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RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR CULTURAL AND MEDIA ECONOMIES

CAMEo

CUTS #4

Crafting the Craft Economy

Julia Bennett

CAMEo Cuts

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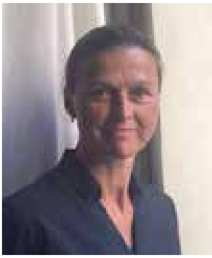
Crafting the Craft Economy

Julia Bennett

In the fourth issue of CAMEo Cuts, Julia Bennett explores the UK craft economy. She begins with a reflection on the rich and diverse history of craft in London, and outlines some of the challenges now being faced by its contemporary makers and designers. In the second part, she outlines the key role played by the Crafts Council in supporting production, education and innovation in the crafts sector, at the local, regional and national level.



About the Author

Julia Bennett is the Crafts Council's Head of Research and Policy. She develops policy and advocacy strategies, writes about craft and manages research projects, strengthening evidence to improve the conditions for craft. Recent research commissions include *Studying Craft 16*, an analysis of trends in craft education and training, *Innovation through Crafts: opportunities for growth*, that describes how collaboration drives innovation and growth, and *Measuring the Craft Economy*, a set of proposals which resulted in DCMS including craft data for the first time in its economic estimates. As an experienced researcher, research manager, policy specialist and strategist, Julia has worked independently with small charities and arts organisations, as well as for the Local Government Association, the Learning and Skills Improvement Service, the Minority Rights Group and a number of local councils.

Crafting the Craft Economy

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Part One: Back to the Future

As you travel through London, have you glimpsed Clothworkers Road, Fletcher Street, Goldsmith Lane or Smithy Street? The names indicate how deeply making is woven into the texture of London's history, revealing places where craft workers have long practised and refined their skills. From tailors in Savile Row to furniture and textiles artists in east London, makers today follow in the centuries-old traditions of the 110 City livery companies, which include, for example, carpenters, clothworkers, glaziers, furniture makers and pewterers. Traditional apprentices are still proud to earn the Freedom of the City and the right (should they choose, of course) to drive sheep across London Bridge. London is still home to a number of thriving centres of excellence, including The Goldsmiths' Centre and the diamond-cutting trade in Hatton Garden.

Alongside these industries with tenacious historical roots sit stunning examples of craft driving innovation in industries such as healthcare and construction, together with automotive and high-value manufacturing. Glass artist Matt Durran used his skills and knowledge of glass slumping techniques to collaborate with researchers at the Royal Free Hospital. Together they created the hygienic glass moulds needed to develop the first tissue-engineered tracheotomy. Lauren Bowker is a 'textile alchemist' whose company, The Unseen, has developed colour-changing materials that are now used in tracking car aerodynamics for Formula One, and in bandages and soft devices that can monitor patients' health conditions. Trained in chemistry and textiles, Lauren began work as a material innovator, making designs for devices that can monitor the body and the environment, changing colour in response to heat, ultraviolet rays, friction, moisture, chemicals and air pollution (Crafts Council, 2016a).

This juxtaposition of the traditional and the innovative is one reason why London-based craft is thriving in an era of huge technological advances and rapidly evolving working practices – think of how 3D printing is transforming manufacturing. The tech era has seen a resurgence of interest in craft, in the authentic, the personal, and in the provenance of products. This is reflected in the growing popularity of London Craft week, in its third year this spring, with the eclectic nature of the disciplines showcased (gun engraving to millinery, 3D printed ceramics to live calligraphy demonstrations) a testament to the breadth of craft in the capital.

Makers help to create a strong sense of place in distinct areas of London. Annie Warburton, in her foreword to *Makers of East London* (2015), points to the strength of local networks: 'It will be a revelation just how many everyday objects are made in the streets of east London, from spectacles to chopping boards, umbrellas to spoons, bicycles to lamps... what shines out in each of these stories is the strength of community in east London. The interconnectedness of creative fields is apparent. From the pointe shoemakers serving dancers on Covent Garden stages to the foundry that works with Britain's fine art stars, these makers are integral to a flourishing ecology of musicians, film-makers, fashion designers and architects. While virtual networks enable makers to trade globally, this is an ecology founded on local relationships'.

This is echoed by Katharina Eisenköck, creator of small-batch furniture and products, who attributes the success of her work partly to 'the relaxed atmosphere, the rough beauty of the houses, and the convergence of creative minds' in east London. This creativity is deeply embedded: in medieval times, Homerton was the site of leather tanning and 'fulling', the use of urine to clean felt cloth; today, textile artist Katherine May grows plants for dye, sources fabric from textile recycling centres for her Homerton studio, and aims to demonstrate in her work 'the role that cloth has played throughout history, from clothing our bodies to dressing our wounds' (ibid., p. 21).

The immediacy and intimacy of the performance of making is a powerful incentive and reward for craftspeople. Rob Court, neon sign and lighting maker, says: 'I never get bored of the final switch-on. It's the moment when all my work comes to life. It can be a very moving moment. Personal neon messages have brought clients to tears' (ibid., p. 99). The Dalai Lama, Paul McCartney and Oprah Winfrey each have one of Court's creations.

The vast majority of makers operate as sole traders or microbusinesses, and this ability to work independently and on their own terms is another driver for many. James Kennedy of Kennedy City Bicycles, says: 'I get to meet my customers, discuss the design of their bicycle, build it, take them on test rides, and teach them how to maintain and service it. I feel really privileged to do that for so many people.' He pushes this idea further, in ways that aren't always welcomed by those promoting business growth: 'People criticise us for being an 'idea that doesn't scale', but I bloody love being an idea that doesn't scale!' (ibid., p. 190). At this time of passionate reactions to the perceived powerlessness created by globalisation, the desire to take control of one's own skills and outputs is strong.

But the opportunity to pursue this level of personal and creative satisfaction in your work is rarely a straightforward or smooth process. Becoming a maker can be an arduous and perilous journey, fraught with financial, educational and practical obstacles, in addition to the risks that are an inherent part of the creativity of workmanship. Whitechapel Bell Foundry, one of the businesses featured in *Makers of East London*, recently announced it will cease activities at its Whitechapel Road site, its home since 1738, as it tries to secure a future.

The growing public enthusiasm for craft doesn't negate the challenges of making a career of it. The route into becoming a craftsperson may combine an apprenticeship or creative degree with tenacious experimentation and exploration of technologies and materials, until a level of creative skill and concept is arrived at that will translate into a product for sale. Some craftspeople spend a long time as portfolio workers, combining their making with a career in education, hospitality, or other industries that offer flexible part-time roles. In earlier issues, *London Essays* has focused on the rising costs of studio space and how this is driving making out of the capital. In addition to the difficulties of affording accommodation (a problem common to many creatives and start-ups), it's also the case that refining your business concept, identifying a market, building a customer base and feeding a supply chain may all give a slow return on investment – quite apart from the task of finding time for these activities alongside designing and making your product.

Azem William is a freelance graphic designer and creative director seeking to kickstart a career as a ceramicist at Turning Earth, an open-access ceramics studio in Hoxton. Having participated in a small number of sales last year, Azem earned about 10 per cent of his income selling his sculptural vases and ceramic portraits, a figure he would like to increase to 40 per cent. His main challenges are the time needed to develop a body of work, as well as identifying and pursuing an appropriate market (reflected in his detailed business plans)[1]. Both of these aspects are addressed in professional development programmes offered by the Crafts Council, one of a small number of organisations offering training to sole traders in craft. But demand for such opportunities cannot be met: Crafts Council programmes are heavily oversubscribed and applications to join Turning Earth's Hoxton studio have tripled recently (they have just opened a new 8,500 sq ft studio in a former factory in Leyton).

It remains hard to convince some parents and careers advisors that a creative career can also be a financially rewarding one. There is a market failure in education, with 50 per cent of craft-related higher education courses closing since 2007/08 (Crafts Council, 2016b). In many cases, makers must succeed in spite of, rather than because of, available support. If their earnings are below the VAT threshold, makers are invisible in government economic estimates and thus not informing government business programmes. Sole traders, who are characteristic of craft businesses, are a growing phenomenon in the London workforce, as evidence from the Royal Society of Arts (2015), Demos (2014) and the Creative Industries Federation (2017) has acknowledged.

As an increasingly attractive mode of work, craft needs business support tailored to its needs (rather than to those of SMEs), and tax incentives – for example, for continuing professional development or to reduce shipping costs for exports in this era of new trade tariffs. There are also challenges for makers in identifying the right people to collaborate with when working across disciplines and industrial sectors. There can be a lack of understanding among potential partners of how to manage the risk involved, or an unwillingness to invest in R&D in micro-businesses: a failure to recognise that the capacity for innovation doesn't always correlate with the size of a business.

The government's recent acknowledgement in its *Building our Industrial Strategy* green paper (HM Government, 2017) that the creative industries are highly competitive internationally is widely welcomed. Makers contribute skills across the creative economy, and their work appears to be more resistant to automation than most other jobs; it is more future-proof against technologies like machine learning and mobile robotics. London has a higher proportion of the workforce in creative jobs than many other areas of the country (Nesta, 2015).

So where do we go from here? Craft not only drives innovation and the creation of unique and beautiful objects, it also produces careers that meet a desire for meaning and individual expression. It helps to forge and shape the character and community of London's diverse neighbourhoods. But we're seeing makers moving further into the suburbs or out of London altogether. And fewer schools are offering the design and technology qualifications that give students the experience in three-dimensional problem-solving so essential to craft disciplines.

We need to address these issues if we are to sustain the contribution of craft to the life of the capital. Currently, some areas of London are protected from developers' rights to create residential units out of former offices without planning permission. This protection should be extended to preserve more former industrial space for artists' use and to build on the idea of Creative Enterprise Zones (areas of small workspaces and associated living space specifically for artists and makers). And the London Curriculum, currently a useful resource for teachers, could strengthen its art and design offer to help more schools sustain creative learning in the face of pressures to prioritise more 'academic' subjects. We must also diversify routes into craft, smoothing the labyrinthine process of trying to set up new apprenticeships for micro-businesses.

Without long-term vision and investment in making, the city will be poorer and we, as communities and individuals, will start to lose a historic and vital aspect of our creative fabric.

Part Two: The Crafts Council

Both within and without London, in its role as the UK development agency for craft, the Crafts Council's goal is to build a strong economy and infrastructure for craft, to grow and diversify audiences, and to champion high quality craft practice nationally and internationally. We attract over 2.8 million visitors each year to our exhibitions, fairs and online showcases.

A core component of the UK's thriving creative industries, craft contributes £3.4bn to the UK economy each year. Typically, craft makers are microbusinesses and sole traders. The Crafts Council offers professional development to support businesses, from bite-sized workshops to year-long programmes, for makers who are just starting out to those already well-established. We've supported the success of leading British makers over five decades, incubating international brands such as Thomas Heatherwick and Tom Dixon.

The Crafts Council has a reputation for producing high quality research that has been received positively by the research councils. We're working increasingly closely with higher education institutions in the UK and abroad, actively interested in developing co-produced research outputs through new collaborations across a range of disciplines, including with economists, ethnographers, chemists and geographers as well as with academics and practitioners in art and design. We work in sectors such as health care, high-value manufacturing and technology, demonstrating impact on both audiences and businesses.

The purpose of our research is to create an evidence base to improve the conditions for craft. We therefore focus on generating findings that strengthen the interaction between research, policy and advocacy in a virtuous circle, seeking to influence the influencers across the creative economy, as well as government, funders and lead bodies in related sectors such as those outlined above.

There are three research areas in which the Crafts Council has published significant findings: the craft economy, education and training, and innovation.

The craft economy

Since the late 1990s the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has published economic estimates for the creative industries[2] that give detailed breakdowns of Gross Value Added (GVA) for the creative economy[3] as well as, more recently, data on exports and employment demographics. Until 2013 no data were published for craft owing to alleged challenges in identifying robust datasets.

The Crafts Council and others disputed this approach and, in response, we commission a series of reports (Crafts Council 2013a, 2013b, 2014) setting out a rationale and evidence for the inclusion of a set of relevant industry and occupational codes with which to measure craft. We produced the fullest picture to date of the value and scale of craft's contribution to the UK economy (£3.4bn) and thus convinced DCMS to publish each year a (partial) set of economic estimates for craft.

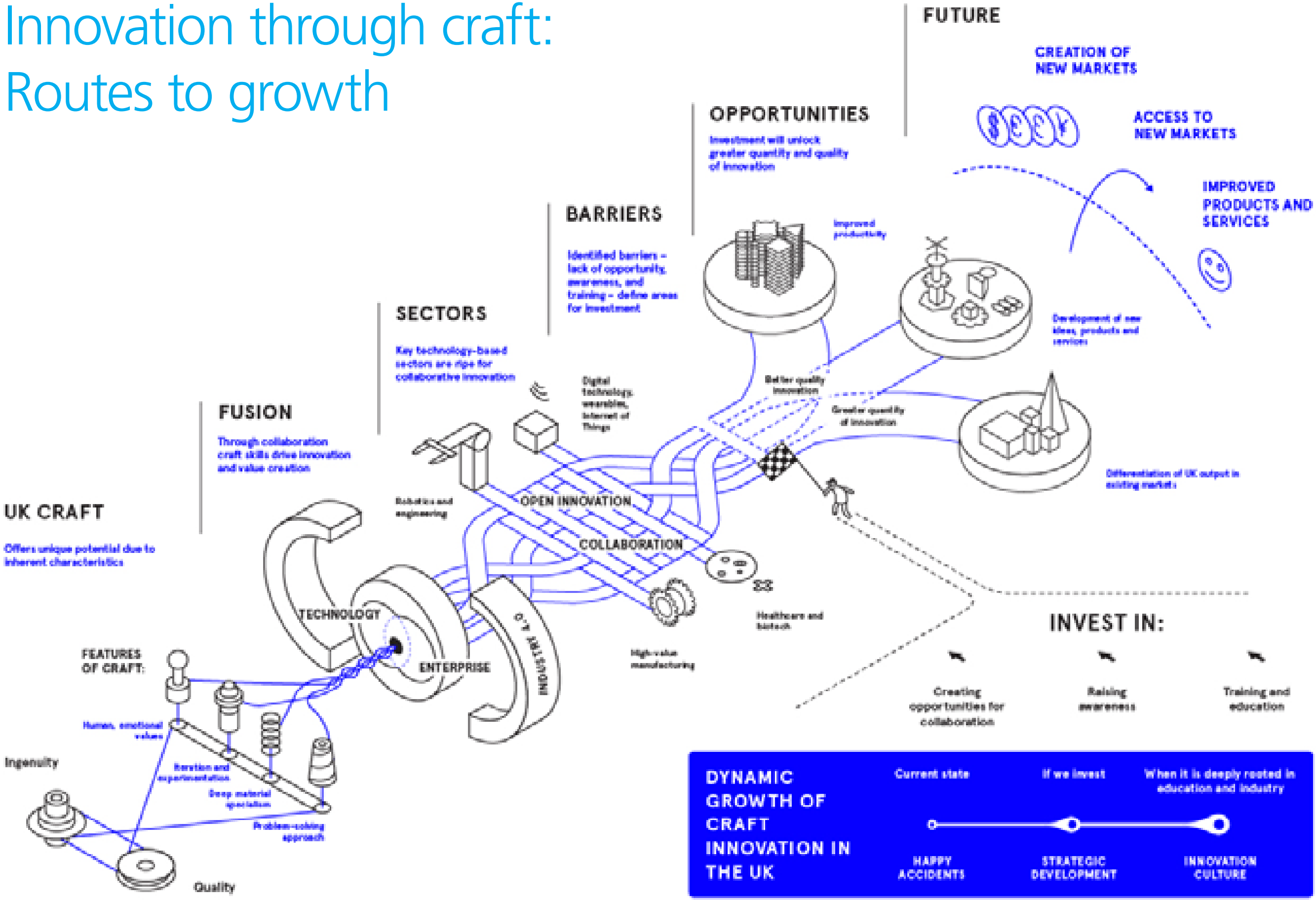
We continue to engage DCMS in regular dialogue about the importance of generating a full set of estimates. We also work closely with the Creative Industries Council (the government/industry body), the Creative Industries Federation (the sector trade body) and partner craft organisations to ensure that the craft sector's contribution is visible in national policy formulation, for example, in the Industrial Strategy (HM Government. 2017). The Crafts Council also regularly highlights the needs of the microbusinesses that are often invisible in Government statistics where they operate below the VAT threshold[4].

Craft education and training

The Crafts Council works closely with education advocates and providers to strengthen the place of craft in the curriculum, to provide opportunities to learn crafts[5] and to make clear the risks of current trends in education and training to the pipeline of future makers. Growing concerns about the negative impact on creative subjects of successive governments' education performance measures, combined with increasing budget challenges in education, prompted us to investigate the evidence.

The latest in our time series study of trends in education and training, *Studying Craft 16*, presents a picture of a sector at risk, facing an unsustainable model for educating and training our current and future makers. Figures from the study reveal that over the seven years 2007/08 to 2014/15 the number of students studying craft GCSEs has plummeted by nearly 25%, the number of GCSE Design & Technology students has dropped by 41%,

Innovation through craft: Routes to growth



and course consolidation in higher education institutions has led to a fall in courses of 50% since 2007/08.

Studying Craft 16 also indicates that whilst the number of students taking entry level courses in further education has boomed to 67,340 since 2007/08, only 8% of these students progress to more advanced courses indicating a decline in the development of new professional talent.

Innovation in and through craft

Looking at the wider application of craft skills in, for example, the automotive, construction and textiles industries, it is evident that there are benefits to cross sector innovation and collaboration. Working with partners the Knowledge Transfer Network and the University of Brighton, the Crafts Council commissioned KPMG to investigate the processes and impact of innovation through craft. The report (Crafts Council, 2016a) describes the way in which collaboration drives innovation. The case studies show how the fusion of craft and technology skills can lead to significant multiplier effects in the GVA accrued to companies further down the supply chain.

Report authors KPMG say that 'Craft skills and knowledge have a strong economic impact and significant potential to drive further growth and innovation in other sectors, as this report demonstrates.' Yet this potential is hampered by a lack of understanding of the value of craft innovation that leads to underinvestment in innovation by individual firms, and underinvestment in craft education and skills, a point we are making to government in the context of the Industrial Strategy.

The model opposite developed by the Crafts Council and From Now On, builds on the known features of craft skills and shows how they can drive innovation and value creation in key technology-based sectors, once these barriers are overcome. In moving craft innovation from a state of happy accident to a culture of innovation, the possible rewards would be great: improved productivity and development of new products and services, enabling us to access new global markets and reap both social and economic benefits.

Endnotes

[1] Interview with the author, February 2017.

[2] For example see DCMS Creative Industries Economic Estimates (2016).

[3] The Creative Economy includes the contribution of those who are in creative occupations outside the creative industries as well as all those employed in the Creative Industries; see Nesta (2013).

[4] See also Creative Industries Federation (2017).

[5] See Make Your Future http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/make-your-future/ and Hey Clay! http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/hey-clay/

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Publisher's Note

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