

# FUTURESCAN 4: VALUING PRACTICE

## A Practice Based Methodology for Research in the Archive

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### Abstract

My research focuses on the fabric samples and documentation held in the archive of the furniture company Parker Knoll Ltd, part of the Frederick Parker Collection London Metropolitan University, United Kingdom (UK). This archive is an under researched and under theorised resource, particularly in a creative context. The anonymous and neglected fabric samples are unknown to the textile community and I will be undertaking the first critical study surrounding this collection.

The aim for this practice-based research is to create material responses to the archive in the form of the 'interpretative object' that reveals and explores the context of the fabric samples' design, selection and manufacture. Here connections between the archive and the audience can be reflected upon to formulate a new model of pedagogical use of an archive both in design education, and with different social and community groups.

My research proposes an intention to explicitly act as an intermediary or transitional tool to inspire a selected participatory group into a guided activity. The project work undertaken will be reflected upon to determine the success or otherwise of the models used for furthering the use of the archive as an educational methodology.

Keywords: archive; fabrics; interpretative object; pedagogy

### Introduction

My doctoral research focuses on the fabric samples held in the Frederick Parker Collection, of the furniture company Parker Knoll Ltd and will be one of the first critical studies into these fabrics. I am focusing on the post-second world war time period from 1945 to 1955; a time of continued austerity but also of important events for the UK which symbolised confidence in the future, such as the Britain Can Make It exhibition in 1946, the 1948 Olympics and the Festival of Britain in 1951.

Figure 1 shows two pages from one of the seven sample books recording the fabrics used for upholstery on chairs. All the samples have names, but few have any details about the manufacturer. As can be seen in this image, these are some of the few which have manufacturers and dates.



Figure 1: Sample Books, Parker Knoll Ltd, Frederick Parker Collection, 1949-1950.  
Photograph, Gina Pierce.

The aim for my practice based research is to create material responses to the archive in the form of the interpretative object which explores the context of the design and manufacture of the fabrics. The idea of the interpretative object is that it will bring these forgotten samples to the attention of a wider audience, and may encourage new creative outcomes in project work with both design students and other groups. It is hoped that the results can be reflected upon to formulate new models of pedagogical use of an archive in design education.

### Pilot Project

A pilot project was initiated through my study into the concept of re-activating the archive, drawing on Jane Bennett's (2010: 112) writing on the inanimate having an energy which should be considered when encountering the contents of the archive.

The artists Amalia Pica and Mark Leckey who are both concerned with the agency of the material object were another inspiration. Curator Chris Fite-Wassilak (2017: 67) describes them as concerned with the ideas of '...the imminent agency of things...', who '...attempt to recognise the mysteriousness of objects, and a new animism'.

Mark Leckey's work has pursued this concept in art pieces including 'The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things' (2013) in which he placed a selection of objects including William Blake's death mask and a Cyberman's helmet together in an exhibition space to observe the communication between them.

Amalia Pica is another artist whose work looks at the presence of the object, and the interaction between the objects and between the objects and ourselves. Her project, 'I am in Tower Hamlets, as I

am in Tower of Hamlets, just like a lot of other people are 2011-12' (2011) involved a small granite sculpture of an Echeveria plant being passed around to over 50 homes for a week at a time. This experiment which tested the response by members of the public to an inanimate object inspired me to set up my own examination of how the public would respond to the inanimate.

For the pilot project, named 'The Handover Project', I designed a piece of fabric inspired by the archive for participants to take into their homes and use however they wished. As the intention of the exercise was to explore the relationship between the participant and the piece of cloth, to avoid influencing their use of the fabric, no information about the archive, or the origin of the pattern, was given to the participants. Using the archive fabrics as a starting point, but without replicating the imagery, I designed a selection of fabrics, as shown in figure 2. During production of my textile designs, the physical and technical aspects of the original samples was considered and a deliberate reference was made to a small range of screen-printed linen fabrics in the archive. The screen-prints were produced in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and used as cheaper, fresher looking alternatives to the usual woven designs. The UK Government's Utility scheme was still in place at this time, and yarns for traditional woollen upholstery fabrics were difficult to obtain. To develop the new design, the scale of the prints on the original samples was enlarged, elements of different designs were blended together, and there was experimentation with different colour palettes. The new design was then screen-printed onto linen.



Figure 2: *The Fabric Handover Project*, design ideas. Photograph, Gina Pierce.



A one colour print was chosen, and enough printed to be able to give participants a metre each, as can be seen in figure 3. The blue on white colour palette I selected for the print deliberately rejected one of the original archive colours, to distance them from the time period, and to appeal to as broad a range of tastes as possible.



*Figure 3: The Fabric Handover Project, the selected design on the print table.  
Photograph, Gina Pierce.*

A wide range of participants were chosen from a range of ages, genders, cultures and backgrounds. On agreeing to take part, participants were given the fabric and asked to do anything they wanted with it. Five weeks later they were emailed with a set of open questions and asked to provide three photographs of the fabric within their homes. The images illustrating the outcomes (figures 4-9) are a selection of those photographs. The participants were asked the following questions:

1. How did it make you feel being asked to take and use the fabric?
2. Is there any particular reason you used the fabric in the way that you have?
3. Would you like to keep the fabric, throw it away or return it to me?
4. Does this project make you want to know more about the inspiration for the design of the fabric?

## Results

Figure 4 shows the photographs taken by two participants, A and C. Participant A is in her twenties; she explained that she tried using the fabric as a table cloth, however her partner preferred to see the wood of the table top so the fabric was put away in a cupboard whose contents reflect objects that are rarely used. Participant C is a male in his twenties. Again, although he intended to ‘do something’ he didn’t remove it from the bag in which it arrived (figure 4).



*Figure 4: Participant A (left) put the fabric away in a cupboard. Participant C (right) did not remove the fabric from the bag in which it arrived.*

The response from eighteen year old Participant B, the youngest in the study, admitted ‘...it sat in my room for a couple of weeks while I attempted to figure out what to do with it, soon enough it just blended into the mess.’ Figure 5 illustrates how the fabric has become part of a sea of clothing on her bedroom floor.





*Figure 5: The fabric in the bedroom of Participant B.*

Participant D is a male journalist in his sixties with an interest in design; he decided to use the fabric as a table cloth, and has continued to use it in different locations, as shown in figure 6.



*Figure 6: The fabric used as a tablecloth by Participant D.*

Participant E is a very keen, self-taught needle woman. She wanted to be able to use all the fabric, so started first making a cushion, a bag, and finally a small bag using any left-over fabric. Participant E



used an inventive way of joining smaller pieces together and tacit use of zero waste pattern cutting to make three items from the 1 metre of cloth (figure 7).



*Figure 7: Two bags and a cushion made by Participant E.*

F and G are two female participants, both of whom have had design training. Both have developed very personal and creative responses. Participant F has used recycled jewellery to work into the shapes (figure 8) the other has added stitching (figure 9).



*Figure 8: Participant F used recycled jewellery to work into her fabric.*





*Figure 9: Participant G added stitching.*

Participant H is a professional textile artist. He experimented with cutting out sections, re-stitching them in a different layout and adding in sections of other cloth. This continues a theme of disruption of the normative which he pursues in his own practice (figure 10).



*Figure 10: Participant H experimented with cutting out and re-stitching processes.*



## Discussion

The project has raised areas for further research which will be explored through theory and practice. One question concerns the differences between the younger or less experienced and the older age group in their reaction to using the fabric. The younger did not attempt to do anything inventive or constructive. The lack of any ideas for use or display, even to drape it over a chair, was surprising, but this lack of response in the younger age group is the most useful for further study. Although there are pedagogical questions that could be asked about the teaching of hand skills to this generation, it also raises the issue of the perception of the fabric. It might suggest that the textile itself is not recognised as an independent entity without being applied to a three-dimensional form, reflecting the perception of how textiles are valued; without being made into a product for clothing or furnishing, it struggles to exist as an independent entity. When referring to photographs of her work, Marianne Straub, weaver and designer of many commercial fabrics, declared that ‘...a cloth relates to its use; it only becomes ‘alive’ when it is seen in the context of its purpose’ (Schoeser 1984: 5).

Another question that this project raises is the way in which the interpretative object should be able to guide the participants in a more directed way in order to elicit a creative response, particularly when there is a lack of tacit experience. To have pedagogical meaning, the interpretative object appears to need to be created for a focused group of participants. This reflects research conducted into how students work in a museum environments which found that inspiration can be taken from museums and collections by those who have reached a level of experience within their own practice and skill set, and have an understanding of their own design development methods (Hendon and Santino 2018; Eckert and Stacey 1998). In a study conducted by Hendon and Santino (2018: 146) at the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture, it was found that students used the collection effectively if they were experienced in selecting material and so had pre-existing knowledge of how they would use particular artefacts.

In another study, Eckert and Stacey (1998: 10) found that ‘...to generate good ideas of their own, creative thinkers depend on their prior knowledge and their ability to recognise its relevance’. Preparation for work in the archive could be seen as a deterrent for those who are unaccustomed to this approach, and modelling a method of response might communicate to them more directly. For the novice student or participant using the museum to research for creative inspiration, the interpretative object could be one that demonstrates use of the fabrics, and gives very specific guidance. The project has suggested generative theory in the value and pedagogical use of textiles, from which a methodology can be developed for working with the archive, directing how the interpretative object will be produced to meet the needs of the next participatory group. In their responses all of the participants expressed pleasure at having been invited to take part in the project. Some felt a little daunted by the responsibility, but were confident that their reactions were appropriate to their own levels of ability, and satisfied with their outcomes- even those who produced nothing new.

An encouraging final response from this study showed that all participants would be interested in knowing more about the archive, which can be taken as a positive outcome.

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