

Furniture designer and maker *Luke Hughes* debates the importance of the craft practitioner

Craft's place in post-Brexit Britain

In 1999 I gave a lecture at the Royal Society of Arts, in which I envisaged a model of 'virtual production' through loose associations of small workshops and craft practitioners. It was subsequently published, in part, in *Crafts* no. 163, March/April 2000 (and again in no. 230, May/June 2011), and the nub of it was as follows:

'There persists in the world of crafts some deep-seated prejudices about "industry", which, for more than a century, have got in the way of economic logic. However, the intellectual approach of modern designer-craft practitioners to their work has seen some seismic changes, and the effect of recent changes in industry, technology, markets and distribution have been equally radical [...] Perhaps by better understanding these processes and showcasing examples, we can stimulate a craft-led renaissance in British manufacturing.'

The reason for the lecture? After six frustrating years sitting on its board of trustees, I was much exercised about what the Crafts Council was for, how it could justify receiving public funds without proving economic relevance.

I concluded: 'Who cares? [The crafts should] not just be about the occupation of the elderly in future years or even providing some spice to our aesthetic lives, some "pepper and salt" to our visual culture. It is also about employment and prosperity in a post-industrial world. There is a danger of thinking manufacturing has no place in our future. This is palpably nonsense. Industry has just become more complex. With emerging industries in the Far East, it is clear we cannot compete on price, so there is only one option, [to] add value through quality. For that we clearly need the craftsmen-designers, we need the small producers and we need them to be able to find each other.'

Eighteen years on, they can indeed now find each other easily, thanks to the formidable speed of change in technology and communications. The internet and computer-aided design were in their infancy, as were digital cameras and the ability to instantly transmit images around the world; smartphones did not exist, nor did Skype, FaceTime or the ability to make cheap visual contact across the globe.

More recently, the evolution of 3D printing has meant that model making



Above: Keystone Academy High School Library, Beijing. Below: the library's dragon door handles in bronze by sculptor Jill Watson

has been transformed (dramatically accelerating development times) and can be harnessed to make actual products themselves. Nevertheless, in my view, the role of the craft practitioner remains as vital as ever. In the immortal words of Gordon Russell, 'the problem about machines is you must teach them manners'. Craft practitioners are best placed to do this.

Earlier this year Luke Hughes and Company completed a library project for Keystone Academy, a Chinese school in Beijing. It was seen as critical in extending the school's cultural identity while projecting its ethos as a Chinese

institution with an international flavour. It involved 24 tonnes of furniture, produced by over 20 suppliers, all predominately small (less than 10 employees), 85 per cent in the UK. The project was worth over £1 million and everything was designed, developed, manufactured and dispatched within four months. It involved the combined design talents of my team as well as the work of six other artists and designers, including bronze sculpture by Jill Watson and Lydia Segrave, letter-cutting by Caroline Webb and graphics by Brian Webb and Francis Carne.

Shipping that much furniture to China might seem like selling refrigerators to Greenland. Not so. To the client, the value lay in the whole offering being far greater than the sum of its parts – there is simply no way conventional manufacturers or distribution channels can offer such a rich talent of creativity, combined with the manufacturing knowledge and efficient delivery. Sure, it was a complex logistical operation, but one that reflected all the principals envisaged in that 1999 lecture.

The team has now delivered dozens of similar projects across the UK, the USA and Asia. As a post-Brexit world emerges, those embryonic ideas are now proven. There is hope for the crafts.

