

Finding distinctiveness in the dustbin: engendering a sense of place through waste

Dr Amy Twigger Holroyd

When we divert waste from landfill, we seek to regain the practical value of the materials we reuse. Yet waste material often carries another type of value, which is easy to overlook: it can provide an important sense of place. In this essay, I will draw upon a major collaborative research project, Design Routes, to discuss the ways in which designers can embed a sense of place in product narratives through the use of local materials and, more specifically, local waste materials.

Revitalising culturally significant products

The Design Routes research is exploring how design can make a meaningful contribution in developing and revitalising culturally significant designs, products and practices to make them relevant to the needs of people today. Culturally significant products are tangible, durable and portable artefacts that are linked to particular places, employ traditional making processes or are embedded in local ways of life. Their cultural significance is derived from social, historical and aesthetic characteristics valued by a particular community over time.

Today, for a variety of reasons, many of these designs, products and practices are in decline. Yet, across the globe, countless initiatives are seeking to revitalise them. I use the term 'revitalisation' to describe any initiative that brings new life to a culturally significant design, product or practice, while aiming to retain (or even enhance) the values associated with it. Designers are frequently involved in these initiatives, often playing a key role in shaping the interaction between tradition and innovation.

A central element of the research is the development of an accessible framework, built around a taxonomy of revitalisation strategies, to support key stakeholders engaged in revitalisation. The taxonomy has been developed through analysis of over 400 examples of revitalisation, examining the relationship of these examples to the traditions upon which they build. The strategies identified are organised into eight clusters. The clusters address diverse areas of interest in terms of revitalisation, from sustaining traditional practices through design to initiatives focusing on promotion, skills and enterprise.

One cluster, 'Value of Place', places a spotlight on place and provenance in product narratives. The strategies in this cluster are: *introduce traditional making practice in new place; reintroduce lost making practice in relevant historical location; and utilise local materials*. The final strategy will be the focus of this essay.

Provenance, terroir and local distinctiveness

Before looking at waste materials, I will begin by thinking about naturally occurring materials and the ways in which they can offer a connection with particular places.

The rush floor matting made by Felicity Irons and her company, Rush Matters, provides a useful first example. Each summer Irons harvests an incredible 3000 bolts of rush from rivers in the English counties of Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire. She then uses the material to produce floor mats, runners and fitted carpets, plaiting the rush into lengths three inches wide and sewing them together with jute twine. These products offer a clear connection with the specific locations in which the rush flourishes, and a readily apparent sense of provenance. Most commonly used with reference to food and works of art, provenance means the place in which something originates, and/or the record of ownership of an item that proves its authenticity (Oxford Dictionaries 2016a). In terms of culturally significant products, provenance can be translated as the story of an item's making.

The rush matting also illustrates another key concept in terms of products and place: terroir. Conventionally used with reference to wine, terroir denotes 'The complete natural environment in which a particular wine is produced, including factors such as the soil, topography, and climate' (Oxford Dictionaries 2016b). This specific environment gives the wine its characteristic taste and flavour. The same concept can be applied to other crops – including those, like rush, which are used to make durable objects rather than consumables. The terroir of rush is not limited to the place in which it is grown. The rush, once harvested, must be left out to dry, and the weather conditions during this process affect its colour. 'Prolonged sun gently bleaches to warm honey tones. During windy weather the colours have a more vivid green/blue hue' (Rush Matters, undated).

A different version of provenance and terroir comes into play when material from a very specific source – one with its own historical significance – is used to make a product. British maker Eleanor Lakelin, for example, produces a range of wooden vessels made from the remains of a cedar tree planted by the Duke of Wellington in

1827 at Kingston Lacy, a stately home in Dorset. Similarly, leatherworker Athene English produces a range of wallets using Russian reindeer leather that formed part of the cargo of a ship sunk in 1786. The 'Stradivarius of leathers' was discovered and salvaged over 200 years later (The Great English Outdoors, undated). Its unique characteristics derive from both the way it was originally produced and the conditions during the time it was submerged.

In some cases, the materials available in a specific location shape the objects that are made there. A prime example is the Orkney chair, a vernacular design created from driftwood and straw with a long curved back to provide protection from draughts. As Bernard D. Cotton explains, the distinctive design of the chair derives from the resources available on the remote Orkney Islands:

On the largely treeless Northern Isles, where wood was harvested as 'found' timber, often on the foreshore, or purchased as an expensive import, straw became an important and effective alternative material from which to make many items for which sawn wood or wicker might otherwise have been used. The straw of the indigenous black oats was used, and the locally grown bent or marram grass was twisted to form a strong cord. (Cotton 2008: 250)

Variation in local materials can lead, then, to variation in local products and consequently a sense of what British organisation Common Ground describes as 'local distinctiveness'. As founders Sue Clifford and Angela King explain:

Everywhere is somewhere. What makes each place unique is the conspiracy of nature and culture; the accumulation of story upon history upon natural history. . . . The unusual, the special, the idiosyncratic or the rare may be important factors in giving a place a sense of itself – the fortifications, the football team, the fritillaries, the fair. But identity is not bound up only in the symbolism of features and festivals. It is the commonplace that defines – the locally abundant plants, the specific wall-building methods, the accents and dialects – the context that exerts the binding force. (Clifford and King 2006: ix–xiii)

Why is local distinctiveness important? Clifford and King write compellingly of the ways in which a locally distinctive culture contributes to a sense of identity and connection with those around us. This is valuable – research by the New Economics

Foundation has investigated qualities which are essential for wellbeing, and identified the importance of a sense of relatedness to other people (New Economics Foundation 2009).

Local distinctiveness can be seen as a counterforce to the homogenisation frequently associated with globalisation. Author Paul Kingsnorth describes this homogenisation: 'In each case, something distinctive has been replaced by something bland; something organic by something manufactured; something definably local with something emptily placeless; something human scale with something impersonal' (Kingsnorth 2008: 7). Dissatisfaction with this homogenisation is far from rare. Craft writer Grant Gibson describes a number of factors – including a suspicion of big brands and environmental concerns – that have 'persuaded a certain type of (generally wealthy and middle class) consumer to think about provenance' (Gibson 2011: 20). Charles Heying, an academic who studies artisan economies, agrees that a contemporary desire for the 'back story' of provenance is leading people to rediscover the importance of place and local knowledge (Heying 2010).

For an object to offer a sense of place, the 'back story' must be readily apparent. In some cases, the material itself may indicate this story. The variable colouring of the rush matting, for example, carries the implicit suggestion of natural forces. Yet in many cases the detail of an item's making will be hidden, and must be drawn out through effective communication. As such, this approach of using local materials connects with another cluster in the taxonomy of revitalisation strategies: *Promotion*. Within this cluster are a series of strategies which enable designers and makers to tell compelling stories – whether through text, image and film; effective branding and advertising; or face-to-face events.

Waste materials

Having established the concepts of provenance, terroir and local distinctiveness in relation to naturally occurring materials, I would now like to turn my attention to waste. Could the detritus of domestic and industrial life provide the same connection with place as materials that have grown in the soil, water and air of a particular location?

Let us first consider provenance: the story of an item's making. I would argue that in this respect the use of waste materials has the potential to enhance a sense of provenance, in that it provides additional chapters in a product's story. This is

perhaps especially the case for products made using waste from a very specific source. A small batch of Orkney chairs were made in 1889 using ancient oak beams removed from the roof of the cathedral in the largest town on the islands (Cotton 2008). The maker, David Munro Kirkness, gave detailed attribution on a label attached to each chair, indicating the high status of this 'special' material.

A similar approach can be seen in the products made by Rekindle using wood from demolished houses in Christchurch. This wood has two layers of meaning in terms of provenance. Firstly, much of it is indigenous rimu and kauri timber logged in the early twentieth century, of a quality that is no longer available due to sustainable forestry practices in place today. Secondly, the material is emotionally significant to the inhabitants of the city, and – more specifically – the owners of the damaged homes (Warnock 2014).

The use of emotionally significant waste is common in terms of textiles, and especially clothing. As sociologist Tim Dant explains, clothes are the objects which play the most intimate and constant role in our individual and social lives (Dant 1999). Quilts have long been made from damaged cast-off garments, with the fragments of recognisable fabric scraps allowing the associated memories to live on. Contemporary designers have developed new concepts along similar lines. The 'Rag Chair' made by Dutch designer Tejo Remy, for example, is made from piles of discarded clothes held together with black metal straps. Swedish designer Josefin Landälv has created a weave structure that transforms textile waste into a new durable fabric, inspired by the traditional technique of rep weaving.

Can the concept of terroir translate to waste? The work of British designer Will Shannon suggests that this may be the case. Shannon produces Heath Robinson-esque installations that function as prototypes of localised production set-ups. Several of these concepts are based on the use of local waste. For example:

Autonomous Workplace No 004: Mobile Chipboard Factory is . . . a mobile production line, which creates new products from unwanted furniture wherever it sets down. The furniture is put through a shredder making it into rough saw dust that is then mixed together with a 'syrup' to create a papier maché type material. Moulded into the desired shape it then dries into a hard and durable product. (Disegno 2011)

At first glance, 'unwanted furniture' may appear to be a homogenous and ubiquitous category. Yet it is possible that the composition of this discarded material – its age, colour, size and so on – would vary from place to place. The 'syrup' produced by the Mobile Chipboard Factory could, therefore, show subtle variations according to location. This idea prompts me to wonder whether the waste that is abundant in each place could tell us a lot about life in that particular location and thereby represent a type of terroir.

Of course, I am in danger here of becoming overly romantic. Much of the waste material generated today is associated with the 'emptily placeless' material culture of industrial production. While post-consumer waste would arguably bear the evidence of the cultural practices of a particular community, pre-consumer waste is more likely to be interchangeable: eerily consistent from London to Lagos, and lacking in the compelling back story necessary to build a sense of provenance. Realistically, it is difficult to argue that such material offers any inherent sense of local distinctiveness. Yet the work of Gente de Fibra, a craft cooperative from the town of Maria da Fé in Brazil, demonstrates that generic waste can be fashioned into distinctive items which are strongly linked to the places in which they are made. The artisans produce products made from cardboard – a local waste material – combined with banana tree fibre. In this case a type of waste that we might struggle to see as locally distinctive is given a stronger sense of provenance by being used in conjunction with a naturally occurring local material and local craft skills.

Conclusion

In this essay I have discussed the potential ways in which waste materials, when reused to create new products, can contribute to a sense of place. I have argued that notions of provenance, terroir and local distinctiveness, more usually connected with natural materials, also have relevance to waste.

Many waste materials are rich in provenance; tales of their previous lives can add interest, variety and complexity to the narrative of any newly created item. Yet great effort is required to maintain and pass on these narratives. Provenance will always be precariously contingent on the care demonstrated by the custodians of waste materials. In some cases the unique characteristics of waste arising in a particular place can be seen as a type of terroir, reflecting the practices of making and use taking place there. Other cast-off materials are much more generic; in this situation,

effort is needed to develop cultural significance through combination with more locally rooted materials or the use of locally distinctive making skills.

Taking a step back, we might consider how these ideas could shape future practice. Should we seek to extend the practices of reuse described here? The initiatives discussed clearly have merit, encouraging resourcefulness and maintaining or even enhancing the value of waste materials. On the other hand, the impact of these activities on the industrial system is surely minimal. Initiatives that convert waste into locally distinctive products are typically craft-based, and the economics of craft are such that only a small proportion of any industrial waste product could ever be reused. In fact, such initiatives run the risk of disguising the need for more comprehensive solutions by inadvertently offering a façade of responsibility to waste-generating industries. As Simon Fairlie argues, 'Recycling offers business an environmental excuse for instant obsolescence' (Fairlie 1992: 280).

On the other hand, locally distinctive waste-based artefacts could have the power to influence change by challenging our attitudes and preconceptions. They show that cultural significance can arise in the most unlikely of settings, encouraging us to reframe our ideas about value in terms of materials. They remind us that materials – whether virgin or reused – come with a back story, a story that ought to be recognised, interrogated and celebrated. Furthermore, they remind us that materials have a future, potentially lasting far beyond the time that they are in our possession. Perhaps the stories of waste-based provenance and terroir related here would most productively be used as parables: stories with the potential to provoke thoughtful reflection. If people were to recognise and value the unique narratives underpinning the objects that pass through their hands every day – and their own responsibility in caring for those objects into the future – then perhaps behaviours with regard to waste, in all sectors of society, may start to change.

References

- Clifford, S. and King, A. (2006). *England In Particular*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Cotton, B. D. (2008). *Scottish Vernacular Furniture*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Dant, T. (1999). *Material Culture in the Social World: Values, Activities, Lifestyles*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Disegno (2011). *Designers in Residence* [24 August]. Available from: <www.disegnodaily.com/article/designers-in-residence> [Accessed 8 September 2016].

- Fairlie, S. (1992). 'Long Distance, Short Life: Why Big Business Favours Recycling'. *The Ecologist*, 22(6), pp. 276–83.
- Gibson, G. (2011). The Rise of Craftsmanship. In M. Fraser (Ed.), *Design & Making* (pp. 18–27). Danish Crafts.
- Heying, C. (2010). *Brew to Bikes: Portland's Artisan Economy*. Portland: Ooligan Press.
- Kingsnorth, P. (2008). *Real England: the Battle Against the Bland*. London: Portobello Books.
- New Economics Foundation (2009). *National Accounts of Well-being: Bringing Real Wealth onto the Balance Sheet*. London. Available from: <www.nationalaccountsowellbeing.org/public-data/files/national-accounts-of-well-being-report.pdf> [Accessed 8 September 2016].
- Oxford Dictionaries (2016a). *Definition of Provenance*. Available from: <www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/provenance> [Accessed 8 September 2016].
- Oxford Dictionaries (2016b). *Definition of Terroir*. Available from: <www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/terroir> [Accessed 8 September 2016].
- Rush Matters (undated). *Harvesting English Freshwater Bullrush*. Available from: <www.rushmatters.co.uk/rush/harvesting/1/> [Accessed 8 September 2016].
- The Great English Outdoors (undated). *About Us*. Available from: <www.atheneenglish.com/tgeo> [Accessed 8 September 2016].
- Warnock, A. (2014). A Burning Ambition. *NZ Life & Leisure*, July/August (56).

Bio and experience

Before joining Nottingham Trent University in 2016 as Senior Lecturer in Design, Culture and Context, Amy Twigger Holroyd was a postdoctoral Research Fellow on the Design Routes research project at the University of Leeds. Since 2004, she has explored the emerging field of fashion and sustainability through her 'craft fashion' knitwear label, Keep & Share. Her doctoral research at Birmingham Institute of Art & Design focused on amateur knitting as a strategy for sustainability, and informed her monograph, *Folk Fashion: Understanding Homemade Clothes* (I.B.Tauris, 2017).