

The craft of carpentry

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Abstract. This paper argues that by analysing craft, craft practice, the 'true' craftsman and determining what is understood by craftsmanship it is important to state that the core principles of being a craftsman has to do a lot with experience and specialization. The culture of craft and the inseparable relationship between craft and architecture leads us to the term tectonic which originally has to do with the use of the axe and the craft of joining things together. This evidently brings us to the examples of Japanese carpentry and architecture. The way they treat wood is exemplar for Western culture and should still be celebrated through architectural expression in buildings nowadays.

Key words: architecture " carpentry " craft " craft practice " craftsman " craftsmanship " craft culture " experience " tectonics " wood

Introduction

Nowadays there is still a large number of people working at factories. Factory work started late 18th century, a period known as the Industrial Revolution. During the Industrial Revolution capitalists started using machines for cheap mass produced products. The capitalists paid their workers by the amount of hours they spend on working each day. The hierarchical system with the capitalist in charge of his employees seemed to be a perfectly viable economic model, but also encountered a major problem: instead of paying people by the end product, but rather by the hour, the system resulted in an alienation of the worker towards the end product. Fortunately, during the 19th century, a socialist countermovement known as the Arts and Crafts stood up against this way of producing cheap and soulless products. They followed the socialistic ideas of John Ruskin, a man who strived for true art, which simultaneously had to be useful and beautiful as well as contribute to society. Driven by this philosophy, main spokesman of the Arts and Crafts movement William Morris strived to restore the world of simplicity, beauty and craft. And, although their craft practice was commonly understood as an expensive business model . meaning it could only be afforded by the upper-class - the Arts and Crafts movement did influence Western Culture. They reunited the arts and the crafts and most importantly restored the dignity of the maker. But, *what makes someone a 'true' craftsman?* And, *how should craft and craftsmanship be understood?*

Craft practice

Craft is a process over which a person has detailed control, control that is consequence of craft knowledge¹.

¹ Dormer 1997: 7.

Craft is used to refer to consumption activity in which the product concerned is essentially both made and designed by the same person and to which the consumer typically brings skill, knowledge, judgement and passion while being motivated by a desire for self-expression². In this sense, because the craftsman is both the designer as much as the maker of the product, he does not have to rely on specifications or information coming from someone else. Expressly, he would not have to diligently follow instructions and has all freedom of creativity in doing craft practice. But freedom of creativity comes with making choices. To make something requires choices regarding the structure and appearance of the object as well as a strategy for making it³. Therefore, I believe that the freedom of creativity, the craftsman's judgement and his strategy for making the product are the core principles of understanding what practicing craft means.

In a broader sense, practicing crafts constitutes a cultural phenomenon which pursues a set of values. These values ought to be of some interest philosophically and socially: they include the freedom that comes through the possession of skill and the freedom that is attainable when one is in a position to direct the content, pace and quality of the way one earns one's living⁴. The craftsman demonstrates these values through what he makes as well as his way of life. The craftsman works independently on products that come from his own inspiration and is not someone who is paid by the hour by his capitalist boss.

The 'true' craftsman

The true craftsman has expertise in his field of work, strives for quality of the product, and most importantly has a personal feeling with the things he makes. He needs to be able to be proud on what he accomplishes by doing craft practice. He is defined as someone who engages in practical activity where he is seen to be in control of his work.

Most things that are made by craftsman require tools, which also include time-saving machines, therefore the activity of craft is in most cases not only made by hand. This is where we make the distinction between craft and *handicraft*. Because of the personal bond between the craftsman and his own tools, he spends hours and hours working with them, relies on them as well as falls in love with them - they somehow become part of his body: his tools engaged in practice become an extension of the intelligent hand. a coordination of hand, eye and brain⁵. It seems to me that the hands, the eyes, the brain and the tools that he uses are all inseparably connected. Additionally, the craftsman knows which act should be done

² Campbell 2005: 23.

³ Dormer 1997: 12.

⁴ Dormer 1997: 14.

⁵ Sennett 2008: 174.

with which thing⁶ and his craft knowledge, personal know-how, empowers him to take charge of technology⁷. While being in control of the machines, the tools and the process as well as his personal touch with the materials, he is able to compose a product satisfactory to his own judgement. This enables him to be passionate about his work and gives him the opportunity to share his passion and love with others. What has kept the craftsmen going humanly is belief in their work and their involvement with its materials⁸.

Profoundly, the craftsman explores the dimensions of skill, commitment and judgement in a particular way. It focusses on the intimate connection between hand and head. Every good craftsman conducts a dialogue between concrete practices and thinking; this dialogue evolves into sustaining habits, and these habits establish a rhythm between problem solving and problem finding⁹. For this reason it is only solidified in an educational system that thinking and making are two separate things; thinking is done by the designer and the making by the worker.

Define craftsmanship

Craftsmanship is defined as the skill of making things well¹⁰. It focusses on objective standards, on the thing in itself¹¹. Elaborately, Craftsmanship names an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake¹². He or she represents in each of us the desire to do something well, concretely, for its own sake¹³. In this sense, the craftsman should first of all be proud and enthusiastic about his own work to be able to transmit and share his desire to do something well with others. Craftsmanship can reward an individual with a sense of pride in work¹⁴.

If we reflect on the idea that craft is not only made by hand then we could ask ourselves if *craftsmanship* is actually the right terminology for doing craft practice. This puts craft into a different perspective, making a distinction between craftsmanship and workmanship. This term includes two forms of workmanship: the workmanship of risk referring to the realm of the individuals holding the key to success, and, the workmanship of certainty which refers to mass or serial production. In mass or serial production it is a system that produces, rather than

⁶ Sennett 2008: 195.

⁷ Dormer 1997: 140.

⁸ Sennett 2008: 145.

⁹ Sennett 2008: 9.

¹⁰ Sennett 2008: 8.

¹¹ Sennett 2008: 9.

¹² Sennett 2008: 9.

¹³ Sennett 2008: 144.

¹⁴ Sennett 2008: 9.

an individual¹⁵. On the contrary, the individual process of making is called the *workmanship of risk* because at any moment a mistake by someone could ruin the product; every new object counts as a new beginning rather than a continuation of *one* beginning. *Every new beginning is a risk*¹⁶.

Following from these different perceptions of the word craftsmanship, in my opinion, the *workmanship of risk* does suffice with my idea about craft and the *workmanship of certainty* does not. A craftsman should make inspiring and unique things, experiment to investigate new possibilities and solve new problems with new solutions. Being aware of the difference between these two forms of workmanship does give us a better understanding of what *craftsmanship* is. But, finding new solutions for new problems asks for a craftsman who is highly skilled, fully understands the material he works with, knows how to use his tools in a proper way and is able to improvise and be creative. The craftsman needs to have a lot of experience!

Experience

The risky, crafted way of making things well asks for personal know-how, for craft knowledge. The knowledge of how to make something the way you want it to become, comes with experience¹⁷. The craftsman needs to practice in order to get experience. To be able to make something well, beautiful and possess high quality, the craftsman should practice his skills by doing the same actions repeatedly so they become part of a subconscious routine. Therefore I believe that the cradle of craft is specialization. In this sense, specialization doesn't refer to one specific step in the process of making, such as in an assembly-line process where every workman fulfils his specific task, but rather refers to *mastering one specific type of craft*. *Focussing on the practices of work, craft skills, which are learnt by experience, through repetition and practice, are at work within contemporary forms of employment*. This interest forms part of a wider academic enthusiasm for practice-based accounts and a desire to understand the choreographies of everyday life¹⁸. The choreographies of everyday life are part of the overarching principle known as culture. And, since this paper focusses on craft, this leads us to the principle of *craft culture*.

¹⁵ Pye 1968.

¹⁶ Dormer 1997: 138.

¹⁷ Dormer 1997.

¹⁸ Holmes 2014: 2.

The culture of craft

The power of culture . the ruling passions of the day¹⁹. Culture is defined as a system of values, ideas, and beliefs which constitute a mental apparatus for grasping reality²⁰. Culture is a constantly and actively developed framework of collective values held between individuals that allows these individuals to have understanding and communication through their everyday actions; producing inhabitable boundaries for shared identity, ethics, and aesthetics²¹. While the answer appears to be rather simple, an interesting question that arises is *How does the craftsman share his identity and expresses his thoughts and ideas?* The craft producer is someone who exercises personal control over all the processes involved in the manufacture of the good in question. The craft worker is someone who chooses the design for the product, selects the materials needed and generally personally makes the object in question. The craftsman invests his or her self into the object produced, which is why craft activity is regarded as expressive of the more humane, creative and authentic aspects of human nature²². Thus, the craftsman shares his identity with others through the things he makes. His thoughts and ideas concerning the materials, the structure and the appearance of the object are physically represented in the thing he makes.

Now that we understand the principle of craft practice, the idea of the true craftsman, craftsmanship, his need for experience and the way the craftsman has its influence on craft culture by sharing his identity through the things he makes, this paper will continue to focus on the craft of carpentry and its relationship with architecture. To be able to understand this relationship, the obvious question that arises is: *What is the relationship between craft culture and architecture?*

Architecture and craft culture

This is where the term *tectonic* comes in. Tectonics as a concept brings us into direct confrontation with the process and aesthetics of thoughtful construction. Tectonics deals directly with the concepts of *whole* and *part* but more important, with the specificity of their *relationship*. Therefore we can assume that tectonics is crucial in craft construction²³. In this sense, the specific relationship between the *whole* and the *part* can be explained in how things are put together to make more complex things. *But where does this term come from and what is its relationship with the craft of carpentry?*

¹⁹ Francisco 2007: 976.

²⁰ Lipartito 1995: 2.

²¹ Francisco 2007: 977.

²² Campbell 2005: 27.

²³ Francisco 2007: 981.

The term *tectonic* has its origin in both Greek and Sanskrit, referring to the craft of carpentry and the use of the axe, and through successfully evolving, *tectonics* shifts to the craft of joining the assemblage not only of building parts but also of objects²⁴.

Thus, tectonics evidently acknowledges that there is a relationship between architecture and a crafted way of making things. As follows, we can understand that architecture is made explicit, or specified, to have its intentionality, and craft forms a background of implicit, or tacit knowledge²⁵. Tacit knowledge is embodied in the people who possess it, it is personal know-how - in craft, knowledge is distributed through people alone²⁶. The explicit, specified knowledge, continues to inform and reform craft knowledge²⁷. The dialogue between explicit and implicit, between specified information and cultured knowledge, is critical to any practice or theory of architecture²⁸.

What is interesting here is that the term tectonics originally refers to the craft of carpentry and through evolving successfully to the art of joinery, as well as refers to architecture and a crafted way of building or constructing. *'Historically, where can we detect a traditional carpenter who is both architect as much as carpenter or joiner?'* For that, the traditional Japanese carpenter is considered a viable example.

The craft of carpentry

Carpentry in Japan developed within a family-guild system that appears to have been at times unrivalled anywhere in its absolute authority and absolute protection of secret guild techniques. There were rival groups of specialized guilds in different areas of the country. For instance, the Osaka-Kyoto-based guild groups, which rose to power after the imperial capital was moved to Kyoto in 794, were long the arbiters of design, and the Kyoto standard they established is still recognized as a desirable module for construction. At the beginning of the Edo period (1603-1868) the upstart carpenters of Edo began competing fiercely for supremacy with the Kyoto carpenters. This was known as the Kyoto-Edo guild battle, which was never resolved decisively and each guild or group of carpenters eventually retained ascendancy in its own area. Many of the secrets of these family guilds are now known to us and although many of the guilds have long since disappeared, the heritage of their traditions lingers. Although there are some underlying differences between Western and Japanese carpentry, in both work methods and attitude, starting from the moment a tree is marked to be felled, the purifying ritual of both the area and the woodcutter and the storing of the lumber vertically

²⁴ Frampton 1995: 3.

²⁵ Francisco 2007.

²⁶ Dormer 1997.

²⁷ Francisco 2007: 982.

²⁸ Francisco 2007: 985.

instead of horizontally²⁹, Japanese carpentry, art, and architecture had its influence on Western culture and is considered a great source of inspiration for many architects.

During his travels to Japan in the beginning of the 20th century, the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright found a sense of organic architectural language in Japanese art and architecture. He was aware that ~~we~~ of the West couldn't live in a Japanese houses and we shouldn't. But we could live in houses disciplined by an ideal at least as high and fine as this one of theirs. I am sure that the West needs this source of inspiration, but the truth is the Japanese dwelling is in every bone and fibre of its structure honest and our dwellings are not honest³⁰. This honesty had a lot to do with the way people treated the nature of the material that was used to build their homes. ~~New~~ effect come out of the nature of the materials used to build the house. By respecting the nature of the material and preserve its natural character all of the furnishings can be more understood as an integral harmonious whole³¹. Wright strived for a sense of harmony, serenity and integrity of the house so that people would feel secure and therefore would be willing to live there permanently. By building-in most of the furnishings, as integral part of the design of the house, he made an approach on his idea of organic architecture. Wright considers the Japanese to have the best understanding of the natural and beautiful material wood. So, *what else can we learn from Wright's observations concerning the way the Japanese carpenter treats this honest material wood?*

Wood

In his essay The Meaning of Material - Wood, May 1928, he says that ~~it~~ is the most humanly intimate of all materials. Man loves his association with it, likes to feel it under his hand, sympathetic to his touch and to his eye. Wood is universally beautiful to man. And yet, among higher civilizations, the Japanese understood it best. They have never outraged wood in their art or in their craft. Japan's primitive religion, ~~is~~ Shinto, ~~with its~~ ~~be~~ clean ideal, found in wood ideal material and gave it ideal use in that masterpiece of architecture, the Japanese dwelling as well as in all that pertained to living in it. In that architecture may be seen what a sensitive material, let alone for its own sake, can do for human sensibilities. Whether pole, beam, plank, board, slat or rod, the Japanese architect got the forms and treatments of his architecture out of tree-nature, wood-wise, and heightened the natural beauty of the material by cunning peculiar to himself³².

²⁹ Seike 1977.

³⁰ Wright 1945: 173-179.

³¹ Wright 1954: 170.

³² Gutheim 1975: 179.

He then goes on by comparing the Japanese with the West: %No Western peoples ever used wood with such understanding as the Japanese did in their construction . where wood always came up and came out as nobly beautiful. And when we see the bamboo rod in their hands . seeing a whole industrial world interpreting it into articles of use and art that ask only to be bamboo . we reverence the scientific art that makes wood theirs. The simple Japanese dwelling with its fences and utensils is the revelation of wood. Nowhere else may wood be so profitably studied for its natural possibilities as a major architectural material³³.

Wright and I in full agreement with the Japanese on the fact that the carpenter should treat wood in its most natural and honest way, unpainted, so that the character of the material is expressed in all its purity. The examples of the traditional Japanese craft of carpentry nowadays still account for many carpenters and architect as a great source of inspiration. Using wood in its most natural and honest way is the only way to make a building that would be as inspiring as the examples from Japanese carpentry. The principle of using wood in this way could be used as a starting point to build an inspiring carpentry school in which we are capable of showing many different crafted ways and techniques of joinery and carpentry that has an educational purpose for Western carpentry.

Conclusion

The craftsman both designs and makes the product in question. He does not have to follow instructions coming from someone else and has all freedom of creativity in practicing his craft. He makes choices regarding the structure and appearance of the object as well as creates a strategy for making it. The freedom of creativity, the craftsman's judgement and his strategy for making the product are the core principles of understanding craft practice.

The true craftsman has expertise in his field of work, strives for quality of the product, and most importantly has a personal feeling with the things he makes. He is proud and in control of his own work, in which time-saving tools such as the machines he uses also play a role. In this way he decides the process of his work and is able to compose a product that is satisfactory according to his own judgement. Through the product he is able to share his identity and his love and passion for his craft with others.

Compared to mass or serial production, craftsmanship is a rather risky business, because at any moment a mistake by someone could ruin the product, meaning that every new beginning is a new risk.

³³ Gutheim 1975: 179.

Craftsmanship asks for personal know-how, craft knowledge, and therefore the craftsman needs experience to be able to make something the way he wants them to become.

Therefore, the cradle of craft is specialization. The craftsman is highly skilled and masters one specific type of craft practice. The craftsman uses the things he makes as a tool for self-expression. His thoughts and ideas and his identity are directly represented in the object he makes.

Through understanding the term tectonics, the relationship between the whole and the part, there is a clear relationship between architecture and craft culture: tectonics originally refers to the craft of carpentry and the craft of joining wooden elements or wooden objects.

There is an inseparable connection between architecture and the craft of carpentry. The example of the Japanese craft of carpentry in which the carpenter is joiner as much as engineer reveals this connection. Although there are some underlying differences between Western and Japanese carpentry, Japanese carpentry, art, and architecture had its influence on Western culture and is considered a great source of inspiration for many architects.

For instance, in the work of the architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who strived for a sense of a harmony, learnt a lot of the way the Japanese treated their materials in an honest way. Therefore, he treated furniture as integral part of the design of the house which enabled him to make an approach on his idea of organic architecture.

The Japanese carpenter treats wood in its most natural, pure and honest way, unpainted, wood-wise, and by cunning peculiar to himself he heightens the natural beauty of the wood.

By this natural and honest way of treating wood, the character of the material is expressed in all its purity. The principle of using wood in this honest and natural way should be used as a starting point to build an inspiring carpentry school in which students as well as the public becomes aware of how they should treat wood and learn from the different crafted ways and techniques of joinery and carpentry that are represented in the architecture of the building.

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