The Resourcefulness of Craft: Whole House Reuse

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To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17496772.2017.1294331

Published online: 28 Apr 2017.
Statement of Practice

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Juliet Arnott is an occupational therapist, artist and founder of Rekindle, an arts organization which promotes resourcefulness through craft. She is a New Zealander based in Ōtautahi Christchurch after having lived and practiced in rural Scotland and England for nearly a decade. She is currently producing several projects including the first Journal of Resourcefulness; Resource: Rise Again, a design project with commercial waste; Resourceful Aotearoa, a nationwide network for sharing of resourceful skills; and a post-disaster resource package for community deconstruction and reuse.

Abstract
To choose between being resourceful or wasteful is an everyday decision that is often under-valued. It useful to consider what happens when this choice is taken away and wastefulness is forcibly imposed. To see wastefulness occur, when one would rather act resourcefully, is to experience dispowerment, meaninglessness, loss and an external locus of control. To impose wastefulness is to remove an opportunity to experience a significant capability: resourcefulness. In the context of natural disaster, when sudden trauma causes waste to be seen as a minor issue in relation to other acute priorities, opportunities for resourcefulness often become limited, yet are fundamental to building resilience. To be allowed and enabled to be resourceful post-earthquake by being involved in the craft of deconstruction, resource recovery and reuse, where safe and feasible, is to be offered an opportunity to influence the degree of loss and trauma experienced. Being resourceful enables people to begin to regain some sense of control over what is happening to them, and to feel they can make the most of the resources they have. To see demolition as an opportunity for constructive deconstruction and reuse through craft requires an understanding of the benefits of this over a cheap and hasty
use of diggers and trucks. *Whole House Reuse* was a project that involved the full deconstruction and reuse of one home due for demolition that was made possible by over 250 people engaging in craft for reuse. This project demonstrates that craft is vital as a tool in these times when, more than ever, we need to make the most of the resources we have.

**Keywords:** resourcefulness, post-disaster, deconstruction, reuse, occupational therapy

Many people describe natural disaster as disempowering—it becomes clear that control of what is happening lies far beyond you. With the recent earthquakes here in New Zealand, people talk of a suddenly awakened sense of an external locus of control that lies undoubtedly within Papatūānuku/the Earth. To experience sudden, traumatic and direct loss as a result of earthquakes is haunting and scarring for many people. The trauma of the disaster is then compounded by post-quake impacts such as loss of home, family, friends, school, community, job, business, neighborhood and, in the case of New Zealand, a major city. The discovery that the government-controlled “Recovery” is both rigid and impersonal, and involves you losing your property via a hasty and wasteful demolition by a digger, understandably exacerbates these feelings of loss and disempowerment.

This is what I realized upon returning to Christchurch post-earthquake in late 2011. Naturally thankful not to have lived through this traumatic disaster myself, all I could do was give my all to hearing, feeling and acknowledging its impact. People across the Canterbury region experienced two major earthquakes in September 2010 and February 2011 and then thousands of aftershocks that went on for years, many of which felt like significant reminders of the “big ones.” Of course, no-one can tell when an aftershock might in fact be the beginning of another large earthquake.

In early 2012 I was invited back to Christchurch to speak at an architecture workshop about reuse of materials. While preparing for this event, I walked around the Residential Red Zone (RRZ), the large swath of land that follows the Ōtākaro river that encompassed over 8000 homes that had been designated by the government as unfit for use. The government had purchased this land back from homeowners after the quake and thus controlled the area. Being in this beautiful, silent, forcibly abandoned riverside area that had previously been so full of life was gut-wrenching and eerie. Seeing diggers and trucks working fast behind high fences to smash homes down and cart them in small unrecoverable pieces to the dump was painful to watch. The scale of subsequent demolition was huge; approximately 15,000 homes had to go in the Canterbury area (Figure 1).

As I watched I took images of the homes to be demolished; I did not know why I took images at the time, I think perhaps I felt I needed to mark the existence of the home, and to prove that what was happening was happening. I took an image of the fence outside one of these RRZ homes; it had been spray-painted to “This was a loved home” (Figure 2). I went back the next morning to the same area to gauge how fast demolition was occurring, and noticed that the writing on this fence had been over-painted in white paint. This indicates to me how little voice the people whose homes were in the RRZ had. Their alienation from the process that
followed the earthquakes was so considerable that it has since been investigated by the Human Rights Commission and the bureaucracy has been found wanting.1

That night after my first visit to the RRZ I barely slept, feeling such an urgency to find a way to influence the demolition process to ensure it was less traumatic for those suffering...
so much loss. I was also sure it was essential, even in all the post-quake chaos, to reveal and make public the inherent value of the material resources being discarded, and I felt I would not be alone in the compulsion to do this. I wanted to find a way the community could exert their need to care for and value the homes being wasted, but the scale of demolition ahead was so great it was hard to think of a strategy that could have adequate impact. So I began to think about what could be done by focusing on just one home. Even working with just one home was a huge physical undertaking, yet I had an unerring sense that the transformation of even this scale of undervalued resources was possible because of a shared belief in the capability of craft. So that was when the idea for the Whole House Reuse project came, and it was the next afternoon that I was able to launch this idea publicly as part of my presentation about reuse at the architecture workshop. And from there the project swung into motion.

Whole House Reuse began in May 2012 and was completed in August 2015. The central idea/kaupapa of the Whole House Reuse project was to engage the creative community of New Zealand to turn a home, scheduled for demolition, into beautiful and purposeful artefacts. It involved making overt the concerns about hasty demolition by taking this one home among the thousands due for demolition and treating this with as much care and reverence as possible.
Whole House Reuse involved the deconstruction and salvage of the entire material of one home in Christchurch, 19 Admirals Way in New Brighton, and the further transformation of this resource into 398 works by over 250 people from all over New Zealand and beyond. We believe this was the first time creative reuse of an entire home had been undertaken. The homeowners, Charlotte and Luke Buxton and their boys Caspian and Joel, were frequently involved in this process. Initially they voiced disbelief as to why anyone would take the

Fig 3 Images of some of the participants of Whole House Reuse with their materials, 2013–2014. Photograph by Kate McIntyre.

Fig 4 Bowls from broken window panes by Frances Woodhead, 2015. Photograph by Chris Gardner.
There were three stages within the project: deconstruction, design, and reuse. Whole House Reuse enabled the celebration, examination, transformation, and reuse of the huge array of materials that make up one typical New Zealand home. This project cared for the material resources of one house by dismantling the house, cataloging its materials and then offering these materials to craftspeople/designers/makers across New Zealand and beyond via a public call to action (Figure 3). We asked for people to craft solutions for the reuse of these resources, solutions that revered them and the home and the life it held.

Fig 5 Type carved by Russell Frost, 2015. Photograph by Chris Gardner.

Fig 6 Centuri Chan’s chess set, 2015. Photograph by Chris Gardner.

of this first conversation in our Whole House Reuse: Deconstruction publication in 2014.

time to care for their condemned home when thousands of others had a different demise. So essential was the voice of the homeowners to this project that we published the transcript
Preparing to deconstruct the home took over a year, with many failed attempts to raise funds, work through bureaucracy, and find the right house. Finally in August 2013, under the project management of Kate McIntyre, the deconstruction stage of the project achieved the physical challenge of the salvage which involved a professional team and over thirty volunteers over a period of ten days. The subsequent cataloging of the material of the entire home took another thirty days once the materials were

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**Fig 7** Patrick Fitzgerald’s model, 2015. Photograph by Chris Gardner.

**Fig 8** Cocoon, 2015. The studio by Nic Moon and Lynn Russell. Photograph by Nic Moon.
The cataloging process resulted in a taxonomy of the materials that made up this one particular, but typical, New Zealand home. This acts as a unique record of social history, as well as a quantification of the resources available from just one home that would have otherwise been disposed of. To show the utility of these materials currently being wasted, we specified that only craft objects with purpose and use were to be made from these materials. Reusing the entire house required a truly collective community response, with solutions as numerous and varied as the materials used. The craftspeople and makers that participated chose to respond to the materials in such diverse ways, and many gave so much of themselves freely in doing so. Artefacts ranged from the smallest piece of jewelry cast from broken window panes by Frances Woodhead on the Isle of Tiree in Scotland (Figure 4), a hand-carved set of type from timber framing by Russel Frost in London (Figure 5), a chess set made of building paper and PVC piping by Centuri Chan (Figure 6), a scale model of the home built from laminated layers of the home’s wallpaper by Patrick Fitzgerald (Figure 7), a large dining table by renowned furniture maker David Haig, to the largest work, a stunning hand-crafted studio building by artist Nic Moon and architectural designer Lynn Russell (Figure 8). Children made puppets from leftover materials and performed with them in the shower cubicle puppet theater; and David Trubridge, New Zealand’s leading designer, dedicated time to a fine and delicate piece of work. All and all, thousands of hours of making were bestowed upon the materials.
of this home, this being the antithesis of the wasteful demolition the home would have otherwise received.

At the end of the three stages of Whole House Reuse, the full range of objects were gathered together at the Canterbury Museum in Christchurch in 2015 and displayed to show what a whole house looks like when it is entirely salvaged through reuse. Over the three months of this exhibition there were over 120,000 visitors, a number that represents a third of the population of the city of Christchurch (Figure 9). Many local people were moved by the care taken by the participating craftspeople who valued the materials that had otherwise been so carelessly treated. People have told me how it has helped them to know that we had taken the time to care for the material of this home, that psychologically it helped to have this as an “other” to the waste that was so visually apparent around the city for years following

Fig 10 Orginal Orkney chair I made from Orcadian driftwood and oat straw, 2006. Photograph by Katy Shields.

Fig 11 Pile of wood waste in Auckland with one of the first Rekindle chairs, 2011. Image by Laura Verner.
As a young child growing up on a sheep farm in rural New Zealand, I was enchanted by our woven breadbasket that my mother and father had bought in 1969 from weavers near Glen Coe, Scotland. The basket’s enchantment related to a significant time for my English father and my New Zealand mother when they made their first trip together in his homeland before they were married. This far-travelled basket memorialized the sweetness of my parent’s young love along with their misty photographic portraits in heather on the Scottish moor. I felt so drawn to this cherished object at the age of seven that I tried to “weave” my own from the rushes in the paddock below the house. I can clearly recall the strength of desire for, what I now understand to be, structural integrity. I desperately wanted those rushes to act like the rushes in the basket, to bend into place to become strong. Our front paddock was full of rushes and it seemed careless not to try to see what they could become. Of course, what I thought I had in material resource I lacked in technical knowledge and it was another twenty years until I gained it. Making was commonplace during my childhood; it was a part of self-sufficient farm life. My mother relied on being able to spin, knit, sew and make cheese, butter, yoghurt and making fires to make bread and other essentials. My father made fences, gates, tools, repairs and maintained a large, productive garden. Our interactions with the material resources around us were vital, and being and feeling resourceful was inherent to this way of life.

Years later I chose to train as an occupational therapist but not, as one might deduce, because of the basketry. In 2000, after five years in the profession, I left Christchurch and travelled to the United Kingdom where I stayed for nine years. Occupational therapy formed an important part of becoming connected within the places I lived in, but it most certainly was not the creative profession...
I had hoped for. My initial experiences of British life were challenging and I struggled to find my sense of place amidst an urban and population-dense culture. I found many of my professional peers spent their weekends shopping or redecorating their already decorated homes. As much as this acquisition of goods seemed sophisticated and alluring initially, after a short while I struggled to find meaning in this relationship with objects or material resources. I felt little depth in my relationship with newly bought objects and I felt confused about why I was not satiated by this kind of lifestyle when others seemed to be.

I found myself attracted to more rural places and thankfully, upon moving to Cornwall, I felt more comfortable. One weekend I was invited up to Devon to learn from a woodland-dwelling bodger called Marcus how to make bentwood furniture from coppiced hazel rods. Soon after I was invited to Dorset to learn willow basketry from Norah Kennedy at the Kingcombe Centre. I will not forget either of these weekend courses, or my teachers or their practice, because these brief insights satiated that childhood drive to make from the resources around me. These workshops gave me enough technical knowledge to work with various kinds of local materials: hedgerows, garden cuttings and oft-forgotten hazel coppices. It had taken twenty years, but making my first baskets responded to my childhood longing to weave from our paddock of rushes.

The reality of weaving was not disappointing.

Weaving baskets gave me a strong sense of resourcefulness as I created structural integrity, strength, and beauty from the bundle of seemingly ordinary bendy sticks. Becoming a weaver gave me a sense of place and identity in relationship to the natural world and the people around me. This, in my somewhat angst-filled and transient twenties, was significant as I found craft gave me confidence, competence, and a sense of inner resourcefulness. Those people that evolved these traditions in times past were responding to necessity and sometimes scarcity, they were resource-efficient and skillful in their making. It was through practicing these traditions that I came to truly understand what the occupational therapist in me already knew in theory, that craft is an intimate relationship between ourselves and the material resources we work with, a relationship that is mutually transformational. I found this relationship was especially strong when one uses craft to value undervalued material resources as this requires self-belief, commitment, and a desire to be resourceful. These ideas came to the fore later in the Whole House Reuse project.

My exploration of resourcefulness took me to the Orkney Isles in 2003 to research their local chair-making tradition. The use of oat straw and what would have once been driftwood to make a style of chair so unique was magical (Figure 10). I saw in ancient pieces in museums on Orkney the conversion of straw into strong structures that bear weight, exclude draughts, and give shelter. This was to me the ultimate degree of resourcefulness. If we can meet such vital needs via the use of such simple materials and techniques, then surely we as humans have the ingenuity to make anything we need from what we have.

After returning south to Norwich where I lived at that time, I had cause to visit the local rubbish dump. The queue of people in their vehicles and the volume of the
multitude of resources they were disposing of startled me. In the context of the Orcadian traditions where even straw was valued, I felt stunned by people’s acquiescence to planned obsolescence. From then on, my making practice focused entirely on undervalued or wasted material resources, whether they were natural or the leftovers of global capitalism. I worked with various materials from found timber, plastic bottles, rope and buoy pieces found on beaches from the Shetland Isles to Pembrokeshire, to Greenwood timbers, willow, hazel, and other sticks. It was this practice that took me to Wester Ross, a remote part of the Scottish Highlands, where the Highland Arts Council asked me to work with the communities of Shieldaig, Torridon, and Lochcarron to create sculptural works from locally found resources. Not too long after; in 2006, I found myself living in the wilds in the Highlands at Clashgour on the Blackmount Estate at the Bridge of Orchy, just a few moments south of Glen Coe and the home of the breadbasket of my childhood. Then, as a member of the Scottish Basketmakers Circle, I felt I had unknowingly followed that basket home to a place where life was so physically harsh that one had to live resourcefully. The breadbasket was made for function from one of the abundant resources they had and its simplicity celebrated this. The breadbasket continues to inspire my practice today.

During my nine years away in the UK, I continued to work intermittently in the health system and found that I was seeing much more therapeutic potential in my craft practice than I was in my occupational therapy practice in hospitals. Upon returning home to New Zealand in 2009, I craved a means of bringing together my now professional creative practice with my occupational therapy practice.

So again I visited a rubbish dump, this time in Auckland (Figure 11). This time I was knowingly seeking inspiration and I found it in a large and messy pile of timber going to waste. I was inspired to utilize craft as a means of exposing the latent value in these resources, and what came were chairs, stools and tables made from demolition timbers that we diverted from landfill. That was the beginning of Rekindle, the social enterprise I established to represent resourcefulness and promote the value of craft in reuse, and this continues today. It was around this same time that the shocking impact of the earthquakes hit my previous home of Christchurch.

Being resourceful strengthens our sense of inner confidence that we can cope in that it reinforces an internal locus of control. In a post-disaster context the resourcefulness of craft-as-material reuse is particularly apparent and helps people when a sense of control over the success of completing or mastering anything is significant and when experience is chaotic and beyond your resources. Craft gives us a positive means of interacting with the resources around us.

Whole House Reuse represents my certainty that resourcefulness, via the medium of craft, is an essential characteristic of healthy communities. Being resourceful in our use or reuse of material resources is of benefit to us as humans, and, of course, the earth and its finite resources. Resourcefulness is the antithesis of wastefulness. I am increasing sure that the Earth desperately needs us to be resourceful, and thus feel that craft as a means of resourcefulness is central to the plight of humankind at this time. Nothing less. To live removed from the plight of the Earth at this time is to deny the finite nature of the Earth’s resources upon which we depend. To lose connection with where resources come from...
and how to care for them implicates us in the demise of Earth’s relative homeostasis. So to come to understand, engage, and utilize material resources fully; to harness the materiality, strengths, longevity, and value of every material type is a means of taking care of the Earth. This in turn results in a reduction of virgin resource extraction, less pollution from manufacturing and transportation and a higher degree of reuse. Craft is a fundamental means of understanding (and potentially mastering) the qualities of a resource, as I’ve learnt from my engagement with craft practices in the UK.

Since Whole House Reuse, my work and Rekindle continue to grow and develop with a core focus on resourcefulness via craft and reuse. This year we will publish the first Journal of Resourcefulness, with peer-reviewed articles on waste, resourcefulness, craft and design by Amy Twigger Holroyd, Clare Brass, Atiq Zaman and others. This will also show the body of work from our recent project, Resource: Rise Again, which focused on five designer/makers working to create solutions to commercial waste across New Zealand. As I write, in January 2017, I am heavily involved in supporting the Kaikōura community, which experienced a destructive earthquake on November 14, 2016 to find their way amidst the post-quake bureaucracy to achieve constructive deconstruction and resource recovery outcomes. It is heartening to see how resourcefulness through craft sits at the heart of the post-disaster recovery planning here.

In my work I continue to find confirmation that we need to live resourcefully for our own well-being, that living within the Earth’s resources is undeniably meaningful, and that the Earth needs us to live resourcefully more than ever. Thus we, and our host the Earth, need craft for its inherent resourcefulness more than ever.

Some of the experience of Whole House Reuse can be found on the project website, including a film and images of some of the artefacts made. www.wholehousetreuse.co.nz/

Other information on other projects and ongoing activities by Rekindle can be found on www.rekindle.org.nz/

**Note**