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Manufacturing on the move? Beyond the high dollar in the debate about making things in Australia - the case of the Australian surfboard industry - AUSCCER Discussion Paper No. 2012/2

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Abstract

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Keywords

Manufacturing, making, surfboards, economic geography, labour, creativity, Australia

Disciplines

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Manufacturing on the move?

Beyond the high dollar in the debate about making things in Australia – the case of the Australian surfboard industry

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The Australian Centre for Cultural Environmental Research (AUSCCER) is a research initiative funded since 2009 by the University of Wollongong and the Australian Research Council (by Fellowships to Professors Lesley Head (FL0992397) and Chris Gibson (FT0991193)). AUSCCER started from the human geography node within GeoQuEST Research Centre and the School of Earth and Environmental Sciences. AUSCCER brings together a uniquely strong combination of expertise in several relevant aspects of cultural environmental research, and aims to make significant conceptual, methodological and practical contributions to the field.

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- undertake in-depth cultural analysis of Australia's highest priority environmental issues to make both intellectual and practical contributions to the pressing problems of environmental sustainability
- strengthen national humanities/social science research and research training capacity in the environmental field, with particular strengths in ethnographic and related social science methods
- drive theoretical and practical research frontiers on the cultural environment
- provide a basis for more effective multidisciplinary engagement with the natural and physical sciences
- contribute to the development of relevant local, state and federal policy
- build Australia's international research presence in the cultural dimensions of environmental sustainability

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Manufacturing on the move?

Beyond the high dollar in the debate about making things in Australia – the case of the Australian surfboard industry

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AUSCCER Discussion Paper No. 2012/2

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The death of Australian manufacturing – a casualty of the high dollar?

In October 2011 surfboard manufacturer BASE abruptly closed its factory on the Gold Coast resulting in the direct loss of 50 jobs. A few days later, nearby D'Arcy Surfboards also announced it was shedding workers and downsizing from a state-of-the art purpose built factory into a backyard workshop. Each business exported surfboards internationally and employed some of Australia's best known surfboard-makers. The troubles facing these workshops added to those brewing at the very same in Australia's steel, aluminium, automotive and garment industries. With renewed public debate and media commentary on the future of manufacturing, we now face a crisis in 'making things' in Australia. To inform debate about this crisis, in this discussion paper we focus attention on one industry – surfboard-making – where Australia has had an international comparative advantage, and on which we have been doing extended, detailed qualitative and quantitative research for over three years.

To date the conversation about the future of Australian manufacturing has mostly centred on the high Australian dollar; its impact on exports and chances that the production of evermore goods will move overseas to places where the costs of doing business are lower. This is linked to the increasingly dominant position of power held by the minerals industry, the commodities export-driven elevation of the dollar, and attempts by mining magnates such as Clive Palmer, Gina Rinehart and Andrew 'Twiggy' Forrest to remould Australia around a 'quarry vision' of extractive minerals wealth (see Pearse, 2009). Joining with unions and other commentators from the political Left, we share concern about the way in which mining interests appear to be steering public debate in Australia in ways that entrench their power, permanently elevate the dollar, and render 'common sense' the thinking that a mining boom is a natural and good thing for Australia, while actually hurting other parts of the economy (see Gibson, Carr and Warren, 2012).

The prolonged high value of the Australian currency puts at risk those industries where import substitution is possible. Tourism, education, retail (also threatened by the rise of internet shopping), and the manufacturing sector feel the economic squeeze most directly. There are very real impacts of a high Australian dollar on the economic fortunes of specific sectors. In the industry we spotlight below, surfboard manufacturing, a high dollar has had a genuine impact, which has been region-specific. Surfboard-makers on the Gold Coast and Byron Bay for example are deeply connected to export markets in places like Japan and Western Europe, and to international tourist fluctuations. These have suffered under the high dollar.

The question we seek to pose is: beyond the dollar what other factors play a role in shaping the economic fortunes of manufacturing industries? In light of debates about Australia's future in making things we offer a fresh perspective focusing not just on the high state of the Australian currency but the *internal* features of manufacturing industries and the regions within which they are based. As geographers we argue this type of research can reveal important insights into the current state of manufacturing. A geographical perspective is highly attuned to the moving parts of those industries that apply human effort in the conversion of basic materials into useful products.

We accordingly turn to a novel industry in which Australia has been a major global player for 50 years: surfboard manufacturing. Here the high dollar does not wholly explain struggles currently being experienced. Instead, combinations of industrial, cultural, environmental and regional factors

require closer attention. Following Adam Moore's 'insistence on the primacy of processes and relations over substances, entities or things' (2008:220), we are interested in how vulnerability in manufacturing is experienced, practiced and negotiated by people (as workers) in specific places and times.



Skipp Surfboards, Wollongong

The Australian surfboard industry

The Australian surfboard industry is one of the country's lesser known specialisms. Australian surfboard-makers have driven innovation in surfboard-design and production since the mid-1960s. When surfing 'boomed' in the early 1960s, a craze that took in everything from the music of Dick Dale and the Beach Boys to Gidget movies and new styles of fashion and language, the Australian surfboard industry developed in locations where the pastime was itself concentrated: coastal regions with suitable waves and amenable climates for surfing, often (but not solely) tourism regions. These included the Gold Coast, Byron Bay and northern NSW, Sydney's northern beaches, Newcastle, the Illawarra region and Torquay, near iconic Bells Beach in Victoria.

Australia is home to small but globally recognised workshops such as Bob McTavish in Byron Bay, Bennett Surfboards in Brookvale and Simon Anderson in Torquay. Rather than concentrate in one or two regions, surfboard-making to this day reflects a decentralised and linear, coastal pattern (Warren, 2012). Regional demand persists for locally-made surfboards irrespective of global competition, due to the high rate of replacement for boards (a regular surfer can break two to three

surfboards each year) and the need to customise board style and size to both individual riders and prevailing local waves. Physical geography and individual surfing locations, body size and style demand a largely localised surfboard-making industry in Australia (Warren, 2012).



Bob McTavish marking out a custom hand-shape in his Byron Bay factory, 2012

Australian surfboard manufacturers have been among the most visible, creative and successful, responsible for two of the most significant advances in surfboard design. The high performance 'shortboard' design, developed by Bob McTavish in 1966 set in train a 'shortboard revolution' in surfing style. Meanwhile Simon Anderson's three-fin 'Thruster', introduced in 1980 is a design that continues to dominate the industry. In addition, a trio of companies, Rip Curl, Quiksilver and Billabong (two from Torquay and one from the Gold Coast) have diversified from origins making surfboards, wetsuits and board shorts in the late 1960s and early 1970s into up-scaled mega-brands. Billabong and Quiksilver have even listed on stock exchanges and are branded through networks of thousands of retail stores in scores of countries (Jarratt, 2010). But the surfboard industry, like many other Australian manufacturing sectors, finds itself in a precarious state. The closure of prominent businesses like BASE and reduced production in other workshops along Australia's east coast means the hubs of production are battling with reduced staff, lower output and slimmer margins.

How this state of affairs has come to be is partially explained by a high dollar, and by cheaply-produced surfboards being imported from Asia, which have increased their market share here over the past ten years and softened demand for locally made boards. This has been the story as reported in some broadsheet media recently (see for example, [Murray 2012](#)). But such factors explain only part of the story. Drawing on three years of longitudinal research with 16 different workshops along Australia's east coast from the Sunshine and Gold Coasts in Queensland through coastal New South

Wales and down to Torquay in Victoria, we highlight three deeper factors that threaten surfboard-making. These are:

- 1) the shift from hand-making boards individually to computerised mechanisation (a form of capital-intensification displacing a craft-based form of labour);
- 2) the concentration of power in discount retailers and surf super-stores; and
- 3) a culture of informality emanating from surfing's subcultural roots that amplifies risk and exploitation.

These factors illustrate the complexity of the dynamics within industries and regions – features we believe are critical for a more robust debate about the future of making things in Australia.

Moving production systems: from hand-making to computer shaping

Ancient Hawaiian surfboard-making practices shared certain features with the contemporary system of hand-making surfboards: both involved separate tasks for carving/shaping and sealing/laminating boards (the essential division of labour between what are now called shapers and glassers), and rested on accumulated expert knowledge held by these craftspeople. *Shapers* plane foam 'blanks' into sleek, rideable shapes, while *glassers* laminate and seal each shaped board. Surfboard-making by hand is necessary to finely customise a board to an individual surfer, for local conditions, and remains the production method of choice for most regular surfers. In interviews, shapers and glassers (who incidentally were universally men – where women were employed was in office and administrative positions) emphasised this system as craft, as artform, as well as production of a specialised sporting good. John Skipp from the Illawarra region explains:

We fill each custom order out one on one with our customers, talking through their needs and wants. Then the design you've created is drawn on the blank and cut out, filed down by hand, with a planer and surface form tools. Then it's sanded over and over, to its correct dimensions. The board is cleaned and any artwork and deck design is created with an acrylic paint. Glassers start their work next, layering fibreglass cloth over, cutting it to size. This resin [holds the bottle up], has a catalyst added, and is really carefully spread over the cloth and begins to set hard...Once it's dried you sand it over and polish it up to give off that beautiful finished look of a surfboard.

The emphasis on bodily skills and 'feel' was explained by Bob McTavish in Byron Bay:

A good designer and shaper learns how to feel the board and see how each board is going to turn out before you've even started making it... imagine the design in your mind and picture how you'll shape it together. You have your drawings and order form [for custom boards] but that just gives you something to start with... I rely most on my senses and how a board feels.

Surfboard shapers learned their work informally, as low-paid helpers in workshops initially, then slowly graduating to more complex production tasks. Phil Byrne in the Illawarra explains:

We learnt from scratch, there's no formal training in the industry. I went up to watch a shaper in Sydney for a few hours once... then it was trial and error. We started [with his brother Chris] shaping in our grandparents garage, then I started working for John Skipp...

after a while certain elements led us to starting our own business, around 1976... there's no TAFE or formal training...It is like that in everywhere, watch, listen and learn, all on the run.

In the surfboard-making scene, craftsmanship, customisation and relationships between shapers and customers were all sources of credibility and cultural capital. Maurice Cole (Torquay) described the surfboard as: *'part of the shapers soul...surfers have to trust [the] shaper will use all their knowledge and skill and produce [something] that blows their mind in the water'*. The result is a tightly constrained form of bespoke manufacturing: custom surfboard workshops run on small volumes (often between 500 and 800 surfboards annually), employ just a few people and invest time and energy into maintaining strong relationships with loyal locals. Individual reputation is a premium. Overheads are kept low, and cheap rents are sourced in light industrial estates proximate to surfing areas: Currumbin and West Burleigh Heads on the Gold Coast; North Wollongong; Sunrise Industrial Estate outside Byron Bay; Brookvale in Sydney's northern beaches; the 'surf world' precinct in Torquay. Boards produced are unique and diverse, with regional variations in style reflecting predominant wave types and vernacular surfing culture: some workshops (and regions like the Gold Coast) focus predominantly on high performance competitive shortboards, others in places like Byron Bay more on retro boards and 'alternative' designs. Some custom surfboard-makers seek export markets, or export themselves as travelling 'guest star' shapers visiting factories in Japan, California and Hawai'i to temporarily shape boards there. Otherwise, most retain local markets and boards are specialised to suit such places.



Foam 'blanks' in the process of being 'blown', Bennett Surfboards, Brookvale, Sydney, 2012

This system of local custom surfboard production remained relatively stable between 1960 and the late 1990s as surfing enjoyed continual expansion as a pastime. As early as the 1970s attempts were made to develop crude metal shaping platforms; these were not automated, but welded platforms on which blanks could be secured while a shaper used a router to cut consistent bottom and deck lines. Fully-automated systems would take another two decades to emerge. Nonetheless, in the late 1990s and 2000s, local surfboard-making workshops in Australia adapted to this technology, responding to competition from corporate labels for valuable retail space, and shifted the organisation of their production. To survive smaller workshops sought to sell more surfboards, which required them to be more visible. The way to achieve this was by supplying surfboards to retailers located in shopping malls and in close proximity to popular surfing beaches. One by one local workshops shifted towards an automated, computerized system of surfboard-making, encouraged by retailers and seduced by growth potential. Following a mechanised, automated approach, each surfboard is shaped using computer-generated design templates with the goal of meeting higher levels of demand across a more general mass market. This system involves key structural differences in market scale and occupational specializations within a workshop. Most significantly it also required changes in the relationship between surfers and individual board-makers, altering how much (and if at all) the industry is embedded in dependent relationships and connections with a surrounding local surfing community.

Under this approach, computer assisted design (CAD) programs are combined with computer numerical control (CNC) machines to turn each surfboard from blank foam mould into near-finished shape. A job that took a hand-shaper three or four hours could now be done on a machine in less than twenty minutes, requiring five minutes of fine sanding work before after the machine has finished. Relying on 50 or so precise measurements, this technology has revolutionized global surfboard manufacturing over the last 15 years. Unlike many other forms of manufacturing, the tendency of capital to deskill human labour inputs and convert to mechanised and cheaper offshore production has come late to surfboard-making.

While hand-shaping was appropriate for supplying localized, custom markets – where surfers in a town visited a nearby workshop and ordered a specialized surfboard from a hand-shaper – this system did not cater well to the entry level surfing market: those beginners wanting to get in touch with the surfing lifestyle and learn how to ride waves. Hand-based production was labour-intensive and slow. Increasingly prevalent discount retailers and surf superstores needed rapid production and supply regimes for the novice mass market. At busy local workshops with a backlog of orders over the busiest periods, new custom made boards take four to eight weeks to deliver. Many beginners and tourists (especially on the Gold Coast, in Byron Bay and Torquay) simply wanted a generic design from a retail surf shop, a user-friendly surfboard that could be tried out at the beach immediately. Hand-shaping thus became limiting for smaller independent workshops, and mechanically-produced boards soaked up more and more of the available retail space:

In the retail market, the way I look at it you've got a set of rings, there's an inner ring, there's a middle ring and then there's an outer ring. I've always wanted to reach the outer ring. People that just want to get in touch with the culture, how are they going to get a board for little Johnny? They don't necessarily need to take my time asking for measurements and designs. It's all very time consuming. That's when I struck up a relationship with Beach Street...who sell my boards in their surf shops off the shelf. (Chris, Illawarra)

Novice surfers were the market segment being increasingly monopolized by discount retailers, and by Rip Curl, Quiksilver and Billabong, with their extensive retail networks and sophisticated, well-funded advertising campaigns. Using CAD/CNC technologies became a strategy for local independent workshops to 'get in touch' with entry level surfers. McTavish, JS Industries, DHD and Byrne in Australia each now sell several thousand computer-shaped boards annually. For surfboard workshops using CNC production, divisions of labour have shifted. Workers in the industry now need expertise in CAD/CNC operating, computer engineering and graphic design. Meanwhile hand-shaping sections of many businesses have been downsized, and in some cases have begun supplying designs and board templates for computerized-shaping – acting as a research and development division. Unlike other patentable forms of innovation, however, surfboard shapers are not recognised as 'authors' of successful designs: mass reproduction of their hand-made shapes through computerised methods takes place without royalty payments or authorship credits. The shaper is only paid a rate per board shaped.

An experienced hand-shaper crafting surfboards using their hands and manual tools can produce four or so finished shapes per day (about twenty per week). By comparison the CAD/CNC system can churn out 250 surfboards over a normal five day working week. Additionally, most of the workshops using CAD/CNC technology – Byrne, McTavish, Diverse, Mt Woodgee, D'Arcy – enabled surfers to order surfboards from a central website or access a link to authorised retailers. Consumers no longer need to visit the workshop directly and can complete transactions online.

The result has been a shift in the scope and scale of the industry, and an amplification of risk and exposure to debt. Independent workshops operating from industrial warehouse space have struggled especially. Their spaces of production are not connected to surf retail shops in prominent beachside areas, which constrains the trade of large volumes of boards to beginners. Being small, it is also difficult to provide consultation to customers while at the same time continuing to operate CAD and CNC machinery. In implementing a computerized production system to up-scale production, and in turn improve profitability, workshops now need to reach a certain critical mass, attain strong brand recognition through advertising and sponsoring pro-tour riders, along with signing product distribution agreements with surf retail outlets. Debt increasingly finances the purchase of expensive equipment and bankrolls increasing production volumes in attempts to secure visibility in retail outlets and meet demand from internet orders. Higher sales volumes must be maintained. Slow periods correspond with a rapid accumulation of incoming bills, high freight costs, employee wages and bills from their large number of suppliers. Relying on markets outside the tight circle of loyal experienced local surfers has meant increasing attention to and investment in branding and marketing – each generating further costs and thus amplifying risks.

Accompanying the strategy of high-volume production has been the increasingly common practice of ghost-shaping for other companies:

How it works is they [large surf brand or label] contact you and have a conversation about entering into an agreement with them to supply their surfboards for a store locally...it's called ghost shaping. The problem for the workshop though is that they have no identity in the process, you literally are a ghost as far as the surfer who ends up buying that board is concerned. (Jerry, Gold Coast)

Ghost-shaping severs the strong social ties between shaper and surfer. The advent of the anonymous shaper has opened the door to competition from computer-machining factories in Thailand and China (companies including Global Surf Industries and Shenzhen Technology). According to Mick Carabine (Illawarra):

You know, it's a dying trade...Shaping machines have taken over and no matter who you are they're all getting shape machine jobs done now, and all they [shapers] finish off is the rails. There are lots more pop-out boards...same designs copied over and over, popped out one after the other. The price has made it into a disposable item: buy a surfboard for \$300, in six months it's wrecked, so throw it away and buy a new one.

For another experienced shaper, cheap imports threatened the viability of local workshops:

Do you want a slave-laboured dude getting US\$3 a week making your surfboards, or do you want a guy who knows how to stand-up in a barrel? And, you know, do you want a piece of art made with human love and heart and soul, or one churned out on a computer? This is one of the last industries that you can buy custom. But if I don't get enough business to stay in business, because of China, popping out boards for \$280, that hurts everybody...all the way down the line...that's my official fucking position.

Related to the advent of computer-shaping as a means to meet mass consumer demand at the entry level, is the consolidation of power in the hands of surf retailers.



Mick Carabine glassing boards, Wollongong, 2010

Retail movements

Between the 1970s and 1990s the Australian market for surfboards focused on small workshops in surfing regions and coastal tourist towns. Some diversified into board-shorts, bikinis, t-shirts and accessories and also became surf retail shops. Others, fearful of growing inventories and the distractions of selling surf clothing and apparel, remained production-only facilities, making surfboards and related watercraft.

This scene has shifted markedly since the 1990s with the emergence of both surf 'super-stores' in larger coastal regions (especially the Gold Coast and Torquay) and discount surfboard shops, found in many coastal towns down the east coast. Retailers that are ostensibly clothing shops also stock a few surfboards, often heavily reducing prices, simply to maintain appearances as legitimate surf shops (Warren, 2012). This shifting retail landscape was cited consistently by workshop owners and their workers as a threat to on-going viability. On Australia's Gold Coast, in Sydney's northern beaches and in Torquay, Victoria, retail deals, their dubious details and episodic breakdowns in trust between producers and shops were the source of much discussion and complaint, among managers and workers alike. According to one workshop owner with extensive history in the industry, the rot began in the late 1970s and 1980s when the 'big three' grew rapidly:

See, Quiksilver had such a control of surfboard-makers then, and if you got offside with them [not meeting a request] you were fucked, they would say to retailers 'you sell that label's boards and we'll pull our gear from the shop'. It happened, it fucking did.

Another workshop owner described how one corporate surf brand's retail arm would not sign a contract with the workshop, which stipulated a minimum order of surfboards per month: *'that doesn't happen [signing a contract] in the surfboard industry. If I demanded they sign something like that they would have laughed at me and just said 'well, we will go and get another label.'*

In an industry where handshake agreements are the norm, smaller, independent businesses often entered into ghost-shaping agreements *'in good faith'*, only to be *'screwed around'* when large surf retailers did not meet the conditions of verbal agreements. Workshops described such *'handshake deals'* as *'the culture of the industry'*, which typifies their experiences and dealings with large surf retailers, along with the extent to which they are poorly treated in comparison with the mega-brands. Particularly venomous is the attitude towards retailers who carried shelf stock of their computer-automated boards, yet were not required to pay for boards for up to 180 days, and sometimes never did:

I have been let down so many times by [large retailers]. They want your boards on a consignment of four months, even longer [laughs]...I could actually live with the consignment if they paid for all the fucking boards they take. Some of the retailers, I haven't had payment from them within the consignment period, so I turn up and I can see the boards have sold, so I'm like 'where the fuck is my money'? I had one manager try and tell me they had paid... another told me flat out he had to pay the Quiksilver bill before I would see anything. That really pissed me off.

In times of economic downturn (exacerbated by the contraction of the tourism industry) struggling retailers repay their largest creditors first – the mega-brands, upon whom retail shops rely to guarantee a certain amount of foot traffic (and without whom they can hardly warrant operating as a surf retail outlet in the first place, because of the big three's oligopolistic brand power).

Independent surfboard manufacturers supplying a comparatively modest number of computer-produced boards are paid last, if at all. Workshops have thus sought to become more prominent by up-scaling production through computer-automated technology, and opened their own retail stores. In part this is a strategy to avoid being pushed into obscurity within an increasingly cut-throat surf retail scene where discount stores, branded mega-retailers and shopping mall outlets soak up the bulk of demand. But in so doing, they have also up-scaled the levels of risk involved, through the sheer amount of borrowing necessary to finance the retail visibility and advertising considered necessary to secure greater market share.

Further complexities surround the oligopolisation of surf branding by the big three companies, and their expanding use of subcontracting and ghost shaping arrangements. For instance, one Gold Coast workshop was the Australian licensee of a Hawai'i-based business. They made surfboards locally on the Gold Coast and labelled them with the Hawaiian brand, to specifications set by the Hawaiian workshop, using CAD/CNC equipment. Yet when the Hawaiian brand in turn signed a distribution deal with one of the major corporate brands, the small Gold Coast workshop found themselves ostensibly producing boards as an outsourced third party for the corporate brand. This had little benefit for the workshop, because the corporate brand demanded they provide exclusively to certain retail shops, but subsequently ordered just a small number of boards:

Because they took him on as one of the [corporate brand] shapers...then we had a relationship with [corporate brand] as far as supplying them [in Australia]. But one of the things they discussed in forming our relationship in the beginning was that if they were prepared to maintain good numbers [of surfboards] and keep stock up then we should give them exclusivity and only supply to [corporate brand] stores and no other surf retailers. Then we said to a whole bunch of shops, sorry we can't supply you because we have a deal with [corporate brand]...but [corporate brand] never ordered many boards. We had just flogged off these other shops that would have stocked our boards.

An important consideration in the debate about making things in Australia is therefore the shifting role of retailers in specific sectors upstream of production – and how consolidation of power at this point in the 'system of provision' (Fine and Leopold, 1993) for individual manufactured goods hampers local manufacturers.

A culture of informality

Surfboard production is based around an informal arrangement with no prescribed or recognized qualifications for proficiency or professional attainment. Despite a recent initiative proposed by some Gold Coast workshops, there is not yet an established industry association to organise training schemes, professional qualifications, workplace safety standards or even measure the quantitative size of the industry. Career pathways in the Australian surfboard industry are opaque and endemically disorganized. Back in the 1960s some had their fortunate break by simply hanging around the workshop enough; something hard to imagine being possible nowadays.

Informality continues to govern crucial aspects of the contemporary surfboard industry: from employment contracts and workers' wages to deals forged between workshops and retailers. Rates of pay are wildly variable (no standard rate exists anywhere: pay is on per finished board basis but

the rate varies depending on the strength of social relationships and how 'good' a worker is perceived to be), while work is physical, dirty and exhausting. Added to this is that workshops provide no guarantee to keep workers employed in an ongoing basis. Other work opportunities thus prove more appealing:

It's one of the real problems we see with the industry here on the Gold Coast. The work is just so informal and the people already in the industry are protective of their knowledge and set in their ways. There needs to be a way to teach younger people that are interested, about the industry. You know how it works: the types of skills they need. Without being able to do a proper qualification or apprenticeship, which we could use to market the industry as well, then I think in 10 years time we won't have any younger hand-shapers coming through because they will have found jobs somewhere else. (Workshop owner, Gold Coast)



Stuart D'Arcy discussing his preferred tools in his Currumbin factory, before its closure in 2011

In shifting to mechanized production to meet elevated demand for standard boards supplied rapidly, hand-shapers have drifted to peripheral roles in many workshops. Skilled hand-shapers survive precariously in financial and logistical terms. They grapple with insecure work (seasonality and long periods of no work are common), fluctuating wages and uncertain futures – making boards by hand only to return marginal monetary benefits. Below the surface are deeper concerns revealed by hand-shapers towards general working conditions, especially dwindling hours and insecurity. Wayne, an experienced hand-shaper working for more than twenty years described the culture of informality and precarity:

We call it nervous November because you're waiting around to see how busy it will be for the summer...you start to get nervous by late November that the phone won't ring, and last summer it didn't. We were sitting here twiddling our thumbs, the six of us in the factory and just didn't have any work. We got sent home after three hours every day. It's been tough.

According to another factory worker in Australia, the supposed 'lifestyle time' offered by intermittent and casual work was a myth perpetuated by business owners in the surfboard industry to persuade workers to accept fewer hours:

We call it fluffy talk because you hear things like: 'ah, there's no work the next few days, so you can go surfing'. Or: 'yeah you can take the missus for a trip'. Well, it's all a joke because you can't. That costs money! [laughs] I end up contracting to other workshops, running all over the place to pick up some other work.

The seasonality and precarity of hand-shaping employment was not viewed as 'freedom', 'lifestyle time' or 'flexible', especially for hand-shapers. While surfing was indeed a lifestyle and passionate leisure pursuit – less time working was potentially more time surfing – workers did not buy into ideas of creative work as freedom, ideas typically spread by boosterish proponents of 'flexibility' in contemporary working experiences (Sennett, 1998).



Geoff McCoy discussing his favourite electric planer in his Byron Bay workshop, 2012

While legendary stories pervade surf culture about times when factories were empty because the surf was good and employees had taken to the local line ups, this is simply no longer the way things operate. Famous shaper Geoff McCoy lamented during a work tour of his workshop:

Look, the surfboard industry, I can guarantee you this Andrew: it's a very unique industry. It shouldn't be called an industry really but you've got to. If you bring business ethics into the surf industry you're going to eat shit. It doesn't work like that.

Why then, did hand-shapers in particular persist with manual, lowly paid, increasingly insecure and time intensive jobs? This was in large part due to emotional dimensions and pride in making things. Celebrated surfboard-maker Bob McTavish explained:

Why we do it is because we see physical products come out from our work. All of us – glassers, sanders, polishers, artists, shapers – we all get to see a physical product come out from our work. Guys sitting in offices designing ships, it takes them years before it manifests, whereas we see a product within a couple of days...there it is, a beautifully finished board. That's what keeps you going, it's the creativity and the beauty of the product that keeps inspiring you.

In the face of corporatisation and mechanisation, hand-makers remain true to the mythology and art of surfboard-making, commitments that provide mediocre financial rewards but gratifying personal and emotional pay-offs.



Yasu sanding a custom surfboard, Skipp Surfboards, Wollongong, 2010

Where to now for the Australian surfboard industry?

Things are moving quickly. The high dollar has undoubtedly made Australian manufacturing less competitive: wages and costs are comparatively higher than overseas and combined with weak economic conditions in the United States, Europe and Japan (the three largest export markets for Australian surfboard-makers) things made by Australians necessarily struggle to sell. But we wish to dig deeper than one-line explanations by economic rationalists of the future of Australian manufacturing, to observe in the case of the surfboard industry, more complex dynamics within industries and regions that clarify existing vulnerabilities. By focusing on the practices and experiences of making things *within* Australian industries and regions we have sought to provide evidence to trouble generalisations based purely on national competitive advantage and the high dollar, and to question the sense of inevitability and powerlessness in the debate.

Important to the dynamics of the surfboard industry are its cultural roots: specifically its informal, subcultural origins. Lingered long after the 1960s many described surfboard manufacturing as a 'cowboy culture'. It was uncool to talk of contracts, budgets and marketing plans. A particular culture of industrial relations also prevails – akin to other creative and design-based industries – where 'doing it for the love' is cited frequently as an excuse for putting up with low pay, conditions and future prospects (Gibson, 2003). If surfboard-makers were rational economic actors they would have packed up and '*pissed off ages ago*' (Mick, Illawarra).

Instead, what keeps workshops going despite slim margins is this very connection to surfing, to local surfing culture, loyal customers and the social interactions and pleasures that come with the job. Making things by hand instilled pride and respect. Computerised-shaping technologies by contrast altered the relationships and interactions amongst workers, and between makers and customers. Power has consolidated in surf retailers who service beginner markets, and they in turn depend on maintaining relationships with the corporate brands more than small local manufacturers. Hand-shake agreements, broken promises, backstabbing and deteriorating conditions of work have become commonplace.

If surfboard-making is to survive in Australia, it will do so based on a combination of local subcultural loyalty and personal passions of key individuals – not just because of the manoeuvrings of the national currency. Hand-made surfboards are always likely to retain subcultural capital – and this in turn is likely to rely on reputations associated with particular workshops and iconic surfing places. The question is whether this is enough to ward off the industry's proclivity towards short-term survival at any cost (including replacing immensely skillful craftsmen with computers). Whatever the outcome, politicians, commentators and consultant 'experts' currently debating the future of manufacturing in Australia would do well by incorporating into their view some of this texture of the everyday struggles, pleasures and challenges of making things within industries and regions. The surfboards industry is more than an idiosyncratic case: other sectors troubled by a high dollar, from steel to cars, also have their own challenges and opportunities, internally and regionally. Closer mapping of such challenges and opportunities is critical, before decision-makers jump to conclusions and forsake the making of things for which Australian regions and workers have distinct talents.

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