

# Making It

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In the late 1920s, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein designed and built a house in Vienna for his sister. Wittgenstein's family was extremely wealthy (there were gold-plated faucets in the bathrooms at home), and the building proceeded without the usual financial constraint. In one famous instance, to better satisfy his sense of proportion Wittgenstein had the drawing room ceiling torn out and rebuilt three centimeters higher.

As a novice architect, Wittgenstein obviously had large ambitions. "I am not interested in erecting a building," he once wrote, "but in ... presenting to myself the foundations of all possible buildings." Whether or not his sister's house approached this high ideal, Wittgenstein himself judged the finished building to be austere and sterile. It has "good manners," he later wrote, but no "primordial life," no "health."

Richard Sennett's "guiding intuition" in "The Craftsman" is that "making is thinking," and Wittgenstein's experience as a builder speaks to the point, even in its combination of obsession and disappointment. As Sennett notes, it "came at the end of a period in Wittgenstein's life when he had sought the philosophical equivalent of 'the foundation of all possible buildings.'" There is a strong link, Sennett argues, between what Wittgenstein learned by building a house and the turn that his philosophy subsequently took, away from rigorous logic and toward a playful engagement with common speech, paradox and parable.

This is a large claim in regard to a career in philosophy, but it becomes plausible in context, for Sennett's book gathers case after case in which we see how the work of the hand can inform the work of the mind. Moreover, it is through his insistence that thought arises in relation to craft that Sennett comes to one of his more intriguing interventions, a reimagining of the Enlightenment in terms not of ideas but of how craftsmen learned to work.

"The hand is the window on to the mind," Immanuel Kant wrote, and Sennett asks that we not pass through that window until we have adequately studied the hand. For Sennett the emblematic Enlightenment publication was Diderot's "Encyclopedia, or Dictionary of Arts and Crafts." In 35 volumes, this great work told its readers how to keep bees, make cider or wooden shoes, cure tobacco, prepare hemp, build a windmill, grind wheat, or — in the case that Sennett expands upon — make paper as it was then produced at the great L'Anglée factory south of Paris. The Enlightenment as pictured by Diderot arose from the conversation between craftsmen and all the stuff — the wood, the gold, the papermaking rags — that met their hands. The material world speaks back to us constantly, by its resistance, by its ambiguity, by the way it changes as circumstances change, and the enlightened are those able to enter into this dialogue and, by so doing, come to develop an "intelligent hand."

Using craftsmen as symbols of the Enlightenment turns out to be part of an argument that Sennett is conducting with one of his teachers, Hannah Arendt. In her own portrait of the human condition, Arendt distinguished between the world of animal needs and a "higher" world of art, politics and philosophy. This division is, for Sennett, a serious philosophical mistake with serious ethical and political consequences. It isn't only that it demeans those who labor with their hands, but that it fails to recognize one of the

foundations of good citizenship and cannot then imagine the kind of democracy in which governance is widely diffused, not given over to expert elites.

For it is Sennett's contention that "nearly anyone can become a good craftsman" and that "learning to work well enables people to govern themselves and so become good citizens." This line of thought depends, among other things, upon the Enlightenment assumption that craft abilities are innate and widely distributed, and that, when rightly stimulated and trained, they allow craftsmen to become knowledgeable public persons.

And what is it that such persons know? They know how to negotiate between autonomy and authority (as one must in any workshop); how to work not against resistant forces but with them (as did the engineers who first drilled tunnels beneath the Thames); how to complete their tasks using "minimum force" (as do all chefs who must chop vegetables); how to meet people and things with sympathetic imagination (as does the glassblower whose "corporeal anticipation" lets her stay one step ahead of the molten glass); and above all they know how to play, for it is in play that we find "the origin of the dialogue the craftsman conducts with materials like clay and glass."

The assumption that craft abilities are widely diffused leads Sennett into a meditation on our love of those intelligence tests by which we supposedly single out the very smart and the very stupid so that some will go to college and others go to bagging groceries. Sennett points out that such sorting ignores the "densely populated middle ground" where most of the population is actually found. Rather than celebrating a "common ground of talents," we tend to inflate "small differences in degree into large differences in kind" and so legitimate existing systems of privilege. Thinking of the median as the mediocre creates an excuse for neglect. This is one reason, Sennett argues, that "it proves so hard to find charitable contributions to vocational schools" while currently the wealth of the [Ivy League](#) schools is compounding at an astounding rate.

Sennett builds his argument slowly and allows himself many seeming digressions, a method that sometimes makes for frustrating reading. It wasn't until the final pages of "The Craftsman" that its organizing ideas crystallized for me, and at 300 pages that's a long time to wait. It may be that Sennett knows the foundations of his own approach so well that he forgets that others do not. Near the end, for example, he remarks that "an eagle-eyed reader" will have noticed that he almost never uses the word "creativity." Those familiar with Sennett's earlier work, especially "The Fall of Public Man," may well remember the impatience with which he treats the inflated importance given to Romantic genius, but newcomers may wonder why his working assumptions can't simply be revealed for the eyes of lesser birds.

All this said, rather than demanding a spine of overt ideas it may be better to read a book like this for the companionship of its inquiring intelligence. There is much to learn here — about the quilted titanium fabricated for [Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum](#) in Bilbao, for example, or about how Antonio Stradivari ran his violin workshop, or how the inventor of a mechanical flute player designed the first automated machines for weaving silk.

My favorite of such lessons involves four different recipes by four different chefs, each trying to explain how to prepare a famous French dish — a boned chicken, stuffed and glazed — known as poulet à la d'Albufera. One chef simply lists each step in the flattest of language ("force the flesh loose"), a style Sennett calls "dead denotation." Another — [Julia](#)

Child – writes the narrative with empathy for a timid beginner; a third says very little about the actual preparations, describing instead how a French cook might approach the barnyard to choose a hen.

Finally we come to one Madame Benshaw, from whom Sennett once took a cooking class. An Iranian refugee, Madame Benshaw had poor English (stuffing the bird, she would hold up an ingredient she had found in the market, neither she nor her pupils knowing its name). Prevailed upon to write out a recipe for poulet à la d'Albufera, she took a month to produce the following:

“Your dead child. Prepare him for new life. Fill him with the earth. Be careful! He should not overeat. Put on his golden coat. You bathe him. Warm him but be careful! A child dies from too much sun. Put on his jewels. This is my recipe.”

Those who wish to know how to decode these instructions will have to read Sennett's book. After that, those wishing to actually prepare this dish will need to seek out a teacher with the kind of intelligent hands that can turn cooking into craftsmanship.

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/06/books/review/Hyde-t.html?pagewanted=1&r=1>