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Contemporary craft and cultural sustainability: a case study of the Scottish Craft Centre (1970-1990).

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Contemporary Craft and Cultural Sustainability: A case study of the Scottish Craft Centre (1970-1990)

1970-1990 was a period of renaissance for the crafts in the UK and North America. The creation of national organisations and infrastructures to support craft, and define its identity, played a crucial role. It is often assumed that Scottish craft history followed a trajectory similar to that of the rest of Britain during this time. My research challenges this interpretation, positing that because Scotland had its own funding bodies for the crafts, it had different financial and ideological outcomes. Whereas England and Wales witnessed the promotion of the craftsman as ‘artist’, Scottish funding agencies encouraged Scottish craft as small business activity. Scottish agencies aspired not only to create a craft industry that would be commercially and culturally sustainable, but also to maintain standards of quality, innovation and cultural integrity.

This paper will provide a case study of how national organisations can act as cultural intermediaries in the commodification of craft objects, by shaping their identity and ideology, and consider how craft objects acquire new meanings when commodified. It will draw upon primary research from the Scottish Craft Centre (1949-90) archive. Established in 1949 to preserve, develop and promote studio craft in Scotland, the Scottish Craft Centre (SCC) was the only Scottish enterprise to receive annual support from the government in the 1970s. Based in Edinburgh, the SCC operated as a locus for craft practitioners and consumers.

Its remit was to provide a showcase for the best of Scottish craft and to stimulate quality craftsmanship nationally. The SCC organised exhibitions throughout Scotland, and promoted and maintained standards of both traditional and contemporary Scottish craft. Its archive provides a unique record of craft activity and cultural values in Scotland at the end of the twentieth century.

The paper will argue that a clear thread of influence can be drawn between craft cultural policy and craft practice in Scotland during the period of 1970-1990. It will substantiate how Scottish cultural agencies played a defining role in promoting craft as a small business activity, and attempted to market Scottish craft as a culturally sustainable product. As a case study, the research will provide insight into how cultural policy and strategy can determine the course of craft production and consumption, and will consider whether lessons can be applied to contemporary practice and policy.

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Contemporary Craft and Cultural Sustainability: A case study of the Scottish Craft Centre (1970–1990)

It is acknowledged by design historians that the 1970s were a time when the crafts in Britain flourished (Harrod 1999; Lucie-Smith 1981). The reasons for this renaissance are complex, and can be attributed to a variety of causal factors, one being the creation of specific government organisations to fund and promote craft practice. The aim of this paper is to analyse the Scottish craft context during this craft revival, by examining the Scottish Craft Centre (1949–90). The Scottish Craft Centre was the only Scottish enterprise to receive financial support from the government in the 1970s, and operated as a national hub for craft activity until the latter half of the twentieth century (Joint Crafts Committee 1976). Its remit was to provide a showcase for the best of Scottish craft and to stimulate quality craftsmanship nationally (Brief Memorandum of Opposition to Scottish Craft Centre Chairman's Report 1977). Somewhat surprisingly, its history has remained largely un-documented. Design historians writing about cultural organisations of the 1970s have instead focused mainly on the activities of the Crafts Advisory Committee, now the Crafts Council. The Crafts Advisory Committee was also a state-backed, central organisation with responsibility for the crafts; however, its remit was specific to England and Wales. This research posits that because Scotland had its own cultural organisation for the crafts, namely the Scottish Craft Centre, it had its own particular concerns and outcomes – practical and ideological. Although this research is located nationally, it has wider cultural applications for the design historian and theorist. As a case study, the research will provide insight into how cultural policy and strategy can impact upon the production and consumption of craft, and provide lessons that can be applied to contemporary practice and policy.

This paper forms part of a PhD project on the subject of Scottish craft in the late twentieth century and draws upon the Scottish Craft Centre archive at the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh. The Scottish Craft Centre archive is substantial, consisting of over 650 files, and includes detailed minutes, correspondence, accounts, photographs and papers relating to the Centre. It provides a rich body of

evidence documenting the Scottish craft 'scene' of the mid-to-late twentieth century. For this paper, I have relied upon minutes from meetings, as well as policy documents and memoranda, to tell the story. Rather than attempt a comprehensive history of the Centre in this paper, I have instead chosen to focus on a few key themes, which had a specific impact upon the Centre's existence, and which provide an opportunity to analyse the importance of the Scottish Craft Centre in a wider critical context.

The Scottish Craft Centre was established in 1949, as a non-profit charitable organisation based in Edinburgh, and was in operation until 1990. Its initial aim was to preserve and develop Scotland's heritage in fine workmanship and design (Scottish Craft Centre 1985). It operated primarily as a membership organisation, and took its inspiration from the Craft Centre of Britain, founded in London a year earlier. As with the Craft Centre of Great Britain, the Scottish Craft Centre answered the call of Scottish craftspeople for a formally recognised professional platform from which to promote the best of their work (Scottish Craft Centre 1986). In 1976 its membership numbered 597, and consisted of makers, as well as corporate and associate members. At this time, members were elected by the Scottish Craft Centre's council, and the membership selection procedure was rigorous, involving the submission of examples of work and evidence of the makers' background and training (Joint Crafts Committee 1976).

The 1970s were a unique period in time for the crafts in Britain, when they benefited from unprecedented amounts of government support in terms of funding and ideological attention. This was largely the result of the policies and influence of the government's paymaster general, Lord Eccles, who had a personal interest in the crafts. His success in securing substantial amounts of state money for their development and encouragement in the 1970s contributed to an overall increase in interest and activity throughout the sector, described as the 'craft revival'. The Scottish Craft Centre benefited from this influx of government cash and was the only craft agency in Scotland to be granted government

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funding in the 1970s, which it received through the Scottish Development Agency. Being a membership organisation, it was down to the Scottish Craft Centre's council to decide how best to allocate the funds. However, strategic decisions were overseen by the Scottish Development Agency craft officer, and its balance sheets were scrutinised. Although the Centre derived a small percentage of its income from subscriptions, donations and sales, its existence was largely at the mercy of the state and prevailing economic trends. This relationship was the source, at times, of considerable tension and conflict of interest, as the creative aspirations of Scottish Craft Centre members did not always tally with the financial preoccupations of its state sponsors.

The original terms of the Scottish Craft Centre's constitution in 1949 stipulated that it should provide a worthy showcase for the best of Scotland's crafts, through the exhibition and sale of members' work. It was initially stressed that the crafts must also demonstrate practical links with industry, and that the Centre's members should provide industry with skills to assist in the production of prototypes for developing products. This practical and forward-thinking aspiration, which reflected the ideology of the Council of Industrial Design at the time, was however flawed; industry showed little interest in the operations of the Centre and it was very difficult to demonstrate, in any tangible form, the Centre's benefit to industry (Scottish Craft Centre 1986). In reality, the Centre acted more as a glorified retail outlet for members.

One of the advantages of becoming a member of the Centre was that you could sell your work in its shop, with a percentage of the profit going to the Centre. The Scottish Development Agency encouraged this, and as funding began to dry up towards the late 1970s and early 1980s, became adamant that its grant would only be renewed if the Centre could demonstrate an ability to become self-financing through the sales of its members' work. The linking of consumerism and cultural artefacts, in this case, the selling of craft objects to support a cultural institution such as the Scottish Craft Centre, could theoretically present positive outcomes for both maker and seller. In actual terms, however, as was the case of the Scottish Craft Centre, there were major discrepancies between the kind of objects the institution aspired to sell, the objects that were actually on sale, and the objects that the consumer ultimately wanted to buy.

It was never intended by members that the Centre would simply be a shop. Instead it was hoped that the

selling and exhibiting of objects would have a more elevating role to play in terms of educating the public. The Scottish Craft Centre chairman wrote in 1977 that the primary motivation for the creation of the Scottish Craft Centre was the belief the crafts formed an essential part of the culture of Great Britain, but that 'possession was probably the surest way of cultivating a true appreciation' (Draft of Statement by Chairman at the Scottish Crafts Centre Annual General Meeting 1977). Possession, in this context, was presumed to imbue the consumer with craft connoisseurship and taste. It was further argued that in order for craftsmen to realise their potential, they required a supply of discriminating and demanding clients, and the only way to achieve this was to establish a reputation for quality. This was, however, easier said than done. Although the overall preoccupation at the Crafts Centre was now on selling, there was the caveat of selling quality craft products to a discerning customer. Unfortunately the Centre struggled on both counts. As the minutes of the Centre indicate, members could not be relied upon to provide the Centre with a continuous supply of quality objects to sell. Consumers were generally not impressed by what was on offer, or worse, were interested in objects that the Centre preferred not to be associated with, such as hobby-craft and souvenirs. All these factors led to an unfortunate self-perpetuating situation that was the reverse to that which the Centre had originally aspired.

In some ways the Scottish Craft Centre can be considered a victim of its early successes. Whereas in its nascent years it enjoyed the status of being the only retail outlet for the crafts in Edinburgh, the craft renaissance of the 1970s led to a rapid proliferation of specialist independent craft galleries in its vicinity, where consumers now had a variety of the best work to choose from. As a non-profit organisation, the Centre operated a 'sale or return policy', which meant that members only received payment for their work if and when it eventually sold. This policy, although initially acceptable to Centre members, was now perceived as economically unattractive to makers, particularly when more competitive galleries were willing to pay them upfront for their work. Increasing pressure from the Scottish Development Association to improve sales or have their grant withdrawn meant that the Centre had to tread a very thin line between becoming more commercially orientated but continuing to maintain the high standards of product and presentation to which they aspired.

Minutes of meetings and letters throughout this period document members' concerns about the

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quality of the objects being sold in the Scottish Craft Centre shop. It transpired that many members were now electing to place their 'best' objects with more specialist galleries, leaving their lesser work to the Scottish Craft Centre. One member asked:

What exactly does it mean to say 'I am a member of the Scottish Crafts Centre'? Does it mean that 'I have a line of goods accepted but, of course, I have another cheap line which I also sell' or does membership mean 'I am a good all around craftsman and everything I do is done well and soundly'? (Panel Report 1974)

Even its chairman was forced to admit: 'Over the years a fair amount of poor work had crept in, and it was difficult to steer a course which, in eliminating this, might empty the shelves' (Panel Report 1960).

The Centre's president, Lord Haig, was dismayed to note that despite some beautiful objects being available, and the consuming public apparently showing interest, the Centre was still not financially self-sufficient. Was this due to a lack of appreciation on the part of the consuming public, or to the limited range of quality products on offer? Haig indicated that the reasons were far more deep-rooted:

... our financial precariousness seems to go rather deeper and indicate a situation in which the handcraftsman is at variance with the machine-minded civilisation in which we live. ... The idiom of the present generation is away from the detailed ornament, the beautifully engraved glass, the finely wrought iron. The modern idiom is expressed through modern techniques of plastic and concrete; beautifully shaped stone is now largely cut; and unless the handcraftsman is able to come to terms with the modern idiom, he is out too. (Minute of Annual General Meeting 1962)

Haig wrote compellingly about visiting Edinburgh College of Art and seeing a fine display of glass engraving that 'had a Jackson Pollock touch about it' (Minute of Annual General Meeting 1962). But it was evident that young craftspeople were not gravitating towards the Scottish Crafts Centre. The perception was that it lacked contemporary vigour and modernity, and therefore struggled to attract the newer, younger members it needed. The Centre's physical location, Acheson House, was certainly a contributing factor to this perception. Acheson House, a sixteenth-century property situated on Edinburgh's Royal Mile, was leased to the Scottish Craft Centre

in 1949 from Lord David Stuart, a member of the aristocratic Bute family (Cummings 1997: 68). Although the Centre owed its existence to a government grant, from its inception it had strong connections with the Edinburgh elite and Scottish nobility. Its founding chairman, John Noble, was the son of the first baronet of Ardkinglas, and its president, Lord Haig, was a descendant of the Scottish Clan Haig, dating back to the twelfth century. Early membership lists from the Centre indicate an abundance of similarly titled individuals. Many of these founding members were not actually craft practitioners but simply had a love for Scottish craft and a passion for preserving Scottish cultural heritage. Although much of the Centre's early success was down to the enthusiasm and conviction of these early members, many who worked as volunteers, its reputation for elitism and 'stuffiness' was to prove a limiting factor in its achieving longevity.

Design historian Elizabeth Cummings notes that it was significant that Edinburgh was chosen over Glasgow as the location for this government-funded national showcase (Cummings 1997: 68). Despite Glasgow being a commercial centre in its own right, Edinburgh had the advantage in terms of its links to aristocracy and cultural capital, which appeared to be an essential part of the Scottish Craft Centre's early identity. Cummings describes 'the cult of tradition' (Cummings 1997: 66) as something which exemplified British, and particularly Scottish, craft after the Second World War. In this context, the Scottish Craft Centre was an exemplar. In her article 'Living Tradition or Invented Identity' she illustrates how crafts people in Scotland 'celebrated past achievement' rather than future potential. Modernism in this instance 'symbolised not a positive future but an abandonment of heritage' (Cummings 1997: 66).

Cultural historian Christopher Frayling in his essay 'Forever Ambridge' discusses Britain's uncomfortable relationship with technology and subsequent yearning for a bygone era, which he argues is why Britain continues to mythologise the craftsperson (Frayling 2011). In particular, the minutes of the Scottish Craft Centre provide evidence of concerns about the Centre being run 'by an Edinburgh clique' (Panel Report 1974), and being 'not representative of the total scene of Scottish crafts' (Minute of Annual General Meeting 1980). An accusation often levelled at the Centre was that it was too traditional, something that chairman John Noble was keen to refute, arguing that 'Surely the aim should be to keep the balance between old and new in a living organisation' (Minute of Annual General Meeting 1964).

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In many ways, Acheson House can be seen as the physical embodiment of the Scottish Craft Centre's core values, and the battle to balance old and new was a constant source of tension amongst its members. The Centre's brochure of 1985 described the sixteenth-century property as 'one of the most unique and beautiful houses in Edinburgh's Royal Mile' (Scottish Craft Centre 1985). The objects housed within Acheson House aspired to be the equivalent, in terms of quality, workmanship and timeless beauty, to the property itself. For older members, Acheson House, with its historic interior of flagstone floors and timbered ceilings, was something to be cherished. Seemingly impervious to the demands of the outside world, the Centre was a haven to those who wished to escape from late-twentieth-century modernity. Promoted as a historic landmark along the Royal Mile, it was also popular with tourists, who came to the Centre looking for Scottish souvenirs.

However, by the 1970s it was clear that the ancient interior did not project the sort of image required for a forward-thinking crafts organisation. Parallels were made with London establishments, such as the British Craft Centre, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Design Centre, which all had contemporary craft shops but, unlike the Scottish Craft Centre, had consciously abandoned the precious image traditionally associated with the crafts (Scottish Craft Centre 1982). As Scottish Craft Centre vice president Robert Clark complained in an investment and development proposal for the Centre: 'At the outset Acheson House was eminently suited to the existing, somewhat staid, practices of the day, but they no longer apply ... the Centre must move with the times' (Scottish Craft Centre 1986).

The Scottish Craft Centre's council was not oblivious to these tensions, and when it became apparent in the 1980s that government funding for the Centre was at risk, due to its inability to demonstrate self-sufficiency, it commissioned several marketing studies on how to make the Centre more commercially viable. The external consensus was that Acheson House was a liability to the organisation. Although attractive, it suggested an art gallery or museum, rather than a serious retail operation, giving a 'look but do not touch/buy' impression. It was strongly recommended that the Centre either seek new premises (Marketing Proposal for Scottish Crafts Centre 1983) or, if this was not possible, clad all the inner areas to neutralise the visual impact of the historic interior (Scottish Craft Centre 1982). Although attempts were made to seek new premises, the subject of leaving Acheson

House proved highly emotive for members, and no satisfactory consensus was reached. Efforts were instead made to revamp the interior on a limited budget, and the Centre remained in its original premises until its demise in 1990.

As with many cultural organisations, the Scottish Craft Centre was reliant upon state funding, and in its final years found itself in particularly bleak financial circumstances. Despite emphasising its mission to 'seek to maintain and improve the standard of design and workmanship' (Scottish Craft Centre 1976), late 1970s inflation had rendered the Centre extremely vulnerable, and it was forced to make increasingly drastic economies. Plans to reinvigorate sales through an ambitious exhibition programme had to be severely cut back, losing the one activity that its chairman stated 'clearly marked the Craft Centre as being a retail outlet with a difference' (Draft of Statement by Chairman 1977). When the Scottish Development Agency halved their grant to the Centre in 1989, it was left with a deficit that rendered it bankrupt (Minute of Council Meeting 1989). By August the following year, after forty-one years in business, Scotland's only national showcase for the crafts was left with no other option than to close (Minute of Council Meeting 1990).

This paper set out to examine a largely undocumented period in Scottish craft history and see if any lessons might be applied to contemporary craft practice and policy. The 1970s were a unique period in time for the crafts in Britain, when they enjoyed an unprecedented amount of state-backed support in terms of funding and ideological attention. Scotland benefited from this, through money allocated to the Scottish Craft Centre. However, although the craft revival of the 1970s presented opportunities for the craft community across Britain, the Scottish Craft Centre was not fully able to capitalise on this. Indeed, this research demonstrates that despite intentions to create a national showcase for the best of Scottish crafts, the creative aspirations of the Scottish Craft Centre were often at odds with the financial demands of the cultural agencies providing the funding, as well as the aspirations of its members. This is essentially a story about the conflict between the commodification of craft and cultural policy, demonstrating that cultural artefacts, such as craft, when treated purely as commodities, can present the maker and the seller with difficult compromises. In the case of the Scottish Craft Centre, the desire to promote original, high-quality work was not always compatible with the necessity of producing something that would easily sell.

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This research has also touched upon an issue that is not only specific to Scottish craft but may be applied to cultural commodities generally, which is the difficulty in balancing the desire to safeguard heritage with the aspiration to embrace modernity. In the case of the Scottish Craft Centre, much of its original impetus came from wanting to promote craft as a means of preserving tradition, but this led to an identity which was more often associated with privilege and elitism, and failed to attract a younger, more contemporary membership that was so crucial to its long-term survival. An inability to ‘move with the times’ meant that the Scottish Craft Centre lost valuable business to more specialist retail outlets, which spotted opportunities presented by the 1970s craft revival that the Centre had missed. Because it struggled with an identity that was perceived by many as old-fashioned and reactionary, it was reduced to selling the kind of objects that many of its members did not want to be associated with, such as souvenirs or nostalgic forms of hobby-craft. Its ambition of educating the public in terms of appreciating quality Scottish craftsmanship was therefore never fully realised.

Twenty-three years later we again find ourselves in the midst of a craft revival, but the outlook in terms of Scottish craft and its relationship with cultural organisations is very different. Since 2008, Scottish craft is both nationally and internationally represented by Craft Scotland, a registered charity funded by the national agency for the arts and creative industries, Creative Scotland. Craft Scotland’s aim to ‘unite, inspire and champion Scottish craft’ (www.craftscotland.org) is primarily achieved through an online platform, which brings together makers, galleries, retailers and educational institutions. By making use of new media, Craft Scotland has freed itself from the constraints of physical location that hindered the Scottish Craft Centre. Its presence is contemporary and dynamic, rather than traditional or backward looking, appealing to students as well as established makers. Rather than finding itself at the rear of the craft revival, as the Scottish Craft Centre did in the 1970s, Craft Scotland instead appears confident that they are in the vanguard by ‘placing ourselves at the front of a global craft revolution’ (www.craftscotland.org).

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