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What About Crafts: Visual Anatomy and Curation of Local Craftsmanship

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SD PolyU – UoA 38

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SIU, King Chung co-directs an art collective, the [Community Museum Project](#), through which he conducts artistic and curatorial research on visual culture, indigenous design and community heritage in Hong Kong and elsewhere. He pioneers in local socially engaged art & design practices where he explores methodologies and tactics to initiate collaborations among students, teachers, designers, artists, activists and community partners. The approaches have allowed him to experiment and develop viable collaborative strategies and forms for exhibition design, installation display, information and publication design as well as alternative museum practices. Since 2017, his approach has been translated into the first formal BA curriculum on Social Design in Hong Kong.

Title: What About Crafts: Visual Anatomy and Curation of Local Craftsmanship

Descriptor

- This series of craftspeople study is a sequel of local craftsmanship explorations initiated by the author under an art collective, the Community Museum Project since 2007. As a pioneering study locally, its aim is to identify anonymous local craftspeople in an attempt to (visually) codify and disseminate their unspoken knowledge to a wider learning audience and design community. Serious efforts are put into building relationships among craftspeople, designers and students so as to curate contemporary cross-generational platforms for craft and design learning.
- The body of work constitutes a series of in-depth study of craftsmanship embedded in a variety of local handicraft trades, namely, the crafts of "white metal", "flower plate", "fire dragon", "woodwork", "paper offerings", "Chinese unicorn", "letterpress", "rattan furniture" and "wooden cart";
- The findings and visual outcomes of the study were disseminated through a co-curated exhibition, entitled, *What about Crafts?* at the Innovation Tower Gallery, HK PolyU from 26 July to 24 September, 2014. (The project was funded by the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust and co-curated with a local NGO, the St. James Settlement Community Classroom);
- The project includes extensive documentation and findings, that were visually interpreted and displayed in form of an exhibition. Research and curatorial methodologies are developed in due course. Both the findings and methods are then disseminated through the corresponding community education workshops and other education platforms locally and overseas;
- Part of the exhibition content and artefacts were generated with students in a design subject of HKPolyU's School of Design, where a master metal craftsman was invited to conduct sessions in the course. This is the author's attempt to curate also the social relations among craftspeople, designers and students.
- To further study the spatial-economic practices of the handicraft trades which are subjected to the pressure of urban gentrification, the author published two initial case studies (2017), relating to that of the rattan furniture and wooden cart trades in a district, Sham Shui Po.

What constitutes the research output / body of work ?

Keywords: Craft processes; Cross-generational design collaboration; Hong Kong craftspeople; Visual heritage study

Exhibition Content:

- A series of visual research methodologies, e.g. photo-stocktaking, and visual narrative of the processes; (see sample maps about the letterpress study: a) [Experimental collaboration](#) among poet, designer and letter craftsman; b) [Type-finding](#) configuration; c) [Type-setting](#) process; d) [Hand-printing](#) process; e) [Offset printing](#).)
- The said exhibition (2015) featuring a variety of local crafts and a collection of explanatory and publicity videos; (See videos: [Letterpress](#); [Flower-plate](#); [White-metal](#); [Woodwork](#); [Fire dragon](#); [Chinese unicorn](#); [overview publicity](#))

Workshops and Artefacts:

- A series of cross-generational experimental design workshops co-run by the craftsmen together with designers for secondary school students.
- A series of craft products co-designed by the author and design tutors with students and the craftspeople; (2013 – now)

Publications:

- A book chapter entitled: "Extinct Forms of Spatial-economic Practices – Craft Trades in Sham Shui Po". In Krusche, Juergen & Siu, King Chung. (Eds.) (2017). *Deep Water: Public Spaces in Sham Shui Po*. HK: MCCM Creations. Pp. 30-37. ([see book chapter](#))
- 2 booklets (in Chinese) (2015) explicating the handicraft processes of the metal craftsmen and the flower plate craftsman respectively; (see booklet: [metal](#) or [flower-plate](#))

Research questions

- 1. Who are the active craftspeople in Hong Kong?**
- 2. What and how could specific handicraft processes be identified, studied, codified and represented in publicly accessible forms?**
- 3. How does local craftspeople develop their trades in the midst of cultural and urban transformation in Hong Kong currently?**
- 4. How could the handicraft processes be appreciated, analyzed, understood, disseminated, and learnt by the outsiders?**
- 5. How is it possible to engage young designers, students and local craftspeople into meaningful cross-generational learning and collaboration, so as to regenerate the specific crafts?**

Research methods and materials

The author, along with the Community Museum Project and St. James Settlement have developed the following approaches in collecting data, and experimenting with different engagement tools for cross-generational craftsmanship and design learning.

- **Visual Research** by means of “photo-stocktaking”, a method of systematically collecting images of the handicraft processes;
- **Interview** with craftspeople employing the photo-elicitation approach;
- **Processes Explanation** by means of a series of visual narratives to explain the craftsmanship processes via information design;
- **Prototyping Collaborations** among craftspeople, designers and students by engaging them in artefact design and making;
- **Exhibition Design** to disseminate the (visual) findings.

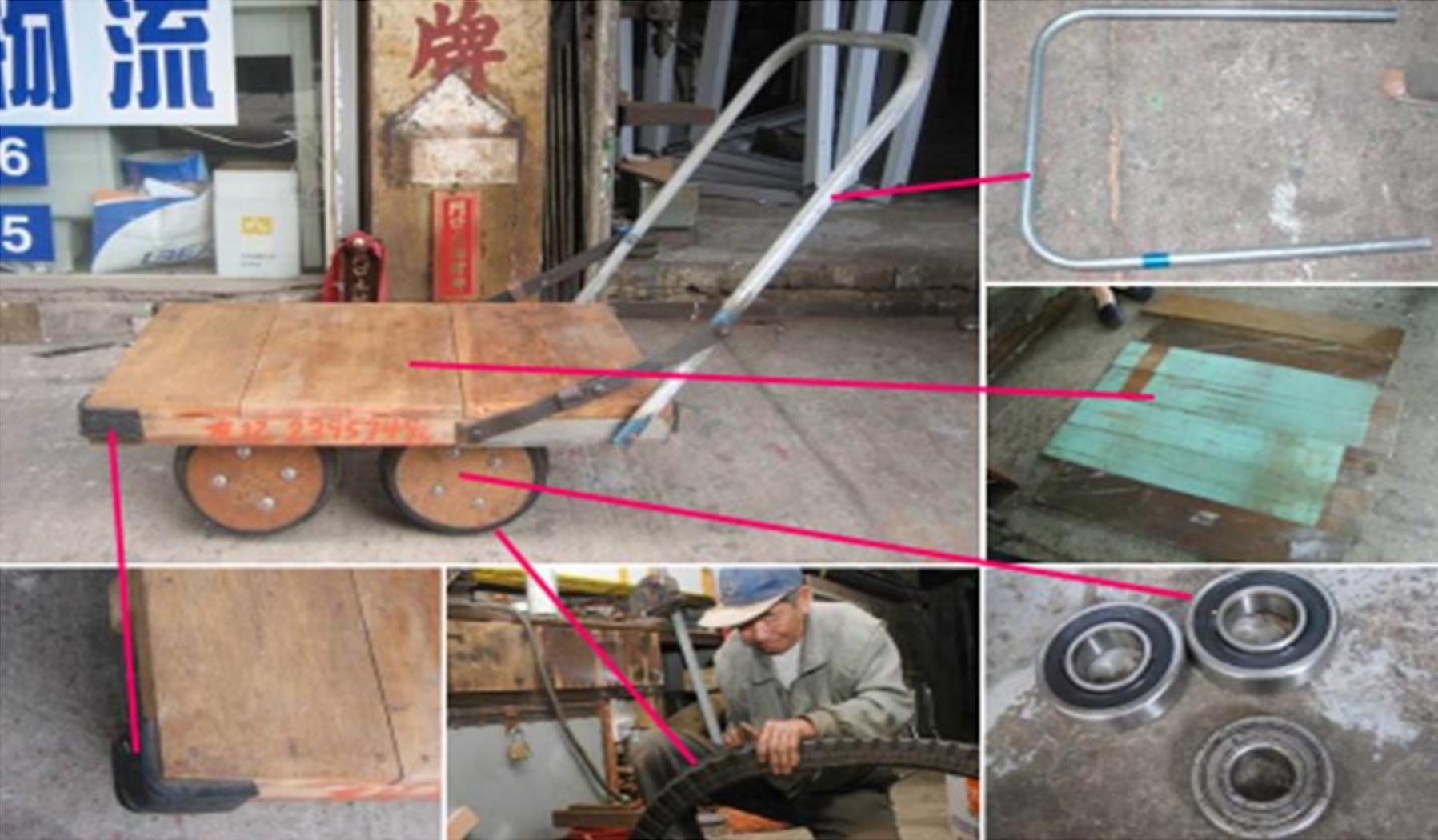
Photo-stocktaking the modular & adaptive production design of a rattan couch



The above image and the following (next few slides) illustrate the different ways a certain visual explanation of the handicraft processes is structured and re-presented. The aim is to visually disseminate complicated findings (i.e. of certain unspoken tacit knowledge of the craftsman) to a general audience.

Research methods and materials (cont'd)

Photo-stocktaking of the wooden cart components (in one format of visual explanation)



Research methods and materials (cont'd)

Photo-stocktaking of the wooden cart making process (in one format of visual explanation)



Research methods and materials (cont'd)

Cross-generational design collaboration (visually narrated in another format)

The exhibition **In Search of Marginalized Wisdom** was held in an old housing estate to showcase the creativity of the artisans. Mr & Mrs Lee were part of it, along with other seven craftspeople. It became the foundation for further development.



Metalware maker



Rattan furniture maker



Seamstresses & fashion designer



Two generations of designers working together on the prototype.

Mrs Lee is the manager and designer of the workshop, while her husband focuses more on technical matter.



CMP invited industrial designer Brian Lee to work with the cart-makers. The idea is to use the existing skill for something more for household.

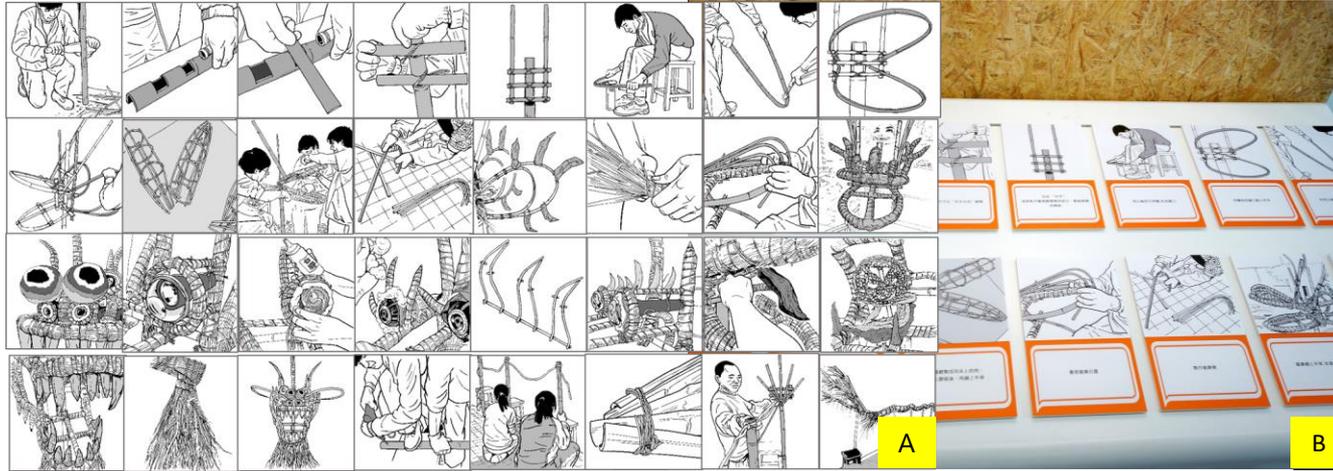


The trolley, widely used in construction site, now becomes a table that is more suitable for household usage. It retains most of the original features and technology.

The trolley-cum-table was literally the presentation stage in the seminar 'Socially Yours', jointly organized with Het Blauwe Huis, the Netherlands.

Content curation: Translating the findings into visual didactic panels for the exhibition

An example: The making of a Fire-dragon

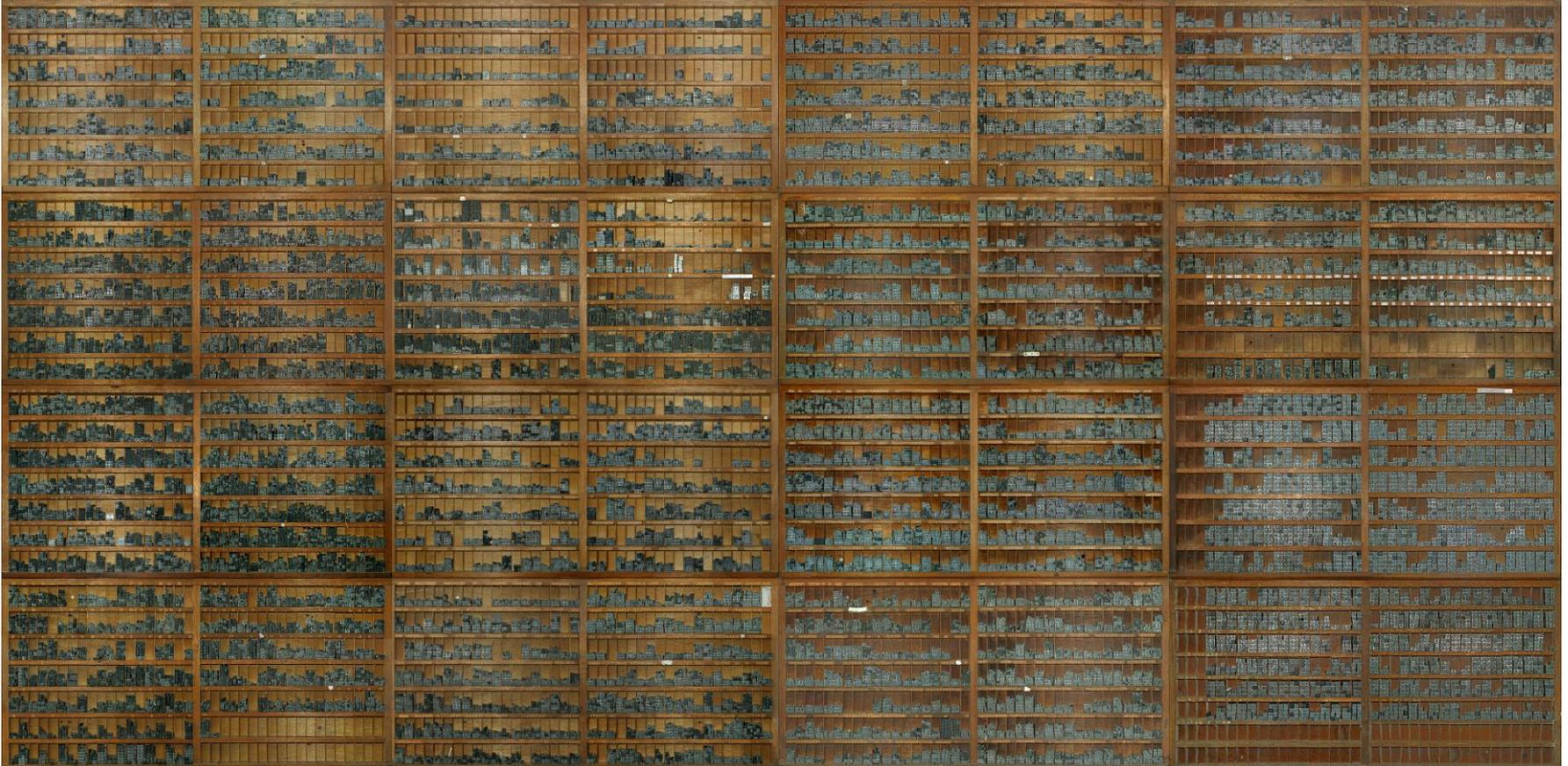


- A. Visualizing the step-by-step making processes of a fire-dragon as a methodology of this craftsmanship research.
- B. Findings are translated into didactic panels for dissemination in the exhibition.
- C. The artefact of a fire-dragon head co-created by the craftsman and students being displayed in the exhibition.



- D. Panel explaining the annual rite of fire-dragon performance during the mid-autumn festival at Pokfulam Village, Hong Kong.
- E. Close-up of the fire-dragon head made by the workshop participants.
- F. Tools and materials for the fire-dragon craft.

Inventorying a complete set of Chinese Letterpress Types



A complete set of Chinese Letterpress Types and its storage configuration was visually documented with high resolution image. Audience are able to see each components of a Chinese type. This is an unique visual archive showcased in the exhibition.

Research Conclusions

- Collaborating with the St. James Settlement's Community Classroom (a NGO) and the craftspeople, we are able to kick-start a series of visual study of local craftsmanship and their trades which also involves three-generations of stakeholders, namely, the students, the designers and the craftspeople;
- In-depth documentation and understanding of the handicrafts processes have been visualized and curated to become didactic visual tools (in forms of exhibits and instructions) for learning in the exhibition and the cross-generational crafts-cum-design workshops;
- Experimentations are conducted among young students, designers and the craftspeople to contemporize the designs of local crafts; thereby spurring the chance to re-activate the local craft tradition.



A view at the gallery: visual explanation (with the exhibits and graphics) of the metal-making processes in the exhibition. Products at the background are newly designed and made by the students in collaboration with the metal craftsman, the carpenter and a few design tutors.

Research Conclusions (cont'd)

- It is possible to regenerate the interests of local young designers and students for our handicraft tradition, given the right understanding of the processes and implications of the social potentials of such heritage in a contemporary city like Hong Kong;
- In the wooden cart case, it is possible to rebuild the community (i.e. valorisation of the intangible heritage) beyond the craftspeople and their original grassroots partners. This is through a series of experimental collaborations introduced by the project to develop a new circle of stakeholder's relations with the craftspeople. (The stakeholders map on the right illustrates these expanding stakeholder relations)

Re-making of the Wooden Cart and the grassroots community

1. Master Mr. Lee
2. Master Mrs. Lee
3. Street Cleaners (Material providers 1)
4. Garage People (Material providers 2)
5. Sign Shop owner (Space provider)
6. New & Long-time Customers
7. Community Museum Project
8. The Exhibition (for the craftspeople)
9. Shamshuipo District Council (Funder)
10. Young Design-collaborators
11. Student Apprentices
12. Public Audience
13. Student / School Audience
14. Community Museum Project Website
15. Potential Collaborators
16. S-Stars Hotel (Commission relation)
17. Potential Dissemination Channel
18. Potential International Exhibition



Point 1 to 6 of the above map represent the original community network of the craft-duo, Mr. & Mrs. Lee. This stakeholders' circle began to expand with certain design interventions and collaborative learning. For some background discussion, see my article: "Extinct Forms of Spatial-economic Practices – Craft Trades in Sham Shui Po." In Krusche, Juergen & Siu, King Chung (Eds.). (2017). Deep Water: Public Spaces in Sham Shui Po. HK: MCCM Creations. Pp. 30-37.

Dissemination

Different outputs as listed from A to F

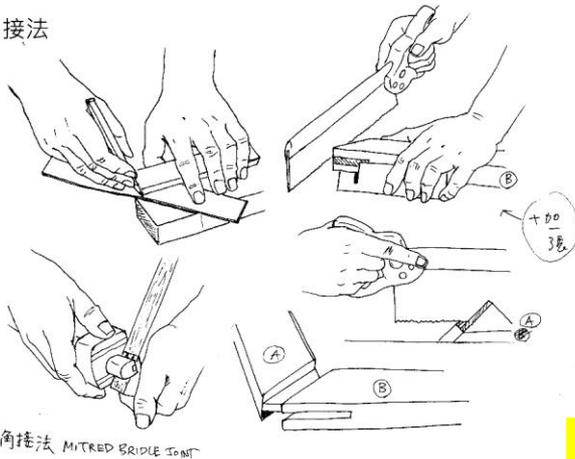


A



B

角接法



角接法 MITRED BRIDLE JOINT

C



D



E

- A. A view of the exhibition which was held for 2 months at the PolyU's Innovation Tower;
- B. Exhibition is accompanied by a series of workshops with youngsters, designers and craftsmen;
- C. A series of visual explanations of the different craft processes;
- D. Seven pamphlets, each for one craftsman were produced.
- E. Two 24pp brochures, one on white metal ([see pdf](#)) and the other on flower plate ([see pdf](#)) respectively;
- F. Two related case studies of the spatial-economic crafts practices were published in a book chapter, in Krusche, Juergen & Siu, King Chung (Eds.). (2017). Deep Water: Public Spaces in Sham Shui Po. HK: MCCM Creations. Pp. 30-37. ([see book chapter](#))

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