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START AUDIO

Respondent: We're just at home at the moment, just doing lots of DIY and some commissions every now and then as people order things, email me and what have you and I'm just making things. It's all very relaxed really.

Interviewer: Have you been able to sell and do business even in this situation?

Respondent: It's surprising, but we're getting a fair number of people coming to us and going, "I've got this idea for something." Particularly with [audio breaking]. I think what happened is that people are ___, "Yes, I'm really interested in that. I should do it sometime." Now it's that time when they can get around to it, so that's quite good.

Interviewer: Silver lining to all of it.

Respondent: Financially for us I guess it's probably pretty neutral. Every day we're doing building work that we would have paid builders to do. What we're losing on income, we're probably gaining on savings.

Interviewer: I've heard that from other people as well.

Respondent: Challenging time, isn't it? You've just got to sit tight really and get through it.

Interviewer: Well, I have a script with some specific questions. I think I'll try to go through them and then as we've been discussing similar subjects for years I think in some points I'll jump. There are things I'd ask other people that I'm sure we've discussed in the past already.

I'll just go through some of the specific questions and then by the end we can open to a broader discussion. I'm really interested to hear your take on some things that aren't in my script. The other thing I need to make sure once again that you confirm you've read the participant information sheet that was in that form.

Respondent: Yes, absolutely. I've read that and I've filled in the form online. I've pressed confirm and you should have been contacted by now by that form to say...

Interviewer: Yes, I have.

Respondent: Okay, cool.

Interviewer: Just let me give you an overview. My research is part of a research project that is a cooperation between the University of

Dundee and the Mozilla Foundation in Berlin. We'll be spending half the research time here in Dundee and the other half in Berlin. It's called OpenDoTT, the Open Design of Trusted Things. It's in the school of art and design. It's concerned with trust and IOT, Internet of Things.

We have five different subjects and each one is being researched by a different person. My specific topic is smart cities, which is a topic I'm very critical about. I've been writing about it for over a decade, always from a really pessimistic and critical point of view. I don't trust much of what's said or written about smart cities.

I've found one gap that has to do with my background working with different projects in Brazil and this is what I'm focusing on. The lack of alternative approaches to waste management and thinking about the materials that are discarded in smart cities projects. If you look for whatever is being proposed in terms of waste in smart cities, it's usually about increasing the efficiency of waste collection. There's very little challenge to the way things are made today. It's mostly making things rich as quickly as possible the hands of international cooperation's whose goals are not necessarily the same as society.

In my literature review and my first steps of research I found the idea that there's a lot of potential wealth in what is being treated as waste. It could be a good path to try and understand what kinds of methodologies, policies and technologies could help society to reuse more of the materials it discards every day. I'm particularly interested, not necessarily in the three final destinations of waste, recycling, incineration or landfill. But whatever we can do to improve things before that, to enable society to reuse more of its materials.

Then the kind of thing that you've been doing for more than 20 years come into focus. One of the main things I want to ask you

about is value, how to assess value and what kind of value in material objects. What kinds of operations and transformations can be applied so as to change the perception of value and change the transactional value?

Respondent: The economic value, yes.

Interviewer: I can group some of these questions and I'm sure your answers will be amazing. One of the questions is, what kinds of materials come in?

Respondent: Just before you start, can you give me an idea, roughly, of the number of questions there are in total?

Interviewer: I have 10 questions.

Respondent: That's good, it just gives me an idea. You might have said 3 and you might have said 150. We've got a rough idea. Okay, go for it.

Interviewer: There may be three groups of questions. I'll ask you to focus specifically in your shop and your business today. Of course, you can always bring in examples from [...] other projects you've been involved in. The first group of questions, what kinds of materials come in? How is their potential value assessed? How are they handled and stored?

Respondent: Let's just think about the practicalities of this. In terms of storage, it's a small business, it's a physically small space, so all the time we're trying to minimise the amount of stuff we store. We're trying to deal with stuff fairly continuously and try not to stockpile, store or accumulate. The business is orientated around old things, reusing, remaking, repurposing and so on. Particularly on interior design, art, homewares and these kinds of things. The sort of thing you might buy in order to make your house nicer.

What comes in? It's probably worth first talking about the sources of where things come from. On the one hand we will go and buy things. Typically, we buy them from auctions we'll buy lots in bulk. When you're maybe buying 50 or 60 things at one time you can't be sure about exactly what you're buying, but you'll buy them as a job lot and then we'll analyse them. There with a job lot we'll get items that we know we want and we'll get other items that accompany them.

Typically, we might buy something like lamps, china, glassware, artworks, pictures, clocks, these kinds of interior domestic items. Also, we acquire things through a different method, which is people will come into the shop and say to us, "We have this thing and we don't want it anymore, would you like it?" We get given things quite often or we'll sometimes buy things from people as they bring things in. That's quite unexpected and we'll deal with that on an ad-hoc basis.

We also buy in materials, raw materials, things like wood, electrical fittings and electrical cabling, switches and similar material items, things like Perspex, components and so on. That tells you something about what we get in and how we get it, if you see what I mean.

You were also asking how we assess the value of that. That's actually one of the key things that we do. Let's take the example

of a job lot, we'll bring that into the shop and we'll go through everything that we've got, take a look at it and make a brief initial assessment of what we think the value of it is. In some cases we'll actually Google and we'll do quite a bit of research.

Occasionally, we've bought things for quite a modest price which it turns out are actually quite valuable. We bought, for example, some Chinese figures we thought were some kind of garden ornament and then found out they were 300 years old and really, potentially, very valuable indeed.

Interviewer: How did you find they were 300 years old?

Respondent: We were suspicious of them because they looked strange and we liked them. We did a bit of Googling online. Then in fact my wife took the figures to an auction valuation open day. There's still a question about the true value of these things, so we haven't sold them as it stands. That can be one thing that happens.

Often, what we'll find is the things we've got are great, but they have some reason why it is they're not ideal. A typical example of this you can have a pair of vases and one of them will have a little chip in, so you don't have a perfect pair and that greatly reduces the value. Then we start thinking, how can we increase the value again? In some cases you can repair things, you can just directly make a repair and the thing is as good as it was before. Quite frequently, that's not feasible.

You could perhaps make an aesthetic repair, but the item wouldn't function properly. In that case, like you can stick together a vase, but that doesn't mean it will hold water. That

sort of thing, we try and avoid that and instead we go, how can we repurpose this or change it into something else?

A typical thing we'll do, the example of vases is if we have a vase that has a crack in it that you can't see, that doesn't mean it can't be a lamp because you're not going to fill a lamp with water. It's a question of looking at these different objects and saying, "What can we do with these?"

In some cases, one of the things that happens that increases value is just knowledge alone. What we'll do is we'll Google and find out who the maker of something is, where it's from, what its origin is, what its purpose was originally. That creates kind of a story around the object. At that particular point, something that we haven't physically transformed actually becomes of higher value. We're able to, for example, label artworks with who the artist was, when the artwork was painted, what the history of the artist was and so on. That changes the perceived value.

Similarly, with curiosities sometimes we'll get strange things and we really have very little idea what they are. Then we find out that they're an old piece of industrial machinery or what have you. We can find out exactly what it is and suddenly people find it interesting in that it's got some kind of history value or story value to it. That's another way that value is increased is just by attaching information to the object.

You've also got the reverse process, which is where you buy something maybe very cheaply from a modern manufacturer, but you can represent it in such a way that it looks much more appealing than you might think. Sometimes if you're clever you can look at mass produced objects and go, if this was just changed in a particular way it would be something of far higher value. That's about recontextualising an object.

Interviewer: Can you give me an example of that?

Respondent: For example, you can get fashion stores will sometimes also sell pottery, glassware or something like this. You can see things they're selling ridiculously cheaply, but actually they're really good. Once you see it and you can actually understand what the aesthetic value of them is, if you could take those things and you can represent them in a different form.

We, for example, have bought very, very cheap modern vases and made them into lamps. The lamps look fantastic and they look like they're tremendously high value, but actually the parts that we made them out of are really quite low value.

An example of that was we were in Estonia and we bought some wrestling awards. We were at a market and we saw these incredibly weird... They were like prizes, we think, for weightlifting and wrestling. Once you look past the kitsch nature of them and actually look at the objects themselves, they're really nicely made.

We bought them, took them apart, made them into lamps and they're just beautiful things. Sometimes it's a question of rather than being able to add accurate information to an object to increase its value, it can be about taking away information. Do you see what I mean? Origin information.

Interviewer: Erasing its source and original purpose.

Respondent: There's an interesting value relationship there between in some cases the value... In all cases what we're talking about here is on the one hand practical value, so utility value, but also

perceived value. That perceived value is often aesthetic value. The one thing we won't do is to attach false information to an object. That's where you get into the zone of forgery, do you see what I mean?

You're attaching a false story to an otherwise unremarkable object and that's changing its perceived value. We won't do that because we're ethical. Nonetheless, it's worth noting that's a possible thing to do, do you see what I mean? It's something that has been done.

Interviewer: It's perhaps what the whole advertising industry feeds on, right?

Respondent: I would say so, yes. Often, what they're doing, rather than directly engaging in that process... They're not directly saying, "Buy this iPhone and you will get a really attractive partner." They're not saying that, but they're presenting a scenario or a circumstance that leads people to infer that. They're creating a false story around the whole thing.

Interviewer: At least a false scenario.

Respondent: Yes. More subtly, they're allowing the customer to make a false inference. It's the customer that's lying to themselves. However, they've been put in a position where they do that. It's a very, if you like, indirect or stochastic way of working. There are some other things to think about here as well about the value of items, which is we found that cleaning items makes a huge difference. Some of the best value increases that we've had have been from cleaning things.

That sounds absurd, but it's quite incredible how things look amazingly disappointing and then you clean them really thoroughly and suddenly realise they're great. Some things are easy to clean and some things are very difficult to clean. One would think that it would be advantageous for... This sounds kind of absurd in a way. It's possibly more sustainable to create objects that are easy to clean.

Interviewer: That's never mentioned in circular economy reports, at most they talk about the possibility to reuse materials by the end of the line. Sometimes they talk about reuse and repairability, but never about maintenance and cleaning.

Respondent: It sounds stupid, but you'd be amazed. Sometimes we'll buy a lot, we'll buy a series of lots and we've spent £300. We'll be going, "We're £300 down here, let's have a look at what we got. That's worth £5 and that we can sell for £10 and £20." Then we'll spend a whole morning cleaning things and go, "Wow, we've just tripled our money here." Just from cleaning and that's kind of an interesting thing.

As a side issue, we spend a lot of time and a lot of effort making our shop nice. We've lit it really nicely. We've got well considered and expensive light fittings or things we paid a lot of attention to, displays, mirrors and thinking about how things are presented exactly to the customer.

One of the things we'll do is to take away things that are not good. If we buy a lot of things and it's got 60 items in it, we may only ever sell 20 of those items. If we tried to sell the other 40, they'd reduce the value of the 20 we're selling. The presence of something nasty can reduce the value of something nice.

Interviewer: Your curation to drive the focus and interest in people.

Respondent: I'm trying to work out a good analogy. There's kind of a DJ analogy here. If you've got a DJ who's playing cool music and then once every 40 minutes he plays a really inappropriate track, the whole evening is ruined. Do you see what I mean? Somehow it hasn't worked right because the presence that something that's out of place or is disappointing, the presence of something that spoils the illusion messes the whole thing up.

Interviewer: I'll just jump to one of what would have been my last questions about unusable outputs and what's done to them.

Respondent: That's interesting. In terms of practicalities, what we'll do is we'll take things that are... If we buy a job lot, I'll take a typical number, which might be 60 items. We've got 60 items.

Interviewer: I've heard you use that term twice already. Can you describe because I'm not sure what that is?

Respondent: A job lot? A job lot would be you buy boxes of antiques, collectables, curiosities, debris, which could be from a house clearance or something like that. This is where someone has died and their relatives have said, "We just want you to sell it all." These things get collected up and they get put into boxes. Those boxes could be typically they're fruit boxes, maybe 15cm

high and about the size you could put 10 bunches of bananas into, this size of box.

These things will get put in these boxes and in one lot you might have three or four boxes, typically. You might get 60 items in them and they might include lamps, sculptures, watches, ashtrays, plant pots, scissors, candlesticks. Anything you can think of that would be lying around someone's house might end up in these job lots.

Interviewer: Understood. Thanks for the clarification.

Respondent: Basically, out of one of these job lots we might say we've got 60 items here. After we've cleaned them and we've understood them, we might try to sell 10 things out of that lot of 60. Those may have been the reason that we bought that lot in the first place.

There might be another 10 where we say, "We're going to transform these things." We'll keep them and we're going to physically change them in some way. Maybe there might be another 10 things we're going to treat as debris. What we're going to do is probably destroy them, smash them up in some way, but represent them. For example, you have something like broken pottery, which you can then make into a mosaic. That's like a quite profound transformation.

The other half, the other 30 items we might say these things may be perfectly good, but we're not going to touch them. In that case things that are truly broken and they're truly useless, we will throw them away. Things that are potentially good, but we feel they're low quality, we'll take to a charity shop. We'll take

them to a nearby shop where they'll sell them very, very cheaply.

Interviewer: How do you sell them, by the lot?

Respondent: No, we'll just give them to the charity shops. Charity shops typically are based on the idea that they have a lot of volunteers. Those volunteers can spend a lot of time looking at the objects that are presented to them. Also, they'll be prepared to sell things very, very cheaply indeed. They'll take objects like some kind of salt and pepper shaker and they'll go, "Okay, these are 50p." We won't have them around. If we do that it changes people's perception of what else is in the rest of the shop.

Interviewer: They expect to pay less.

Respondent: That's a typical example. If you take the question about materials, we buy in wood and Perspex, for example. We throw things away, we have to. It would be great if we could get microscale recycling, but all these things do require space and space costs money.

If we've got the debris from laser cutting... A great example of a strange relationship of perceived value is that we'll do a lot of laser cutting where we're either making new things for people or we're making components, which are going to help us reuse things.

An example of that are bases. If you've got something like a lamp, you're going to need a stable flat base which contains the electronics, switches and so on that will make an object into a

lamp. We'll cut out those things using a laser cutter. We've got some templates, which we can adjust in size. It's a very quick process, but we end up with offcuts.

Those offcuts, quite often they're very appealing. I'll photograph those offcuts and put them onto Instagram or something like that. I have been contacted a lot by people who've gone, "Wow, these things are great. Can I have some?" We say, "Yes, you can. Absolutely, come and get them." Do you know what, people don't. They say they will and they think they will, but when it really comes down to it, you know what, they don't.

Interviewer: Then if you keep it, it will use your space.

Respondent: Exactly. At any one time I've probably got about 20kg of offcuts. They're great things, like loads of stars where I've made a fretwork pierced screen where you cut stars out to leave a mesh. Then you've got the stars on the side, which are a by-product. People love these things. Rather, they think they love them. They look at them and go, "Wow, that's really cool. That gives me loads of creative ideas, which I won't do."

Interviewer: Do you relate that to a kind of disconnection between what people think they would be able to do had they had the skills, tools or equipment and then they realise that actually they don't have the skills, time or the product?

Respondent: Yes. I think there's something very interesting going on here. People imagine that they'll get around to doing something fun and creative, but actually all they do is they just imagine that

they will do something fun and creative. That's as far as they get. I don't know, but it's a really persistent phenomena that we've seen is people saying they like the idea of offcuts and then they don't turn up, they don't collect them.

Interviewer: There may be a relation with frustration people have had in the past while trying to do other things. I'd like to ask you about the deceptions and frustrations when trying. Any particular story you can share about trying to make some object useful. How much do you insist and eventually give up and say, "No, this lamp will never work, so let's ditch it and go to another project."

Respondent: That's interesting. Sometimes we've started working on things where all the time you're saying, this isn't just about objects, it's also about the time involved. We have to put our time into things that are the most effective transformations that we can make. Certainly, for us what we've found is a very effective transformation is making lamps. People like lamps and they're prepared to pay a sensible amount of money for lamps. We've got a good method of doing this now.

You can have things and you can go, "Yes, that would work if only we could drill through this piece here, but we can't." Or, "Yes, we can if we crack it." Sometimes we'll take things and just go, "No, it's gone. We've got to get rid of it." You always have waste in these processes.

I think it's a mistake to start off the process or to start off the model by saying, "We're determined that our model is going to be zero waste." No. The first thing you need to do is have a model that's financially viable. If you don't have a model that's financially viable it will not continue. Do you see what I mean? Over time, it won't continue.

What I'm starting to realise is that actually many of the waste products that we have are a by-product of not being surrounded by an ecosystem of other makers. Do you see what I mean? Any one particular making or remaking business greatly benefits from an ecosystem of other makers and making businesses around them.

Interviewer: This was also part of my last group of questions. Can you identify what kinds of actors are around you? You mentioned your shop and the charity shops.

Respondent: I can tell you a little bit about that. We bought this shop, which is on a row of 16 shops. Our reasons for selecting this shop in particular is because it's on a street that's a poor street. It's a main road and the social economic condition of the street is quite low, it's quite problematic. But, it's right next door to a very rich area. Literally, if you look out of the front door of our shop, you can see a house that's worth £600,000.

We thought, "This is clever because we can buy a shop cheaply, but maybe we can tempt people to walk to 100m that they'll need to walk so that we're accessing customers who've got enough money." We bought this shop and at the time we looked at the row of 16 shops and said, "Who else is here and what are they doing?"

This is where we perhaps started off by thinking we were terribly clever and innovative in that we were taking digital manufacturing technologies, so the laser cutting, and we're starting to apply that to some kind of transformation or super local making. We thought, "Look at this, we're ahead of the game. We're incredibly innovative compared to other people."

Now, looking carefully at those shops, I start to realise that many of those shops are actually doing the same thing, but it wasn't obvious to me when we did that. On this row of shops there's a bicycle repair shop, which has been there since 1932. That's a sustainable model. (Laughter)

Interviewer: Are they open now during the lockdown?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: I heard bike repairs are open.

Respondent: Next door to them is a laptop repair shop. He does electrical wiring, electronics, repairs laptops and sells computers. Very, very similar thing. Next door to that there was a shop that opened after our shop which was a mini market and that closed. Within 18 months of opening it had closed again. That's a shop that was not involved with local manufacture. It wasn't involved in a high degree of adding value, they were simply merchants and they closed.

Then there's our shop. Then next door to us there's a tea shop and café. The difference with this tea shop is they actually cook their own cakes. They are, in a sense, micro manufacturers. They've actually become quite a successful tea shop. Of course, we don't know what's going to happen now with corona virus. I've talked to the owner and she's making cakes to sell to people in their houses. She's been able to take the manufacture element of her business and continue it online, even when people can't come to the café, so that's interesting.

After that there's a barbershop. That's a very, very difficult situation with corona virus, but nonetheless it's interesting to note this is a craft-based activity. The value is added in the premises, it's not like he's buying in haircuts from China. Do you see what I mean?

Interviewer: Yes, sure. The raw materials come from the community.

Respondent: Those are the nearest shops. I think I've just gone through eight shops there. Yes, because the mini market was two shops. They're the nearest shops to us. I could go through the rest if you like, but I won't bore you.

Interviewer: No, I get the picture. Then also about the ecosystem of objects before waste. Charity shops and you mentioned some repair shops that are part of that.

Respondent: On the one hand we'll give things to charity shops, that's our waste going out, if you like. We'll also try to supply people with things. If there are crafters or makers and they want objects or parts of objects for things, then we'll deal with them as individuals.

In terms of where we're acquiring things from, it may be individuals, we deal with auction houses where we'll physically go to the auction and buy things from there. We'll go to charity shops that are further afield. We'll go to larger scale charity shops, like charity warehouses, which do exist, they are a thing. Find things that have been recovered from house clearances and what have you. That's another possible source of things.

It's interesting to see when it comes to, for example, footfall. Footfall is an issue which is of concern to all local shops. There's quite an interesting amount of collaboration between shops that are perhaps not thematically connected, but they are connected by the fact they need to attract people. One of the things we found on the street that we're located on is a lot of people are now saying, "This is becoming really trendy. This is like a really cool place to come." Because there are so many small microbusinesses that are doing some kind of interesting and bespoke value adding on the premises.

This is not just about cafes and bars, it can also be about interior décor shops. Maybe paint shops, that's an interesting one custom paint shops. Bakers, brewers, I'm just trying to think of some other examples. Oh yes, dress shops where they actually will make a dress or tailors where'll they'll do alterations. Upholstery. I'm just trying to think of some other examples of shops that are really nearby where the manufacturing is happening on the premises.

Interviewer: Do you understand there's a potential for the reinvention of the high street with this kind of reasoning, moving out of...?

Respondent: I think this is exactly right. One of our big themes has been, what's going to happen to all these shops? The correct place to buy a laptop is eBay. Do you see what I mean? Buy online, it's cheaper and you get a guarantee. New objects that are created to standardised specifications, the correct place to buy them is online, end of story. There isn't anything else.

What we're seeing is out of the ecosystem of local traders, the ones that are being successful are doing something that's very specific. They're doing something where that value is added in

person on the premises. Do you see what I mean? It's definitely a kind of personal service. I think that's absolutely about the change in the high street.

Interviewer: That's very interesting. Do you have any relationship...? I know you did in the past, do you have any relationship today with proper waste and recycling apart from putting things to recycling?

Respondent: No.

Interviewer: Not anymore.

Respondent: No, not at all. The quantities that we're talking about... I used to do a lot of PC recycling and so on, but the quantities we're talking about, we might produce 1,000kg of waste a year or something like that. It's not the same quantity as shipments of 10 tonnes or what have you at a time, which we were dealing with previously. We could quite easily produce that on [our media lab], for example. We could produce tonnes of recycling per month.

Interviewer: Just one last question about ecosystems. I noticed you never mentioned what's usually understood as a maker space or a fab lab. Do you see...?

Respondent: That's interesting. The thing is, what's our connection with those things and what are those differences? On a personal level I've

obviously been involved with maker spaces, fab labs and related spaces for many years. I've gone and visited ones throughout the northern hemisphere in many different countries.

What I've seen is that there's a real question with these volunteer spaces that are often based on a membership model, is all the people who are involved in them look very self-similar. They're male, they're well educated, they're usually educated in computer science or engineering. They appear to be very similar types of people.

One of the interesting things about that is at [our media lab], which is a maker space like place that I used to run. We made a great deal of effort to try to include more women, more people from ethnic minorities, more people with social or emotional difficulties and so on, so marginal or excluded people. What we found was when we did workshop activities, for example, then we'd have a more representative participation. When we were in a general default do it yourself mode of operation, then the people who opted in were the usual suspects, were these educated white male science and engineering guys.

The interesting thing about the maker space aspect of [our] shop is that one of the aspects of what we do I haven't talked about at all in this conversation and that's manufacturing things for people. People will come to us with the designs and say, "I've got this cool idea for a little product, can you help me to make some prototypes? Can you help make small batches of this?" We might make batches of 50, 60, maybe 200. This kind of batch size of objects that people are then going to sell. People will sell them online or through their own shops in some cases.

What we found at [our shop] is that probably 75% to 80% of our making clients are women. This is with no intervention whatsoever. I believe the reason that has happened is because

of the context, it's a shop. It's a lovely place and you can come into it and go, "Oh, wow. Look at all these nice things."

If you're a member of the public, you walk into a shop and say, "What is the theme?" The theme isn't making, the theme is niceness. Do you see what I mean? It's beautiful things, it's curiosities, it's interesting things, it's fascination. It's going away from the process and into the final result, the aesthetic, the niceness, the value you want to impart to things.

One of the common factors I've seen about maker spaces is often maker spaces will be guilty of making things that are tremendously ingenious, but essentially valueless. They're interesting, but interesting is not the same as want. How many maker spaces have you been to where you've seen another plastic bust of Albert Einstein? The 3D printed bust of Albert Einstein or the marble run that's made from laser cut pieces of plywood. How fascinating it is, for four minutes. That doesn't mean you're actually going to have it in your house.

Interviewer: It's interesting about downloading a 3D model, having it print that and then forgetting about it or throwing it in the bin.

Respondent: The interesting thing there is a lot of the times maker spaces are focused on the process, but not actually on the product. What we realised was if we were going to make a space that was financially sustainable and members of the public can come and they can engage in the making process in our workshop, then we had to concentrate on the part of the story that involves value. We have to make sure the things we make are nice and saleable.

Interviewer: That's a choice you've made since the beginning, if I remember.

Respondent: That's right.

Interviewer: It was a choice to move away from depending on grants and find people who'd be willing to pay for it.

Respondent: What I've started to think is that the business model of when people are saying, "Who takes part in maker spaces? How can we change that?" I'd say the answer is you can't change it. You've already encoded in who's going to take part over the long term with your business model. Your business model has already selected the participants.

Interviewer: How do you present, how do you introduce your shop to people who are not used to the whole maker context? Do you present yourself as a craft shop?

Respondent: The key thing is the main introduction to the shop is the outside of the shop. People are driving past, they're looking in the window, they're walking past they're going, "That looks interesting. That's a fascinating thing. I don't know, maybe I should buy that." It's a really familiar interface.

Sometimes people will look at our website online or what have you and realise... We do have a sign that says, 'Laser cutting service.' We have signs on the outside of the shop that say, 'We make lamps and lampshades.' When people come into the shop

then we'll chat to them if they seem interested or not if they're not. If they want to just look around, we'll leave them to that.

The first thing that everyone has to get to grips with is nice things. Only later can they think, "Wouldn't that be good if I could have that, but with my wife's name on it." "I've got this idea for a..." At that point we can say to people, "You could design your own or we could help you design it." They go, "Oh, really?" It's only when people start thinking about the processes that are necessary to end up with nice things and things that are specific as well. They need to start getting involved with that.

Interviewer: I'd be interested to see pictures and I'll look for the website to see how people experience it online. Then I may ask you later for pictures of the shop and stuff. Can you tell me about how the physical space is laid out? What's the proportion between the workshop and space for people to circulate and the product? How is that distributed by proportion?

Respondent: It's probably not ideal, but at the moment we have a situation where downstairs in the entranceway two thirds of the space is shop space and one third is workshop. Of course, we could quite easily have more workshop space, but there isn't any. Upstairs we have a space where local makers can rent a cupboard from us and it's like a wall display. They can rent that from us really cheaply and then sell their things from there.

We also have another maker who we hire a space to who's on the third floor. Then on the second floor we have a gallery. There we'll do individual deals with artists so they can bring in interesting things, display them and hopefully sell them as well. That gives you an idea of the space allocation. Out of the whole space only perhaps a quarter of it is actual workshop space.

Interviewer: What kind of equipment do you have there?

Respondent: The one we use all the time is the laser cutter. Also, we have a whole bunch of hand tools and power tools. We have had a 3D printer and we gave it away to our local maker space, it just was not worthwhile. The time that we put into it, the amount of time and effort you put into it versus the value of the object you get out, it just doesn't work. It was kind of an interesting one because for some years...

I was literally given this 3D printer and it was quite an advanced one as well that had two heads, so it could do two different materials. Particularly interesting is doing a soluble material and a non-soluble material, so you can make things that support themselves and have interior spaces you can then dissolve away. In the end we gave it to the local maker space and said, "Guys, if you have the time and energy to have fun with this, then go for it." (Laughter)

Interviewer: I could easily spend the whole day talking to you, as we've done in the past already. Do you think there are any measures by the local authority that would be useful from your perspective to increase the amount of materials that society uses instead of throwing them away? Thinking about methodologies or facilities, spaces or warehouses where people could give things. This kind of municipal or local level.

Respondent: I'm going to answer you in a way that's quite indirect, I think. I suspect the answer is, no, really there probably aren't. (Laughter) Actually, on a more philosophical level I'm starting to

sense that people are prepared and interested to engage with old objects when they have a story behind them, when they've got some kind of emotional connection, when they're beautiful. When they've got a particular aesthetic to them, then people will engage with them. People will expend time, effort and money in repairing things when they're fabulous.

In a way, I think the most effective thing that local authorities could do would be to encourage a culture of niceness, of beauty. This is very indirect, but that could be about planting trees. It could be about maintaining street art and graffiti. It could be about encouraging art galleries or perhaps giving advantage to businesses that are creating things that are of high quality, high aesthetic quality. I don't know. Somehow, it's that connection that people have that actually gives things value and makes things repairable.

I think I said in an email to you that we ourselves have become subject to this by having an old van. We bought a VW van to advertise the shop. We've ended up spending a huge amount of money on getting it fixed up, repainted, reupholstered, de-rusted, engine repaired, all sorts of things. There is an economic difference to that money that we've spent, which is we've spent that money not on an international corporation creating new vans, but we've spent on local craftspeople, local mechanics and local painters and so on, who are real human bodies. They're real people who live in the area.

Effectively, what we're doing is we're taking car manufacture away from multinationals and we're putting it back into the locality. If people could be persuaded to do this... For us, that's not only financially, but also ecologically is probably the largest action that we've taken. If people could be somehow encouraged to think about how they could... I was going to say make do and mend, but I don't mean that.

What I mean is see that the old thing they already have is just more gorgeous than anything that's available. It's a nicer thing. Not only is it nicer, but also it just happens to be more ecological and it happens to be more local. It's a very tricky area, isn't it? If people could be persuaded to refurbish... This could go for buildings, as well as vehicles, as well as the things in people's houses, furniture and so on. So much of it is about the aesthetic. It's about the niceness of the design, the patina of age.

Interviewer: And the stories.

Respondent: Someone has said before, have you noticed that mobile phones are made from plastic and metal? They're not made from wood. If they were made from wood, then as you had them in your pocket over the years they'd get more and more lovely physically. They'd become gorgeous things as they were handled, as the oil from your hands got onto them, they became shinier, the colour became richer and so on. Actually, they're designed out of high shine plastic materials that over time become more and more disappointing.

Interviewer: Yes, over a short period of time. After six months it doesn't look as good as the ads for the new ones.

Respondent: I think that's a very interesting question. Can we encourage...? This could go into street furniture, the design of public spaces, the design of buildings and so on. It's all the same thing, just on different scales. There's another thing you might want to connect to, which is building things from brick rather than building things from concrete.

If you build something from brick, then it's repurposable. It's possible to put new entrances in, to reconfigure a brick building is quite economic. Whereas concrete buildings are very difficult to repurpose. It's very expensive to cut new spaces into concrete buildings. Whereas brick buildings are inherently more reconfigurable and they become more interesting as well as they are changed and refurbished. That's a connection there that might be helpful.

Interviewer: Just one final point that wasn't in my script, but as things happen has been around. What do you expect the current situation in the world in connection to reuse of materials? One of the things you mentioned was the first thing you do is to clean items that come into the shop. Would you add some extra measures of cleaning to disinfection?

In the wider perspective, I think there's this tension and I've even posted on my blog about it. This tension between on the one hand there's the impression that people will be wary of using things that were touched by others, even though it's always the case if you buy your groceries in the supermarket. In a way, second-hand objects bring with them the story of the former owners and people may be wary of being aware they're using something that used to belong to another person.

On the other hand, the economic effects, the crisis and the lack of wages and money to buy things will probably make people more aware they have to reuse, maintain and buy things from more affordable sources. This tension about will reuse increase due to the corona virus or will it decrease? I'd like to hear your thoughts on it.

Respondent: Just a couple of corona virus responses there. One is one of our clients for laser cutting, he happens to be an air filtration specialist. During the crisis one of the things that we've been doing is to work with him to prototype new types of breathing mask. He's currently applying for a British Standard for these masks and for all we know that could become a major part of our business.

What that illustrates is when you have super local manufacturing capability, when you have smart manufacturing, then you can repurpose your manufacturing to another product very, very suddenly. Just because we create lamps and we create interior décor items, that doesn't mean we can't produce PPE. That's kind of an interesting thing.

From the point of view of the business itself, we've shut the business for the moment because we don't want people coming to visit a shop. We don't want people physically there. What will happen when the crisis is over, on the one hand we're kind of assuming that people will probably want to get out of the house. They'll want to come and visit places and they'll want to look at nice things, which I think is very different in real life than it is online.

Before the crisis many of our customers were saying, "We're just coming here. We're really sorry but is it okay if we just look?" We said, "Yes, of course." That's our evil trick because they always end up buying something anyway. They go, "Ah, I didn't realise I needed a 19th Century penholder, but actually I do."
(Laughter)

Interviewer: You say that with a smirk on your face, "Yes, sure."

Respondent: Yes, "Have a look around." Sometimes people will stay for an hour. We also have a lot of families who come in with children and the children are just fascinated by the shop. They just want to look at all these interesting things. We know by being welcoming and by being this miniature museum, actually that happens. I assume that people will still want to do that. On a practical basis what we're also doing is setting up a workshop in our house. My partner has just brought me a cup of tea, she could tell my throat was getting dry with all this talking.
(Laughter)

Interviewer: It's been an hour, I guess.

Respondent: We're setting up a workshop in our house, which is actually going to be a larger workshop than the workshop at the shop. It might be in the future that we work from home. If it turns out this is something where really the idea of a local shop is not a possible thing, then we'll be able to work from home and to manufacture things for people behind closed doors as we're doing now. Expand that part of the business and reduce the size or even abandon the part of the business of actually having a shop.

What we're not tempted to do is to get into online sales. We've always made it a touchstone that we're not going to open up the business online and just sell objects. This is because the internet is a bad neighbourhood. The internet, you're right next door to someone who's selling something that superficially looks to be very similar but is actually under-priced and poor quality. It's impossible to actually say that until you've bought the thing, got it home and then been disappointed. We like people to actually handle things.

I don't know. Is there going to be a suspicion of...? I think there might be. Gradually, I think this is happening independently of corona virus, but corona virus may amplify it. I think more and more particularly young people are understanding the value of locality. The value of buying things from their mates and local crafts people and things that are very specific.

It's almost like now there's a kind of category of young person for whom the homemade suit is the coolest suit. This is the millennial or hipster effect to an increasing environment of commercialisation. They're just going, "No, I'm just doing my own thing."

Interviewer: My concern is how economically relevant that is for local manufacturing when most young people are underpaid. There may be a class of higher educated middle-class young people who pay attention to that. As it's very hard for local manufacturing to compete with Tesco buying cheap shit from China.

That's where I may oppose your point before that there's very little local authorities can do. I guess there may be tax incentives for local manufacturing that are not in place right now that could maybe make these things more affordable and allow them to compete with these kinds of international monsters.

Respondent: I think more and more what's happening is that in a way you're saying, how can the local authority encourage vegetarianism? The answer is, they probably can't or only on a very superficial level. They could buy in sandwiches for their meetings from local suppliers of vegetarian foods. Really, it's an aesthetic choice as much as it is a moral choice or an economic choice. I think the aesthetics of food are changing. Also, I think the aesthetics of

consumption are changing. You can say those things are a very marginal consideration. Do you know what, I don't think they are.

I think right now we can say more educated people and hipsters, those young people, they may be doing that, but your typical young person isn't. I would say they are the precursors, they're the beginning, they're the leaders. That we may see in 20 years' time that all young people are just saying, "Look, we're not buying your shit." That's quite encouraging. You're seeing these kinds of big changes that are happening. I think actually it's a good analogy, the analogy of vegetarianism and people getting more involved with recycling, reuse and improving the environment.

Interviewer: And local crafting.

Respondent: Something that might be highly relevant is pollution. My shop, because it's on a main road and because it's on a dip in the road as well happens to be in one of the areas that's got one of the poorest air qualities in [the city]. Now it's beautiful. Do you know what, people aren't going to want to step back to not beautiful. Now they've had a taste of just how cool things are without cars, I think there's going to be a change there.

In terms of smart cities, we actually have an air pollution monitor maybe 5m from our shop. That will be providing data, that data will be published and those sorts of things. It's also opposite a school and parents will get to see the difference. People will go, "Holy cow, we don't need to drive as much as we did."

Interviewer: This is an unexpected large experiment in change and some of those changes are things that many people have been proposing for decades and they were not acceptable. Now we won't have to change things. It's a matter of telling that story. I guess it comes down to how to better tell that story.

Respondent: I think so and I think those kinds of social changes will happen.

Interviewer: I've used a lot of your time already.

Respondent: I'm sorry, I've just given you kind of an audio editing job, which is probably miniature nightmare. Sorry about that.

Interviewer: The thing today, it's easier. When I first went into college in the '90s then we'd have tape recorders, but now I can speed up, get back easily and cut the silence automatically. I remember transcribing audio used to be a pain. Now it's still a pain, but not as bad. As I told you, I think we could go on for hours. I'll maybe write you some emails to clarify some points.

Respondent: Absolutely, yes. I would like to say this is all unprepared. While I've said things now, I might think about them later and...
(Laughter)

Interviewer: Sure. If you have any further ideas, you can send to me and we can go.

Respondent: I'm just very interested in the questions you're asking about, reuse and materials, they're focused on objects. Is it the fact that in this conversation I've said quite possibly it's actually values that will make the difference? The way we handle objects actually emerges from the values and not the other way around.

Interviewer: There are some things I will try to pursue later in my research. How to design systems that allow objects to be dealt with based on ethical values. How do you create a commons of materials or objects?

Respondent: I'm convinced that strategically the main thing that could happen is to say, can we value and give support to local enterprises that are owned and run by local people? I'm the leader of [a local] retail community, which is a group of local enterprises and we're trying to improve the economic and aesthetic prospects for the area.

What we realised when we set up that group was that people who own their own shops are important stakeholders. They're more important stakeholders than people who rent shops because people who own the shops have got a vested interest in improving the neighbourhood in all sorts of ways. They're stuck there, but also the value of their pension is the value of that shop when they sell it when they retire.

It would be very interesting for cities to start thinking about the value of local business ownership because it creates a different incentive structure. I'm wondering whether it's worth... In very much the same way I was saying with maker spaces, your business model already selects who's going to take part. I'd suggest your regeneration model, your development model for your city is going to be determined by ownership. How do you

rope in stakeholders? The answer is, by making sure that ownership is local and not remote.

Interviewer: That's very clever. I guess it ties in with lots of the discussions and the critical perspectives on smart cities and the very issue of ownership. In some projects, for instance in Toronto, they're giving land to Google to develop their Sidewalk Labs smart city project. It's like just giving away public land to huge corporations.

Respondent: That's interesting because that's doing almost exactly the opposite of what I'm suggesting. If you give that land to a local cooperative on the understanding they're going to accommodate the Google Lab for five years and assess its success or failure is an entirely different thing. We just had the last one minute of conversation there and came up with a whole new interesting idea, so that's good.

Interviewer: We should keep that for the next one.

Respondent: Okay. (Laughter) It's great to hear from you, stay safe and I'll maybe see you in a short while.

Interviewer: Yes, I hope the restrictions.

Respondent: [Crosstalk] amount of time.

Interviewer: The future is an obsolete concept. I hope before leaving the UK I can visit you and actually get to see the shop.

Respondent: Yes, that would be really cool.

Interviewer: Let's see how the restrictions go. It was a pleasure to talk to you again.

Respondent: Likewise.

Interviewer: It's like a very interesting podcast.

Respondent: It's a very interesting...? Sorry.

Interviewer: A podcast, a radio show.

Respondent: I was going to say, if you wanted to do things like that, even I who's very, very sceptical about things like video conferencing, even I have started to install and test these kinds of video conference type of mechanisms. Podcasting is quite an interesting thing. I think at last it's starting to become a viable thing. Even three years ago podcasts were not an interesting thing. Now they've become... The technology is there enough to make it possible, I think.

Interviewer: Talk soon, bye.

Respondent: Okay, bye.

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