



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

Crafts as a University Discipline

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The Department of Conservation, University of Gothenburg, has over the last decade developed training and education in traditional crafts at university level at the campus Dacapo in Mariestad. These programs in building crafts (timber and masonry) and in gardening and garden design, are two of the five professional programs at the Department of Conservation.

The historical background

The need for an advanced education in traditional building crafts can partly be explained by an increasing demand for knowledge and skills that have been partly lost since the 1950s with the emergence of industrialised building methods. For the conservation of our building heritage, this is a situation that has lead to increasing costs within an area already weak in resources. The maintenance and conservation of historic buildings requires a competency that no longer exists or can't be reproduced within modern building trade.

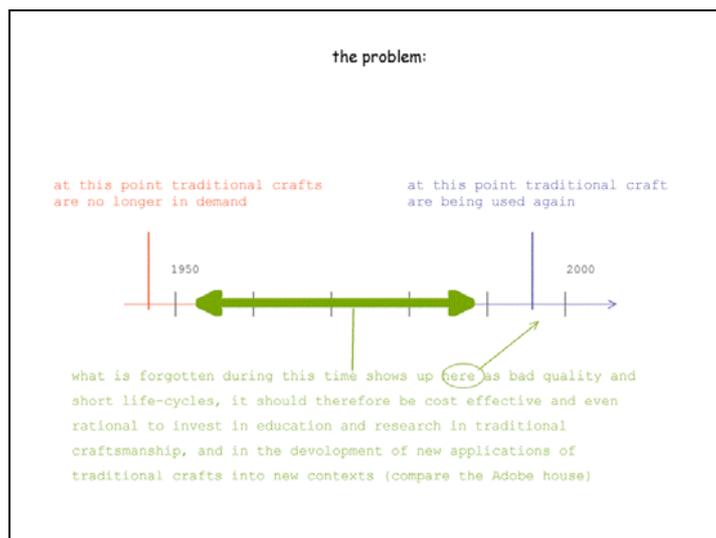


Illustration P. Sjömar 2006

This situation leads us to conclude that the traditional crafts must be regarded as a new profession. The training in these crafts cannot be solely dependent on the mechanisms and economy in the building industry or on a traditional organisation based on training from master craftsmen. This leads to a lot of considerations not only to the application, transfer and communication of knowledge and skills in the conservation process, but also more generally to the modes of production and re-production of knowledge in areas that have been regarded as tradition based: What are the specific gaps of knowledge both within the trades, as well as in other professions about aspects of craftsmanship in the building heritage? How are we to value the need of specialist knowledge in relation to heritage and conservation, versus the need for placing conservation in the curriculum of general vocational training on a basic level? What are the needs for and scope of continuous or recurrent training in crafts? How are we to link specialist training to research, how are we to balance between theory and practice, how to translate between abstract and concrete, how to develop communication between professions and experts?

The division between the craftsmen and other conservation professionals, which is far too common in conservation practice, is another reason for putting crafts on the university agenda. This professional divide has many consequences and risks:

- practical problems in conservation
- misunderstandings of technical problems due to variations in building techniques
- narrow definition of historical knowledge and interest
- democratic problems concerning the content of what we define as heritage

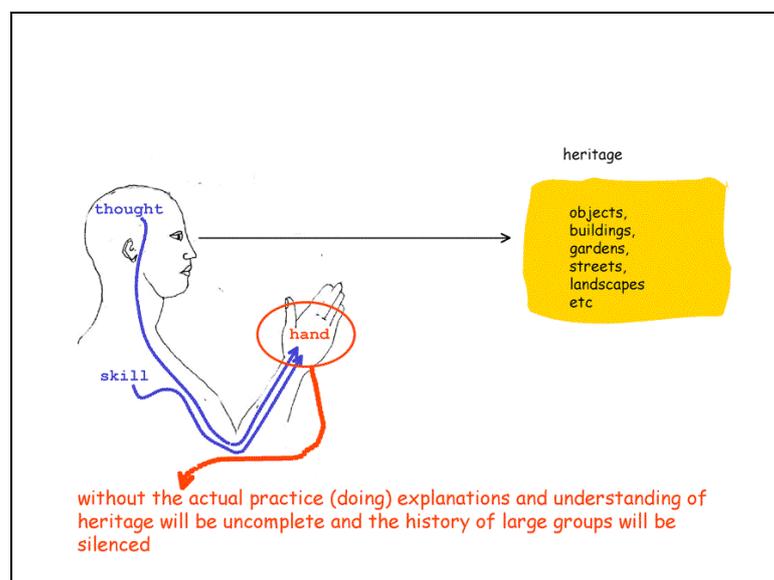


Illustration P. Sjömar 2006



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The speed, early emergence and large scale implementation of industrialisation in the building sector in Sweden has made the situation more urgent here than in many other countries where there still exists a small scale and traditional way of building. But even if the Swedish development seems to be rather extensive, the trend seems to be similar in most countries.

There is a need to make the transfer and development of new knowledge in this field more effective, to find ways to reduce costs in conservation and to give a better exchange of economic resources in the heritage sector.

The programs

The programs consist of three years of full time studies. A previous knowledge and skill in craft is required from the student to begin at the school. The curriculum puts emphasis on the execution of the craft. Nearly all education and training is centred on applications in real situations. A substantial part of this training is done in a traditional way, taught person to person and in learning by doing.

But at the same time the theoretical content of the craftsmanship is recognised in a systematic way. This is done to enhance and facilitate teaching, to document and describe methodologies, principles and processes, and to find new ways to study and reconstruct old and forgotten methods and knowledge.

The overall aims of the programs are of course related to the problems outlined above:

- To keep and transfer existing skills in historical craft
- To recover and reconstruct forgotten knowledge
- To develop new knowledge and skills for the conservation of heritage object



Photo and illustration P. Sjömar 2006

The University building is located in Mariestad next to the river Tidan. School gardens and work yards are planned to be raised in the vicinity, in the park areas on the banks of the river.

In the building crafts (timber and masonry) and gardening programmes, we try to take a craft perspective. That is, we try to pass know how about the craft processes, to the next generation in a somewhat new way. To study and develop crafts today, when we no longer have a small scale, local market where the techniques are brought to the next generation traditionally, we have to intellectualize. Unfortunately the intellectual part of hand craft is poorly described in literature. We need to make new detailed descriptions of the processes that we still master as well as research lost or forgotten historical techniques that we have to reconstruct. This means, for example, when making an opening in a wall, answering in detail questions like, “How does the bricklayer know that he will end up with a whole brick when reaching the other side?” Text, recorded drawings and sketches that describe processes (like in a cook book) play an important role in doing this.

An old building is in itself an important source for information about historical crafts. Investigating and recording buildings as well as gardens and landscapes plays an important role in the education. If you look at the building as the result of a building process with the question “How was it built?” you get interesting answers about the historical building crafts and the resources, ability and priorities of the original builders. When you take this craft perspective while recording, the observations must be very detailed and the information very precise.

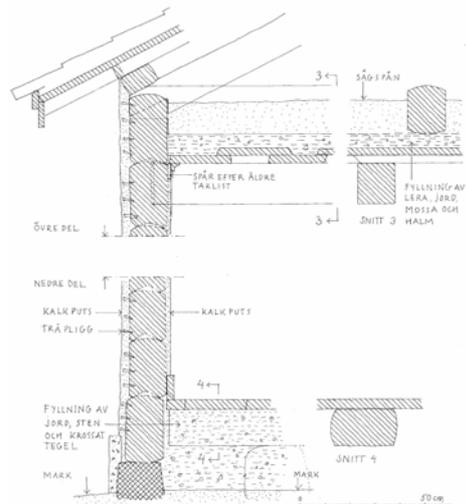


Photo R. Carlsson 2007. Section in log house, drawing K. Linscott 2004

New values in focus

Detailed studies and reconstruction of historical techniques and processes also opens a new perspective at the other end of the conservation process; in cultural history knowledge. When we get a better understanding of a building culture from the past, we can also better understand the time and culture for which the old buildings are an expression. Building heritage and building environments are important resources for identity and learning in a sustainable society. The concept of what cultural heritage is and the identification and assessment of values in cultural heritage is strengthened with the increased knowledge of traditional crafts. This puts new values in focus. Articulating these values are of importance when priorities are made; what to conserve and how to conserve it, in order to both protect the heritage and make it relevant for society.

Professionals from different fields; conservation specialists, architects, engineers, building managers, craftsmen and contractors are in charge of different, but equally important parts of the conservation process and they all need to cooperate in a conservation or restoration project. Then we will improve and develop the quality of conservation.