

Craft Surrogates

Jonathan Nesci

What “craft” means proves itself to be elusive and, at the same time, ubiquitous regarding the act of making. Through this written exercise I look inward and study where craft is found in my own work as well as observe how it applies to the work of my contemporaries. Although most think of a craftsperson as the individual who makes objects, my interests in fabrication span multiple materials and connection methods. Early in my journey I grew frustrated with limitations of my making skill sets. It took a few years to realize that making wasn't my strength. Instead, I rely on “craft surrogates” to execute my ideas, people I can rely on for a level of quality that would otherwise take me years to refine. My craft is the understanding I have gained from working closely with these talented craftspeople and from learning the parameters of their craft. I design for the capabilities of the craft surrogates. In my mind, the precision I seek in every detail of what I design is done with someone who has years of technique and skill in his or her particular field to achieve that precision. My craft is to continually refine a supply chain around these craft surrogates, to garner an overview of their skill sets and interject my perspective in producing a work I am proud to offer.

As I designer, three activities occupy me: design, production, and sales. I design things that get produced and in turn are sold. A pretty easy process to understand. Each step has interwoven layers of specialized technique and accumulative skills.

Let's start at the end, with sales. Not so long ago a traditional furniture designer had, generally speaking, one obvious path for getting their designs produced and sold. That was to design for a furniture manufacturer and collect a design fee and/or a royalty. Think Charles and Ray Eames for Herman Miller or, more currently, Marc Newson for Apple, Ford, and Cappellini. Possibly, like Florence Knoll, it was one's own business. Today, working for a manufacturer is only one of many ways to get one's furniture produced and to market.

Fifteen to twenty years ago, design galleries shifted from selling only vintage goods by famous architects and designers to working closely with designers to create and produce works exclusively for these galleries. Trade fairs like Design Miami and Collective Design Fair, as well as online sales platforms such as 1stdibs.com have taken root. Galleries have been quick to respond to these new physical and online markets. Design galleries stemming from the late great Moss of New York to present day design influencers Volume Gallery, Chamber



Jonathan Nesci, Drop Light. Image: Volume Gallery



Jonathan Nesci, Galvanized Chair. Image: Patrick Parrish Gallery

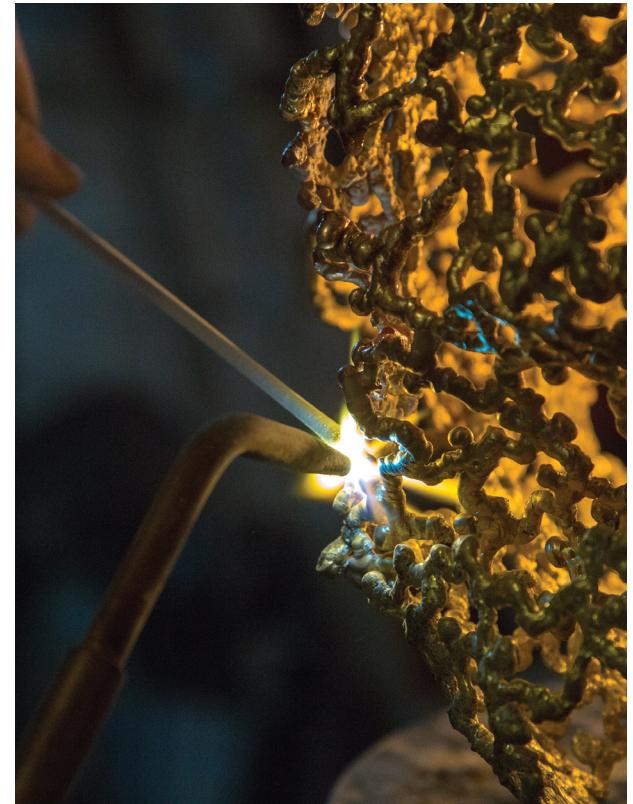
Gallery, Carpenters Workshop, Friedman Benda, Dzek, Patrick Parrish Gallery, R&Co and Etage to name a few. These entities are committed to representing designers' new works in the same way art galleries have represented artists for ages.

How do I get my work to market? One, I am represented by numerous design galleries—galleries that invest in and promote my work. Being represented gets my designs to an international market while also allowing me to experiment with material, process, form, and finish. Galleries promote these works through solo and group exhibitions as well as through design fair exhibitions. Secondly, I manage and produce my own line of furniture independent of the gallery structure, and I sell directly to interior designers and architects. Think couture versus ready-to-wear. The non-editioned work is equal in design attention, but, for the most part, the work is produced through tried-and-true manufacturing techniques, while the gallery work is more experimental in form or technique, made exclusively for the gallery and is often limited in number.

Designers make an array of products including lighting, furniture, custom interiors, and exhibitions. How a designer works varies as much as the products they make. Some designers, like Christopher Schanck or Jack Craig (both graduates of Cranbrook), develop very specific production techniques and produce their designs in their studios. They are able to scale these ideas by training and hiring assistants to produce their designs. Others, still working with their particular design language, collaborate with skilled artisans. For example, architects Aranda/Lasch worked with Native American weaver Terrol Dew Johnson for their recent show "Meeting the Clouds Halfway" at The Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson. This



Artwork by Jack Craig. Image: PD Rearick



Aranda Lasch with Terrol Dew Johnson at Volume Gallery. Image: Volume Gallery

process is intriguing to me as it is a collaboration and not a dictation of plans. These talent pairings can mix and match to produce an unlimited variety of possibilities.

There are also designers, like Lindsey Adelman, who work alongside machinists, glass blowers, and metal finishers to produce modular elements that are then assembled in house. These modular elements have a fixed retail price and the many combinations yield different price points. I believe Adelman has perfected this model and has been a pioneer in working with talented craftspeople to produce her designs. These designed elements then become the building blocks for new creations within her studio.

In my practice, I manage the production of my designs, and I rely on craftspeople who specialize in their field. My craft was honed while I worked for Wright Auction in Chicago. A large part of my position was to manage restoration of designs by some of the world's best designers and architects. I found many highly skilled upholsterers, glass vendors, machine shops, sculpture restoration specialists, woodworkers, and metal fabrications in the Chicago area to repair works by Nakashima, Prouvé, Vladimir Kagan, Frank Lloyd Wright, and many more. I learned to work beside these craftspeople for nearly five years and gleaned much from their work. I continue to seek out the craftsperson who, often unnoticed, is toiling behind the scenes of some larger industrial process making component parts. These specialists have accumulated experience through countless hours of industry. They have earned their knowledge and expertise by taking on one fabrication task at a time over many years. I have never found a craftsperson through something as simple as a Google search. Finding this person is, in itself, an art form,

because it demands that I develop a relationship with someone who will produce my project with rigorous detail and technique.

For ten years I have had the good fortune to work with talented craftspeople. I bring them fabrication challenges they have not often faced in the course of their daily work. Yet with their accumulated experience and knowledge, they have the patience to work beside me to find a solution. With care I nurture these relationships to connect my mind with their mind and hands. We have gained respect for one another and the work we do.

When I first started as a designer, I worked with a number of metal fabricators to learn the basic processes of sheet metal goods. Each project

introduced me to a new process. For my first design, metal was cut. Then, for my second design, it was cut and bent. For the third, it was cut, bent, and welded. For the fourth, it was cut, bent, welded, and painted. And on it goes. Most recently I have been experimenting with various plating processes on a steel vase I designed for Patrick Parrish Gallery in New York as well as new techniques for a CNC-milled work for Fisher-Parrish.

I recognize the limits of my own knowledge in lacking the hands-on experience of the craftspeople with whom I work and can say I fully rely on their expertise. It is at the start of working together when the potential relationship is most fragile. I ask the craftsperson to take a risk, to commit to working with me. I am well aware that working with someone

like me—who, at best, might have a novice's knowledge — can be a source of frustration. With each new project, I have a baseline understanding about the new process I would like to employ and spend significant time researching what they do prior to working with them. Each project is a give-and-take or a push-and-pull negotiation between me and the craftsperson. If I have done my research well and understand his or her capabilities, our negotiation is almost effortless.

With each new design, I strive to learn a new process. I combine what I have learned in order to reach what I have not yet discovered. This building-block method does not merely train me in a new process, it allows me to gradually build a network of craftspeople who are adept at producing



Jonathan Nesci, H1 Table, Image: Brian Franczyk



Jonathan Nesci, Hall Chair.



Jonathan Nesci, Prop Bookends



Jonathan Nesci, A Stool



Jonathan Nesci, Ratio Table



Jonathan Nesci, Fifty 50 Floor Shelf.

my designs to specification. In 2014 I first started worked with Curt Aton and the skilled metal shop Noblitt Fabricating in Columbus, Indiana. Noblitt, for the most part, produces low-quantity production and prototype metal parts for Cummins, Inc., the engine manufacturer. Although Noblitt does not typically produce furniture, they employ tooling and skilled individuals to do a variety of

in-house projects. This collaboration has opened new markets for Noblitt and it is exciting to watch as new opportunities from various creative firms come through the shop.

As a pilot project for what has become Exhibit Columbus, I worked closely with Noblitt to produce 100 unique occasional tables in mirror-polished aluminum that were installed in the



Jonathan Nesci, Miami Console. Image: Ross Floyd



Jonathan Nesci, Lividi Nightstands. Image: Casati Gallery

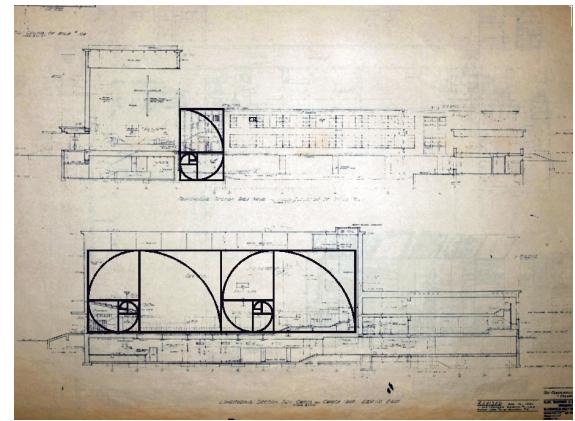
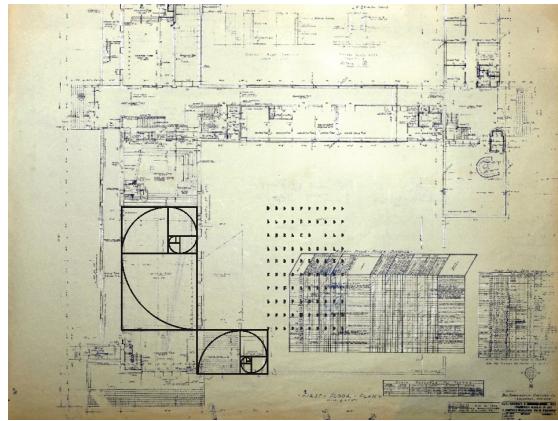


sunken courtyard of Eliel Saarinen's First Christian Church. Owner Curt Aton as well as the CNC mill and lathe operator worked with me to refine a method to produce these unique works as efficiently as possible. This was a true craft surrogate moment that did not involve me handing an idea to a fabricator blindly. Rather, I worked with them to refine ideas of process, order of operations, and logistics of installation. My work is most fulfilling when I am learning by immersing myself into the production process.

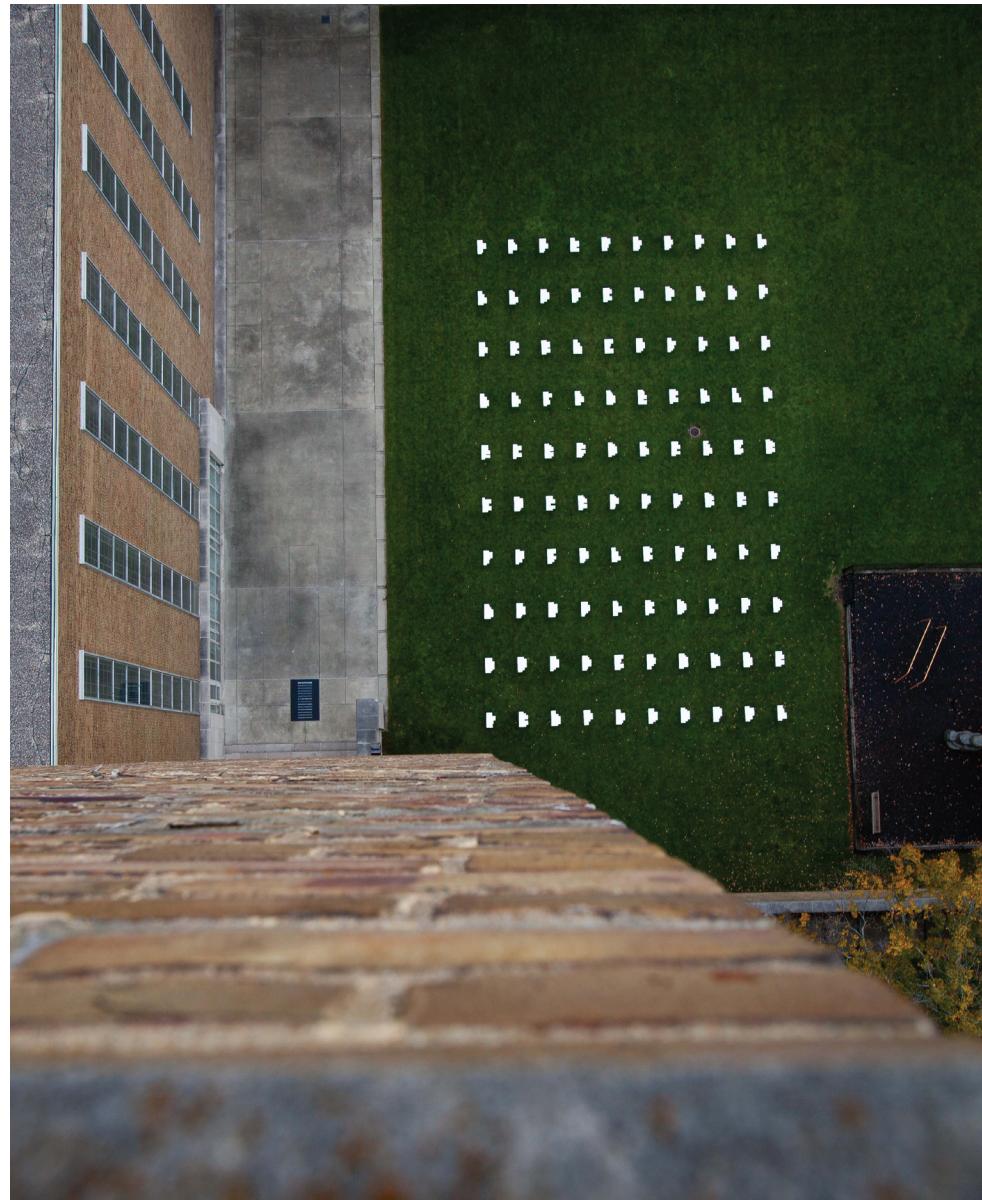
Although I learn about a new material or different process with each project, I have not changed how I design. I sketch out ideas on paper or in AutoCAD 3-D as I did when I entered the field. The change is in what I design, because I rely not only on my own accumulated knowledge and experience, but also on the skills of craftspeople with whom I work. I find this model of the designer relying on a craftsman who specializes in a process, material, or technique quite compelling. Certainly it is a model that has allowed me to thrive, but it also feels like the model for many of today's designers.

When I consider the various ways in which designers are working to get their products made and to market, I see these developments as part of a broader cultural shift, a shift that includes the recent craft beer market and the many new make-sell online platforms. We all are participating in the proliferation of social networks and crowd-sourced businesses. The digitally-savvy client seeks out unique, limited, or custom works by designers who are equally savvy. I see these models as being in their infancy. With these tools the micro can compete and even influence the macro.

The speed with which ideas and products are exchanged demands



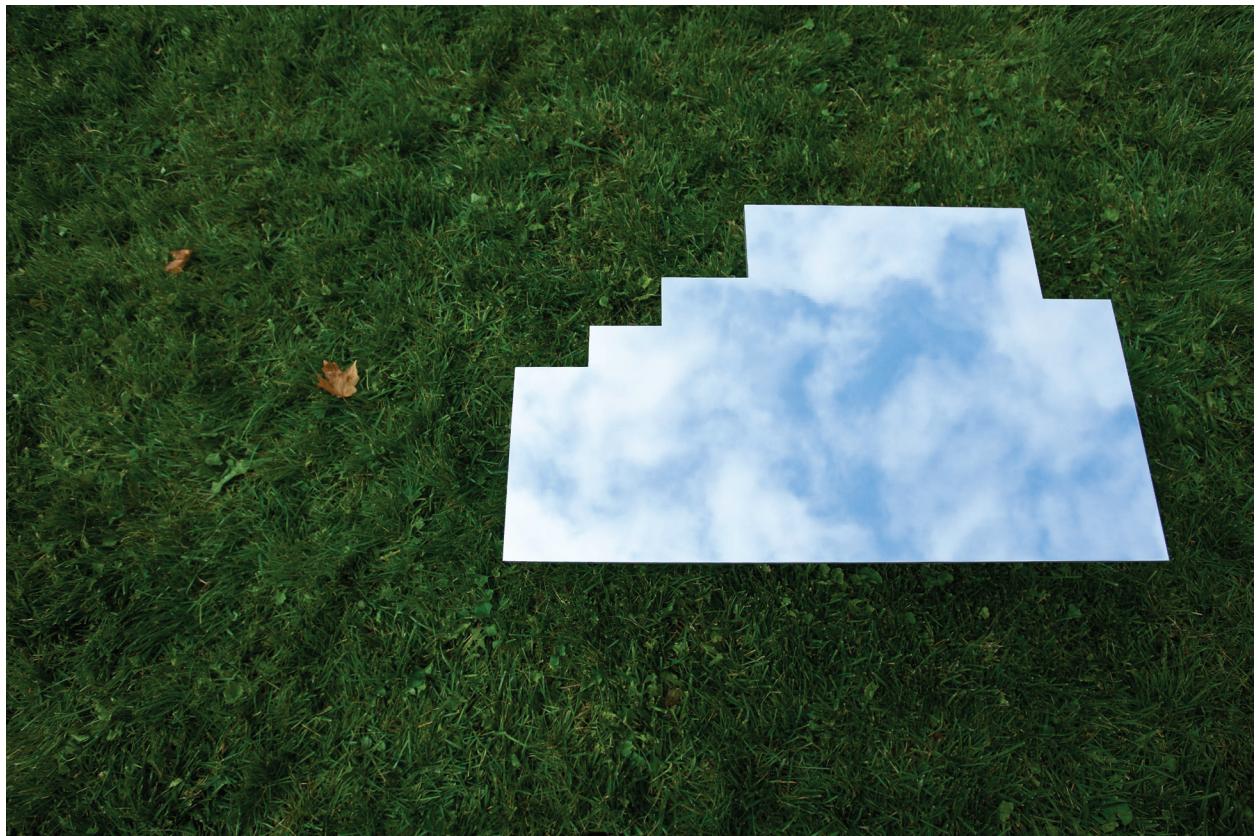
Jonathan Nesci, 100 Occasional Tables Installation, Eliel Saarinen's First Christian Church, Columbus, Indiana.



Jonathan Nesci, 100 Occasional Tables Installation, Eliel Saarinen's First Christian Church, Columbus, Indiana. Looking downward from church steeple. Image: Jeffrey Bond



such an array of skills that we cannot work on our own. In this age of interconnection, we must be part of a broader web of talent. Craft is the capacity to enter and become part of a substantive community. Craft is the interconnection between designer and fabricator that enables the designer to launch ideas with a speed not experienced before. Craft is the collaboration between the individual with an idea and the specialist who can make that idea a physical reality. Craft is the push-and-pull negotiation between the designer who brings new challenges and the people who are open to risk and possible failure. Craft is the exchange when a designer learns from craftspeople the parameters of a process and the limitations of a material. Craft is that moment when a fabricator meets the designer's challenge willingly. Craft produces the best work. Craft pushes the boundaries of human invention.



Jonathan Nesci, 100 Occasional Tables Installation, Eliel Saarinen's First Christian Church, Columbus, Indiana. Image: Jeffrey Bond