity of master craftspeople to take on apprentices or otherwise pass on their skills remains limited, as many respondents acknowledged:

> People have said to me how do you make the tools so well? And I am like, "I have done it every way wrong"; I have learnt by my mistakes and kept going. I think they're out there, but people are hesitant in employing people because I found most people that are really keen that are very clever are flat out doing stuff.
>
> —*Colin Clenton*

> There are so many of my friends who are older generation who through no fault of their own have been either unable to pass on their knowledge. You know, there's not been someone there willing to be able to take it on. Or [they have] unfortunately passed away before they could get to that point … So we've got a really critical problem with transferring of knowledge, and skills between generations.
>
> —*Aaron Smith*

Without completing their formal training or possessing more varied and longer work experience, future craft workers will be less well equipped to work with a more diverse range of materials and existing building infrastructure, including in contexts of maintenance and repair. Significantly too, such a shallow level of skill acquisition does not set these workers up well to be innovators of new, more careful materials or methods.

Re-imagining proximity to craft skills as a pathway to more caring material worlds

Craft skills have an important physical, economic and social role to play in the return of more localised making ecologies, and the exploration of new, more sustainable (including on-demand and/or potentially transnational) manufacturing processes. As Richard Sennett has written, craft skills afford "the ability to localize, to question, and to open up."[24] Embodied in actual members of the community, craft skills keep us in contact with how the things we use are actually made. Thus, as Jesse Adams Stein has observed: "Industrial craft – residing as it does at the intersection of manual work and mechanical industry – humanises our relation to technology and mass-production and keeps us in closer touch with the fundamentals of the material world."[25] However, as Carl Grodach, Justin O'Connor and Chris Gibson have noted in their work on urban manufacturing clusters in Australia, (re-)localised manufacturing is under threat and not seen as a serious future making option in manufacturing policy discourses that privilege the new and large-scale.[26]

Unsurprisingly, principles of localness and direct responsibility for and visibility of the impacts of production are at the heart of the more care-full economies called for by the authors of *The Care Manifesto*:

> wherever possible, markets should also be locally embedded. Local markets are better suited for cultivating relationships among producers, traders and consumers. They can address local needs, stimulate placemaking and community-making and provide a shield against the interests of transnational capital, making them better suited for (caring purposes). They are more likely to be deeply entrenched within an ideology of sustainability and translocal solidarity, rather than being driven by parochial or paternalistic logics.[27]

There are important caveats to be made around the idea of only pursuing local production options where ecosystems are not optimal for a particular item – sometimes seeking out goods "made locally" elsewhere may be the lower impact option. But while this kind of embeddedness of manufacturing within localised economies may seem idealistic, it is important to remember that, while it is often large-scale, highly automated manufacturing that we see in the media or political announcements, the reality is that 95 percent of manufacturing in Australia is undertaken by small- to medium-sized businesses.[28] In the USA this figure is 98.6 percent,[29] in the UK it is 99 percent[30] and in Canada it is 99.4 percent.[31]

Best of both worlds? Digital tools and the future of more careful production

The capacity of this kind of smaller-scale manufacturing is increasing, alongside the development of making technologies that enable scaled-up niche production. This includes the more careful production practices of "making to order," when goods are required and have already been sold.[32] The use of digital tools to enable customisation and (economically sustainable) scaling up by small-scale producers was evident in the project interviews. For those working with wood especially, computer numerically controlled (CNC) cutting is now almost ubiquitous. Similarly, for many of the textile producers we interviewed, digital looms and fibre processing machines are enabling the scaling up of sole-trader or family-sized manufacturing, which, in turn, opens up new opportunities for "forms of happiness that people might be able to enjoy were they to opt for an alternative economic order … open[ing] up a new political imaginary"[33]:

> Certainly over the last couple of years with Covid we've been flat out, people have been willing to try our yarns, and the feedback we get is that they are amazed when they feel the quality of our yarns. We've had many people say that we've spoilt them because they'll never go back to buying yarn from [a big box retailer] again … people are getting hold of that story and,

> especially when we do the tours, we do a lot of explanation about how our yarns [are processed and made to minimise environmental impacts] … Once they realise and they start to hear that and understand that, paying $20, $28, $30 for a skein of wool suddenly becomes common sense for them.
>
> *—Nick Renters, Great Ocean Road Woollen Mill; see Figure 3.4*

Correspondingly, 3D printers capable of working with materials beyond plastics are revolutionising industries such as custom bike manufacture:

> we brought to market the world's first commercially viable titanium 3D printed bike, and now we specialise in luxury performance racing bicycles, all mostly made to order, uniquely crafted for their owner.
>
> *—Ben Schultz, Bastion Cycles.*

The team behind Bastion Cycles formed while working together in the dying days of Australian automotive manufacture. As Stein reminds us, in these remnant industrial craft ecosystems of earlier manufacturing may lie "the potential for more sustainable and equitable futures of work and production."[34] The loss of such "thick" manufacturing ecosystems that have long supported the development of craft skills will limit genuine innovation and thus new, more sustainable opportunities for future making.

FIGURE 3.4 Nick Renters, Great Ocean Road Woollen Mill, 12 July 2022. Photograph: Rosina Possingham, reproduced with permission.

Conclusion

> I mean, as valuable as an engineering degree is, certainly mine was, it's no replacement for actually doing stuff. You know, you come out, and you don't know how to get things made. You don't know how to make things easily. You don't know how to make things cheaply. You don't know what's really critical around manufacturing now … So coming out of uni, it's kind of a given that you don't actually know what to do. But you're a pretty good problem solver, [this] is more what it teaches you. It's critical to recognise that, and then understand that there are people out there who have done all this before, and who know how to do it. And it's just so much faster to kind of lean on that expertise. But the pool is certainly dwindling. Like it's harder and harder to find good tradesmen, and good craftsmen who not only know what they're doing but are willing to work in a fairly niche industry … [Finding] people with [the skills] to turn ideas into things is becoming more and more challenging.
>
> —*James Boyle*

The loss of craft skills across the English-speaking countries of the Global North means these communities are poorly equipped to enact the changes required to create the more sustainable material production demanded by the climate crisis. Far from being an anachronistic legacy of the past, this loss of deep haptic knowledge of materials and making skills presents a profound challenge to our capacity to grow more sustainable, more careful production ecosystems. The result, at both the individual and community level, is a new kind of fragility and vulnerability. Acknowledging the importance but also the fragility of craft skills empowers the exploration of ideas about the "'economy' not as a set of global forces 'out there' impinging on us, but as an internal question of how [humans] access, use and value material resources as *moral and social beings*."[35]

Despite the persistent dominance in government policy and economic practice of neoliberal principles, it is increasingly understood that the "idea that economic growth will 'float all boats' and that it will deliver prosperous, cohesive societies has been severely challenged. [This has led to] calls for an economic system that puts human wellbeing front and centre."[36] Framed in this manner, moving forward in a spirit of care enables us to better approach maintenance and repair, making do with less and re-imagining our production ecosystems beyond the terms of a deficit model. Such an approach would bring more people back into contact with what actually goes into the production of everyday objects, and thus the consequences of the choices made when purchasing or otherwise obtaining material goods. But while the practice of making do with fewer, but ideally better quality, things[37] is slowly shedding its negative associations with thrift and self-reliance, the capacity to embrace such living with agency rather than through lack of choice remains marked by levels

of economic privilege. The challenge of redressing growing inequality and rising binaries of "haves" and "have nots" is a larger question here, but one very much in keeping with an ethics of care. Moving beyond the idea that we have to "give up" our material comforts to live in a world marked by climate crisis, valuing and (re-)building craft skills is an essential part of the project of seeking alternative forms of "hedonism," of "[n]ew kinds of individual experience (involving new ideas about the aesthetics of material culture and the satisfactions it provides, and a heightened sense of the potential power of consumption – or non-consumption)."[38] That is, it is part of the project of learning to live more care-fully.

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Notes

1 Gibson, Carr, and Warren, "A Country that Makes Things?" 112. See also Lane and Watson, "Stewardship of Things".
2 Carr and Gibson, "Geographies of Making"; Gibson, Carr, and Warren, "A Country That Makes Things?".
3 "Sustainable Prosperity".
4 See Carr, "Maintenance and Repair"; Carr and Gibson, "Geographies of Making"; Stein, *Industrial Craft in Australia*.
5 Oakley and Banks, *Cultural Industries*; Soper, *Post-Growth Living*.
6 Carr, "Maintenance and Repair," 644.
7 Chatzidakis et al., *The Care Manifesto*, 8.
8 Chatzidakis et al., *The Care Manifesto*, 21, drawing upon the work of Joan Tronto among other feminist thinkers.
9 Elhacham et al., "Global Human-Made Mass." See also Venditti and Belan, "Visualizing the Accumulation".
10 Booth, "Housing Crisis"; Nicol and Bremner, "Domestic Renewal".
11 Fletcher, *Craft of Use*, 139–40.
12 Fletcher, *Craft of Use*, 139.
13 Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*.
14 Stein, *Industrial Craft in Australia*, 2.
15 Luckman and Phillipov, "I'd (Still) Rather Be a Cyborg"; Phillipov, Luckman, and Loyer, "Agile Producers".
16 Gibson, Carr, and Warren, "Making Things"; Grodach, O'Connor, and Gibson, "Manufacturing and Cultural Production"; Stein, *Industrial Craft in Australia*.
17 These interviews were conducted from early 2020 to mid-2022, mostly via Zoom but some in person.
18 Dodd and Morgan, *Defining and Measuring Craft: Report One*; Dodd and Morgan, *Defining and Measuring Craft: Report Two*; Bennett, License, and Tuck, *Defining and Measuring Craft*.

19 For details of these and the research methodology employed, see Luckman and Tower, *The Value of Craft Skills*.
20 Carr, "Maintenance and Repair," 643.
21 Luckman and Tower, *The Value of Craft Skills*.
22 Anderson, *Makers*; Luckman, "The Aura of the Analogue"; Luckman, *Craft and the Creative Economy*; Westbury, *Creating Cities*.
23 Luckman, *Craft and the Creative Economy*.
24 Sennett, *The Craftsman*, 277.
25 Stein, "Advanced Manufacturing".
26 Grodach, O'Connor, and Gibson, "Manufacturing and Cultural Production".
27 Chatzidakis et al., *The Care Manifesto*, 82.
28 Lindner, "The Most Surprising.".
29 "98.6% of American Manufacturing Companies".
30 "Start-Up to Scale-Up".
31 "Key Small Business Statistics".
32 Anderson, *Makers*.
33 Soper, *Post-Growth Living*, 66–67.
34 Stein, *Industrial Craft in Australia*, 17.
35 Gibson, Carr, and Warren, "A Country that Makes Things?" 113.
36 McCartney et al., "Culture as an Objective," 2.
37 Adamson, *Fewer Better Things*.
38 Soper, *Post-Growth Living*, 75.

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