This article challenges the assumption that “tradition” is a quality pertaining chiefly to objects, stylistic conventions, or the use of materials. Equally, it refutes the notion that tradition is merely the perpetuation of ritualized practices or skilled techniques. By considering the complex relation between vocational migration, heritage, and identity among contemporary fine woodworkers at London’s Building Crafts College, it argues that tradition is a state of mind — a recurring nostalgia for an idealized past, or the desire for a utopian future. More specifically, the article investigates a “tradition of longing” for engagement in nonalienating modes of production, aesthetic work, and an authentic way of living.

People interested in the details of the arts of life feel a desire to revert to methods of handicraft for production in general.

— William Morris, 1888

In September 2005 I commenced a three-year anthropological study of building craft and the transmission of skill-based knowledge among fine woodworkers at London’s Building Crafts College. A key aim of the research is to produce a detailed ethnographic study of Britain’s contemporary craft context that will also allow a cross-cultural comparative analysis with my previous work with masons in Arabia and West Africa. The current project, supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), includes two years of fieldwork, during which I am attending the college as a full-time student in order to conduct a direct study of craft training and establish lasting professional relations with the next generation of fine woodworkers for long-term research.

Based on interviews and data compiled during the first year, this article challenges the popular assumption that “tradition” is a quality pertaining chiefly to objects, stylistic conventions, or the use of materials. Equally, it refutes the notion that tradition is merely the perpetuation of ritualized practices or skilled techniques. By considering the complex relation between vocational migration, heritage, and identity construction among
trainees at the college, I will argue that tradition is a state of mind — a recurring nostalgia for an idealized past, or the desire for a utopian future. More specifically, the article investigates a “tradition of longing” for engagement in non-alienating modes of production, aesthetic work, and an authentic way of living.

The article begins with a brief historical account of London’s Worshipful Company of Carpenters, including their growing interest in technical education and their role in founding the Building Crafts College in the nineteenth century. The following section explores a certain spirit of craftwork as expressed by one of Britain’s recognized furniture makers. His practices and aspirations embody ideals of both the nation’s rural past and a possible postindustrial future, and they communicate a strong commitment to locality, balanced with a responsible acceptance of duty to the global environment.

This sets the stage for a presentation of short case studies of these individual college trainees, whom I have categorized as “vocational migrants.” These mature, generally middle-class men and women have quit former careers to seek meaningful and satisfying work and engage in a more aesthetic way of living. Each harbors individual goals, some of which differ, or are in conflict with, those of fellow colleagues. However, a number of common themes unite this group in their struggle against the hegemony of late-capitalist alienating modes of production, aesthetic work, and an environmental approach to sourcing materials.

Following the section of personal studies, the article next explores an English tradition of “longing,” and it contextualizes the aspirations of the vocational migrants and other contemporary furniture makers within its history. With Thomas More’s Utopia, a genre of utopian writing was established, anchored in humanism and set in locations spatially or temporally displaced from the author’s own. The culmination of this strain of socialist utopia arguably came with William Morris’s News from Nowhere. Morris, like More, painted a future of fair economic distribution, social equality, and, importantly, pleasurable work. As a prominent figure in the English Arts and Crafts Movement of the late nineteenth century, his vision of craftwork has continued to resonate with generations of artisans. Morris’s writings emphasized an intimate relation between small-scale handicraft production, the workshop setting, and the balanced life of the craftsperson. He maintained that meaningful work integrated mind and body through the skilled use of the hands and resulted in happiness and self-actualization.

Ruth Levitas has observed that utopias are not strategic plans for realizing revolutionary ideologies; rather, the key function of utopia is to educate desire and direct human longing toward a future of more pleasing and enriching possibilities. This view has been borne out by the “designermakers” who first emerged in the 1970s British Craft Revival. Leading members of this community pointed to Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement as the inspirations for their drive to make quality objects and find pleasure in work. Many have also adopted a “green” agenda, integrating environmentally friendly approaches in their sourcing of materials and production methods. I argue that the utopian ideals they share are today “written” in their social and professional comportment and in the objects they create, and that these act as vehicles for the education of desire for successive generations of craftpeople — as well as for their clients, and, hopefully, the wider public of consumers.

In conclusion, the article addresses the disjuncture between the subject and the realization of utopian desire. The objects of longing — namely, satisfying work and self-actualization — are shown to be forever displaced, both temporally and spatially. Aspirations to gather together material resources, the processes of making, and a community of clients into a physical and spiritual sense of “place” are vexed by real global market forces that dislocate, abstract and alienate. Equally, the reproduction of the craft has been deterritorialized, as apprenticeship training, once embedded in the workshop and the community, has been supplanted by formalized training regulated by institutions and detached from the market. In this sense, the fine woodwork craft, with imagined associations to satisfying work and life, has been effectively rendered a “hyper-tradition,” fed by nostalgia for an idealized past and a longing for an alternative future.

Vocational migrants to the trade face multiple hurdles to success and slender possibilities for financial gain. Their choice to abandon lucrative careers for craft training must therefore be conceptualized as an attempt to reform their own subjectivity and secure a sense of integrated self within the disorienting flux of late capitalism and globalization.
THE CARPENTERS COMPANY, TECHNICAL EDUCATION, AND THE BUILDING CRAFTS COLLEGE

London’s Worshipful Carpenters Company received its first charter of incorporation from Edward IV in 1477. But a professional association seemingly existed at a much earlier date. Indeed, the first concrete evidence of the “Brotherhood of the Carpenters of London” appears with their “Boke of Ordinances” drawn up in 1333 and submitted to Richard II in 1388. Though the Carpenters Company was not included among the so-called “Great Twelve Liversies of the City of London,” they came to possess one of the city’s most substantial halls, and the company’s freemen played a decisive role in the physical building of the city.1 Throughout the late medieval and early modern periods, timber was the principal material for domestic construction in London, and the carpenter, not the mason, was the master craftsman in this realm.2

The Great Fire brought about enormous change to the construction industry and sparked a long decline in the status and authority of the city’s working carpenters. As noted by the economic historians Alford and Barker, without its established property interests, survival of the Carpenters Company would have been unlikely. By necessity, the company underwent the transformation from a craft organization to a modern livery after 1666.3 Instrumental to this change was the Rebuilding Act of 1667. Guided by the plans of Sir Christopher Wren and greatly profiting bricklayers at the expense of carpenters, it required that all exteriors be constructed in brick or stone with the exception of door cases, window frames, and shop fronts.4 The enormous demand for skilled and unskilled labor during that period also brought a flood of “forrens” into London, ultimately resulting in declining wages by the early 1670s.5 Despite the protests of several companies, including the Carpenters, Joiners, Bricklayers, Masons and Plasterers, the authorities refused to expel the “forrens,” who, importantly, bolstered both the workforce and the dwindling population of the city.6 By 1739 the Carpenters Company ended its futile attempt to control the trade in London, and turned its focus instead to growing its prosperity as a livery.7

One of the original objectives of trade guilds was to provide relief for poorer brethren of the fraternity. Funds for this activity were drawn from “revenues and property bequeathed by charitable individuals.”8 Over the centuries, the Carpenters Company thus came to administer almshouses, make charitable donations, and, notably, support education. The company’s interest in education began during the reign of James I with offers of scholarships to needy students attending Oxford and Cambridge. However, its role as a benefactor, especially for technical education, grew considerably throughout the nineteenth century in response to Parliament’s call for educational reform as stipulated in the Education Act of 1870.9 Also known as the “Forster Act,” the bill laid the groundwork for Britain’s modern systems of formal and technical education.

Until the late seventeenth century Britain was essentially a “one-way technological debtor,” importing most of its industrial and manufacturing techniques from the continent. This situation began to reverse in the final decades of the seventeenth century. And by 1750, according to Epstein, premodern England had been transformed from “a technological and under-urbanised periphery to the most technologically innovative and urbanised country in the West.”10 Rapid technological development and urbanization, coupled with increasing industrialization into the nineteenth century, wrought monumental change in the work and lives of craftspeople. Economic quantification and rational standardization were deeply entrenched in all aspects of manufacture, as exemplified by the plethora of late-eighteenth-century publications like Mr. Hoppus’s Measurer, which systematically categorized, graded and priced all trade materials required by the carpenter-builder.11

As the promotion of domestic industry came to dominate the concerns of Europe’s mercantile states, the correlation between technological advancement and economics strengthened, and competition between nations to develop new and more efficient productivity intensified.12 By the late nineteenth century, Britain’s position as a leader in industrialization was being threatened by the manufacturing strength of other nations, most notably Germany, which invested more heavily in technical education. Looming worries about the nation’s economic and trade prowess impelled the carpenters and other city companies to sponsor the development of available technical education in London.13 In 1880 the City and Guilds of London Institute was founded as a joint central body for the promotion of technical and scientific learning; and, with generous support of the companies, construction of both the City Technical College and a national institute (to become South Kensington’s Imperial College) was started in 1881.14

Sharing in the Victorian enthusiasm for exhibitions, the Carpenters, in conjunction with the joiners, hosted the first annual carpentry show at their hall on Throgmorton Avenue in 1884. It was during this period that the company also adopted an active role in promoting building-craft education and establishing recognized qualifications and trade standards. Banister Fletcher, a professor of architecture at Kings College London and a vocal advocate for technical schooling, was the chief initiator behind the first carpentry and joinery examinations administered by the company in 1888.15 The three-day exam comprised theory and practical components and was mainly targeted at those aspiring to become foremen or clerks of work. In 1890 eleven successful candidates founded the Institute of Certified Carpenters (renamed the Institute of Carpenters in 1976), and the company’s examination continued to serve as means of entry to the institute until 1956.16 As one member who joined in 1898 later reflected, “There was enthusiasm and hope that the Institute would become to the craft a great and inspiring head to revive the nobility of the craft which it was said existed in some past age.”17
The traditional seven-year apprenticeship, codified in the Statue of 1563, had been severely weakened by the sheer magnitude of social, economic and technological change in Britain during the nineteenth century. Craft learning was most noticeably affected in the nation’s urban centers. Not only did industrial progress pose a threat to trades rooted in an early medieval past, but — more alarmingly — it jeopardized the continuing transmission of their skill-based knowledge, which had historically unfolded between generations of masters and apprentices in a workshop setting. This practical knowledge was not written and recorded, and its preservation relied on an ongoing physical engagement of craftspeople in their trades. The fervent attacks launched by the likes of Carlyle, Ruskin and Morris on the laissez-faire economics of the factory, and their rallying of support for a return to agriculture and skilled artisan work, drew considerable public attention to the plight of British craft.

It merits quoting each since the essence of their messages retains contemporary relevance.

The haggard despair of Cotton-factory, Coal-mine operatives, Chandos Farm-labourers, in these days, is painful to behold; but not so painful, hideous to the inner sense, as the brutish god-forgetting Profit-and-Loss Philosophy, and Life-theory, which we hear jangled on all hands of us.

— Carlyle

And the great cry that rises from all our manufacturing cities, louder than their furnace blast, is all in very deed for this — that we manufacture everything there except men; we blanch cotton, and strengthen steel, and refine sugar, and shape pottery; but to brighten, to strengthen, to refine, or to form a single living spirit, never enters into our estimate of advantages.

— Ruskin

They are called ‘labour-saving machines’ — a commonly used phrase which implies what we expect of them: but we do not get what we expect. What they really do is to reduce the skilled labour to the ranks of the unskilled, to increase the number of the ‘reserve army of labour’ — that is, to increase the precariousness of life among the workers and to intensify labour of those who serve the machines.

— Morris

In 1893 the Carpenters Company founded the Trades Training School in Great Titchfield Street, West London, to provide instruction in wood, masonry and other trades. The strategic aim was to promote traditional building crafts in the face of industrialization, rising mass production, and the widespread devaluation of handicraft. The college served this purpose throughout the twentieth century. In 1948 it was renamed the Building Crafts Training School, and this name was changed to the Building Crafts College in 1993. In 2001 the college moved to a new and larger premise in Stratford, East London, built on land belonging to the Carpenters Company (fig. 1). The Carpenters continue to promote the craft, as demonstrated by the annual Carpenters Craft Competition, held jointly with the Institute of Carpenters, and it would seem that the future of fine woodworking will remain safeguarded in its present vocational form by the college and other similar training institutions throughout Britain.

The institutionalization of craft learning, however, has had the affect of entrenching a divide between trade theory and practice. The transfer of learning from operational workshops to college classrooms has translated into an increasing reliance on standardized examinations and the codification of knowledge in textbooks, starting with such early editions as the Fletcher brother’s *Carpentry and Joinery* (1897) and Ellis’s seminal *Modern Practical Joinery* (1902). During the last century the Institute of Carpenters inaugurated its own series of examinations in addition to those administered by City and Guilds, including a “Pre-Vocational Certificate” for school-leavers intended to “bridge the gap
between school life and a vocation in wood.” In 1987, with the launch of the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) framework, control over curriculum and carpentry standards was further distanced from the traditional master’s workshop. NVQs are overseen by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, and measure vocational competence against set national standards.  

In 2002 the Building Crafts College became a government-sponsored Center of Vocational Excellence, offering NVQs in Wood Occupations on behalf of the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB). In general, this program serves so-called “apprentices” who attend the college over three years on scheduled periods of block release from their paid work as site carpenters and laborers. This scheme has attracted funding and enabled the college administrators to play a more direct role in the nation’s construction industry. But there is a perceived risk that the overwhelming volume of work involved in training “apprentices” will overshadow the much smaller craft-intensive fine woodwork program that has historically been the flagship of the institution.

Though the remit of the college has changed since its nineteenth-century beginnings, it retains a degree of its founding spirit. More specifically, the institution remains committed to fostering craft excellence and to meeting the ever-present challenge of perpetuating the craft traditions in wood, masonry, and lead. These programs attract small but diverse student populations.

Based on my fieldwork with the trainees and recent graduates in fine woodwork, the remainder of this article will focus on those I call “vocational migrants.” Demographically, this group comprises a mix of mature male and female students, most of whom would be described as “middle class.” Though the majority reside in or near London, others travel from greater distances to attend the program. All have abandoned professional careers or other steady employment for what they perceive as a more fulfilling vocation and lifestyle.

Ultimately, the people in this group long to escape the atomizing effects of globalization, and they seek the possibility of new subjectivities that promise a greater control over their daily production and practices. Despite the real risk of poor wages and underemployment, they consistently justify the choice of fine woodwork as “satisfying” and “meaningful” work. They also associate handicraft with self-autonomy and the acquisition of personal virtues, which link contemporary practitioners to an imagined heritage of craftspeople stemming from Britain’s nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts Movement, and extending further back to the medieval guilds and fraternities.

THE SPIRIT OF HANDICRAFT

Tea structures the workday. But today, after morning break, we are directed from the canteen to a classroom in the training college. Heavy work boots shuffle through the doorway, and saw-dusted bodies settle into seats. One woodwork student grumbles to his neighbor about missing bench time. Tools have been idled as project deadlines loom.

The speaker flashes a smile at the small gathering, shifting nervously and making final inspections of his Powerpoint presentation. He is dressed all in black and has a smart shock of silver hair; the broken arm of his black-rimmed spectacles is neatly mended with tape. His attire sniffs more of “architect” than carpenter.

The room quiets, and the program convenor introduces the man before us: he is Philip Koomen, an esteemed furniture maker and an active figure in the growing ecological movement in Britain for sustainable timber sourcing, use and design.

“Becoming a furniture maker,” Koomen starts, “was a move toward a utopian ideal.” The craft revival of the 1970s made that realization more possible, and today he considers himself fortunate to have played a part in it. At twenty-one years old and one year into a college social-science degree, Koomen explains, he left academia to seek the “nature and purpose of work” and a “practical approach to making a difference.” For him, furniture-making would be a “path to self knowledge,” bringing together “the designer and the maker as one.” He recounts how the following year he set up a partnership with a fellow carpenter near Henley-on-Thames to repair furniture and do reproduction work. As a self-taught craftsman, learning and experience came through patient practice with his tools and materials, and his professional engagement was guided by a spiritual outlook and code of ethics. What began as a search for an appropriate form of work became an ongoing evolution of self as a designer-maker.

Koomen then explains how, with the launch of AGENDA 21 (the United Nations’ declaration on environment and development for the twenty-first century), he and a small number of other British woodworkers responded to the call for a grassroots approach to sustainability. Not only did the 1992 Rio Earth Summit underline the need to combat deforestation and develop sustainable forestry practices, but it brought home how “the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in industrialized countries.” Koomen explains that correcting this situation will require the sensitization of both producers and consumers to the fragile relation between economy, lifestyle, and environment.

He took this challenge personally. “I understood wood as a commodity, but I needed to understand the forestry debate,” he tells his audience of college trainees. “I had to develop a fitting business model.” The impetus of the model was to narrow the distance between the forest resources, the
process of making, and delivery to the consumer. Local sourcing and sustainable use of timber in his native Oxfordshire then became the focus of a doctoral study. And, Koomen explains, he has since become an advocate for the craftsperson as educator.

“Craftsmanship is a sort of universal language that connects the designer-maker with the client-consumer,” he says. Producers have a responsibility to make clients aware of the ethical dimensions as well as the aesthetic issues in their consumer choices. He believes that educating people effectively creates markets for sustainable furniture design. As he sums up these relationships: “Craft is a model of sustainability,” and we should be striving to “build things that last, things for the future.”

Koomen’s vision seems to engage both with the craft traditions of England’s rural past and with an imagined future that honors locality while embracing the duties of global citizenship. And his weave of sustainability, self-sufficiency, emplacement, ethics and happiness resonates with a number of the trainees in the audience. As future “designer-makers,” they share an aspiration to be employed in meaningful work and to forge direct relations with the raw materials of their craft and with individual patrons who will commission their creations. Ultimately, they covet a sense of control and a position to oversee their entire enterprise.

Others present also harbor this ambition, but are less persuaded by Koomen when his talk turns to the role that the Baha’i faith, spiritual growth, and Sufi Islam have played in his professional life. For a few of the young trainees who came directly to the fine woodwork program from secondary school, the spiritual message simply falls flat.

It is agreed by all, however, that Koomen is a master craftsman. And his business success provides a beacon of hope.

CASE STUDIES OF VOCATIONAL MIGRANTS

Karl left school with dreams of being an oboist, and decided to major in music at Nottingham University. By the end of studies, however, he came to the difficult realization that he wasn’t likely to succeed as a performing musician, and soon afterwards he took a job with the British Broadcasting Corporation. He was employed for five years there as a program researcher for radio before making the break to retrain as a fine woodworker.

“I wasn’t happy with my work, being just a cog in a giant machine,” Karl says. “The BBC is a creative place, of course, but I felt completely removed from the audience. Some people might say ‘Oh, great bit of research,’ but most had no clue I was working on the program.” He read stories in the papers about professionals who switched to vocational trades, and thought that he, too, would be better satisfied doing something more creative with his hands than pounding a keyboard.

The financial risks were high, as were the social ones. Karl was nearly thirty, with a mortgage and limited savings. “I had never contemplated NVQs (National Vocational Qualifications) or manual work,” he explains. “My school pushed everyone toward university. If you’re middle class, you go to university. That’s the mentality. Most of my friends have safe jobs, earning big salaries, and now here I am spending all my life’s savings, but on something I really want to do.”

Karl recognizes that the chances of reaping a huge financial reward from woodwork are slim, but he has discovered pride in being part of a historic profession, and in possessing skills that remain relevant but have become increasingly rare since the nineteenth century (fig. 2).

A second fine woodwork trainee, Richard, tells a different story. “I had a complete lack of satisfaction with corporate, computer-based life,” he says. “There were always bigger processes happening at higher levels over which I had little control. I had lots of responsibility, but little authority. I was always busy, always stressed.”
After receiving an M.Phil. in social sciences, Richard took a job at a London-based environmental consultancy. “I joined, believing that I would be part of something that could make things better, but I discovered that in reality we were only making things less worse.” Stress-related illness eventually forced him to resign at thirty-one and embark on a new road to living and working. Becoming a carpenter now promises the chance to be autonomous, and to be free to seek a professional identity that doesn’t conform with the dominant Western ethos.

“Working with wood and hand tools is like a retreat, almost in a religious sense,” he explains. “I feel that I can cut myself off from the negative manifestations of modernity — the noise, the constant material consumption — and return to being someone capable of completing something, from a thought to a finished product.”

Richard describes how woodworking has given him a sense of integrity and transformed work into a satisfying way of living day to day. “I can turn up in any place and just be a carpenter, a woodworker. It’s a skill that I think there’ll always be a demand for, and to have it seems good and honest” (fig. 3).

A third student, Dawn, describes herself as never having quite known what she wanted to do. She finished a university degree in marketing, and later held posts in various business institutions. Her last job was in the IT department of the British Home Office in Croydon, earning what she describes as “nice money,” and saving it with a view to making the next move.

“I wanted to work with my hands, to make things, and I liked wood because it’s a natural material,” she explains. “It was probably in my head for years, but not seriously. And finally having a pot of cash, I put the idea to the forefront.”

When she arrived at the training college, Dawn was keen on learning architectural joinery, but as the course progressed into the second year, her interests, like those of most others, shifted to furniture.

As opposed to some male trainees who consider the craft to be “manly,” Dawn believes furniture making is carpentry’s link to the female and the domestic arenas. “I find working with wood a really feminine thing to do,” she says. “To be making things, to be creative with your hands, whether with a paintbrush or whatever, is seen to be a quite feminine quality. In no way does it make me feel ‘manly’. That’s for sure! Doors, windows and stairs might be quite butch, but furniture is a girly thing. They [i.e., the male trainees] just don’t realize it. They’re a bunch of big girl’s blouses!”

In a more serious tone, she adds: “A piece of furniture’s like a little baby. You put all that love into making it and nurturing that wood to get it into the form that you want. It’s incredibly female. I don’t understand how it can be seen as ‘manly’. That’s a very traditional view of carpentry, being a man’s thing, isn’t it? But there’s absolutely no reason for it, even physically, unless you’re doing heavy construction-type work.”

For Dawn, furniture-making is also ultimately about “people pleasing,” and her aim to fully integrate the client’s vision with the production process is informed by her prior experience as a facilitator in the business world. “People should have an input rather than buying it premade,” she asserts. “There needs to be some individuality in this mass-produced world of Ikea and Habitat. Furniture makers are in a position to help people realize their own art.”

In contrast to the hectic pace and sense of fragmentation associated with her previous career, Dawn explains that woodworking allows her to focus in a calm and controlled manner. “I don’t see myself as a high-end artist making the next fabulous ‘one-off’. Nevertheless, she explains that putting all that energy into creating new and useful things is “a nice place to be.”

“We’re not academic failures,” she adds. “Many of us are high achievers who decided to take a left turn. Maybe we should be in firms, project-managing for thirty, forty or sixty ‘K’, but we ditched all that for something better.”

Nevertheless, a nagging uncertainty remains for her as to whether her imagined new livelihood will be tenable. “Most people probably think that wanting to be an independent furniture maker is a pipedream,” she confides. “And I guess it remains to be tested” (fig. 4).

The views of a fourth student, Harvey, also turn to economics as a measure of success. “Gone are the days when we can really make much of a living,” he says. “We’ve got a tough situation in fine woodwork. It’s still a ‘shed in the backyard’ industry. As a rule, people set up on their own and try to make it work. A few of us may be lucky enough to make our mark, become one of the top ten in the country, and make some serious money out of it.”

Yet, despite these concerns, Harvey regularly iterates that he is not in woodwork for the money. “Never have and never will be!” he exclaims. “I don’t want a huge factory or anything like that. I just want to be able to release what I want to release.”

Harvey is a final-year trainee, talented designer, skilled carpenter, and perfectionist. Unlike Dawn, he aspires to producing luxurious bespoke pieces for a privileged, art-savvy clientele.
Yet, even though he strives for recognition, he denies that material gain is his key motivating force. Being able to create is what is vital, and being in that mode “is where other people like me to be, because they like me best when I’m happy.”

“Doing fine woodwork,” he contends, “makes me a better person.”

Art has long been Harvey’s main passion, and creating things is the key outlet for his emotions. He studied art in secondary school and was accepted into the interior design program at London Guildhall University. Contrary to his expectations, however, he soon found that the course was stifling his passion.

“Short bouts of freedom to think creatively were followed by what seemed like months of sitting at the drawing board,” he explains in an exasperated tone. “There was lots of paperwork and searching though books and trade magazines for products and finishes — just the sort of thing that didn’t interest me.”

He struggled to finish, and then spent the next few years drifting from one venture to the next before heading to Stafford, where he enrolled on a college art foundation course. He built props part-time for the college theater, working under the direction of a senior carpenter who he described as “an old-school type.” “When I got it wrong, the guy threw spanners and hammers at me,” Harvey tells me half-jokingly. “But I learned lots from him.”

After six years of “earning a pittance,” he deemed it time to get proper qualifications and hone the wood skills he had acquired. Now, with his fine-woodwork diploma complete, he proudly distinguishes himself as a “craftsman,” and hopes to never find himself in a “factory-type shop just knocking things out.

“I need to be with people who are masters of their trades, who have passion. People similar to me,” he says (fig. 5).

In contrast to Harvey, Anna had no background in woodworking when she began. At forty-one, after nearly two decades in nursing, she started out in search of a career where she could work artistically with her hands. “That aspect was absolutely fundamental,” she says with conviction. “It’s when I’m lost in the moment of creating that I feel most comfortable.”

Anna regrets not having ventured into something “arty” during her school days, but her secondary modern in North London “tried to make everyone into something ready for a job in the bank.”

There was no history of professional artists in her family, and “it all seemed very dangerous.” As she recalls, “neither parent was particularly handy, so I normally came up with the solutions for fixing things. I knew this made me happiest, but I couldn’t see how I could translate that into work.”

Like many fellow woodwork trainees, she insists that money was never her prime motive. Given her science background, a vocation in nursing seemed a logical choice.
“What I confused at the time was that just because something is vocational, doesn’t mean that it’s necessarily going to satisfy you. What I really needed was a creative outlet.”

While working at a hospital in South Wales, Anna and her partner bought a house which served as her testing ground for “DIY” work. She also arranged with the hospital to spend one day a week on a garden-design course. “That was fantastic! I really enjoyed that, but I came to the conclusion that I didn’t want to draw pictures of people’s gardens and have them made by someone else. I wanted to do the whole thing. But in reality that sort of work was just physically too challenging.”

“When I started fine woodwork,” Anna recounts, “my partner was a bit skeptical. Not about me making money, but about whether I would ever ‘think’ again. Would we ever have proper conversations again? Who would I be mixing with? How much intellectual stimulation was I going to get?”

These concerns reflect popular misconceptions in Britain that building and craft trades are for the intellectually and academically challenged, she believes. “An awful lot of people from educated backgrounds have thought carefully about why they want to do this,” she says, referring to her fellow fine woodworkers. This is a profession that requires “patience, dexterity, a degree of creativity, a holistic approach, and . . . yes, more patience.”

“I’ve got so much pride!” she announces jubilantly. “When I actually tell people, ‘I’m a carpenter,’ the reaction is amazing! ‘Oh, that’s so unusual!’ they say. I’m absolutely delighted with myself that I’ve done this. I’m almost smug about it. I don’t feel the need to apologize for my profession in any way.”

Like Dawn, Anna isn’t driven toward the superstar status enjoyed by some of Britain’s elite designers: “If I really wanted to make it as a top furniture maker in this country, I’d have to put so much of my time into advertising and promotion rather than being a crafts person, and I really don’t want that. It’s not why I made the change.”

Anna believes there is enough work in London to make a decent income. “I can make enough money doing carpentry and joinery work, and do fine woodwork on the side . . . and if I’m lucky, that will eventually become most of what I do.” At the end of the day, she hopes to be producing things that people want and that she takes pleasure in making (fig. 6).

Oliver provides my last short case study. After completing a philosophy degree at University College London and making a stab at entry to the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, he took an interim job as an agent with a London real estate broker. It was financially rewarding, and he found himself surrounded by people in the building industry, including architects and developers. This sparked an interest in the building trades, and he soon realized that lots of contractors were doing a poor job.

“I always had a leaning toward doing something creative,” he tells me. “But for some reason I put it off.

Perhaps because it’s not seen . . . well, there just aren’t many of those sorts of careers that make financial sense,” and he had allowed the pragmatic side of his mind to take control.

He recalls his enthusiasm for artwork when he was a boy, and declares, “if you have that inside you, you’ll always find an outlet for it. For years I was really into cooking.” He came across a telephone number for the Institute of Carpenters, and from there was directed to the Building Crafts College.

“At first I was interested in the whole building side of things.” During his first year in woodwork he even took an evening course in plastering. “My idea was that I could run a more efficient business if I knew as many trades as possible. I wanted to buy places, do them up, and sell them. The thought of working for other people just didn’t appeal.”

His introduction to furniture-making changed all that, and by his second year he was rigorously exploring his potential as a designer. Importantly, he discovered that there was “something quite magical” in realizing an idea.

For Oliver, carpentry is less about some finite body of knowledge of craft technique as it is about “practical problem-solving.”
“That’s the beauty of all practical disciplines — you can rely on your wits. There’s a huge scope of possibilities and maybe that’s why so many engineers find their way into the field.”

Oliver ranks “personal satisfaction” tops, and states that “to succeed in life you have to enjoy what you’re doing.”

“Financial success is not my main motivator; otherwise, I would have stayed working as a property agent,” he says. But money did figure more strongly in his future goals than most other vocational migrants. “I’m a competitive person, ambitious, and that’s the sort of thing you relate with wealth . . . so it’s always been at the forefront of my mind, but ultimately it isn’t my main drive.”

He describes his ideal situation as one in which he can generate enough income as a recognized furniture designer to invest in property for restoration, interior design work, and future sale.

“In a world where everything’s being homogenized, there’ll always be people looking for something individual — something special and different from the rest,” he concludes confidently (fig. 7).

**SHARED ASPIRATIONS AND ANXIETIES**

Karl values the opportunity to be creative with his hands; Richard cherishes control over his production and his environment. Dawn underlined the importance of human relations and the need to bring clients into the process. She alluded to the appeal of working and shaping natural materials into functional and aesthetic artifacts, while Harvey spoke of channeling his passion and energies into the design and creation of unique objects that fuse art and technology. Anna discovered self-esteem in possessing specialized skills and in being part of a craft tradition. Oliver thrives on the constant challenges, problem solving, and the broad scope of possibilities that hand-crafting furniture offers.

The values and assets cited by these men and women echo those esteemed by the majority of vocational migrants in the fine woodwork program. They perceive carpentry to be a wholesome profession rooted somehow in humankind’s early cultural beginnings and basic needs. These associations serve to connect contemporary practice with an ancient heritage that finds universal expression in the woodwork of all peoples at all times, as well as in the unique expressions that have evolved in particular regions and places.

In an almost Rousseau-like sense, these people construe the heart of the craft as “noble” and “honest,” uncorrupted by Western modernity’s division of labor, technological abstraction, speed, placelessness, and alienation from the meaning and value of work. They believe a clear, unambiguous connection exists between the fine woodworker and his or her environment of tools, materials and marketplace.

Hand tools are particularly important to this vision. They are conceived to be an extension of the limbs, hands and fingers, and regular practice with them is thought to result in a coordinated integration of mind, body and tool, forging direct and animated relations between one’s subjectivity and things-in-the-world (fig. 8). One writer recently noted how woodworking hand tools “have become probably the most complex, numerous and varied of all categories of hand-craft tools.” Yet their design, mechanics and function are readily available to scrutiny and logical contemplation — and to practical alteration, renewal and repair when necessary. Many tool parts are also discussed with biological metaphors: “the ‘head’ and ‘claws’ of a hammer, the ‘frog’ and ‘throat’ of a plane, the ‘jaws’ of a vice, the ‘eye’ of an adze,” making them conceptually and physically familiar.  

The materials, tools and methods employed in the workshop are also tangible and can be appropriated by the body through direct engagement and hard-earned experience. The body serves as the primary vehicle for learning and performing craft skills, thereby blurring the boundary between theory and practice, and uniting mind, body and spirit in activity.

This unity was recognized by Ruskin in his nineteenth-century writings on ironwork:
All art worthy of the name is the energy — neither of the human body alone, nor of the human soul alone, but of both united, one guiding the other: good craftsmanship and work of the fingers joined with good emotion and work of the heart.36

Unlike the traditional on-site apprenticeship systems I have studied in Yemen and Mali (or, for example, those studied by Dilley in Senegal, or Simpson in western India37) theory and practice remain somewhat divided by the Building Crafts College curriculum, with scheduled separations made between reading and writing assignments and workbench time. Nevertheless, the unanimous preference for instruction among trainees, including those with backgrounds in higher education, is for demonstration and practice. They deem a combination of watching, imitating and practicing the most effective means of learning. Ralph Waldo Emerson also observed that . . . [words] cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth. They break, chop and impoverish it. An action is the perfection and publication of thought. A right action seems to fill the eye, and to be related to all nature.38

In the activity of woodworking, physical performance and problem-solving are coupled, each informing and modifying the content and progression of the other in an unfolding dialogue. Attitude and emotion also have a profound impact on the quality of work experience and creative output. The program at the Building Crafts College encourages trainees to invest themselves fully in the processes of design and making by tapping into their passion for the craft, and into their sensitivities for tools and materials.

Working with wood has frequently been described as “sensuous,” stimulating and invoking the senses of sight, touch and smell: the mellow coloring of resinous redwood, the aromatic cedar of Lebanon, chocolaty American walnut, and the spicy tannins of oak that purple the fingertips. Every plank of timber possesses distinct properties — grain, figure, texture and durability — and each behaves differently under the blade of the plane (fig. 9). As Walter Rose eloquently wrote in his classic, The Village Carpenter:

To the woodworker the varied dispositions of woods are almost human; even in the same species they differ, some yielding to his wishes as though glad to co-operate, others stubborn and intractable.39

Auditory senses, too, are important, providing “information on the effectiveness or accuracy of a movement.” Again in Rose’s words:

The sound of tools properly used is a pleasing tune. The craftsman has no need to examine a saw to know if it is sharp, or if it is handled properly. Nor need he look at a plane to know if it functions at its best. The ill-used tool makes a discordant noise which is agony to the trained ear.40

A “sixth sense” employed in woodworking is that of the somatic system, bodily perception associated with the position, location, orientation, movement and muscular tensions of the body and limbs. Mature trainees and seasoned woodworkers

FIGURE 8. Workbench training and evaluation.
often describe their engagement at the bench using such terms as focused, meditative and calming. At the college, all claimed that working with tools hones the sense of discipline and control over thought, and coordinates actions and movements. Somatosensory data is what sensitizes the carpenter’s awareness to such things as stance at the workbench, the angling of a chisel in the hand, the rhythm of sawing, the force of the mallet, and the pressure applied with a plane. Practice and experience fine-tune somatic perception to the task at hand, enabling the confident performance and rapid recalibration of position, applied force, and movement that characterizes the “expert.”

For several vocational migrants, the satisfaction derived from a direct bodily engagement is further heightened by their zeal for hand tools and their appreciation of the “naturalness” of wood as a material (fig. 10). The program at the college emphasizes the importance of mastering hand tools and promotes their use over power tools whenever practicable. Proper care and maintenance of cutting edges is stressed, and trainees are encouraged to buy old tools and restore them to working condition for regular use at the bench.

Among those I met there, Karl and Richard were strong devotees of salvaging rebate planes, molding planes, grooving planes, marking gauges, dovetail saws, and mortise chisels, purchasing them from websites, markets, and second-hand shops. Not only was there a financial motivation in this, but both equally appreciated the often-superior quality of the steel and iron castings manufactured in the past. Restoring tools also contributed to the broader ethos regarding sustainability and green politics voiced by Koomen.

Coordinated efforts were also being made by trainees to ensure that college timber supplies were harvested from sustainable sources and, if possible, from Western European forests in order to reduce transport distances and environmental impact. According to a recent World Wildlife Fund report, the U.K. imports more illegal timber than any other European country, constituting an estimated 28 percent of its foreign timber intake. A barrage of reports linking illegal timber sourcing with environmental degradation, global warming, and Third World poverty influenced trainees’ selection of timber species for projects and their decision to use off-cuts from the timber racks when possible.

figure 9. Woodworking student, Toby, cramping a component for a piece of furniture at the workbench.

figure 10. Overview of a workbench and the hand tools used for crafting a bedside table.
Dawn was a particular advocate of these practices. She developed a method of glue-laminating available off-cuts of oak to produce the thicker sections needed for a display unit. And she spoke ardently of one day settling in Eastern Europe to start a small furniture-making industry using salvaged timber from construction waste and demolitions, and thereby fostering regional awareness of forestry resources.

Fine woodwork was also associated with quality and the production of “heirloom” pieces that would be passed down through generations, as opposed to being disposed after a contemporary trend or fashion had run its course. In sum, environmental conservation and responsible use of materials figured prominently in the strategies of many vocational migrants.

However, for vocational migrants, the above tactics for revolutionizing life and work were offset by a number of deep-rooted anxieties and the sense that serious obstacles loomed. Emphasis during the two short years of study at the college is on the acquisition of carpentry skills — not preparation for the marketplace or how to manage a profitable business. By contrast, in traditional on-site apprenticeships, skill training is typically integrated with the economics of the shop, and apprentices are exposed to daily interactions with a spectrum of actors, including other tradespeople, merchants, suppliers, brokers, accountants, tax officials — and, importantly, clients, with all of their idiosyncratic expectations and demands.

In the words of one former graduate of the fine woodworking program, “the college is set apart from everything else, which I suppose is part of its appeal, but it’s sort of like it’s operating in a little bubble.” This holds true of most institutionalized vocational programs. They offer the luxury to explore ideas, make mistakes, learn a wide variety of skills, and progress at a personal pace. But this is weighted by the impossibility of inculcating the sort of rounded experience needed to launch a business venture. Arguably, these economic aspects may be considered part and parcel of one’s postcollege education under the aegis of more experienced employers; but given their late ages, previous experiences, and ambitious expectations, all vocational migrants sought professional autonomy on the not-too-distant horizon.

Ideals of professional success and financial goals varied widely — from those who aimed to make their mark on the glittering stage of British design, to others who aspired to earn a simple but secure living as small-scale carpenters and furniture makers. But if there was a commonality, it was that all renounced money as a main incentive; this was borne out by the fact that several had left careers that offered more certain financial reward.

There were, however, underlying tensions that revolved around money matters. “Can I afford the tools, machinery and the space to set up shop?” (The question of affordable space is especially salient for London residents.) “Can I generate enough work?” “Is there a sufficient market for fine furniture, and for my ideas?” “Will I earn enough to survive and carry on as a carpenter?” And, perhaps most worryingly, “Will I have to go back to my desk in the city?”

At the 2006 “New Designers Show” in Islington, twenty-eight colleges and universities leased space to exhibit the latest furniture designs by graduating students. It was apparent here that the sheer number of designer-makers churned out annually by British higher education far exceeds the market’s buoyancy for costly ingenuity and bespoke pieces. By necessity, most graduates will explore other, more commercial niches, and many will eventually abandon the field. Thus, for many, the prospect of a dystopic future, once again staring into a computer screen or enduring dreary board meetings, looms threateningly on the horizon.

Other anxieties simmering below the surface include uncertainty about one’s potential as a designer and craftsman. Fine woodwork demands exacting precision in marking out, cutting, chopping and planing; minimal tolerances in fitting and joinery; and near perfection in veneering, polishing and finishing. Design requires vision, novelty, knowledge of historic styles and contemporary trends, aesthetic judgment, understanding of proportion, and an engineer’s sagacity of structure. A designer-maker must also possess the aptitude for drafting and reading scale drawings and rods (FIG. 11).

**FIGURE 11.** Woodwork student producing scale technical drawings for making a new furniture project.
This represents a daunting skill set, which still doesn’t take account of the social and business skills needed to run a workshop. And despite this complex array of expertise, for some trainees the nagging question of whether carpentry was a “worthy” pursuit persisted, echoing concerns of parents and partners, and conditioned by a prevalent undervaluation of manual vocations in the U.K.

Perhaps the most pressing worry, and that to which all other anxieties ultimately related, was the question of autonomy and self-realization. The desire for autonomy was not a quest for isolation, but a search for a self-supporting life free from the numbing, mechanized constraints of state bureaucracy; free from the abstract economics and marketing structures imposed by corporate interests; and free from the alienating conditions of late-capitalist urban culture. Fine woodworking held the promise of uniting mind, body and spirit in pleasurable activity; of liberating creative potential; and of engaging in a mode of production that linked producers and consumers through the demand for, and making of, meaningful objects.

The well-established furniture maker Fred Baier has posted these words of encouragement for neophytes on his website manifesto:

*If you want to make it in the field of making things, you need single-mindedness, determination preferably without arrogance and an inner confidence in the face of nay-sayers. . . . It’s frowned upon nowadays to choose a career for its life qualities rather than its pecuniary rewards, but that’s the only real way to prevent work being something you don’t like doing. . . . If you want to release your full creative potential, resist as far as possible, for as long as possible, the urge to be secure. . . . Deal with your customers very carefully. Don’t let them dilute your ideas, and watch the lure of patronage.*

A TRADITION OF LONGING

The social position of vocational migrants can be better understood by considering it within a far-reaching tradition of utopianism in Britain, which looks both to the past and to the future. In 1888 William Morris wrote:

*People interested, or who suppose that they are interested, in the details of the arts of life feel a desire to revert to methods of handicraft for production in general; and it may therefore be worth considering how far this is a mere reactionary sentiment incapable of realisation, and how far it may foreshadow a real coming change in our habits of life as irresistible as the former change which has produced the system of machine-production, the system against which revolt is now attempted.*

Of course, Morris’s prediction of “a real coming change” never materialized. But the spirit of his revolt survives in agendas nurtured by numerous twenty-first-century communities of craftspeople, as it does among the trainees I interviewed.

In Britain, the longing for an alternative way finds perhaps its earliest literary manifestation in the fanciful fourteenth-century poem “The Land of Cokaygne.”46 But it was not until 1516, under the reign of Henry VIII, that Thomas More published *Utopia*, a book that established a new and lasting genre for the expression of political will.

*Utopia* (meaning “no-place”) is set, like “Cokaygne,” on a distant island. There, all citizens are involved in agricultural production, and each is taught a special trade, including wool and flax processing, stone masonry, blacksmithing and carpentry.46 More argued that private property should be abolished because it was the root of the inequitable distribution of goods, the cause of the dissatisfying organization of human life, and the reason why a handful of powerbrokers lorded over a vast majority of impoverished laborers.47 He wrote, “where money is the only standard of value, there are bound to be dozens of unnecessary trades carried on, which merely supply luxury goods or entertainment.”48 By contrast, the main impetus behind *Utopia*’s straightforward economy is to provide an abundance of time away from the drudgery of labor to pursue intellectual cultivation, the “secret to a happy life.”49 Pleasure and happiness, More later contended, should be sought in “any state or activity, physical or mental, which is naturally enjoyable,” and which serves basic human necessities without inflicting harm on others.50

After more than four centuries, these communal utopian ideals would resonate again under the pens of Ruskin and Morris. But in the interim, Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1627) charted a different path for More’s utopian genre. Unlike the devoutly spiritual and superstitious world of the early Tudors, Bacon’s era stood at the brink of the Enlightenment, and his support of scientific inquiry and assertion that “knowledge is power” colored his utopian account.51 As A.L. Morton has described it, Bacon’s outlook was one that “confidently believed that the whole universe, from the solar system to the mind of man, was a vast complex machine and could be mastered absolutely by a sufficient understanding of the laws of mechanics.”52

According to Morton, a theme of enlightened self-interest endured from Bacon’s era into the next century, where it was much in evidence in works such as Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. Here, “utopia is a one-man colony where the individual owes everything to his own efforts and is neither helped nor hindered by anyone.”53 Like other utopias of the eighteenth century, Defoe’s — aside from its island setting — had little in common with More’s communal ethos, universal equality, and insistence on pleasurable work. Indeed, it was not until the full thrust of industrial capitalism blackened the landscape and menaced all traditional modes of production that the English utopia returned sharply to these earlier romantic aspirations.54
“The foundations of society were never so shaken as they are at this day,” thundered Ruskin in The Stones of Venice (1851). “It is not that man is ill fed, but that they have no pleasure in the work by which they make their bread, and therefore look to wealth as the only means of pleasure.”55 Ruskin championed the creative freedom liberated by the arts and crafts in place of the soulless grind that plagued the nineteenth-century laborer. It was his chapter on “The Nature of Gothic,” in particular, that deeply inspired Morris.56

The central theme explored in Morris’s seminal utopian work, News from Nowhere (1890), was the relation between work and pleasure. Here, utopia is set not on an island, but in a twenty-second-century Britain that has reconstituted its rural heritage and embraced a return to an agrarian economy and a medieval tradition of craftsmanship. Corrupt parliamentary politics have given way to a socialist form of decentralized popular democracy; money has been abolished; formal education has been replaced by experiential learning and apprenticeship; and useless, repetitive toil at industrial machines has been superseded by meaningful forms of work that dissolve the division between intellectual and manual labor.

Morris was not adverse to machines that freed people from repetitive and mundane tasks; but he maintained that, though “wonders of invention,” the bulk of industrial machines merely served the production of “measureless quantities of worthless makeshifts.”57 As opposed to Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward, published two years earlier (a utopian vision of machines and industrial armies in which the United States of America is organized as one great business corporation run by the people and fulfilling their collective capitalist interests58), News from Nowhere, published in 1890, called for the revival of the medieval workshop with its small-scale, ecologically sustainable, high-quality craft production.

Then, as now, the argument against Morris’s vision was that handmade items are considerably more costly than mass-produced ones. Therefore, his prescribed role for craft is criticized for merely serving the indulgences of the elite. Indeed, this contradiction continues to challenge the socialist persuasions of some trainees at the Building Crafts College. It also conflicts with the views of established members of the fine woodwork trade who wish to see individual, quality workmanship one day replace the homogenous, assembly-line furnishings that crowd shops and homes. Morris, too, was a self-declared and politically active socialist, and was conscious of the problem. Thus, in his tale, demand and production are based on need, not excess or profit; and without monetary exchange to drive the market, people choose to engage in work for pleasure and self-actualization.

Morris rejected the existing capitalist industrial society of his time. And by at once turning to a romantic image of England’s medieval past and innovatively reconstruing this into something new (as he did so successfully in his artistic designs), he was able to project a future of alternative possibilities. As Ruth Levitas has written, by rearticulating and propelling the backward-gazing nostalgia of Carlyle and Ruskin into the future, and by supplementing Marx with a dimension of the individual’s sensibilities, values, and desire for self-realization, Morris “effect[ed] a synthesis between Romanticism and Marxism which enriched and transformed both.”59 Thus, his dream of the transformation in life and labor was to be realized not through centralization and state governance of regulations and communal principles but through the willed and “active participation of individuals in all aspects of the social process.”60

Utopia, Levitas has argued, is not a blueprint for change, like Marxist ideology; rather, its key function is the education of desire and longing.61 Utopia “enables people to work towards an understanding of what is necessary for human fulfilment, a broadening, deepening and raising of aspirations in terms quite different to those of their everyday life.”62

Paul Ricoeur has also differentiated between the concepts of ideology and utopia. He has drawn a dialectical relation between the two, whereby the former functions to preserve and legitimate the identity of a person or group, and the latter is a vehicle for challenging the status quo and exploring possible ideals toward which we are directed, but which we realize we will never fully attain.63 Utopia guides this exploration and educates desire.

According to Levitas, News from Nowhere offers a poignant critique of alienation, and “invites us to experience what it would mean to be in full possession of our humanity.”64

THE TRADITION OF LONGING AS A HYPER-TRADITION

In 1973 the economist Ernst Schumacher published the influential book Small is Beautiful, in which he called for an entirely new lifestyle for Britain and the West. This new life would be based on alternative methods of production and new patterns of consumption: “a lifestyle designed for permanence.”65 Schumacher’s vision was unquestionably utopian, and its objective was to educate desire and human longing for something better. He squarely challenged the industrial methods and technological basis of the twentieth century, calling for complete reforms for agriculture and manufacture based on small-scale, ecological, user-friendly technologies. In line with utopian writers from More to Morris, Schumacher underscored the necessity for people to derive pleasure from daily work. The machines of modernity have strictly reduced or eliminated the need for productive, skilled handwork with real, natural materials, he wrote. In our society, “such work has become exceedingly rare, and to make a decent living . . . has become virtually impossible.” Engagement in craftwork has become a luxury, he observed; and he provocatively diagnosed modernity’s “neuroses” as rooted in our disengagement from satisfying, creative handwork.66

A new national movement referred to as the Seventies British Craft Revival emerged around the same time as...
Schumacher’s publication. Pioneering craftspeople of the movement included Jeremy Broun, Fred Baier, David Colwell, Martin Grierson, John Makepeace, and Alan Peters, who apprenticed with the famous Arts and Crafts furniture maker Sir Edward Barnsley. Their common aim was to engage in small-scale bespoke productions that tapped into the turn-of-the-century English Arts and Crafts traditions of quality, honest use of materials, and pleasurable work. At the same time, they desired to lay the foundations for a new and forward-looking tradition of British furniture making.

In a website history of the so-called “designer-makers,” Jeremy Broun notes that the gradual postwar replacement of the traditional apprenticeship with college training resulted by the 1970s in a loosely connected group of graduates who had set up “cottage workshops” and forged a professional network through the exhibition circuit (i.e., Prestcote Gallery, Oxfordshire) and the emerging media on handicraft, including the newly formed Crafts Council’s magazine.67

The movement was reinforced throughout the 1980s and 90s by graduates from various colleges, including Parnham, Rycote and Buckinghamshire, as well as by a growing number of independently established, self-taught furniture makers.68 One of a few remaining carpenters in the Chilterns’ town of West Wycombe conceded, “Some of today’s best furniture makers are those older people who changed careers and chose carpentry. They’re intelligent and usually self-trained. They’re not making overly complicated pieces like craftsmen in the past — with carvings and cabriole legs — but they’re making good-quality, straightforward pieces with simple geometries and uncomplicated joints.” Yet, like Morris, today’s “designer-makers” are not Luddites; they recognize a place for the machine in their production. According to Broun, machines serve “a vital part of economic evolution; they’re making good-quality, straightforward pieces with simple geometries and uncomplicated joints.”

In striving to shape the aesthetic appreciation and ethical choices of the consumer, such craftspeople are, as in Morris’s utopia, educating desire. A few have chosen the written word as a medium to express their vision. But perhaps all craftspeople communicate most effectively through their physical and social comportment, professional activities, materials they use, and objects that they make. All of these are manifested materially in the world as performance and artifacts, and are thus available for observation, use, scrutiny, interpretation and, possibly, emulation.

In seeking their inspiration from a community of artisans and craftspeople working more than a century ago, a handful of today’s designer-makers have attempted to breathe new life into this imagined past by rearticulating its values and ethos in their present work and in their visions for tomorrow.

It is within this established tradition of longing for radical change and a better future that many of my fellow career-changers at the Building Crafts College have positioned themselves. At tea and in the pub, daily discussions and debates turn to world issues, the environment, and the place of craftsmanship in the global economy. Their individual anxieties, concerns and devotion to the craft combine to perpetuate the tradition of longing and redefine it with contemporary relevance. Utopia, however, is forever displaced temporally and physically, and so too is its object of desire. In short, the realization of utopia is always postponed because its existence as a concept lies in its dialectical relation to the present, and is therefore in a perpetual state of transformation. Longing, therefore, produces a necessary and agonizing disjuncture between the subject and the possibility of attaining one’s vision.

More concretely, many craftspeople over the past century have longed for the recovery of “place”: an anchoring of materials, making and market to a physical location that promotes the nurturing of a regional expression and a sense of belonging. The present reality for many, however, is complex and contradictory: most tools and materials are imported from distant places; the timber on racks may be sourced illegally; financial dependency on commercial commissions and mass production evolves; direct relations and engagement with clients are superseded by a chain of marketing middlemen; design and choice of materials succumb to globalized tastes; and clients are scattered across the nation, and sometimes the world. In sum, the alienation of the laborer and abstraction of relations produced by those world market forces so vehemently condemned by Morris pose an ever-present obstacle to self-actualization and the search for “emplacement.”

A sense of dislocation applies equally to the reproduction of the fine woodworking tradition itself. With small student-instructor ratios and an emphasis on hand tools and disciplined conduct, the college environment endeavors to conjure idealized notions of apprenticeship and personal formation. But the compression of training into two years, as well as a standardization of curriculum and examinations, results in an education substantially different from that experienced by the “medieval journeyman.” Specifically, the transfer of on-site learning to an institutional setting has segregated training both from the operational constraints of the workshop and from consumer demands. In effect, reproduction of the fine woodworker has been deterritorialized from the workshop and marketplace, rendering the craft and its imagined historic integration of learning with lifestyle a hyper-tradition.
By contextualizing the study of vocational migrants within a history of ideas from More to Morris and onwards, this article has illustrated that longing for a recovery of handicraft and its associated lifestyle is not unique to our era. Indeed, this established tradition of longing continues to lure a small but steady flow of vocational migrants from mainstream professions into such fields as fine woodwork. This is occurring despite the trade’s relative isolation from the wider economy and technological trends, the financial obstacles it presents, and its confinement to institutions, conservation interest groups, and elite niche markets.

Based on my ethnographic experiences and interviews, the decision to abandon conventional (often well-remunerated) occupations to retrain in craftwork must be duly recognized as an individual coping strategy and an attempt to reform subjectivity in the face of a disorientating flux of global forces, world markets, and environmental degradation. By relocating the self within an imagined heritage of craft production, and by embodying the ethos of a future utopia that promises satisfaction and actualization, vocational migrants are ultimately striving to realize a unity of mind, body and spirit: an aesthetic integration of work with life, and a harmonious balance of autonomy with community.

REFERENCE NOTES

2. My three-year study, entitled “Building-Craft Knowledge and Apprenticeship in Britain,” has been supported by a Fellowship sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council. Supplementary support has been provided by the School of Oriental and African Studies.
3. The term “tradition” is set in quotations on first reference here to indicate that much of the rest of the article will examine its definition in practice, specifically as a “tradition of longing.”
4. The term hyper-tradition is used here in reference to the definition contained in the call for papers for the tenth IASTE conference, held in December 2006, in Bangkok, Thailand.
5. The Great Twelve Livery Companies of the City of London included, in descending order of precedence (as established in 1515), the Mercers, Grocers, Drapers, Fishmongers, Goldsmiths, Merchant Taylors, Skinners, Haberdashers, Salters, Ironmongers, Vintners and Clothworkers. Based on economic and political influence, the Carpenters were ranked twenty-sixth of the forty-eight liverys in existence at the time.
7. Ibid., p.128.
9. “Forrens” was the term used to describe those who came to London from other regions seeking work. From the view of the city companies and free craftsmen, those who had not apprenticed in London and been granted the freedom of the city did not have the right to work in the city or the surrounding region under its authority.
11. Ibid., p.138.
13. The 1870 Education Act was largely a result of the Second Reform Act of 1867 and the government’s objective to have an educated electorate. Changing attitudes toward education, and growing positive valuation, began much earlier, starting with Samuel Whitbread’s 1807 Bill for reforming the Poor Law, as well as the Factory Acts of 1833, 1844 and 1867, which imposed restrictions on child labor and opened the possibility for national education. The year 1869 saw the establishment of the secular Education League and the more conservative and Anglican National Education Union, both of which played an important part in Britain’s adoption of the Education Act the following year. A further Education Act in 1891 established free elementary education.
15. Mr. Hoppus’s Measurer Greatly Enlarged & Improved, published by E. Hoppus, 1790.
26. In 1767, the carpenters purchased “a freehold farm consisting of sixty-three acres of marshland tithe free lying in the Parish of West Ham,” and made further property investment there in the nineteenth century. Alford and Barker, A History of the Carpenters Company, pp.136,145.
27. B.F. Fletcher and H.P. Fletcher, Carpentry and Joinery (S.I.: Whitaker, 1914, orig. 1898); G. Ellis, Modern Practical Joinery.
41. Rose, The Village Carpenter, p. 55.
45. This English poem of nearly two hundred lines describes a fantastical earthly paradise on an island located off the western shores of Britain. A.L. Morton has suggested that “The Land of Cockayne,” “anticipates some of the most fundamental conceptions of modern socialism,” and is the “beginning of a dialectical growth of the concept of utopia, which has its culmination in the greatest and the most fully socialist work of this type, William Morris’ News from Nowhere.” Morton, The English Utopia (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1952), p. 33.
47. Despite espousing notions of equality, More’s patriarchal stance relegated the “weaker sex” to lighter jobs, while men performed the heavier ones, illustrating that persistent association between woodwork and “manliness” that some male trainees invoked, and that Dawn so fervently contested. A gendered division of labor was later also strongly evoked by Ruskin, who wrote that “a happy nation may be defined as one in which the husband’s hand is on the plough, and the housewife’s on the needle.” See “The Work of Iron,” p. 81.
49. Ibid., p. 59. Note that Henry David Thoreau also praised the idea that when the laborer’s day ends, “he is then free to devote himself to his chosen pursuit, independent of his labor,” as opposed to the employer who never finds respite from worry. Thoreau, “Walden,” in Walden and Civil Disobedience (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 114.
50. More, Utopia, p. 73. Note that More was not advocating hedonistic pleasure (he was deeply religious and conservative), but pleasure found in noble and moral cultivations of mind and body.
53. Ibid., p. 100.
56. C. Wilmer, “Introduction,” in Morris, News from Nowhere and Other Writings, pp. xii.
60. Levitas, The Concept of Utopia, p. 128.
61. It could be argued, however, that Saint Simon and Fourier did try to realize their non-Marxist socialist utopias.
64. Levitas, The Concept of Utopia, p. 122.
66. Ibid., pp. 122–23.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid.