

Crafts Council / Education

Craft Journey

Riya Patel / Curator



Riya Patel. Photo © Amandine Alessandra.

What I do

I'm the curator at The Aram Gallery and a freelance design writer. At the gallery I programme five exhibitions a year, some of which I curate myself, and others in which I invite designers to put on solo shows. The exhibitions are all to do with architecture, design or craft, although they have individual themes. It's a non-profit gallery that acts as a platform for younger designers. As a writer, I contribute news, features and interviews to magazines. I like to keep both things going side by side as it helps keep me informed and meeting new people.

Jobs in museums and galleries

There are plenty of jobs in craft, design and architecture that don't involve practising it directly. I'm a journalist and curator, but there are lots of roles in public relations, social media, event management, project management, studio support, technical support, model-making, 3D visualisation, relationship management etc too. Lots of people get into this area of work wanting to do one job, but find they are better suited or more interested in another.



Aram Gallery. Photo © Adam Scott.

Why craft?

I worked in magazine journalism just as online news was rapidly expanding.

Writing for the web demands working fast and producing articles in volume. The gallery seemed to me to provide a slower pace of research and production. It also seemed like a good way to use my knowledge, skills and the network I had grown from my previous jobs. And it presented a new challenge! Because it is such an individual job (I mostly work alone) I have a lot of freedom to pursue ideas that are interesting to me and people I want to work with. That was very appealing to me too. What I enjoy most about it is visiting designers in their studios and developing ideas that we can present together.

What I studied at school

I studied English, Maths and Physics at A-level and Design and Technology at GCSE.

I was an all-rounder and good at both arts and science subjects so I attempted to do a mix. English was always my favourite subject, and this is the one I still draw on today in terms of how to effectively use and interpret language. I never took art seriously at school, which I regret, as it would have helped me a great deal given where I have ended up. That said, not studying art didn't hold me back from studying architecture as many courses prefer technical skill. It depends where you go.



Aram Gallery. Photo © Adam Scott.

What I studied after school

I went to Cardiff University (Welsh School of Architecture). In the beginning I wanted to be an architect, and a formal university education is still the way to do that. But the experience (especially the first three years) is actually very broad. We learned about history, philosophy, economics and the environment, as well as construction and design. For me a university education was most valuable for learning to think critically and analyse things that previously I just accepted as being as they are. I trained for 5 years. In architecture, you do an undergraduate degree (3 years) then a postgraduate degree (2 years). At Cardiff, the fourth year is spent working in practice while doing some coursework. There is a final part which leads to qualification, but I haven't taken this. I decided to move into journalism and curation instead.

My career path

So I started studying architecture, and working in architects' offices as an assistant. In 2008 there was an economic slowdown and lots of building projects went on hold. That's when I decided to apply for an internship at the Architects' Journal. I knew from school and university that I had good writing skills, and wanted to see if I could still use my architecture education in a new way. That internship led to me getting a job at Icon magazine as a junior editor. I was really excited when I got that job as I knew my career would be very different from then on. At Icon I learned much more about craft and design as I had to begin writing about it straight away. In 2015, I came to work at The Aram Gallery as curator.

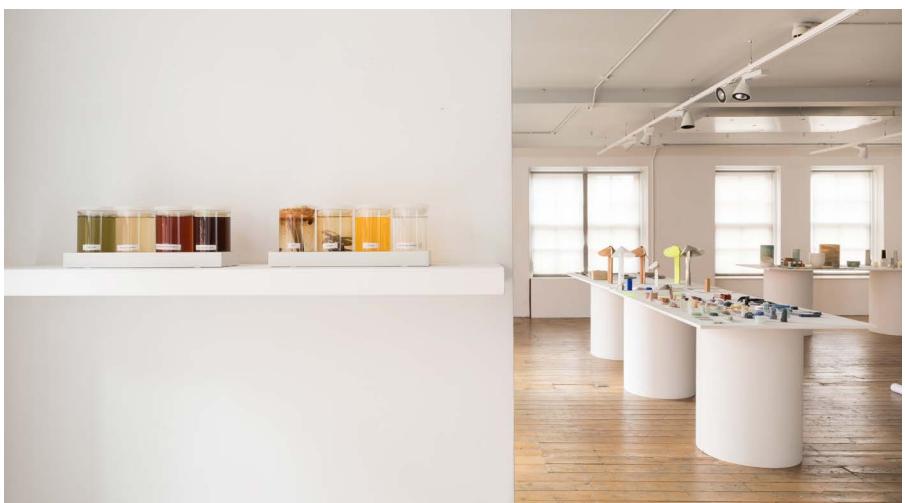
I had no prior experience of curation, but had a good network of contacts from journalism, plus spatial design and organisation skills from my university education. In swapping to journalism then curation, I've been very fortunate that certain people have seen my potential despite not having a formal education in the subject. I've been allowed to prove myself once in the door.

Important decisions

I think I was quite bold in deciding to be an architect, having none in my family and little prior experience of what it would actually be like! Looking back, making such a big decision aged 18 seems very tough. My parents weren't from an arts background but accepted that it was something I wanted to do. Possibly, they were happy that architecture is a profession and deemed to be more secure than say, art. When I took an internship at the Architects' Journal, I didn't know it would lead me to another career. I was also fortunate that I found something I really loved doing, and could use my education in a different way than becoming an architect. No-one really helped me make those choices, I just followed opportunities. My thinking about my career has become far more flexible as I've gone along.

Challenges

I suppose the biggest challenge was the economic slowdown in 2008. And realising that my career was leading somewhere different to what I'd imagined. I wasn't very happy doing architecture and it took some self-awareness to figure out what I needed to change. I took a pay cut to change career path the first time, which I could do when I was younger but would be much more difficult now. That took some adjustment and real faith that I would succeed in journalism. At the same time, having come through that has given me confidence that I wouldn't have otherwise. I certainly would not have approached the gallery and persuaded them that I could curate!



Aram Gallery. Photo © Adam Scott.

My advice to you

Be adaptable and do your own research. If you have a fixed idea of what you want to do in this sector, you are likely to be disappointed as the opportunities are so few. You really have to be prepared to research and ask people what they do and how they got there. My best moves and opportunities have come about by word of mouth so it really pays to get talking, and get lots of different work experience (if you can) so that you can find out what you like doing. Be prepared that this can be an unstable area for work. If you can be adaptable, things are a bit more secure as you are able to apply your skills to lots of different types of work. Keep a good attitude even if you aren't enjoying every aspect of the work. It's an exciting sector but there are lots of boring tasks that need doing too.

Craft Careers

Craft generates £3.4 billion for the UK economy each year, with the contribution of the wider creative industries now growing at twice the rate of the UK economy. British craft has never been so sought-after and craft skills are revolutionising industries from aerospace to architecture.

To learn more about craft careers visit:
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