

PLATE 2015—‘Cultures of Mending’ workshop

“Maintenance and repair as a vital source of improvement, variation, customization, improvisation and innovation”

A culture of visible mending: Improvisation, or bodging the job?

Introduction

The first declaration of the MENDR*S Manifesto is ‘To make mending visible’. I take this to have a double meaning. First, that mending as a practice has been hidden from view, eclipsed by a worship of disposable consumer culture. Second, that the mending of an object should itself leave a visible trace. This indication of repair might result from the addition of materials—patches, glue, stitching, etc., traces of workmanship (sic), or the radical reworking of the form of an object.

This second interpretation might be more contentious but, I’m going to let it stand as I want to explore the ‘nexus’ of ideas and practices that link visibility, skill, and improvisation, in relation to mending and repair.

Currently, there seem to be three ‘ideal types’ of mending practices vying for visibility.

1. A craft skills driven culture of mending which values, improvisation, creativity, and co-operation between menders. This approach promotes both the visibility of mending as a practice and the visibility of the mend—mending as ‘creativity’, MENDR*S.
2. A professional workshop culture of repair which values training, tacit knowledge, and a deep respect for materials. In this case, the visibility of the practice of repair is promoted alongside an indifference concerning the visibility of the mend—mending as ‘submission’, Matthew B. Crawford.
3. A ‘proxy’ culture of mending which separates the skill and knowledge needed for mending from the practice. The visibility of what is being offered—advice, instruction, tools—is strongly promoted. However, there is an assumption that the mend itself will be of little visible significance as this ‘proxy’ approach is mainly oriented around industrially designed consumer goods—mending as ‘opposition’, iFixit.

Visibility

The history of mending is rich with examples of both visible and ‘invisible’ mending. It would be tempting to equate the former with lack of expertise and the latter with developed expertise. However, this does not quite fit. Kintsugi, for example, was a visible, highly skilled, form of repair which very competently restored the function of objects and extended their durability and

longevity. Conversely, much historical repair of furniture was carried out using concealed, unskilled 'botch-work' which often further reduced an object's durability and longevity.

However, while the application of skill by the mender is not the sole determinant of the visibility of a repair, it plays a significant role. Consider the difference between darning and 'invisible mending'. While both require more skill than simple patching, darning requires less skill and less knowledge of fabric construction, and the properties of the materials to be used, than invisible mending. Invisible mending requires much more developed knowledge, in a more time-consuming demonstration of skillful work.

Of course, the immediate context of the mend, including cost, the materials at hand, the tools available, the urgency of the required repair, and so on, all play a role in the type of mend that might be attempted.¹ One of these contextual dependents is the skill of the mender.

Skill

Skill, unlike the other factors needed for a repair—tools, materials, instructions—cannot be shared. It can be developed only through practice. That does not mean that only the practice of repair can develop the skills need for successful repair; rather, many skills are both generic and transferable. However, skill does define a limit to what can be successfully achieved, let alone shared, because it is so dependent on tacit knowledge. While there are a range of opinions concerning 'tacit' knowledge, most commentators agree that it cannot be transferred, and some argue that it cannot even be articulated successfully; it can only be learnt through doing and doing again, and again.

This has a significant consequence for calls to encourage a vernacular culture of mending, especially visible mending. If the aim is to encourage people to become repeat menders of specific classes of objects, that is an invitation for the putative mender, through practice, to develop precisely those skills whose repetition builds tacit knowledge. However, this does not mean that this knowledge then becomes the basis for the mending of different objects with different physical properties, and which not only 'break' differently but which demand different practices, skills, tools, materials, and so on, to effect a successful repair. On the other hand, if the aim to make mending visible is through encouraging in people a mending propensity towards the world, how can the tacit knowledge required for specific, knowledgeable repair be developed in relation to this general 'stance' Perhaps, improvisation provides an answer?

¹ Hopefully, a 'visible culture of mending' will have room for failed mends. The literature on the value of failure, and its role in the development of skill, is considerable. The promotion of mending as a vernacular culture of reparation would be enhanced through the sharing of what did not work.

Improvisation and bodging

There is a widespread conflation of improvised repair with a bodge or botch, that is, a clumsy, unskilled mend. This is misleading. An improvised repair can, of course, be a botch, and might even need to be so in an emergency. Improvised repairs can, though, be of the highest quality, whether they be short-term, emergency expedients, or a longer lasting and durable repair. Bodes, on the other hand are, by definition, poor quality repairs and can, again, be short-term expedients or longer-term, repeated 'fixes'.² A short-term bodge might be immediately successful but will require more effective attention due to it being inherently fragile. A long term bodge will often result in the same bodge being repeated when what is called for is a considered repair, whether improvised or otherwise.³

So, bodging is not quite explained by improvisation, whether honest or otherwise, and the research on mending describes conflicting descriptions of improvisation. The first results from an enthusiastic intention to mend, using that which is at hand, or can be procured readily, certainly by using that with which one is already familiar, and which tends to result in a visible mend. There's a kind of 'kit' of materials for vernacular, visible mending—cable ties, Gorilla Glue, stitching, Sugru, etc., and mending is seen as a worthwhile orientation towards the world. It bends the will of the objects to be mended to that of the mender. The other description of improvisation insists that the ability to improvise flows from precisely the same skill, expertise and tacit knowledge from which other forms of workmanship flow. Improvisation is not some 'on the spot', emergency reaction. Rather, improvisation is the result of deep reserves of understanding; the will of the mender has to submit to an accommodation with that of the 'stuff' being repaired.

² Where the 'poorness' of the mend resides in a bodge is an interesting question and might include the ill considered nature of the mend to be attempted, the honesty of intention, inappropriate materials, tools and processes, and a lack of expertise in carrying through the work of mending. All of these might characterise and inform a bodge and so determine it as a clumsy repair.

³ The relationship between improvised repairs and bodes was recently brought home to me when I heard someone describe the famous Apollo 13 'mailbox' improvisation as a bodge. One of a number of improvised emergency innovations, this device served the purpose of removing potentially lethal carbon dioxide from the air being breathed by stranded astronauts. Basically, two seemingly incompatible devices were joined and made to work by using a space-suit return hose. This was far from a bodge and depended on a complex association of knowledge training, clear communication, trust and ability. The knowledge of what needed to be done was separated from the execution of the repair as engineers on Earth devised the repair and the astronauts in space carried it out. This improvised, emergency repair was a short-term 'mend' of the utmost importance and the consequences of bodging this job could have been fatal.

Commentators who favour the first understanding of improvisation are likely to argue that the visibility of the mend is part and parcel of 'making mending visible'. Conversely, those commentators who insist on the second description of improvisation are mostly agnostic to the visibility of the mend itself. This is due, in part, to the fact that such mending aims towards unobtrusiveness. This aim arises not because of a desire that repair should be undetectable in the sense of 'invisible mending' but, because such repair is constrained by (or respects) the 'integrity' of that which has been mended— the repair of a skilfully rebuilt, welted shoe, for example, leaves few visible traces compared to one patched with Sugru, though there may have been improvisation in both repairs.

Another approach?

One approach to addressing these tensions might be found in the idea of 'proxy' mending. Know-how websites which share formal knowledge, allied to those online retailers which give access to the tools and materials needed for home repair, supply, in effect, much of what is needed. This repair tool kit comprises iFixit, eSpares, blogs, etc. The irony is that the 'visible' aspect of such mending is oriented towards forms of repair which involve standardised, mass produced consumer goods and which rely on discrete, replaceable components, modular construction, and replicable technical instructions. While the visibility of mending advice, and campaigning for mending, is pronounced, the resulting repairs themselves are often 'invisible'. Moreover, the advice offered for these types of repair eschews 'workmanship' 'bodging', and improvisation, in favour of a pragmatic, inclusive and instrumental approach to repair.

I want to explore these tensions between visibility, skill, and improvisation in relation to the call to 'To make mending visible'.