Chapter one: Norman Potter: Faith and mania in design decision-making

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1.0 – Introduction to chapter one

In this chapter, I examine Norman Potter, the English designer, writer, and educator, as a design decision-maker. In my view, Potter's work is defined by its being at once attentive to infinitesimal detail, and demanding of an expansive, outward-looking conscience. "I think it can be argued that the sort of designer who is going to be useful in the immediate and distant future, is the sort whose mind, and vision, moves swiftly and continuously from the particular to the universal and back again."[1] Potter's utterly uncompromising approach limited his output and brought him little commercial success, but continues to sustain his reputation as a formidable voice on design. In 0.1, above, I elaborate on his significance for my research. My intention here is not a well-rounded portrait. I am after an evocation of Potter's particularly manic and recursive kind of *rigour*, as an essential element of my own formulation of the isomorphic design decision.

The focus here is 'stick furniture', Potter's design for a basic modular structure that is storied in his book *Models & Constructs*.[2] The chapter is informed by two days spent at the Edinburgh home of Oliver Brookes, a friend and former student of Potter, in 2014; and by a partly speculative, practice-based remake of a piece of stick furniture, done in collaboration with Simon Jones Studio in London in 2019.

I acknowledge here that Potter was a polarising, sometimes problematic character. In my research I have both read his statements in support of feminism and heard anecdotal accounts of his sexism. I have formed impressions of him as an unbearably insistent and sometimes destructive individual. So, why write about him at all? What remains exemplary about Potter seems inextricably bound to the difficult aspects of his personality. To his being, as an educator, someone who enthralled and inspired students, but whose unforgiving standards still seem to haunt those who found them unattainable. And, as a designer, someone with no patience for what he perceived as a lack of conviction or a surrender to compromise in his collaborators.

Stylistically, this chapter differs from the remainder of the dissertation. It adopts and furthers a first-person prose style developed in four other essays that I have

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1 Norman Potter, student report (1977). Norman Potter Archive.

2 Norman Potter, *Models & Constructs* (Hyphen Press, 1990).

published during my engagement with Potter's archive since 2011.[3] This initially deferential voice emerged in response to what I consider my own insecure inheritance from Potter. The origin of my interest in isomorphism in design comes from Potter's work, as set out in his two books, which were instrumental in my introduction to design culture. But, not having been formally educated as a designer, I have always felt a lack of authority writing about Potter's already highly articulate position. I have mitigated this doubt by writing about his work as if only for myself. For this reason, my writing about Potter has been criticised by Robin Kinross, his publisher, as being not sufficiently "outward-looking".[4] In the present chapter, I go further to give voice to this combination of admiration and intimidation. I persist with, and exaggerate, this voice because what I have to say about Potter can't be said in the kind of sentences that I wrote in section 0.1, above. If what I identify as the *unreasonable* energy in his approach is cloaked in academic prose, it dissolves, and, in the process, becomes apparently *reasonable*. To write "Potter pursued his ideals obsessively, with extreme rigour and with no concern for their commercial viability", just doesn't make the point. Potter's work is highly "cogent", as Brookes describes it, but also essentially libidinal and resistant to measured explanation. I convey this here through mantras, adapted from Potter's sayings, and repeated religiously.[5]

As another strategy in pursuit of authenticity (and consistent with the pieces of mine cited above), the chapter abides by Potter's *commandment*:

> "There is also, I believe, a commandment — if I may put it so strongly — to speak of objects only in their presence."[6]

This manifests as follows. Only Potter's two books, *What is a designer* and *Models & Constructs* are quoted from at length.[7] Short phrases from reports written by Potter to his students are also included. These date from the period when Oliver Brookes was Potter's student in the mid-1970s, but none were

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3 James Langdon, 'Potter's Lexikon', *A Circular* no. 3 (2015); James Langdon, 'Now in color', *The Bulletins of The Serving Library* no. 11 (2016); James Langdon, 'Norman Potter's Teaching Spaces', *One and Many Mirrors: Perspectives on Graphic Design Education* (Occasional Papers, 2020); James Langdon, 'A Teacher's Presence', Deschooling (2020). Via: http://deschooling.org.

4 Email correspondence with the author. Kinross read several of the pieces cited above for comment before publication.

5 "Matchbox maxims" are included in short sections in *What is a designer*, and are mentioned by interviewees as a feature of Potter's conversational style.

6 Norman Potter, script for a lecture titled 'Box and Fox', given at the Royal College of Art, London (1969).

7 Norman Potter, *What is a designer* (Hyphen Press, 2002).

written to Brookes directly. I have handled and scanned original typed copies of these reports. Brookes, Jack Neville, and Simon Jones are quoted from audio recordings made in the presence of the various objects under discussion. (Extracts from the above sources are sometimes abstracted and repeatedly embedded in my writing, identified by the use of italic type. In these cases references are given in footnotes.) The George Steiner book mentioned by Potter in his account of stick furniture is treated as an exceptional *object* (as opposed to a conventional text citation) and a copy contemporaneous with the writing of *Models & Constructs* was found for quotations. No other references beyond the scope of the objects presented here are included. In view of these constraints, I also consider it in keeping with the conclusion of Potter's account of stick furniture in *Models & Constructs* (see 1.3, below) that, from early 2020 to the present writing in early 2021, my stick furniture remake itself is inaccessible because of the COVID-19 pandemic. I can offer no comment about its authenticity or significance.

1.1 – Questioning design

Norman's first book is *What is a designer*, no question mark. And no pictures. Norman wanted his disdain for pictures of design known. *Nobody ponces about in a dusty workshop with a camera.*[8] There are indeed questions here, but they will be encountered rather as obstacles. Norman demanding critical thinking: *In typography can you see a Marxist concern for the just allocation of spaces?*[9] Norman pointing out ethical conundrums: *Would you design a prison?*[10] Norman confrontative: *What is the difference between honesty and sincerity in your work?*[11] Norman dismissive: *Have you ever seen a well-designed electric fire?*[12] Norman challenging, testing, interrogating, yes. But certain. No question. Norman knows and does not conceal the fact.

What is intrinsically wrong about bookcases?[13] Would you admit that you find the question cryptic? It's meant rhetorically! The answer had to be explained to me by Oliver Brookes. Oliver was Norman's student. Oliver and I are in his kitchen in Edinburgh. Without any provocation he feels compelled to defend a

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8 Potter, *Models & Constructs*, 91.
9 Potter, *What is a designer*, 155.
10 Potter, *What is a designer*, 157.
11 Potter, *What is a designer*, 156.
12 Potter, *What is a designer*, 156.
13 Potter, *What is a designer*, 157.

bookcase of his own making (FIG. 1.1.1). It looks completely believable to me, innocently overflowing with books and his daughter's toys and games. But it's not me he's talking to. Its design derives, despite Oliver's disclaimers, from Norman's minimal 'stick furniture'.

Oliver's bookcase is mounted on the wall with a split baton. The lower part of the baton has a small spirit level bubble embedded in it. This ingenious detail, of Norman's design, means that no other guides are required to install the bookcase. Its being straight is made integral. Oliver seems comfortable with his implementation. For Norman it had to be a *true* split baton: a single length of timber precisely split in the workshop. That meant split skilfully, at risk of failure and the timber being ruined. Mounting the finished bookcase on the baton reunites the original timber grains. Oliver articulates this poetic concept and immediately, painfully, must confess his transgression from it. His batons were bought pre-split. At Homebase. I, Oliver, Norman's student, bought my batons pre-split at Homebase.

Betraying my ignorance, I ask exactly what difference it makes. Oliver is glad to explain it to me:

> "The object has a presence in its entirety even if you can't see it. What you hold the shelf up with will express itself in the nature of the object, the nature of the shelf."[14]

This split baton shortcut is Oliver's burden and its being invisible seems only to make it worse. More internalised and mental. Oliver constantly reminding himself that Norman, wherever Norman is, sees that Oliver, inexplicably to Norman, chose convenience over purity.

Oliver can't be faulted, though, for achieving the ideal of the *no-shelf*. His sticks are tightly-spaced such that no actual planar surface is required (FIG. 1.1.2). Books of all sizes rest squarely on the open frame. Of this detail, Oliver need not be ashamed. Neither does he seem proud. He dismounts another smaller bookcase in the hallway, constructed to the same basic design, so that we can inspect it from the back. Everything is out in the open now, and he becomes reflective:

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[14] Transcript of conversations with Oliver Brookes, Edinburgh (October 6–8, 2014).



1.1.1. Oliver Brookes, bookshelf, photographed 2014.
Photograph by Stuart Whipps.



1.1.2. Oliver Brookes, bookshelf, *no-shelf* detail.
Photograph by Stuart Whipps.

> "I suppose the biggest thing for me was the importance of making things. The responsibility of putting something together, realising something. The detail, and care, and the kind of power that you could bring to it … That was a tremendous shift. I'd never come across — still haven't — anyone so principled and deep thinking and engaged. But I guess it was also quite difficult to climb out from underneath all that. … You're not as bright and intelligent, and as able, as skilful, whatever. So, therefore, what now? What if you're mediocre, is that OK? Yeh, I'm mediocre, so what? What do you want?! I was doing my best, and you've got to be OK about that, otherwise you'll tear yourself apart. But I was also seduced by the certainty, and the argument, and the passion and the love, and the commitment. That seemed such a fabulous encounter. It was, is."[15]

What is intrinsically wrong about bookcases? If it's not obvious yet then it bloody well ought to be.

1.2 – No backs

Oliver brings out a box of Norman stuff. An obituary, torn out of *The Independent* newspaper. It has a photograph of Norman standing resolutely amidst the angular, sculptural planes of his 1961 Penton kitchen (FIG.1.2.1).

Other candid photographs show Oliver's time as Norman's student at the Construction School in Bristol in the 1970s. A group crit with daffodils and wine and French Fancies. An excursion to some private houses of architectural interest. One image of Oliver and Norman together, standing not-quite-shoulder-to-shoulder in front of a couple of disassembled bicycles. Norman faces the camera assuredly. Oliver's disposition is consistent with how it was as he defended his bookcases. *What are you doing here?* His face is reticent, stance subtly twisting away from Norman so that their arms do not touch. *Why stay?* He quietly strains to belong in the picture. *Why?*[16]

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15 Brookes transcript.

16 Potter, student report (1977). Norman Potter Archive.

obituaries / gazette

Norman Potter

The designer Norman Potter liked to quote Rilke's command "Hold to the difficult", alternating it with the sombre maxim of his fellow poet and friend Denise Levertov: "We are living our whole lives in a state of emergency." His presence was uplifting, even electrifying. He was a free spirit of great charm, wit and integrity, a Christian anarchist with deeply ingrained habits of dissent, whose thinking, like the layout and content of his typed lectures and letters, tended to be "ranged left and open-ended."

Potter's childhood was not an extended one. His background, gentility fallen on hard times, took him to a semi-charitable militaristic school. Aged 14 he turned to Rational Press Association books for comfort, taking in Joad and Huxley. Still in his teens, living in a commune, he read Herbert Read's *Poetry and Anarchism*, finding in Read a mentor he never ceased to admire and an intellectual home in anarchism. He thus came to know the scholarly, sophisticated circle of men and women associated with the journals *War Commentary* and *Freedom* – Mary Louise Berneri, John Hewetson, George Woodcock and Vernon Richards.

During the Second World War he spent a month in Chelmsford Prison (aged only 16) for refusing to carry an identity card. This was followed by six months in Wandsworth and Wormwood Scrubs, after an unsuccessful attempt to initiate a moral debate on the nature of war with a military tribunal. He found prison educative and thereafter saw himself as outside the class system, duty-bound to question any kind of institution.

In solitary confinement for non-co-operation he scratched some lines by W.H. Auden into the plaster with a bent pin – "look shining / at new styles of architecture, a change of heart". These words proved prophetic. By 1949 Potter had begun his life as a designer, teaching himself skills, investigating hand and power tools and evolving a design philosophy which took in figures from the Arts and Crafts movement like C.R. Ashbee and W.R. Lethaby, together with younger members of what he saw as an intellectual family – Lewis Mumford, Herbert Read, E.F. Schumacher and Colin Ward.

Like his hero Lethaby he loved sailing boats, lived on them in hard times, and regarded their interiors, when well fitted, as perfect design statements. He immersed himself in a study of the modern movement, visiting its key sites, starting with Wells Coates's Lawn Road flats, where he felt instantly at home. He was buoyed up by his friendships with the typographer Anthony Froshaug, with Geoffrey Bocking and with a lively group of Architectural Association students editing the magazine *Plan*.

After secondary school Potter had no further formal education. Such a thing seemed hardly necessary. A spacious mind, a marvellous feel for accuracy and precision in language and a sense of the high seriousness of the designer's calling took Potter to the books, buildings and objects which he needed to know. All this provided the basis for his workshop which he ran in Corsham, Wiltshire, during the 1950s in partnership with George Philip. This was intended to be as accessible as a local garage and offered undiluted modern design. Though interested in handwork, Potter abhorred the craft furniture movement as it had developed since the 1920s; his own furniture and fittings, recorded with a Brownie box camera by his wife Caroline, were closest in spirit to the Dutch cabinetmaker and architect Gerrit Rietveld. In siting a modernist workshop in a small Somerset town, Potter created something that was in the best sense marginal and quietly disruptive.

At the end of the 1950s Potter went to teach in the Interior Design School at the Royal College of Art at the invitation of Hugh Casson. Conscious that art schools provided "a useful education frequently offered to the wrong people at the wrong age for the wrong reasons", he made his contribution there as "grimly undecorative as our subject-matter would allow", bringing in a "modernist monoculture and methodological underpinnings". There were Bauhaus precedents for Potter's pedagogic style. He demanded a whole-hearted commitment from students. Those able to take the heat and fire found themselves embarked on an invigorating, far-reaching, occasionally unsettling dialogue with their tutor.

In 1964 Potter and a group of like-minded designers and academics migrated to form a Construction School at the West of England School of Art and Design in Bristol, beginning what Potter described as "a long, long, struggle against the grain of English design education". The intention was to re-examine and re-address the modernist project. At Bristol Potter emerged as an indispensable (if dangerous) man to have in an institution, an asker of hard questions and an inspirer of youth.

In 1968 he largely abandoned teaching to join the disaffected students at Hornsey and Guildford. He resigned from Bristol, returning in 1975 to work out a radical non-hierarchical structure for the Construction School with students working in "families" and awarding their own degrees. Potter's last foray into teaching in 1989/90 at Plymouth School of Architecture took his ideas to their natural conclusion. He soon came to see the school as over restrictive and his so-called "counter-course" interventions eschewed assessments. His writing at that time had a real darkness at its philosophical core, as he encouraged students to face up to "extreme situations".

The conventional sites of post-war British art education were unable to accommodate a man with Potter's bold intellectual range, but out of his first period at Bristol came a classic work. *What is a Designer* first appeared in 1969 to much acclaim and was enlarged and republished (in 1980 and 1989) by Robin Kinross's Hyphen Press. The book is an update of the early modern (and Arts and Crafts) project, which puts the workshop (and a moral sensibility) at the heart of the design process. It is an intense, practical book, a combination of vision and good sense.

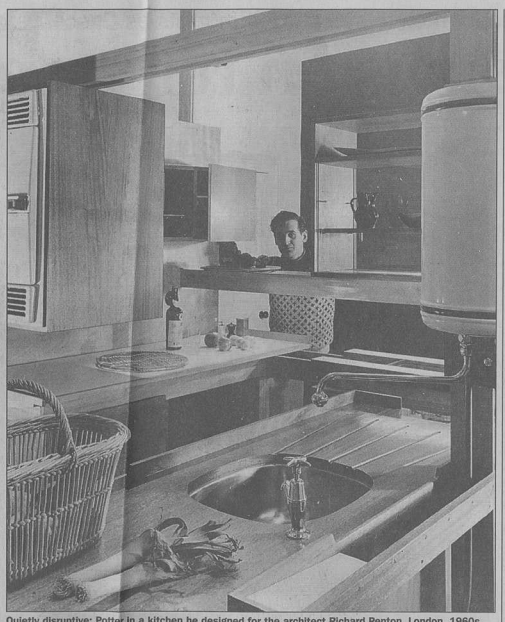
Potter's friendship with Kinross led to a close collaboration on an edition of his collected writing, which appeared in 1990 as *Models & Constructs*. This extraordinary book (designed on the purest modernist principles in collaboration with Kinross) contained snatches of autobiography, poetry, illuminating writing on music, together with philosophical and practical thoughts on design, construction and the workshop.

Potter's horror of compromise in both public and private life did not make for material ease. Those who loved him and whom he loved were tested to their limits. Things were always difficult on a day-to-day basis, although his combination of practicality and vision meant that he could transform any interior into a modern movement statement of pellucid beauty. This was dramatically demonstrated by his flat in Falmouth (his final home) and a studio in France (intended as a permanent home, out of an England that from the 1980s held few charms for him).

He left four children, the eldest, Sally, a film-maker, the youngest, Charlotte, still a schoolgirl. In their company the essential sweetness and humour of his character became movingly manifest.

Tanya Harrod

Norman Arthur Potter, designer, craftsman, writer and poet: born London 17 April 1923; married (two sons, two daughters); died Falmouth 22 November 1995.



Quietly disruptive: Potter in a kitchen he designed for the architect Richard Penton, London, 1960s

Professor Keith Runcorn

Keith Runcorn derived amusement from a remark by an American friend to the effect, "The average speed of motion of geophysicists relative to the Earth's surface is about 60 miles per hour, and we rely on you, Keith, to make up for those of us who prefer to work close to home." Runcorn was once described as the "theoretical visiting professor of physics in Newcastle". But he never stopped thinking about the physics of the Earth and planets, and at most geophysical meetings he could be found entertaining audiences with his latest musings about the magnetism of the Moon, convection in planetary interiors or geomagnetic polarity reversals.

Runcorn was for 32 years the head of the Department of Physics at Newcastle upon Tyne University, until 1988 when, on reaching the official retirement age, he become attached to Imperial College London. He put Newcastle on the geophysical map. Overseas scholars converged to research there or to participate in wide-ranging Nato-sponsored international scientific discussion meetings during which they could enjoy the magnificent scenery of Northumberland as seen from Hadrian's Wall, admire the splendours of Durham Cathedral and York Minster, or sample Newcastle Brown in one of the many pubs, often with Runcorn as indefatigable companion and knowledgeable guide.

Runcorn was wedded to the promotion of geophysics by almost incessant lecture tours, but at no stage did he consider it necessary to hand over the headship of the Physics Department in Newcastle to one of the patient and hard-working members of his very able staff, with whom he kept in touch during long periods of absence by means of telephone



His allotted task was to d
termine how the Earth's ma
netic field varies with dept
which involved carrying o
magnetic measurements
deep coalmines in Kent, La
cashire and Yorkshire. The r
sults would provide a test of
new theory of the Earth's ma
netism that Blackett had ju
proposed. By 1950, the theo
had been disproved not only
the "mine experiment" but a
by the results of a delicate la
oratory experiment Black
conducted, requiring the co
struction of a very sensiti
magnetometer. This instrume
later enabled groups headed
Blackett and Runcorn to mak
important advances in the fie
of rock magnetism.

In 1950 Runcorn returned t
Cambridge, where he spent si
years as Assistant Director
Research in the Department
Geodesy and Geophysics. H
own personal research was cr
cially influenced in 1951 b
new results on polarity reversal
of the Earth's magnetic fiel
that were emerging from stud
ies of the magnetism of Ice
landic lava flows. In parallel wit
work already started by Black
ett's group in Manchester, Run
corn orchestrated at Cambridg
a vigorous programme of fiel
and laboratory studies for de
termining the fossilised ancient
directions of the Earth's mag
netic field in sedimentary and
igneous rocks from several parts
of the world. This provided
striking new evidence in favour
of Alfred Wegener's celebrated
but then controversial "conti
nental drift" hypothesis,
leading in the 1960s to the in
troduction by others of the
highly successful theory of plate
tectonics.

In 1956 Runcorn moved to a
chair of physics at Durham
University and headship of the
Department of Physics at King's
College, Newcastle upon Tyne
– which later became the Uni
versity of Newcastle upon Tyne.

Keith Runcorn celebrated
his 73rd birthday in November,
four months after his widowed
mother attained the age of 100.
Keen on physical fitness, he had
played rugby until his mid-
fifties, swam nearly every day,
and never gave up squash.

On 5 December he was
found dead in a ransacked ho-
tel room in San Diego, Cali-
fornia, a city he knew well. *En*
route to the 1995 fall meeting of

Larry Bartlett

Like all Fleet Street printers, Larry Bartlett was little known outside the photography and





sure to achieve the equivalent of a bye to the final. However, tirely different practices and techniques, and was named

1.2.1. Norman Potter obituary, *The Independent*, 16 December 1995.
Norman Potter Archive.

A piece of paper in the box has a list of words and short sentences, grouped into themes. Memories of Norman that Oliver has written out in preparation for our meeting. One grouping is headed “what he said”, and its first entries are:

> *God can see*
>
> *No one starves*

On God, Oliver says:

> “I don’t have a religion, but I understand what that means. I remember this story came out a couple of times. Norman would talk about there being no backs to anything. Everything is considered in the round ... A common response to someone saying, ‘But Norman, no one is ever going to see the block under the shelf in the cupboard’, would be, half-joking, ‘God will see it’. I kind of understand what that is, what that means. It’s cogent.”[17]

And what about “No one starves”? It’s about commitment. The measure for colleagues. You don’t have time now? Need to get back to the family? Money tight? So what? Norman shrugging. *No one starves*. You won’t make any money? It’s a precarious life? Shrugging. *No one starves.* Because there’s still work to do. How can you leave. There’s still work to do. Don’t be coddled. Don’t be sheltered. Don’t be a trimmer. *No one starves.*

1.3 – Hole-in-one

Norman’s second book is *Models & Constructs*. It’s one part autobiography: *workshops are a bad deal for marriages*.[18] One part technical monograph: *the basic stick section was 1 1/2 inches square*.[19] And one part design criticism: *when I see some of the junk around that is taken seriously, I wonder what some of these people base their standards on*. Pictures this time, but nothing fancy.

Implicit in Oliver’s insecurity about his bookcases is the fact that, being wall-mounted, they evade the defining problem that motivated stick furniture. Norman wanted to make a — or really, *the* — frugal, elemental, modular, and

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17 Brookes transcript.
18 Potter, *Models & Constructs*, 107.
19 Potter, *Models & Constructs*, 125.

free-standing structure. In the chapter ‘Matters arising’, he masterfully constructs the story of its design. It starts with the prototype he made for his friend Anthony Froshaug. A small photograph in the margin is afforded (FIG. 1.3.1). Its sticks were only kept rigid by the tightness of the fixings holding them together. During the Cornish summer, while Anthony worked at his printing press, those fixings loosened, and the sticks eventually toppled over like a parallelogram. Norman was not satisfied with that. A true solution was needed, once and for all. But this was not the kind of problem that would give itself up to an expedient solution. At least, not as Norman formulated it:

> “Every solution had to be capable of being machined or otherwise dealt with by our own equipment. In practice the structure was largely self-stabilising once storage units were attached, but the crossed sticks should in principle stand rigidly without this, and not by mere friction of their fastenings (as in the Froshaug prototype). For various reasons I was not willing to use triangulations (as in the Eames storage system) or to consider proprietary connectors, which anyway would have pushed the cost up astronomically. Well this problem held me up literally for two and a half months. I simply couldn’t crack it.”[20]

With the narrative stalled, a sudden, ecstatic visual encounter occurs. A familiar piece of workshop equipment unexpectedly reveals its higher purpose:

> “Then one day I was staring at the machinery and nearly shot through the roof when I saw the solution perfectly exhibited, it had been *too* obvious to be visible ... I was looking at the actual solution to my problem, which was to have short lengths of square metal tubing in square holes with a cylindrical bolt going through them — exactly the same as the tool that actually did the work.”[21]

What kind of inspiration is this? Norman was held up. Not held up in practice but in principle. In principle the crossed sticks alone should stand rigid. And Norman was held up by reasons. *Various reasons.* His own reasons. Using only the equipment in the workshop for one. Without stabilising attachments. The crossed sticks alone. Not by the mere friction of their fastenings. They should

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20 Potter, *Models & Constructs*, 125.
21 Potter, *Models & Constructs*, 125.



1.3.1. Norman Potter, prototype stick furniture for Anthony Froshaug, 1950s.
Norman Potter Archive.

stand rigid. Without triangulations, without expensive proprietary connectors, without any support, the crossed sticks should stand rigid. In principle and for reasons. Norman's implacable reasons.

The solution took two and a half months. For two and a half months Norman was limited to the equipment in the workshop. Ten weeks of Norman not resorting to stabilising attachments. Seventy-five days. For seventy-five days Norman not triangulating like Eames had. Norman not iterating, not refining. Not tweaking the geometry. Norman not resorting to proprietary connectors. Norman not just dashing off to Homebase and testing out various proprietary connector options.[22] And Norman not over-tightening and submitting to friction alone. Not putting his back into it. Not relying on elbow grease. Not giving it some. Norman not doing anything. Not stabilising, not triangulating, not going proprietary and not over-tightening. Norman knowing that he need not do any of that. Yet Norman present in the workshop, we trust. Norman stoic. Waiting faithfully.

Until the epiphany! And the solution itself? It reads perfectly. Square holes! Each one a diagram of four immaculate right-angled corners. *A rectangle is a rectangle is a rectangle.*[23] A message in rigidity delivered by a familiar machine, a large table-top drill fitted with a hollow chisel mortise bit. A substantial piece of hardware operated by a lever arm that brings the mortise straight down exactly and repeatably. The motion of its drill-bit rotating through its square chisel delightfully isomorphic with the fastenings ultimately rotating through the resulting square holes to secure the sticks. Norman punning jubilant:

> "This is the best instance of holing-in-one that I have ever come across in problem-solving — perfect; and it worked."[24]

But just as suddenly as it appeared, it is gone:

> "In the event, the stick furniture did not make a fortune for the workshop. It was probably our least-selling line ever ..."[25]

That's it. Next sentence. Change the subject.

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22 I realise that Homebase did not exist in the 1950s.

23 Potter, student report (1977). Norman Potter Archive.

24 Potter, *Models & Constructs*, 125–126.

25 Potter, *Models & Constructs*, 126.

1.4 – Language and silence

Not that commercial calamity should come as any surprise. But ... *it worked*. That's it? It worked. Nothing about it. An image might be asking a lot but no description? No, *it worked* and we tested some simple joints, and then made some sets, for bookcases and other modular storage, a modest range, and Anthony printed a card offering stick furniture, available from Norman Potter Constructions in Corsham, Wiltshire and sales were slow but at least I knew that the purists appreciated it. Nothing like that. Nor any narrative. No, *it worked* and then there I was driving down to Cornwall, to Anthony's place, mortised sticks hanging out the back of the Citroën 2CV van. Not even a complaint that the purists didn't appreciate it because they're not fucking pure enough.

What explains this? 'Matters arising' begins on the defensive:

> "A student said to me 'presumably you developed your stick furniture from the environments in Papanek's book; have you extended what it can do?' No, I replied rather tartly, the stick furniture developed from a paring away to the bone in my own thinking, and perhaps my own emotional life, and as an experiment with 'system' over against 'object'. A better source of its background might be found in George Steiner's *Language and silence*. Moreover, I felt obliged to add rather acidly, stick furniture was designed and around the place some ten years before Papanek's book appeared."[26]

This reference to *Language and Silence* is not elaborated and so, I must approach Steiner's book cold, hoping the connection will still be legible. It is. Legible, forceful, extraordinary. Who else but Norman could maintain such poetics? I am fortunate to know Norman, and to have had vicarious access to his work. His words are always with me. Norman whispering, *never look at any particular without relating it to a universal*.[27] Norman warning, *the quality of intention is an implicit characteristic of a design decision, but it is always detectable, and especially so where such a decision has gone by default.*[28] Norman taunting, *you know nothing of modern design, you have not breathed its spirit*.[29] Norman irritated, *you are sitting it out, this won't do*.[30] Norman furious,

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26 Potter, *Models & Constructs*, 123.
27 Potter, student report (1977). Norman Potter Archive.
28 Potter, student report (1977). Norman Potter Archive.
29 Potter, student report (1977). Norman Potter Archive.

you have turned your back on every possibility of thought in the job, or of imaginative response.[31] Unforgiving, *do you think that your being is exempt from the effects of what you do or fail to do?*[32]

Steiner writes:

> "Because their language had served at Belsen, because words could be found for all those things and men were not struck dumb for using them, a number of German writers who had gone into exile or survived Nazism, despaired of their instrument."[33]

Silence here is understood as a spiritually and politically loaded form of abandonment of the writer's voice. The milieu described resonates with Potter's framing, in *What is a designer*, of the scope and consequence of design in postwar Europe:

> "I have always seen our central experiences as twofold: technology on the one hand, and our 20th century experience of Auschwitz, of supreme suffering, on the other. I believe that every aspect of our working assumptions must respect, and in some sense face up to, these facts of experience, and we ignore them at peril of irrelevance or infantilism. Hence, to me, the silliness of patterns on sideboards, though this is almost an equally silly way of putting the matter."[34]

As a period of *silence*, those two and a half months take on a religious connotation. Back with Norman in the workshop. Not two and a half months thinking it through. Not talking it out. Not drawing it up. Not two and a half months in frustrated abandon. Two and a half months of abstinence. Norman abstaining from, after a week, feeling doubtful and admitting to overthinking it. Abstaining from, after two weeks, reconsidering and admitting this is becoming absurd. Abstaining from, after a month, capitulating and saying what's wrong with additional supports anyway and why not reconsider the whole effort and

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30 Potter, student report (1977). Norman Potter Archive.

31 Potter, student report (1977). Norman Potter Archive.

32 Potter, student report (1977). Norman Potter Archive.

33 George Steiner, 'Silence and the Poet', *Language and Silence, Essays 1958–1966* (Peregrine Books reprint, 1979), 73.

34 Potter here seems to paraphrase Steiner's sentiment in 'Silence and the Poet': "that the political inhumanity of the twentieth century and certain elements in the technological mass-society which has followed on the erosion of European bourgeois values, have done injury to language is the underlying theme of this book." Steiner, *Language and Silence*.

admitting perhaps being too ascetic and uncompromising. Abstaining from, after two months, despairing and saying I knew I was overthinking it and I should have reconsidered, I should have capitulated and what's wrong with additional supports anyway and I can't afford to be so uncompromising here in the workshop, here in the village, money is tight and I should just forget the whole thing or make a few small concessions, for my own sake, so that I can finally get this God foresaken stick furniture out the door. Norman abstaining from all of that. Norman silencing those doubtful impulses.

Like that it did work. As Norman wrote. Norman was right when he wrote that *it worked*. As a way to act not a thing to make. Norman never wanted to make it a commercial success! No need, *it worked*. *No one starves* said Norman! Never wanted to promote it. *Nobody ponces about in a dusty workshop with a camera* said Norman! No need, *it worked*. *Scorn to publish* said Norman![35] No need, *it worked*. Commercial failure martyred the effort. *Stripped down to the bone* said Norman! As a way to act not a thing to make. *Respect and face up to those facts of experience* said Norman! Norman acted with decency. And restraint. And *it worked*. Norman was silent. Not only in principle and for reasons. Because it had meaning to be silent. Norman channelled Steiner, and *it worked*:

> "The poet seeks refuge in muteness. Whereupon the upward surge, the verbalisation of the hitherto incommunicable occurs through some miracle of simplicity, by way of a simile invoking a ball-game, hot wax flowing from the impress of a seal-ring, the shoe-maker hammering at his nails. As if the grace of divine meaning were such that it can, under the poet's persuasions, enter the most natural, straightforward of our imaginings."[36]

1.5 – Writers and makers

I have never been in the presence of stick furniture. For years, I failed to find any, *around the place*. In 'Matters arising', Norman *bequeaths* his "hole-in-one" to *any stick-fancier suffering from the same hang-up*.[37] Oliver calls this "the gift".[38] Thank you Norman. But as I am neither adequately skilled nor equipped

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35 Potter, *Models & Constructs*, 90.

36 Steiner, 'Silence and the Poet', 61. Steiner is analysing Dante in this passage.

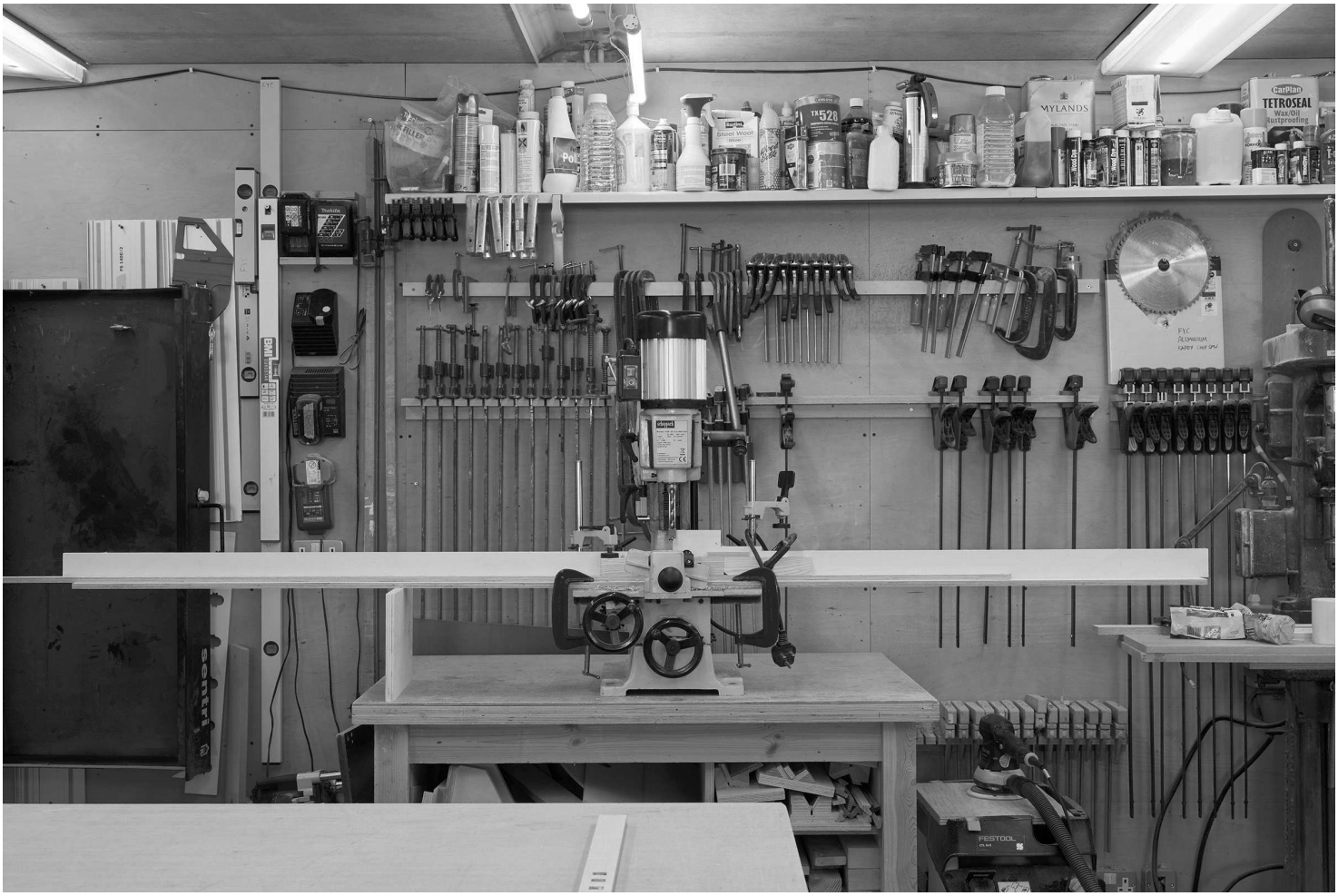
37 Potter, *Models & Constructs*, 126.

38 On his list of words, described in 1.2, above.

to accept it, I have asked Jack Neville and Simon Jones to make stick furniture for me. They are one step further removed from Norman than any of the makers I have met who knew him personally, but there are connections. Jack's father was a student of Norman's in Bristol, and Jack and Simon are based in Workplace Co-operative 115, a small, multidisciplinary workspace in Kentish Town that was co-founded by Norman's publisher Robin Kinross, who still operates Hyphen Press there. This one step of removal makes the work just sufficiently fraught for Jack and Simon. Thank you Norman. They will start the process irreverent and finish it with a hint of self doubt.

The first problem to overcome is a technical anachronism. The standalone mortiser is no longer able to justify its place in the wood workshop. There are contemporary machines that could make the drilling of square holes more precise and less demanding, but the priority must be the recreation of Norman's moment of visual inspiration. With Jack's assistance, it proves not too difficult to locate and buy an old mortiser, and to install it at 115 (FIG. 1.5.1, 1.5.2). A more demanding problem is what exactly to make. After much discussion, we arrive at the idea of a replica of the Froshaug shelf pictured in *Models & Constructs*, but with the corrective gesture of replacing its prototypical round holes with square. Not to claim it as ours. Not to improve on it. Absolutely not. Not to capitalise on it. Only, humbly, to enquire of it. No ambition and no pretension. Just to see. To be in its presence. Hoping for a glimpse. Please, Norman.

We spoke a lot before they made it. Jack and Simon always becoming restless while talking about the "hole-in-one". Other, more pragmatic solutions, seeming irresistibly to suggest themselves. Simon saying I wouldn't do it like that. Simon saying I think at some point a bit of cross-bracing is fine. Me saying but please do it like that. Please do it exactly as Norman wrote it. And Robin in the building the whole time, in the next studio, not saying anything. Jack and Simon saying, as makers would say, but why don't we just do it like this or do it like that? For the workflow. For the convenience of assembly. Always sensible proposals. Always reasonable suggestions. But me saying, for the sake of this writing, it only works if we do it like Norman wrote it. But this being a maker's place, a workshop, where making things is what makes sense, Jack and Simon looking at me as if to say we're not sure we want to do this. We've got other jobs, commercial jobs, that's how it works here, and we are not sure we want to get into this after all. We wouldn't do it like that.



1.5.1. Mortiser installed at Workplace Co-operative 115, 2019.
Photograph by Stuart Whipps.



1.5.2. Mortiser, hollow chisel detail.

After they have made it, we are all confronted with it. Stick furniture. Can we say this is stick furniture? As Norman did it? As Norman wrote it? Jack saying this is daft. The first thing he says. This is daft. Jack, making it, finds it daft. Norman, writing it, insists that it works. Jack saying that even with jigs — and Jack and Simon are used to making the most precise jigs — Jack saying even with jigs if each hole is drilled perfectly and purely straight, there will be variation over the length of the timber and across the batch of timbers. A fractional degree of rotation will be exaggerated along the length of a stick. Timber is just not that straight. It is not as *straight* as the word straight would suggest. Jack saying that they were assembling it by wrestling the parts into alignment. Fighting it. Forcing it, under tension. And now Jack feeling that tension when he looks at the stick furniture. The tension in the materials and in the talk. The wood under tension and that not satisfying Jack, nor Simon. Jack and Simon wanting an economy of effort across the job. Not poetry here and tension there. Simon saying the job is the drawing and the planning and the preparing the workspace and the making and the packing and the logistics and the assembly. Not just the idea of it but all of it including handing it over to the person who will use it.

Jack saying there's still part of me that thinks we've missed something. The last thing that Jack says. Because it just seems so fucking crazy.

Norman saw it forever square and straight. In that moment, from across the workshop, when he saw the mortiser it promised him squareness. I will be like a vector, it guaranteed. Absolutely, definitively square. What he saw was the straightness and squareness of the mortiser. That's your solution. Now, unfortunately, after I've left, taking the stick furniture with me, I suppose Jack and Simon are questioning themselves. Can't we make it? Are we mediocre? Imagining Norman saying it can't be made mediocre. That's not it. If you haven't made it straight you haven't made it. You must have missed something. If you haven't made it square you haven't made it. It's fucking crazy? You mean it's difficult? Yes? *Hold to the difficult.* Norman saying if you haven't made it straight and if you haven't made it square then you haven't made it pure and you haven't truly been in its presence and so what could *you* possibly write about it.



1.5.3. *Stick furniture*, Simon Jones Studio, 2019.
Photograph by Stuart Whipps.