

Artisanal design

Handmade products are today part of an enlightened lifestyle



Architect educator

Andrew Torres is a designer and educator based in Barcelona and New York and an active collaborator with Forsite Studio, a sustainable design-build practice based in Austin, Texas. He earned an A.B. from Harvard University and a Master of Architecture from the University of Texas at Austin. He has worked with SHoP Architects, Rogers Marvel Architects and Soluri Architecture in New York City, Estudio Carme Pinós in Barcelona, and Miró Rivera Architects in Austin and was an Assistant Professor in the School of Architecture and Design at the New York Institute of Technology in Bahrain.

On a recent buying expedition, I came across a major furniture company that allows customers to pick out the exact one-of-a-kind wood tabletop they want. Each of the handmade tabletops has unique shape and pattern of reinforcing butterfly joints reflecting the tree it was made from. On the company's website, one can peruse the tabletops available and even learn about the workshop and craftsmen that create them. In many ways, that tabletop encapsulates the essence and irony of a massive movement in contemporary consumer and design culture.

Artisanal. Handcrafted. Local. There is perhaps no stronger trend in the Western zeitgeist right now. Once upon a time, handcrafted or locally produced goods were seen as charmingly quaint, even old-fashioned. Today, they are the height of cool. Artisanal, handmade products are now seen as part of an enlightened lifestyle that eschews mass produced, globally available products for local, unique, and often precious alternatives.

That such a trend has emerged speaks to a collective desire for a tangible connection to world around us that has become increasingly virtual and global. We have lost our connection with the real, physical and the act of making. Compared to a century ago, most of us do not make things. We deal in abstractions. We generate information, perform services, and manage staff. Even as architects and designers, we operate to a startlingly high degree in virtual spaces. So the act of making, of creating something physical, resonates quite strongly.

The desire for the real and tangible perhaps also stems in part from the recent financial crisis, which revealed just how unreal much of the global economy and our own wealth really are. Artisanal products made by hand are the antithesis of the complex and illusory financial instruments that lead to the crisis. They are concrete and real.

As global consumer culture becomes increasingly homogenous and therefore banal, customers seek out items that are somehow unique or meaningful.

Today, consumers prefer small-batch handmade products that bear the mark of the person who made them and reflect the place they were made.

In this sense, the story of the product matters. Part of this is about being a responsible consumer, but it is also about imbuing what might otherwise be an inert object with soul. It is about creating meaning. Part of the pleasure derived from a purchase is knowing its narrative. By buying that product, consumers participate, however passively and obliquely, in that narrative.

Perhaps the most vital contributor to the artisanal movement is the growing sense that there is value in something being created through hard work and intention rather than simply made or manufactured. It is an awareness of the designer or chef or craftsman and an appreciation of their efforts in creating their product. The mark of the craftsman matters.

The reality though is that nearly everything is handmade. Even something as technologically advanced and complex as an iPhone is largely assembled by hand. But an iPhone does not bear the mark of the person in China who made it. As it is, an iPhone is an anonymous product scrubbed of all but a few select traces of its origin.

And the irony of that one-of-a-kind handmade tabletop mentioned previously is that its ostensible rejection of technology vis-à-vis its rough-hewn, natural uniqueness, is only made possible by a vast technological infrastructure.

However, it would be cynical to conclude that the key element of the artisanal movement is the crafting of the message around the product. Highlighting the process of creation, celebrating the craftsman, and drawing the consumer into that narrative is not mere marketing. At its core, the essential element of the trend is authenticity, that most intangible of qualities. In such an environment, the values of good design we hold dear as designers and architects would seem to find a receptive audience making this a rather fertile professional milieu.