

The Human Side of Modern Craft

Handcrafted items are experiencing resurgence in popular culture, but many of today's workspaces are void of craft.

HAVE YOU EVER GIVEN MUCH THOUGHT TO BUTTONS? IF NOT, TAKE A MOMENT.

Chances are, you're imagining a small, round, clear plastic disc with four perfectly placed holes. It's utterly utilitarian in its design, and universal in its appearance. But what if a button could be more than just a fastener? Something inherently useful but also beautiful, even provocative. Something imaginative with a story. What if a button were made of carved wood with a seemingly random and yet artfully placed pattern of thread holes? Chances are, it would be the coolest button you've ever seen. It would make a statement. You'd want to touch it and feel the texture. You'd want to pull all your old buttons off and sew these new buttons back on, each one with a slightly different stitching pattern between the holes. You'd never look at buttons the same way again.

This is the essence of craft: the artisanal vision, combined with sophisticated technique that transforms a utilitarian object into an expression of beauty and humanity.

But the sad truth is, like the common button, many of today's workplaces are void of craft. Many leaders measure the value of their work on managing costs and increasing productivity, so there's not always a lot of attention paid to creating more inspiring or beautiful work environments. Consideration for issues like aesthetics, wellbeing or employee engagement sometimes slips to a lower priority.

Modern craft is becoming an antidote to uninspired workspaces, not only heightening functionality and aesthetics but also humanizing the workplace experience.

Yet those same issues have been shown to contribute to an organization's overall performance, whether it's talent recruitment and retention, employee engagement or stock prices.

Leading organizations understand that connection, and they're beginning to realize how an infusion of craft can help define their space and express their culture. Modern craft is becoming an antidote to uninspired workspaces, not only heightening functionality and aesthetics but also humanizing the workplace experience.

THE MAKER MOVEMENT

The need to make things with our hands defines us—it's a vital expression of our humanity. When we transform ordinary materials into something new, we reimagine what's possible and change how we experience the world around us.

In the past craftsmen were tinkerers, builders, inventors, masters of their tools and medium. They transformed raw materials into useful and beautiful objects with their hands. They produced one-of-a-kind goods over a long period of time.

Craft doesn't necessarily mean a one-off. It's something that can be replicated, can be mass-produced but still has intrinsic values.

MATT CLAYSON | Director, Detroit Creative Corridor

Today, the Maker Movement is capturing people's imaginations with the idea of crafting things once again, only this time in more modern ways. The idea of handcrafted goods is taking hold across diverse facets of culture from craft beers to community creation labs. Community-based Maker Faires are happening all over the globe.

From the success of online marketplace Etsy, featuring handmade and customized goods, to the increasing popularity and affordability of 3D printers, people are finding more ways to make things powered by shared resources and knowledge. They are beginning to see the inherent differences between crafted goods that spark the imagination and those designed solely to serve a utilitarian purpose.

"I think the Maker Movement is tapping into a really basic fact about us as human beings," says University of Virginia Professor Matthew Crawford. "From infancy we learn about the world by manipulating it, by poking it and seeing how it pokes back."

Today modern craft is more accessible to more people than ever before thanks to new technologies. It represents the nexus of the digital and physical worlds, where technology converts digital designs into physical artifacts. Programming abilities are now as equally valued as hands-on tinkering skills while their inseparable combination provokes us to rethink the meaning of mastery. The crafters' toolbox may still contain traditional machining and woodworking implements but it also likely includes computer-controlled cutters, carvers and drilling machines. The New Makers are just as likely to program a robot as knit a sweater.

Although it weighs less than five pounds, the 5_MY chair can hold more than 300 pounds. That's because it's made from molded and heated layers of carbon fiber, a new material for the furniture industry. The new manufacturing process builds in plenty of handwork to complement the mechanized steps.

“Craft doesn’t necessarily mean a one-off,” said Detroit Creative Corridor Director Matt Clayson. “It’s something that can be replicated, can be mass-produced but still has intrinsic values. It tells a story of the person designing it, making it, but it is something that can reach a broad marketplace. That’s the beauty of what technology is bringing to this movement.”

Craft is becoming big business.

CRAFT IN THE WORKPLACE

Perhaps not surprisingly, furniture is the top category on Etsy, but when you turn your attention to furnishings for the workplace, there’s a visible lack of craft. Many workplaces are designed with a bias toward pragmatism and can feel utilitarian. When craft is included it’s used sparingly and not very democratically, found mostly in leadership spaces.

“Craft can combine utility and beauty to become a distinct alternative to mass produced goods,” explains Coalesse’s General Manager Lew Epstein. “The role of craft in the workplace may combine the refined selection of materials, or seamless mix of digital machine and handwork. In this role, craft becomes a dynamic medium that can be applied to personalize the workspace and express cultural values—ultimately enriching our environments and work experiences.”

Coalesse considers modern craft as both a noun and a verb, according to Epstein. It’s a noun when craft is identified as a useful object. It’s a verb when crafting that usefulness into a repeatable or customizable solution that reflects a distinct capability and its maker’s mark. Either way, craft remains a central theme of the brand.

John Hamilton

Design Director, Coalesse

An industrial designer with training in engineering, John leads the design and development team at Coalesse’s studio in San Francisco, Calif. John has international experience in product development and has been involved in numerous projects that have resulted in innovative products to support new ways of working. He’s inspired by the cycle of disruption and mastery. “Design is all about challenging the boundaries. You disrupt with new ideas, then master them. That’s what modern craft is and what it brings to the world.”

“We’re a brand that’s about bringing inventive ideas to life,” says John Hamilton, Coalesse’s design director. “We’re experimenting with the idea that craft is now a combination of using new materials, new technologies and new methods that blend machines and handwork. We’re looking to master these new ways of doing things.”

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Take the <5_MY chair, a recent introduction by Coalesse. Don't be fooled by the name—this chair is no lightweight. Although it weighs less than five pounds, it can hold more than 300 pounds. That's because it's made from molded and heated layers of carbon fiber, a new material for the furniture industry. The new manufacturing process builds in plenty of handwork to complement the mechanized steps. "It's hand built and hand finished," Hamilton said. "It looks like it just popped out of a mold, but it's handcrafted in almost every dimension starting with the digital design and ending up with the final product. Through another form of digital design, we're experimenting with a new color app that can help customers visualize and then co-create the final steps that complete a <5_MY chair. This new experience may include simply selecting a standard color, customizing a color (PMS) or matching the color seen in a photograph taken with a camera phone. Such combinations are intended to explore new ways to push the boundaries of modern craft and take it further."

In this way, craft can extend beyond the final product, explains Epstein. It's a way to engage others as participants in a creative journey. The result is a deeply satisfying experience, full of stories and choices.

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JOHN HAMILTON | Coalesse

THE CALL OF CRAFT

Craft is undergoing a dramatic reinvention across the board. From its heritage as rudimentary, handmade goods to its more sophisticated museum-quality offspring, craft is now a cultural movement touching multiple categories and, ultimately, our work lives. Its modern manifestation skillfully combines artful handwork with the accuracy of machines, bringing together the digital and the physical to produce, and reproduce, works that are as useful as they are beautiful.

In the workplace, craft is an antidote to the impersonal, an expression of individuality and a celebration of creativity. As brands such as Coalesse continue to remain at the forefront of exploring new materials, technologies and manufacturing methods, craft will continue its natural evolution and bring more inspiring experiences to the workplace for decades to come.

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