

Crafts Council

Circular Economy

April 2022



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Introduction

We often hear about the ‘circular economy’ and it resonates with many makers who value reusing, repurposing and recycling. What does it mean and why is it important to craft? We try and answer some of these points here.

1

What is the Circular Economy?

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation describes the circular economy like this –

In our current economy, we take materials from the Earth, make products from them, and eventually throw them away as waste – the process is linear. In a circular economy, by contrast, we stop waste being produced in the first place.

The circular economy is based on three principles, driven by design:

- 1 Eliminate waste and pollution
- 2 Circulate products and materials (at their highest value)
- 3 Regenerate nature.

WRAP, the charity that promotes sustainable resource use, says circularity transforms our throwaway economy into one where we eliminate waste, circulate resources, and adopt nature-positive, low carbon, resource-efficient systems and actions.

In the circular economy, instead of taking resources from the earth, using them once, and disposing of them in landfill, we keep them in use for as long as possible. We make sure that we gain the maximum benefit from them while reducing negative environmental impacts.

Circularity offers the potential to ‘build back better’, bringing new jobs, healthy lifestyles, and green growth. In a circular economy we reduce our impacts on nature and climate, while ensuring that economies thrive, and citizens lead healthy, sustainable lifestyles.

2

Why does it matter to craft?

More than half of makers already support the use of sustainable materials¹ and this is an evolving picture. This rises to 75% for those working with wood or willow. Similar numbers attach importance to using ethical supply chains and only a slightly smaller number to working with local or fairtrade materials. The differences in priority partly depend on the materials makers work with - recycled materials are twice as important to sculptors as in other disciplines.

85% of makers have told us they’d like support with improving the sustainability² of their practice and the Crafts Council is responding by identifying and sharing effective approaches.

Crafts Council chair (and Ellen MacArthur Foundation chief executive) Andrew Morlet says,

‘Craft and art have a huge role to play in shifting mindsets about the environment and inspiring people’.³

Writing in Crafts magazine, Morlet explains

‘By eliminating waste and pollution and creating products that can be repaired, upgraded and manufactured, and ultimately recycled as a high-quality material feedstock, rather than discarded as landfill, we will get a much higher return on every material’s value and invested energy. We need fewer, better objects and products that we will repair and treasure, which is where craft and design comes in.’⁴

¹ Makers scoring use of sustainable materials as 8 out of 10 or above for importance in response to a survey for our 2020 report *The Market for Craft*

² Crafts Council Makers Needs Survey 2021.

³ Crafts, January 2022, p18

⁴ Crafts, January 2022, p18

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What can we do about it?

In an article for the Crafts Council, the writer, podcaster and sustainability champion Katie Treggiden places craft skills and knowledge at the heart of the debate about our relationship to the planet.⁵ Treggiden says ‘Craft offers not only a way of making, but also a way of thinking – one that is collaborative, inclusive and responsive to our changing natural environment. It is essential if we are to shift away from our current ‘take-make-waste’ model of production to a more circular one. Traditional forms of knowledge and practice should therefore be at the heart of the debate about our relationship to the planet, and yet the knowledge of craftspeople is often relegated in favour of technological and technocratic solutions and the priorities of global corporations.’

⁵ Crafts Council stories

In line with the three tenets of the circular economy, as defined by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, Treggiden says we need to:

- design out waste and pollution
- keep objects and materials in use; and
- regenerate natural systems.

She says these are all things that craftspeople have always embraced. Building on their material literacy, ‘their sheer proximity to their materials during the making process makes pollution personal. Their ability to turn materials into useful, meaningful and valued objects that can be repaired or remade keeps materials and objects in use. And their sense of connectivity to those who have gone before and those who will follow, makes regenerating natural systems inherent to the craft process.’

Many makers are embracing new approaches to materials, for example,

- Klès is a slow fashion brand in Bristol creating handmade leather bags and accessories. Each piece is made to last with traditional leatherworking techniques, using chemical-free leather.
- Madeline Adams, an environmental designer and furniture maker in Sheffield, uses timber sourced in the UK, either from sustainably certified sawmills that focus on forest restoration and wildlife protection; or reclaimed that would otherwise be sent to landfill or burned.
- Aviary Denim is a hand weaving studio in Southend-on-Sea, using industry waste cotton, or

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Further reading

sustainable fibres and organic plant-based dye. The studio is also a denim repair shop specialising in visible mending.

The Crafts Council is increasing its advice on sustainability. Craft businesses and suppliers are also researching how to increase use of sustainable energy sources in making processes (for example, hydrogen ceramics and glass kilns) and how to grow ethical supply chains (the extraction of precious metals and stones is increasingly politically contentious). But it may take longer to reduce overall studio carbon emissions.

Our wider economy is currently dependent on growth as a measure of national success, with disposability and short life rewarded in this approach. We need instead to establish alternative measures that incentivise more sustainable methods. We need a vision of enterprise that accommodates and builds on the kind of characteristics embodied by many craft businesses in building natural capital. Our objective should be to move towards financial systems that support both more productive and sustainable enterprise in a regenerative economy.

Morlet sums up the circular economy:

[It] isn't just about reducing our energy footprint, it's about regenerating natural systems...to make meaningful change, we need to ask questions such as: how can craft influence design? And how can design influence the way we live in the world?'

[Crafts Council resources on sustainable practice and business](#). Contact the [Craft Business Skills team](#) for more information

[Circular economy introduction](#) The Ellen Macarthur Foundation

[The circular economy in detail](#) The Ellen Macarthur Foundation

[Making Craft Circular](#) Katie Tregidden

[Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants](#) by Robin Wall Kimmerer

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