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Craft skills and their role in healing ourselves and the world.

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Abstract/Introduction

The work I am presenting here on craft or, taken to a more basic level, engagement with the material world, came out of a concern about placeless environments as unconducive to human flourishing. A range of positions has developed through the academic discourse on place. These could be characterised as the basic 'placelessness is bad' position, the 'compensatory benefits position', and the 'embracing the post-modern condition with gusto' position. In this paper I will just be giving a flavour of the first two in order to lay out a number of propositions about people and their relationship to place, but the main action of the paper is to explore the role of crafts in forging a more reasonable response to placelessness than the idea that compensatory benefits alone could mitigate the psychological and social problems of living in placeless environments. The compensatory thesis points to ideas such as cosmopolitan freedom and increasing self reflection as the upside of lost embeddedness. However, I propose that we can retain the cosmopolitan ideas of freedom and self-reflection and re-find a sense of embeddedness even in the midst of contemporary 'thinned out' places. And we can do this through even a minimal engagement with handcraft as a means of reintegrating ourselves into the material fabric of the world. I see this as a means to arrive at an emplaced way of being regardless of where we are; and thus a kind of backdoor route to building more meaningful places.

The placelessness thesis

With Relph's seminal work, *Place and Placelessness*, there has developed a strong normative proposition within place literature that says placelessness is a bad thing. A common distinction within the literature is that between space and place, where space is empty of meaning and could be referred to by grid reference and place has unique characteristics that make it the place it is. Placelessness could be thought of simply as standing in for the term space. However, it is more likely to be used when a place rich in local distinctiveness is destroyed by homogenising forces and turned into a space like many others. Typical examples would be when a street of individual shops is taken over by national or international companies and replaced with chainstores, or where a traditional market is covered over and turned into a shopping mall. So what's the problem? There are obviously efficiencies and positive benefits to these kinds of developments. What is claimed to be missing is the rich

web of relationships that places and people will weave together. Out of these relationships a place emerges that is both nurtured by and nurtures the people who live there. When these rich relationships are truncated by some kind of wholesale development design from outside, the place becomes placeless and the people alienated from where they live.

Therefore, a strong claim of the placelessness thesis is that, not only do we build dispiriting identikit towns but that these spaces build alienated selves. How and why this happens is put succinctly by Ralph when he says: "we are creating, in Norberg-Schulz's (1969) terse phrase, a 'flatscape', lacking intentional depth and providing possibilities only for commonplace and mediocre experiences". (Relph 1976: 79)

And presumably having only commonplace and mediocre experiences then has a direct impact on what we are capable of envisaging and of doing.

Making places and made by place

The placelessness thesis requires for its power and its positive agenda, of resisting placelessness and promoting a fuller sense of human flourishing, the normative claim that not only do we suffer in such places but that they change who we are and what kinds of lives we can envisage and desire. We become, to follow Sack's logic 'thinned out people' and to be thus thinned out is a bad thing (Sack 1997). The alternative claims might be that this doesn't happen; we might not enjoy such places but they don't impact on who we are. Or they do impact on who we are and that's a good thing because we could then live quite happily in thinned out places. The worry that this aspect of the placelessness thesis brings out is that not only is it a bad thing but there is no way to redeem these placeless environments because their inhabitants would see no reason to do so or just be denied the place making skills necessary because these are the skills that would be nurtured in and require a different kind of place.

One of the major critiques of the placelessness thesis is that it promotes a backwards looking nostalgia for times past where people remained in the villages and towns they were born in and who's horizons would be limited. This critique could be driven further to identify a stultifying social inclusion and exclusion of anyone from somewhere else. It is through our ability to stand back from local custom and practice that allows us to see it as local custom and practice rather than how the world is. It is not that experience of wider horizons gives us a new access to truth it is just the different experiences allow us the possibility of self reflection.

The compensation thesis

This cosmopolite's viewpoint takes us to a further move in the debate which is the compensation thesis. This is the claim, which has been germinal in the literature on place from Relph onwards, that our alienated state does allow for and indeed makes possible a thoroughly modern and good feature of being human, that of freedom.

Here the idea is that the thoroughly emplaced are living an authentic life but it is one prescribed by their situation. We need only imagine for a moment the divisions of

class and gender to see how great a benefit some detachment from community, from place, from expected roles etc. affords us as human beings living in the centuries that followed the enlightenment. In this sense the authenticity of the traditional for us has become inauthentic because what a human being is has changed; horizons have moved and to live a life prescribed by place is to no longer live a human life.

Edward Casey discusses what he calls this 'compensatory logic of loss' (2001:408). For him the human being is not undermined by the thinness of places because we gain so much from cosmopolitanism and self reflection in the post-modern context. Moreover we can and do seek out thick places to further nurture our selves. The examples Casey gives of us of seeking out thickness, such as video/DVD not replacing cinema or Amazon not replacing bookstores (2001:408), seem to me rather odd. I can only imagine that Casey has neither been to a multiplex cinema recently nor asked a question, which required some degree of literacy, of a bookseller in one of the large stores like Borders. In the city I live in, like so many in Britain, I can see only the latest Hollywood blockbusters and only those by going out of the town to a multiplex not easily accessible by public transport and watch such films along with an audience of about ten people on a smallish screen. This is not an enriching social experience. The idea that this replaces the pre video/DVD cinema experience of going to one's local crowded cinema to see whatever film was showing that week and would be a topic of conversation at work or other social events is strange. This example, and one could do the same with recorded music vs the previous generation's norm of making music in the home, throws up a potential problem with the compensation thesis. The problem is that in the current stage of capitalist driven social structures a rich selection of meaningful social events is not actually available to people. Moreover, from the perspective of a 'thinned out' self it is hard to see where the motivation would come from to seek out such enriching experiences or the imagination to be the driving force initiating them? Capitalist structures are such that, contrary to the claims made, it is not the case that people get what they want, or what they deserve, they get what they are given – or rather what they are sold.

Yi-Fu Tuan's notion of high-modernism as set out in *Cosmos and Hearth* sounds convincing in terms of making the best of the freedom and self-reflection that displacedness affords us, but I wonder, if like Casey's examples of seeking out thick experiences, it isn't ignoring the real nature of the thinness for most people. It is one thing to be highly educated and financially secure in a placeless environment and able to make choices about one's life and quite another to be the recipient of a life of diminished opportunities in such an environment. The question that presents itself even more strongly in such a situation is, 'from whence comes the inspiration to engage in anything enriching and meaningful?' And the post-modern response that whatever is being engaged with *is* obviously meaningful will not do because some engagements/activities just are, to use Mill's term, fecund and some are not (Mill, 1962: 262). Through some activities we learn to demand more of ourselves rather than of the world and it is these activities that we need if we are to redeem non-places and create healthy relationships.

A solution via matter

Help is at hand - quite literally. Placelessness discourse focuses on the local and mobility and lack of belonging etc but it could also focus on the way the mobility impacts on our day-to-day engagement with the world; how we do things here and now in the spaces, places and homes we inhabit. Alongside the historical shift to placelessness there has also been a move away from engagement with matter. This might seem a striking claim in a world we see accused of being evermore materialistic. But materialism as in wanting more gadgets or the latest technology and being only able to respond to the malfunctions of such gadgetry by discarding and relishing the opportunity to buy the latest model is not an engagement with matter and the material nature of the world, it is quite the opposite. And materialism as a political ideology of denying the realm of the spiritual if along with the superstitions and dogma it rejects any sense of wonder about the natural world and the construction of artefacts is also a shift away from matter. How can this observation help the placelessness issue? I think it can in a number of ways: primarily we can endorse or promote a 'new materialism' that really is about engaging with matter. Even if I live in a placeless environment if I can be encouraged to just engage with matter I will be forging a new connection to where I am at the micro level of sitting here doing this and at the macro level or engaging with the material world with its attendant limits and balances.

I'm going to look at four means of engagement encapsulated in the term, make do and mend. Four because there is making things, doing things, and mending things plus, with the removal of the comma, there is also making do.

I'm going to look at these as environmental virtues and as the means to healthy habitation; healthy not just for the planet, but also for us through the self transformatory power of working with matter in an engaged way. It is the latter aspect that I want to focus on and leave as a reasonable assumption that environmentally good effects will follow.

Making things

I want to avoid any criticism of nostalgia but that they are inevitable so I won't delay their arising and will just state that 'we don't make things like we used to'. Here I mean to point not just to the quality of things made but also to the way that making things has disappeared from our lives. If we don't work in a 'making things' profession then we are likely only to make things as a hobby; they are the products of leisure not the products of life. And just as many people used to make music or be able to cook from raw ingredients these are becoming lost skills now elevated to the realm of the arts.

Adam Curtis in his brilliant documentary 'Century of the Self' discusses an interesting example of initial resistance to convenience foods. Apparently the psychologist Ernst Dichter advised the Betty Crocker Company that the reason why their cake mix was not selling was because it was too easy to use. Although it is perfectly possible to make a cake mix where no egg is required, as it can be contained in dry form in the

mix, the use of such a cake mix was denying the cake maker the sense of having made something for their family. Dichter proposed that the mix should call for the addition of an egg, to him this meant that the housewife was symbolically offering up one of her own eggs to her husband and would thus return meaning to the cake making enterprise. If put to one side the Freudian overtones and a more exacting feminist analysis there does seem to be something very basic in Dichter's analysis of the situation. The cake made with the cake mix alone does seem to lack enough participation to be a satisfying experience and indeed cake mixes today still call for an egg to be added. However, why stop at the egg? If one has flour, sugar, butter, and eggs it is possible to make a cake but not only a cake, one is then free to make any number of baked items from received recipes or those invented oneself. What is happening with the packaging of single items is the removal of both rudimentary skills and freedom. To return the requirement for an egg is merely the simulacrum of skill and engagement -- it removes an instinctive disquiet about a distancing from the materials and actions of making something -- without actually allowing freedom and skill development.

A similar simulacrum is evident in the craft industry as is demonstrated on the shelves of art and craft shops across the land. Whereas the shelves used to be filled with rawish materials: paint, paper, clay, wax, ink, and tools such as knives, pencils, brushes etc. now these are being edged to the margins by the pre-packaged 'craft experience' of stickers and one off kits. These are things to fill an empty rainy afternoon not the tools of creative endeavour that can bring about a new and enriched relationship to the world.

To look further at what is happening in the process of making something it might be best to turn to the accounts of craftspersons as here it is possible to find very eloquent expressions that exemplify not just the production and refinement of specific skills but also a production and refinement of the self and more overarching virtues such as patience, an ability to move with the substance, the realisation of a gentle working with the grain producing more impact that forceful working against the grain. Also in developing craft skills is the meta-skill of self-reflection and evaluation without which the craftsperson can never move from apprentice to creative mastery (Kvale 2007). William Morris is a wonderful guide in bringing out the benefits to the individual and society of supporting and encouraging handcrafts, but I want to focus at the moment on what we actually do.

Doing

In my analysis of make do and mend it is in the making and the mending that the really archetypical actions are taking place but standing above that is the more general idea of action itself. This might seem to impose a false dichotomy between thinking and doing and I would never want to suggest that in 'the new materialism' there is no place for thinking or that thinking is somehow to be avoided. To really engage with the material world requires an exacting and rigorous form of thinking because old abstractions and disengaged fantasies would no longer be the easy resting place for the mind.

What kind of doing would help placelessness? I am going to pick up one example of a burgeoning movement which seems to me to encapsulate a lot of what I want to suggest here. This is the action to produce transition towns. Central to the transition

towns movement is the idea of a socially responsible way of responding to the impending crisis of what is called Peak oil (this is the tension between increasing demands from oil meeting dwindling supplies). Recognizing that individual self-sufficiency is never going to be an appropriate response transition towns are those that have engaged in a highly public way and shared discussion and debate about how <u>this</u> specific town is going to slowly adapt itself to a more environmentally sustainable future. This is, it seems to me, just the kind of doing that is absolutely appropriate for shifting what has become a placeless town into somewhere supportive of a rich interweaving of human and place relationship. Moreover, a focus of the transition movement is increasing local resilience and this often boils down to someone local knowing how to do things and passing those skills on to others.

It is perhaps interesting to note though that those towns which have quickly adopted this agenda, such as Totnes or Stroud, had never really made that initial transition into placelessness. This only helps to underline the placelessness thesis that would expect soulless towns to lack the human movers and shakers that would have the necessary aspiration to begin the process.

Mending

It is a wonderful expression of care for objects and for the world that instead of throwing something away we mend it and give it, as the expression goes, a 'longer life' or 'a new lease of life'. Through our activity the object, which has fallen out of the realm of human use, is returned to that sphere and in that sense we do breathe life back into it. Previously a darned sock, patched trousers or glued together cup were a marker of poverty and perhaps they still are. However what we need to see now is the poverty of skill evident in the thrown away item that could easily be mended.

Contemporary manufacturing processes work against this with such things as designed redundancy, repairs that are more expensive than buying a new item, modular components, sweatshop derived low prices, upgrades that quickly out date previous equipment through lack of compatibility. These and many more of what an elderly relative used to call 'go-wrongary' built into modern products are what thwart us today in our effort to care.

However there are some areas of life where mending is still an option and I want to take one of these as an example in order to outline what this kind of engagement with the world is like and what it can bring us. Many of you will have had the experience of a perfectly good and serviceable pair of jeans wearing through in just one area, if you are a gardener the knees and if an academic probably the seat. These can be very easily patched up by using a strip of some other fabric (perhaps even sacrificing one very old pair of jeans to provide fabric for this task for the next 20 years), a needle and thread. The task is not complex but does require a certain amount of dexterity and takes approximately 15 minutes. The wonderful thing about dexterity though is that it comes almost unbidden, you try to do something and in the trying you discover both how to do it and that you can do it better; it just requires a certain amount of tenacity.

But what about the fabric? In making the effort to engage with the initially recalcitrant denim and then finding ways to hold the patch and the jeans whilst

manipulating the needle we develop an awareness of the nature of denim and the nature of wear and tear, we might extend the patch to not just cover the tear but to strengthen surrounding areas that are developing a soft plush of worn-ness. We might realise that jeans can be patched from the inside or from the outside depending on the type of damage and what is most comfortable to the wearer. The repair might incorporate a degree of darning (where the missing threads are replaced by stitching across the gap and weaving the replacement threads as in the warp and woof of the original fabric) as preliminary strengthening and to maintain the shape of the original prior to patching. [1]

In hand skills there is always more that can be done with practice: more accuracy, smaller stitches, less visible repairs, faster execution, more creative solutions, less injuries, and so on. In the process of mending we re-new the jeans and we develop our own skills. Moreover, we also change ourselves: our character or way-of-being becomes part of the world of the repairable. C.K. Williams in his beautiful poem Invisible Mending shows how the action (and attendant attitude) of mending does connect to some deep currents in ourselves. There is a sense in which we practice forgiveness when we resist throwing away that which is no longer perfect but add to it our care to make it good again. In resisting the lure of the new and nurturing what we have we do practice a virtue that is self-transforming and exemplifies a care for the things in our orbit and a care for the wider environment.

Making do

I don't want to say much about making do except to use it to deflect any notion of impoverishment or sufferance in endorsing make do and mend. Just as the driving force behind the transition towns idea is not just a panic about dwindling resources and a mean-spirited notion of thrift. It is about saying we are not mourning the loss of our current lifestyles and making do with some diminished form of living. We are, rather, saying there is a lot that doesn't work about this 21st-century lifestyle to us as humans and the environmental crisis is just the trigger to get us communicating together about more enriching ways of living. Likewise the positive aspect of making do is the invitation and endorsement of human creativity.

I want to just end with a specific example which I think exemplifies the make, do and mend idea. My daughter called in to visit after various trips away and I noticed she was doing some crochet. I asked what she was making and she just lifted up her legs to show that she had only one slipper and said, 'I lost the other out of my bag somewhere and need to make another'. She had made the initial pair and was now able to replace a missing one just with her own ingenuity, craft skill and some spare wool. They might not be a perfect match but how much better to have, at least in some area of one's life, that degree of resourcefulness and mastery of materials such that the world comes close and we can accommodate ourselves to it.

By engaging with the material realm, not as automata, but as creative individuals we can do more with less and shape our lives and our homes and communities such that they exemplify enriching places of co-creation. Therefore, my central thesis is that by endorsing make do and mend and triggering a new form of materialism we can begin to redeem placelessness.

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[1] My focus is on the micro level and personal transformation but I will just mention that it takes 20,000 litres of water to grow the cotton for 1 pair of jeans and a t-shirt and 73% of cotton is grown on irrigated land.

http://www.panda.org/about_wwf/what_we_do/freshwater/problems/thirsty_crops/cotton/index.cfm

accessed 28.05.08