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CRAFTING SPACES – A CRITIQUE

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CRAFTING SPACES – A CRITIQUE

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Nathalie Bäckström asks: "Is the practice of needle work being considered in *contemporary* architecture?"¹ and, in response, I ask if craft is being considered in contemporary domestic architecture.

Domestic architecture sets out to design spaces for living or, in the language of Paris Hilton, "sliving" or living your best life. In "sliving," one is successful, self-empowered and fulfilled. For many people, their best life is one where they have time and space to follow their interests, and engage in activities that are relaxing, provide accomplishment and allow for creativity. For some people, this occurs through leisure time, and in hobby activities that are colloquially termed craft. This paper seeks to interrogate the visible intersection of leisure craft activity and domestic architecture through a location lens.

Here, craft refers primarily to non-commercial making – that is, carried out in the home as a leisure activity. In academic and non-academic spaces other terms are used for this activity, including amateur craft, hobby and leisure craft. Each of these comes from different fields, and in this paper each term is used where it fits best, on the understanding that they refer to similar practices. I do not consider the value and worth of amateur craft practices here – that discussion exists, and continues, elsewhere.²

HOME AND HOUSE

Our homes were designed to be lived in, with spaces to prepare, store and share food, spaces to store belongings, spaces to rest, spaces to care for ourselves and spaces to socialise.

Importantly, our homes serve as 'not work,' although that is changing as many adapt to a world of WFH (work from home), so many homes also have office spaces.

While most of us may never be involved in the process of designing our own homes, all our homes have, nevertheless, been designed. Houses are possibly the most expensive 'possession' that many people will own or rent in their lifetime. Architecture is one of the design forms that we interact with most over a lifetime, perhaps the other being our clothing. Architecture provides us with the designed form we call home. Beyond the idea of the financial value or capital of our homes, our homes can also provide social capital. The way we share our homes connects us to others in our community, and for crafters this plays out through our ability to make, repair, gift or share knowledge through our crafting.

This paper is shaped by the politics of my own situation or location, as described by Buckley, who suggests that thinking or theoretical understanding cannot be detached from one's personal histories and lived experiences.³ My own location, my history, is as tangata tiriti, born into a working-class family with two working parents who had hobbies and interests at home. My Mum, when not working as a secretary, sewed many of our clothes, and Dad used his mechanics training to maintain the family car, restore bicycles and toys, and repair fishing boats in exchange for fresh fish. The value they placed on these activities is a clear memory. Long before that, my tipuna | grandparents turned wood, sewed and knitted in their homes.

My home is a twentieth-century house, and there is little doubt that in the twentieth century some types of leisure were positioned as both domestic and gendered.⁴ In particular, the leisure pursuits of women as portrayed in media seemed to narrow to comprise those that supported or enhanced the domestic sphere, such as needlework, cooking, gardening and other aesthetic activities that enhanced the experience or look of the domestic space. Women were encouraged to work on the garden, food, decorative textiles and clothing to enhance the lives of those who lived in the home (e.g., sewing, knitting, crochet, quilting, embroidery, macrame/tatting, spinning, weaving and many others). Other crafts that have been practiced in the domestic sphere include woodworking, painting, drawing, photography, the assembly, refurbishment and production of furniture, and model railroads, but the gendering of crafts influences the way that craft is perceived and accommodated in architecture.

My home, my house, built in 1939 for my father-in-law and his first family, was designed by Dunedin architect Cecil Gardner Dunning. The home was then, and is now, a family home, a modest 100m² single-storey brick building with large, clear windows. The original plan (see Figure 1) shows two bedrooms, a drawing room/sunroom, lounge room, breakfast room, kitchen, bathroom, water-closet and a laundry with outdoor access. As was typical in 1939, there is no storage built into the living or bedroom spaces, and no provision for a 'spare bedroom,' a quiet indicator of wealth for much of the twentieth century.⁵

The major change that has been made to modernise the house in the twenty-first century reflects a trend towards open-plan living to replace smaller, discrete spaces. Our kitchen, dining and living spaces have been opened into one larger space, the laundry has internal access, and the house has a separate back door.

The house functions well, and generations of my whānau have lived here since 1939. At first and second glance, the plan lacks any indication of the home being a site of craft leisure – so how does one craft in a space where no provision has been made for craft?

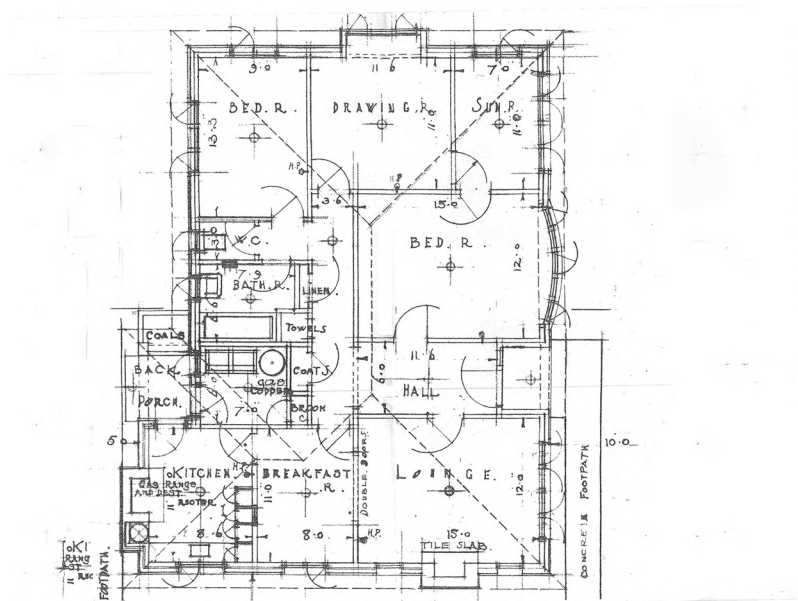


Figure 1. Baughen Family Home, circa 1939, plans by Cecil Gardner Dunning.

TEMPORARY AND PORTABLE

All the sewing machines used in my family have been portable models with handles and cases. The implication of these handles is clear – these are tools that are to be lifted and carried to the workspace and then put away after use. Buckley situates this architecturally as flexible space.⁶ The most common flexible space in crafting is the kitchen table, but flexible space can be any spaces that double as crafting spaces. What is important here is the idea that craft is a temporary and portable activity. This is denoted in two ways, through the design of craft equipment and through architecture.

It is this flexible space that sets up a tension, at once positioning craft as both visible and temporary. This positioning holds true even when craft spaces are legitimised by being allocated permanent positions in the home. Where the crafting equipment is granted a permanent space, perhaps in an alcove, often this is as a secondary, rather than primary, use. An example from my own location is the spare bedroom that doubles as a sewing space. The room may be used more for sewing than guests, but it carries the name of guest room or spare room.

SELVEDGE

One conceptualisation of leisure crafting is as a selvedge activity. A fabric selvedge is found where the outer warp threads of a width of woven cloth are packed together to form a self-finished and durable edge that is resistant to fraying. At this edge, the weft turns and wraps around the outermost threads, compressing them so that their spacing becomes slightly denser than the threads in the central section of the cloth (Figure 2).

As a weaver, I liken craft space to a selvedge, a space where the elements are crammed closer together at the edge. Unlike other domestic furniture that is positioned centrally in a room, the furniture and appliances used for crafting tend to occupy the edges, the corners; craft items are peripheral to the objects that define rooms.

There is political tension in space used for crafting. Stalp discovered that quilters are criticised by their families for the time they spend on hobbies, and that families expected quilters to restrict their crafting time to fit around family leisure and social needs.⁷ The ability to engage in a hobby, spend funds and use space was to be negotiated, even when a crafter was nationally recognised in the field of quilting or earning their own money. These expectations reinforce the notion that craft is secondary, and temporary.

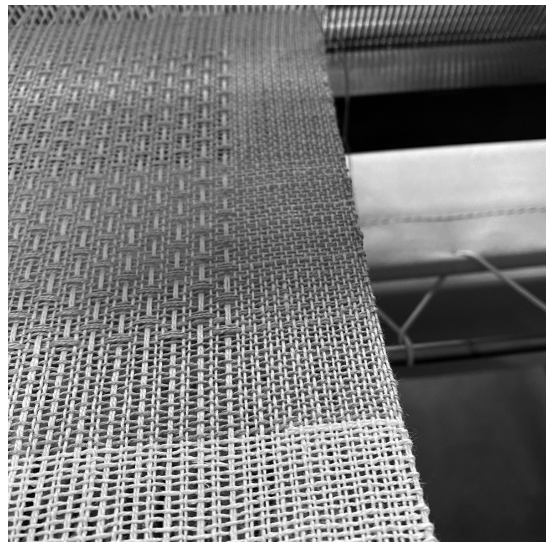


Figure 2. Woven fabric selvedge, edge, an increased density is a key feature of craft spaces.

CRAFTING IN NON-FLEXIBLE SPACE

In my location, my lived experience, this temporary and portable concept has proved true only for some crafts, and for some of the time. The largest room in my home houses an 8-shaft Countermarche Loom. At 200kg, my loom is the largest piece of furniture in my home, and so cannot be neatly tidied away into a storage cupboard. My loom cannot, and does not, occupy flexible space. The room is my Loom Room, and also houses associated equipment that is needed to set up and work the loom: a vertical mill, temples, shuttles, bobbin/quill and pirm winders, lease sticks, raddles, various sizes of reeds, and warp sticks.

This example is at odds with the concept of flexible space, and also highlights the practice whereby rooms are named and their inhabitants directed as to their intended usage by architects. My loom occupies what was originally the larger bedroom, which has not been altered in layout, but its usage is very different from what the architect originally considered.



Figure 3. The loom room with its 200 kg of loom.

CRAFT CONSUMPTION AS ACTIVISM AMID CONSUMERISM

This location of craft at the selvedge of rooms and homes, the edges, is reinforced by the positioning of the products of crafting as leisure. Amateur production circulates in spaces that are not commercial and have low visibility – in social spaces as gifts, and in the home as decoration, and only rarely in museums and in commercial spaces.⁸ Crafting, outside of indigenous craft, requires materials to be sourced, found and, mostly commonly, purchased. This is described by Campbell as craft consumption.⁹

Crafting, although identified as a form of consumption, is very different to the mass consumption that fuels much of a contemporary 'lifestyle'. Garber found that with crafting, the *act* of crafting is the key element, and not the artefact being produced.¹⁰ Elsewhere, I have described crafting as a deliberate choice to make, rather than purchase ready-made, as a subversive rejection of a dominant consumer approach to living.¹¹

Hackney sets out the potential and practice of home craft as quiet activism.¹² In this respect, craft serves as both a recognisable marker of a crafter rejecting aspects of contemporary consumerist living and, perhaps more meaningfully, as a search for authentic connection and autonomy over what we eat, how we dress and our domestic environment. Knott hypothesises that the home/domestic/amateur craft space is differentiated within the "normative structures of capitalism," confirming what it is to be middle class at the same time as "stretching its boundaries."¹³ Recognising the peripheral position of crafting and craft production provides impetus for architecture to respond, to ensure that crafting, crafts and crafters are not left at the edges.

STASH, STORAGE AND STUFF

In describing my loom as occupying non-flexible space, I detailed the additional materials, equipment and resources that those tools required. Knott discusses three elements required for amateur craft activity: bases (materials/surfaces), carriers (tools), and arbiters (books, technical manuals).¹⁴ Each element is important, and leisure crafters require spaces to house the bases, carriers and arbiters of their craft. The element described by Knott as 'materials/surfaces' is known to textile crafters as 'stash' – the yarns and other materials required to make fabric or work with fabric.

Stalp sets out the tensions involved in textile stashing and storing materials in domestic spaces.¹⁵ Space is, of course, important. Not only is there a need for space to be available, but the use of that space must be negotiated, and that negotiation can be tricky. Stalp also provides evidence that financial investment in materials is a contentious issue for many crafters, who must downplay the cost, sneak supplies into the home or hide their stash.¹⁶

Storage and access for arbiters requires both physical and digital space. In a world where books are increasingly replaced by digital content, it is not unusual for crafters to own a small physical library of significant texts, alongside a dedicated computer and printer set up to access digital content, with the aim of planning craft projects or communicating with online craft communities.

THE POLITICS OF THE HOME

The contemporary middle-class home, as portrayed in media, is a tidy, clean, neutral space – a container for living. This image seems little changed from the modernist ideals of the mid-twentieth century, expressed in terms of white, form-revealing walls.¹⁷ In this machine for ideal living, the detritus of living (the dry washing waiting to be folded, the cutlery and crockery discarded from cooking and eating, evidence of crafting) has no place. A place for everything and everything in its place. The alternative is a hoarder house, terrifyingly full of an excess of stuff.

Knott provides a background for crafting in domestic spaces, and outlines a history where crafting is designed to be concealed and tidied away, or managed into something that is in keeping with contemporary ideals of domestic space and home.¹⁸ The pegboard is identified by Knott as a key historical element of domestic craft spaces, intended to ensure safe storage, timesaving and precise, aligned-to-the-grid organisation. The Masonite Corporation's Presto Pegboard of the early 1960s has become the default craft organising system, with a promise of easy, tidy and aesthetically ordered storage.

Knott sets out a commercialised development of hobby-as-leisure in Western societies, of twentieth-century magazine articles and images setting a goal of clutter-free, organised and tidy craft spaces.¹⁹ Knott and Buckley both describe the reality of craft spaces as being more "fragmented" and less important than typical domestic spaces. For Buckley, the lack of permanent homes for craft activities speaks to the inherent "non-necessity" of such practices in home life.²⁰

For Knott, this temporary, portable craft practice denotes something that is interesting but visibly less important than other aspects of home life.²¹ Ikea's Raskog trolley is the contemporary embodiment of dedicated craft space, an assumption that craft can be contained in a small, efficiently organised space to be wheeled out of sight (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Raskog trolley, the 21st century crafters default storage system.

What is notable here is that the politics of design set out to provide space for sleeping, eating, meal prep, personal care and socialising, but with no mention of space for craft. Instead, there is an assumption that the contemporary home is presented not as a site of production, but one of display. That display suggests a generic lifestyle, of people who exist, to misquote a pop-culture reference, “to make the house look good.”²² This phenomenon presents as part of a wider practice of seasonal home décor, shorthand for home decoration. Homes are places to display purchases, not places for showcasing the handmade achievements of homemakers.²³

MODERNISM – A DOMESTIC LEGACY OF PRODUCTION AND CONSUMERISM

Modernism, from which architecture seems to still take its primary cues, is about production, commercialisation and the distribution of better-designed outcomes for the benefit of all.²⁴ While domestic architecture sits in an uneasy space between custom design for particular clients and the larger-scale development of multiples, contemporary domestic architecture draws visibly on its modernist foundations in the lack of ornament and reliance on form and abstraction over other aspects of design. This focus on form, and subsequently on the display of the designed form, results in a domestic architecture that fails to consider the role of craft in the lives of the inhabitants, those who live daily in the spaces created. Ironically, the flexibility promised by modernity has resulted in a fixed, rather than fluid, domestic architecture.

The default designed white-paint colours (oyster, alabaster, pearl lustre) of contemporary interiors are, at the core, extensions celebrating architectural form. In contrast, crafters require a neutral colour to backdrop their mahi | work space. Neutral tones, often grey, provide better backgrounds when comparing colours.²⁵

Bäckström’s plate, “Dimensions of the body, Mormor sitting” (Figure 5), critiques architectural planning through its appearance in the *Arkitektens Handbok*.²⁶ This reveals that the tools of architecture, and underpinning notions of modernism, mass production and rationalism, have failed to provide space for crafting – in this case, knitting.



Figure 5. *Dimensions of the body, Mormor sitting*, highlights how the needs of crafters are not part of the architectural toolkit.

DUST

I can't help but see craft conceptualised in architecture as household dust, detritus from living and somehow outside of design. Other forms of household 'dust,' such as the compost bin, have been given a clean, modern solution (hidden in a drawer, compartmentalised to allow for recycling of various types of refuse) yet craft is ignored and metaphorically swept away from flexible spaces. Dust is residue from repurposing spaces primarily for something else more accepted or understood. Craft, as dust, is a metaphor that explains the selvedge position, the temporary flexible space and negotiated position of craft and, perhaps most of all, the lack of architectural planning to accommodate it.

RETURN TO LOCATION AND IDENTITY

Crafting is important to my identity; crafting is informed by my Location, and whakapapa. I am a Knitter not a knitter, a Weaver not a weaver. Yet when I must first challenge the way space in my own home is demarcated, my ability to craft my identity is challenged.

Faud-Luke positions designers as able to advocate for real change, to propose and make choices leading to a better world.²⁷ Design provides opportunities to change the way things are done. Building on earlier work on the role of craft in fashion activist practice,²⁸ I suggest that the practice of architecture should open to show the possibility of craft, not as decorative and aesthetic artifacts, but as messy, permanent spaces requiring normal domestic practice. I propose that architects consider specifically designing for leisure, rather than assuming spaces can be adapted for leisure.

If architectural practice made craft space and craft activity more visible then, in the words of Fuad-Luke, "a counter narrative, aimed at generating and balancing positive social, institutional, environmental, and or economic change"²⁹ would result.

Architecture that allows humans to live their best life must present design solutions that are open to a range of ways to live. For crafters, this means allowing for space to be inhabited as needed, not predetermined in terms of approved uses. This requires architects to reconsider how houses can be used, and to be open to uses beyond mere consumption and display. Architecture that allows for "sliving!"

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