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**Northumbria  
University**  
NEWCASTLE

# TOOLS FOR EVERYDAY LIFE



A practice based  
investigation of the design  
and making of everyday  
products to promote  
active, rather than passive,  
user involvement.

Type of output:  
Artefacts  
and exhibition

*by*  
Rickard  
Whittingham

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# SUMMARY

This body of work exhibited at design festivals and galleries in Newcastle upon Tyne, London and New York City consists of a series of artefacts created by Whittingham and the curation of the work by other designers responding to the briefs he set them.

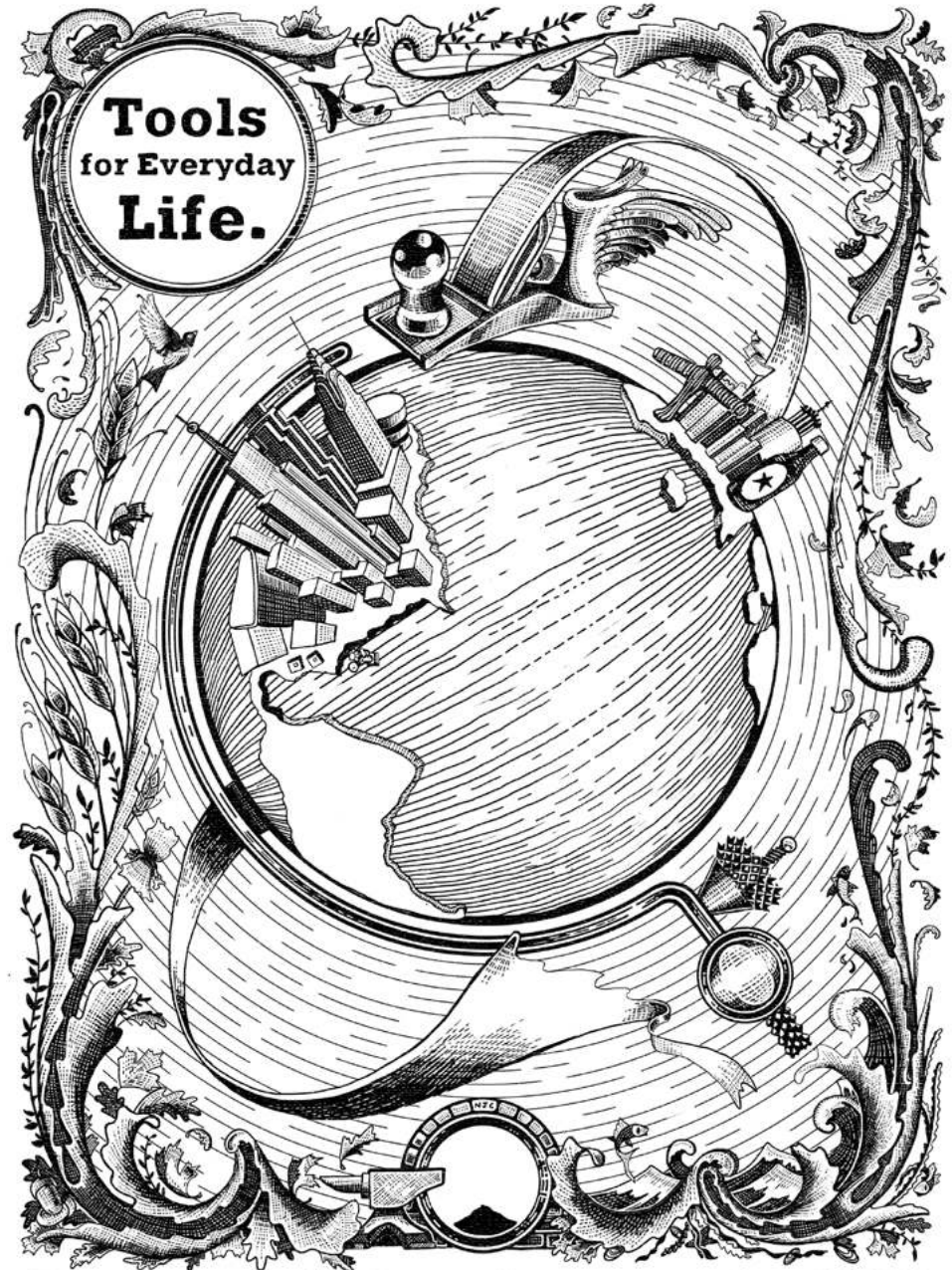
Tools for Everyday Life is a practice based investigation into how the connection the skilled art/design/craft practitioner has with their tools can inspire the creation of products that meaningfully connect users to everyday tasks.

This project is informed by the craftsman's sensitivity to materials and processes and the value ascribed to the workmanship of risk. When much contemporary product design practice is concerned with the development of products activated by an effortless gesture, glance or digitally accumulated data, this research explores what might be gained by designing and making everyday products that promote the active rather than passive involvement of the user to the task at hand.

Since 2014, Whittingham has designed and made products that encourage users to viscerally engage in commonplace activities. With overt reference to the tools and equipment used by art, design and craft practitioners he proposes artefacts that acknowledge everyday life consists of innumerable skilled actions to be celebrated. He set design briefs for other designers and makers to contribute to the project and exhibited their responses alongside his own.

<http://www.toolsforeverydaylife.org/>

Right: TFEL poster illustration  
by Neil Conley.





“This project considers the actions of everyday life not as monotonous, thoughtless acts of daily toil, but rhythmic, practiced interactions with the material world. It is based on the understanding that we are all skilful practitioners, in our own way.”

*from “The Ruler” project brief.*

The collection of works has been exhibited at the London and Northern Design Festivals (2014 - 2016), The Great Exhibition of the North (2018) and was selected for the British Pavilion at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York City (2014-2019). Exhibited products have subsequently been developed for production and retail (e.g. the *Keyway Ruler* by Will Baugh). Documentation of the project was disseminated via the distribution of a Newspaper from the exhibitions.

Tools for Everyday Life is a collection of creative works 2014-2019 designed and made by Whittingham and invited designers drawn from the community of practice within Northumbria University’s School of Design. Supported by Department of International Trade (DIT) with Tradeshow Access Programme (TAP) grants, the project has been exhibited internationally as well as nationally and in the North-East region.

# TIMELINE

2011-13 PRE CENSUS	2014	2015	2016-17	2018	2019-20
<p><b>May 2011:</b> First iteration of the project (initially named Tools for Daily Life) is displayed at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair (ICFF) in New York. <a href="#">It is reviewed by the influential design blog core77.</a></p> <p><b>September 2011:</b> Exhibited at Tom Dixon's Dock Gallery during the London Design Festival.</p> <p><b>May 2012:</b> Second iteration of the project is presented at the ICFF (New York City) and wins the Best Products and Accessories award during the New York Design Week. <a href="#">The project is reviewed by Sight Unseen.</a></p> <p><b>November 2012:</b> The project is presented in Beijing during <a href="#">China Creative Design Week</a>.</p> <p><b>May 2013:</b> The project is selected by the <a href="#">British European Design Group</a> (BEDG) to be part of the UK Trade and investment (UKTI) supported British Pavilion at the ICFF.</p>	<p>Reflecting on the 3 iterations of the project, a more formally structured approach is adopted by setting a brief to designers.</p> <p><b>May:</b> The project is invited by the BEDG to be shown as part of the ICFF. Project documentation and reflection on the process is distributed to visitors of the exhibition by newspaper and via the project website.</p> <p><b>September:</b> Whittingham is invited to present the project at The Design Junction as part of the London Design Festival in September 2014.</p>	<p><b>May:</b> Further products are exhibited at the ICFF.</p> <p><b>September:</b> Exhibited at The Design Junction (London Design festival).</p> <p><b>October:</b> Whittingham curates a further showcase as part of the Newcastle Design festival.</p>	<p><b>May 2016:</b> Further iterations of the project are shown at the ICFF.</p> <p><b>May 2017:</b> Furniture design is introduced to the project and shown at the ICFF.</p>	<p><b>May:</b> Project is shown at the ICFF.</p> <p><b>July/August:</b> A retrospective of the Tools for Everyday life is staged as part of the Great Exhibition of the North, Newcastle upon Tyne.</p>	<p><b>May 2019:</b> A further curated iteration of the project is shown at the ICFF.</p> <p><b>May 2020:</b> A retrospective of the project (2014-2020) was planned to be shown during the NYC Design week (cancelled due to Covid).</p>

# RESEARCH CHALLENGE

## **Aims:**

This body of work explores the language of task focused objects and the connection a designer/ craftsman has with their tools and asks the question: What are the results of a designer treating people as skilled and active users of functional artefacts rather than passive witnesses of a designed object/ experience?

## **Objectives:**

- To utilise the physical pleasure to be gained from, and associated with, skilled tool use as the basis for new product design.
- To design and make prototype products that offer the feedback of tool use.
- To engage a community of design practice with the aims of the project and provide the framework for designers to propose 'everyday' products with tool like qualities.
- To curate and exhibit the works both to show the results of the project and as part of the development of further iterations of the project.

“In the context of skilled trades, the quality of tools is taken seriously. Years of practice make tradespeople sensitive to the response of the material world. The use of good tools – a perfectly weighted hammer, freshly sharpened chisel or a shit hot paint brush – can reward this sensitivity by performing their task so well that, in addition to the required practical result, they gift some additional pleasure to a job.”

*from “The Ruler” project brief.*

# CONTEXT

The Tools for Everyday life 2014-2019 builds on the original goal of the project (started in 2011) to explore opportunities for knowingly giving designed everyday products tool like qualities by utilising the connection that a designer/craftsperson has with their tools.

The work in this portfolio stems from design briefs written by Whittingham to propose variations on specific ubiquitous products (i.e. Ruler) and for specific environments (i.e. office work). By engaging a number of designers in the creation of the same named object or proposing products for the same physical space, the intention was for a more focused engagement with the physical and aesthetic qualities that reference to tool use can bring to the bear on the design of products.

The works overtly explore user involvement in their operation whilst employing the materials and processes knowledge and understanding of Whittingham and the designers. The works draw on Tim Ingold's observations that the use of everyday objects require bodily skills that take years to acquire (Ingold, 2013) whilst also looking towards designers such as [Max Lamb](#) in celebrating the position of the designer that directly engages with manufacture. By encouraging user engagement and casting a critical eye on contemporary industrial production and consumption the works also contribute to themes explored by Enzo Mari in *Autoprogettazione?* (1974). The engagement of multiple designers has methodological parallels with the collective design research activity of the [Furnishing-Utopia](#) project (2015-2018) but where this U.S. based project points its designers to an exploration of a particular place and time (a celebration of Shaker utilitarian traditions) the Tools for Everyday Life project's premise is not centred around a particular

aesthetic but based upon the value of tools as "...repositories of accumulated material intelligence." (Adamson 2019 p.34)

David Pye talked usefully of the workmanship of risk and the workmanship of certainty with regard to how to separate craftsmanship from industrial production (Pye, 1968). A distinction that helps us to understand the reverence with which skilled work is often held. This research prompts debate as to why this distinction should exclusively relate to the making of artefacts, why should this not also apply to their use?



# METHODS AND PROCESSES

The structure of the 2014-2019 phase of the project is best understood as involving distinct activities, with background research and design briefs acting as the backdrops or start points to cycles of:

- designing and making practice,
- curating and exhibiting the works
- reflection on the process.

Designers invited by Whittingham to contribute to the project were selected on the basis of their shared connection to the BA(hons) 3D Design at Northumbria University and that programme's ethos of learning through making. The designers are at different stages of their career and range from recent graduates and established industrial designers to academic design practitioners. By inviting responses from other designers Whittingham was able to both complement and contrast his own practice.

The designers were prompted by Whittingham to explore the potential of imbuing tool-like qualities to everyday products by design briefs for both specific named objects and to respond to more general themes. Named objects: Rulers, Candle sticks, Bar stools and Money boxes. Project themes included office work, collaborating with skilled partners and the outdoors.

The designing and making process was supported by regular critiques and meetings. Deadlines were established by working with design festival organisers and galleries and committing the project to be exhibited at trade fairs and design festivals.



Above top: A silicone mould for casting brass figures for “Sticks”.

Above: Model making for “Sticks”.



Above: Sharing the project via [“The Northern Tool”](#) newspaper.

The resultant works were designed to prompt discussion and debate amongst a wider audience and so the showing of the work to the public, academics, manufacturers, retailers and other practitioners was integral to the ongoing development of the project. This involved Whittingham working with The British European Design Group (BEDG), the organisers of the International Contemporary Furniture Fair (ICFF), The Design Junction, The Northern Design Festival and the Great Exhibition of the North as part of the curatorial and dissemination process.



Above: Tools for Everyday life at Design Junction Sept. 2015

# RULERS [Selected Works]

*"Sticks"*, Rickard Whittingham.

Materials: Box wood, Birch, Beech and Brass (plate and cast).

A series of 12" (304.8mm) lengths of timber with no markings along their length. Each stick has a plate brass insert to reference the ferules found on wood working tools to help secure a blade to a handle. 1:50 scale cast brass figures soldered to the ferules are an embellishment and a source of potential narrative regarding units of measure. The engraving on the ferules of "15.24m" represents the distance to the end of the ruler as seen by the brass figure.



[Ruler brief.](#)

Left: Ferule details.

Below left: Sticks at the ICFF 2014  
<https://www.modenus.com/blog/blogtour/in-pictures-icff-2014-highlights/>

Far left: A beech stick planed square.

Large image: A length of box wood, traditionally found on the tuning pegs of a violin, planed flat on one side to sit flat on a surface.



# RULERS [Selected Works]

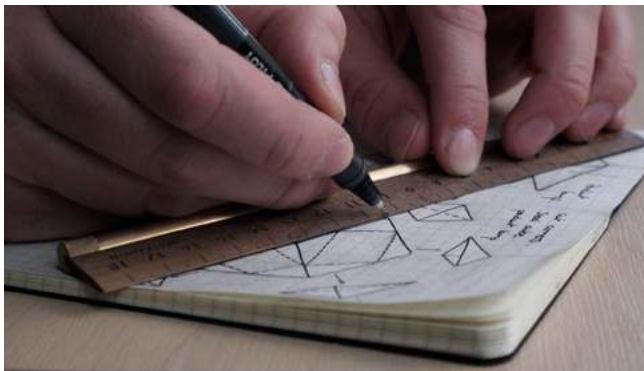
*“Keyway Ruler”*, Will Baugh.

Materials: Brass and steel or brass and walnut  
(production version beech and walnut).

The Keyway Ruler is a comment on the struggle of ‘flipping’ between metric and imperial measurement. The units are kept separate on different faces of the ruler blade to avoid confusion. The physical movement of ‘flipping’ or ‘rolling’ the ruler between the units has been developed from an investigation of existing ruler profiles. The ‘rolling’ of the ruler allows it to be removed from a page once a line has been drawn, reducing the risk of smudging.

Below from left: Brass and walnut edition  
in use / Brass and walnut edition being  
flipped rolled /Keyway ruler by Will Baugh  
on the shelves of the MOMA store in  
New York City 2016

Ruler image: Brass and Steel edition.  
*Photo credit: Will Baugh*



# RULERS [Selected Works]

*“Unbendable”*, Trevor Duncan

Materials: Steel, black engraving ink.

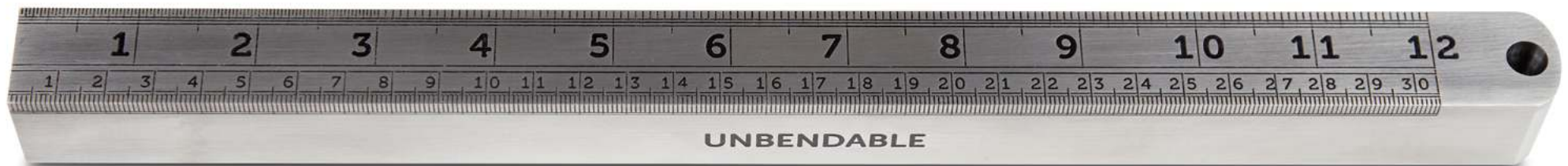
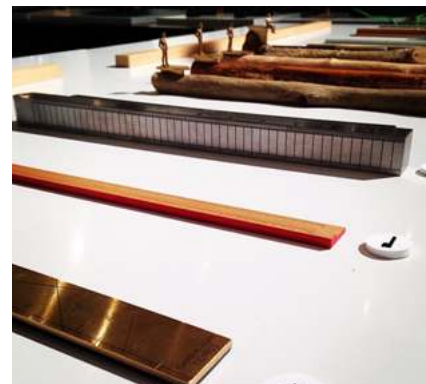
At just over 2 lb and 1” square, the 12” unbendable straightedge and rule is a substantial and precise tool, useful for checking both flatness and accurate measuring. Precision made and ground flat over its entire length to within 0.0010” it will provide years of reliable service.

Below from left: The rulers first shown at the ICFE in NYC in May 2014 / The rulers displayed at The Design Junction as part of the London Design Festival 2016.

*Photo credit: Josh South*

Ruler image: Unbendable by Trevor Duncan.

*Photo credit: Trevor Duncan*



# MONEY BOXES [Selected Works]

*“Money Boxes and Cans”*, Rickard Whittingham.  
Materials: Oak, tin cans, milk paint, powder coat.

The colour, shape and details of these money boxes and cans reference products commonly found in a workshop environment. Two of the money boxes incorporate tin cans as receptacles for the money (coins make a rewarding sound as they find a home in the cans). Once full of cash the cans and boxes can be emptied via access through the discreetly removable bases or via the loosening of the jubilee clips that secure the cans.



Main image:  
Group shot of  
cans and boxes.  
Far left: From above  
Left: Money boxes.



# MONEY BOXES [Selected Works]

*“Shrink Pot”*, Trevor Duncan.

Materials: Ceramic, polyolefin heat-shrink.

A ceramic money box, its 2 halves sealed together by the application of a colored band of plastic heat-shrink. When needed, savings can be accessed by running a blade along the central groove to remove the seal. Saving can recommence by simply adding a new band of heat-shrink.



Top row/Middle row:

Shrink Pot in use.

*Photo credit: Trevor Duncan*

Bottom row: Heat shrink bands.

*Photo credit: Trevor Duncan*

Left: Money boxes as part a curated exhibition has the ICFE 2018.

*Photo credit: Josh South*



# OFFICE [Selected Works]

**“Messenger”**, Rickard Whittingham.  
Materials: Beech and stainless steel.

The Messenger is a product placed on one’s desk to draw attention to a communicate you want to leave for co-workers, petty thieves, line managers etc. who might come calling when you aren’t there. The intention is for messages to be easily spotted amongst the usual desk top debris. It packs flat via the use of a knurled stainless steel thumb screw.

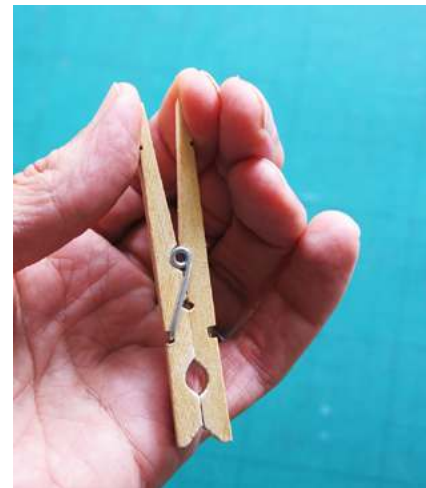
The aim of this product is to draw attention to the understanding we have of the use and mechanics of the clothes peg.

[view the initial “office work” brief presented to the designers here](#)



Left: Messenger, Full length.

Bottom row from left: Rear of base showing threaded nut insert and thumb screw / Thumb screw being tightened to fix the upright in place / Clothes Peg / Messenger, Disassembled.

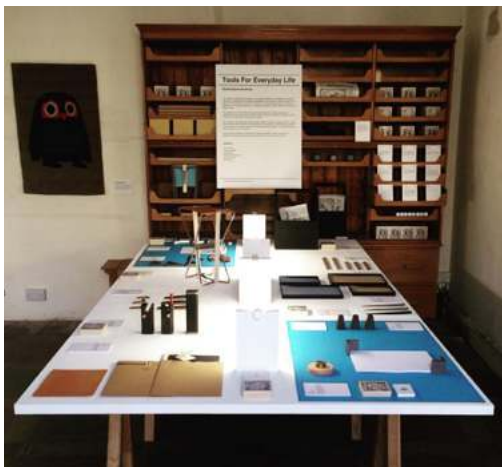


# OFFICE [Selected Works]

*“Paper Tray”*, Will Baugh.

Materials: Blackened Steel, Plywood, Cork and Oak Veneer.

Inspired by the process of die cutting, these paper trays resemble the cutting dies used to shear low strength materials such as leather, card and rubber. They are made from steel and plywood. The base of the paper tray flicks up at the corner allowing the paper to be easily removed.



Top right: A4 and A5 paper trays.  
Bottom right: Detail with paper.

Right: Curated exhibition of  
Office products at the Northern  
Design Festival 2016.

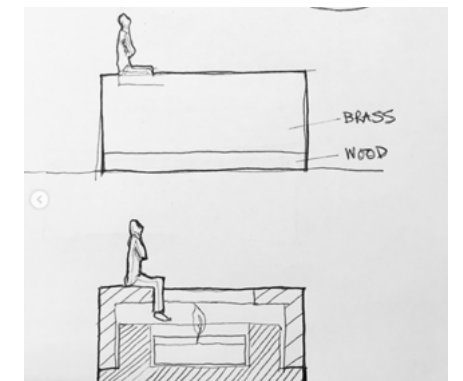
*Photo credits: Will Baugh.*

# CANDLE HOLDERS [Selected Works]

*“Fire”*, Rickard Whittingham.

Materials: Brass, Oak.

A further investigation of the material combination (timber/brass) and ornamentation found in classic hand tools. Functionally the brass cap/ferule slots on to the timber base that houses a standard tea light. There are stories about human relationships, loneliness and the joy of staring at a naked flame that could be attached to these objects. The facts are: 62mm diameter, 48mm high brass and oak tea light holders with brass people attached.



Far right, top to bottom:  
testing in the workshop / drawings.

Right, top to bottom:  
Fire\_man sitting / Fire\_man sitting &  
woman standing / Fire\_man sitting,  
woman standing and man standing.

*Photo credits: George Riding.*

Left: Curated exhibition of  
candleholders at the ICFE 2017.



# DISSEMINATION

## Exhibitions:

The project has been exhibited throughout the 2014-2019 period. A retrospective of the project taking place as part of the Great Exhibition of the North in 2018.

The project has attracted Tradeshow Access Programme (TAP) grants from the Department of International Trade (DIT) for each of its exhibitions at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair. TAP grants have totalled £26 000 for the 2014-2019 period.

## 2014

International Contemporary Furniture Fair (ICFF) (May 17-20) Javits Center, New York. USA. Selected to be part of the DIT supported British European Design Group (BEDG) Pavilion. During of New York Design Week. ICFF attendance: 31,421.

Design Junction (September 18-21) The Sorting Office, 21-23 New Oxford Street, London. part of the London Design festival. Design Junction. Attendance 25,000.

## 2015

ICFF (May 16-19) ICFF attendance: 35,000

Design Junction (September 24-27) The College, Southampton Row, London. part of the London Design festival. Design Junction. Attendance 27,000.

The Northern Design Festival (October 21-25) The Assembly House, Westgate Road, Newcastle upon Tyne. Attendance: 1670.

## 2016

ICFF (May 16-19) ICFF attendance: 35,000.

## 2017

ICFF (May 21-24) ICFF attendance: 34,000.

## 2018

ICFF (May 20-23) ICFF attendance: 36,000.

The Great Exhibition of the North (July 30 – September 9) Sport Central, Northumbria University. <https://getnorth2018.com/previous-events/tools-everyday-life/>

## 2019

ICFF (May19-22) ICFF attendance: 17,500

## 2020

ICFF (May 17-20) cancelled. A retrospective of the project was planned to run throughout New York City Design week.

“The premise of the project- treating the consumer of a product as a skilled user - has consistently struck a chord with and prompted debate amongst the visitors to the BEDG hosted pavilion at the ICFE. What has impressed me particularly with regard the project is the coherence of the product ranges as well as the profound understanding of the potential manufacturing process for each item, which takes the proposed design from the conceptual stage to the actual commercial product.”

Karin-Beate Phillips.  
Founder and director of the British European Design Group

Right: Tools for Everyday Life  
at the ICFE 2015. From the instagram  
account of Swedish designer  
Jens Fager.







Tools for Everyday Life,  
at the Great Exhibition of  
the North 2018.



## Newsprint:

Whittingham produced a newspaper (The Northern Tool) that was distributed from each of the exhibitions and design festivals where the project was shown. This newspaper acts as a device to share the aims of research and offer insights into the process and reflections on it.

The tabloid format was chosen as an accessible method of engaging a wide range of people with the content of the project.

[Issue 6 of the Northern Tool can be viewed here.](#)

It contains:

- Reflections of the project by Whittingham and the designers involved.
- An interview with Whittingham by influential design blog Core77
- A review of the project by online magazine SightUnseen.
- Stories about the development of individual products.



Above: Double page spread from the Northern Tool.

# REFERENCES

Adamson, G. (2018). *Fewer Better Things*, Bloomsbury Publishing.

Ingold, T. (2013). *Making*, Routledge.

Mari, E. (1974). *Autoprogettazione?* Reprint, Edizioni Corraini, 2017

Pye, D. (1968). *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, Reprint, Herbert Press, 2010.

Project Website: [www.toolsforeverydaylife.org](http://www.toolsforeverydaylife.org)

**“If you know how to make something, you understand everything about it. You appreciate its logic, its beauty and its meaning. And its value. And you can pass on these pleasures and benefits.”**

*Stephen Bayley*