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A Decolonised Framework for Couture Jewellery: Craft Authority, Symbolic Materiality, Cultural Relevance and Emotional Durability.

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Abstract
Contemporary luxury discourse is predominantly shaped by market-centred frameworks that privilege brand authority, scarcity, price, and controlled access. Although these dimensions help explain the commercial organisation of luxury, they provide an incomplete account of creative practices in which value is generated through cultural memory, embodied skill, material symbolism, ritual use, and intergenerational knowledge. This paper develops a decolonised luxury framework for the evaluation of couture jewellery. Drawing on postcolonial critique, theories of distinction and conspicuous consumption, material-culture scholarship, and craft theory, it examines how historically produced hierarchies have separated art from craft, design from making, and market-recognised prestige from culturally situated forms of worth (Bourdieu, 1984; Said, 1978; Veblen, 1899). Using a conceptual and interpretive methodology, the paper synthesises these perspectives into a four-dimensional evaluative framework: (1) craft authority, (2) symbolic materiality, (3) cultural and ritual relevance, and (4) emotional durability. The framework is applied ly to a proposed couture jewellery collection, "Roots of Heritage," whose lotus, peacock, and floral-geometric motifs are translated through hand-oriented filigree, enamel, stone-setting, and pearl detailing. The design is treated as a conceptual case illustration rather than empirical evidence. The paper further proposes pedagogical criteria that recognise maker knowledge, provenance, cultural interpretation, material responsibility, and narrative coherence alongside formal and technical quality. It argues that decolonising luxury does not require rejecting markets, innovation, or contemporary design; rather, it requires pluralising the criteria through which value is produced, interpreted, taught, and assessed. The framework offers a structured basis for critical evaluation of couture, heritage-based, and craft-led jewellery practices.

Keywords: decolonised luxury; couture jewellery; craft value; cultural design theory; postcolonial design; symbolic materiality; jewellery pedagogy; craft epistemology.

1. Introduction

Luxury is often described through a recognisable set of market signals: elevated price, restricted availability, prestigious branding, exceptional materials, and symbolic distance from ordinary consumption. These signals are important to the commercial operation of luxury, but they do not exhaust the ways in which objects acquire value. In many craft-based contexts, an object may be valued because it carries the memory of a place, embodies specialised knowledge, marks a life-cycle event, expresses a relationship, or materialises a community's aesthetic and ethical commitments. Jewellery makes this tension especially visible because it operates simultaneously as adornment, material possession, social sign, ritual object, and intimate carrier of memory.

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The dominant market vocabulary can make luxury appear to reside primarily in the brand or the price attached to an object. Veblen's (1899) account of conspicuous consumption explains how expenditure can function as a public display of status, while Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of distinction demonstrates that taste and cultural legitimacy are socially structured. These approaches remain valuable for understanding luxury consumption. Yet, when used as the only evaluative lenses, they risk overlooking forms of worth that are not reducible to conspicuous display, institutional recognition, or purchasing power.

This limitation is particularly consequential for craft and jewellery. Skilled making is frequently celebrated as an aesthetic effect while the knowledge, labour, and authority of makers remain less visible. Adamson (2013) argues that the modern category of craft was historically shaped in relation to industrial production, while Dormer (1997) foregrounds the continuing significance of handicraft in technologically organised design cultures. Risatti (2007) similarly treats craft as a distinctive mode of making in which material, function, and human expression are interrelated. These perspectives support a reconsideration of jewellery value beyond the finished object's visual appearance.

The present paper asks: How can luxury be conceptually redefined to recognise culturally situated craft knowledge in couture jewellery? What dimensions can be used to evaluate such jewellery without simply reproducing brand- and price-led hierarchies? And how might design education assess craft-led luxury in ways that acknowledge maker authority, cultural meaning, and material responsibility?

The paper makes three contributions. First, it reframes luxury as a plural and relational construct rather than a fixed hierarchy of market prestige. Second, it proposes a four-dimensional evaluative framework for couture jewellery. Third, it translates the framework into design pedagogy and an jewellery concept titled "Roots of Heritage." The proposal is conceptual: it offers a structured analytical lens for subsequent empirical, historical, and practice-based research, rather than claiming that the framework has already been validated.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Luxury, status and the social organisation of taste

Veblen's (1899) concept of conspicuous consumption identifies the display of wealth as a social practice through which status is communicated. In luxury markets, price and scarcity can therefore function not only as economic attributes but also as signs that distinguish owners from non-owners. Bourdieu (1984) extends this analysis by showing how taste is shaped by social position, cultural capital, and systems of classification. What is recognised as refined, exclusive, or legitimate is not simply an individual preference; it is also produced within fields of social power.

For jewellery evaluation, these theories explain why brand prestige, rarity, and high-value materials can become dominant indicators of luxury. However, they also invite a critical question: whose taste becomes authoritative, and which forms of making are recognised as legitimate? A decolonised approach does not deny the social reality of prestige. It questions the assumption that prestige is the universal or sufficient measure of value.

2.2 Postcolonial critique and cultural representation

Said's (1978) critique of Orientalism demonstrates how representations of non-Western cultures have historically been organised through unequal relations of knowledge and power. Although his

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analysis is not a theory of jewellery design, it provides a critical lens for examining how cultural forms are selected, described, aestheticised, and circulated. In design contexts, motifs and techniques may be detached from their histories and reframed as exotic surface decoration, while the communities and makers associated with them are rendered invisible.

A decolonised jewellery practice therefore requires more than the inclusion of culturally recognisable motifs. It requires attention to authorship, attribution, context, interpretation, and the distribution of value. Cultural reference should not be treated as a decorative resource available without responsibility. Designers must distinguish respectful engagement from extraction, acknowledge the provenance of motifs and techniques where known, and avoid presenting a diverse tradition as a single, timeless or homogeneous style.

2.3 Craft knowledge and the status of making

Craft scholarship challenges the separation of intellectual conception from manual execution. Dormer (1997) examines the status and future of craft in a world in which technology strongly shapes design and aesthetics. Risatti (2007) analyses the relationship between craft, function, and aesthetic expression, while Adamson (2013) historicises the category of craft as one formed in dialogue with industrial modernity. Taken together, these works support an understanding of craft as knowledge-bearing practice rather than merely a technique used to produce an attractive object.

In couture jewellery, this distinction is crucial. Filigree, enamelling, stone setting, engraving, granulation, and hand-finishing are not interchangeable visual effects. Each involves decisions about material behaviour, sequence, tolerances, tools, and skilled judgement. A design evaluation that considers only the final appearance may overlook the intelligence embedded in the making process. Craft authority, as used in this paper, refers to the recognised knowledge, agency, and contribution of makers throughout conception, prototyping, fabrication, and finishing.

2.4 Material culture and the biography of objects

Appadurai (1986) argues that commodities should be understood through the social and cultural processes by which value is produced and exchanged. Objects move through different contexts and may acquire changing meanings as they circulate. This approach is useful for jewellery because an ornament can move from workshop to marketplace, from ceremonial use to family inheritance, and from personal possession to museum or archival display. Its meaning is not exhausted by its material composition or initial price.

The concept of symbolic materiality developed here refers to the meanings attached to materials through cultural practice, memory, sensory experience, and social use. Gold, pearls, coloured stones, and other materials do not carry one universal meaning in every context. Their significance must be interpreted in relation to particular histories and communities. Consequently, material symbolism should be documented and contextualised rather than asserted as an unchanging cultural fact.

3. Research Gap, Aim and Questions

The literature considered above offers substantial accounts of status consumption, cultural representation, craft, and the social life of objects. However, these perspectives are not always integrated into a practical evaluative model for couture jewellery. Market-oriented luxury measures tend to foreground brand equity, price, rarity, and controlled distribution. Craft-oriented accounts foreground skill and making, while material-culture approaches emphasise circulation and

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meaning. A framework is needed to bring these dimensions into a coherent design-evaluation structure without collapsing their differences.

The aim is to develop a conceptual framework for evaluating couture jewellery through culturally grounded and craft-centred dimensions of luxury.

The study is guided by three research questions:

- RQ1. How can luxury be reconceptualised beyond brand authority, scarcity, and price-based exclusivity?
- RQ2. Which dimensions can evaluate craft-led couture jewellery while recognising cultural meaning and maker knowledge?
- RQ3. How can these dimensions inform studio practice, critique, and assessment in jewellery and design education?

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

This study adopts a conceptual and interpretive research design. It synthesises selected scholarship from postcolonial theory, sociology of taste, craft studies, and material-culture research to construct an analytical framework. The method is theory-led rather than empirical: the paper does not collect primary data from consumers, artisans, educators, or industry representatives, and it does not test causal relationships.

4.2 Analytical procedure

The analysis proceeded through four interpretive stages. First, key concepts relevant to luxury, status, cultural representation, craft, and material meaning were identified in the core literature. Second, overlapping and distinct value claims were compared to identify dimensions that could be translated into jewellery evaluation. Third, these dimensions were organised into a four-part framework. Fourth, the framework was applied ly to a proposed couture jewellery collection to demonstrate how it may guide design decisions and educational assessment.

4.3 Scope and limitations

The framework is a conceptual proposition and should be treated as an initial analytical model. It has not been validated through expert review, artisan interviews, consumer studies, comparative case analysis, or psychometric testing. Its application to the “Roots of Heritage” design is and does not establish the authenticity of any specific regional tradition. Future research should involve relevant makers and cultural knowledge holders, document provenance, and test the framework across different jewellery contexts.

5. Proposed Decolonised Luxury Framework

The framework proposes four mutually informing dimensions. They are not intended as a universal scoring formula or a replacement for all commercial criteria. Rather, they provide an expanded basis for interpretation and evaluation. The dimensions can be considered separately, but the value of a jewellery work emerges through their interaction.

Dimension	Analytical meaning	Indicative evaluation questions
1. Craft authority	Recognition of maker knowledge, skill, agency, and contribution across the design	Are makers credited? Is skilled judgement visible? Are techniques appropriately

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	and production process.	understood and represented?
2. Symbolic materiality	Interpretation of material choices through cultural context, sensory qualities, memory, provenance, and responsible sourcing.	Why are these materials selected? Are meanings contextualised? Is provenance or sourcing information available?
3. Cultural and ritual relevance	Relationship between form, motif, use, memory, and the cultural contexts from which references are drawn.	Are cultural references researched and attributed? Is the design contextually respectful rather than merely decorative?
4. Emotional durability	Capacity of the object to sustain attachment, care, repair, transmission, and meaning over time.	Can the object be maintained or repaired? Does it support personal or intergenerational meaning?

5.1 Craft authority

Craft authority shifts attention from the finished object alone to the knowledge and agency involved in making it. It includes technical competence, material understanding, process innovation, and the recognition of makers as contributors rather than invisible service providers. In a couture jewellery project, evaluation should record who developed the design, who adapted it for fabrication, who executed specialised techniques, and how decisions were negotiated. This dimension draws on craft scholarship that treats skilled making as a substantive mode of knowledge (Adamson, 2013; Dormer, 1997; Risatti, 2007).

5.2 Symbolic materiality

Symbolic materiality evaluates how materials contribute to the object's meaning beyond market price or visual brilliance. It considers the cultural associations attributed to materials, their tactile and visual properties, their provenance, and the ethics of their acquisition and use. Appadurai's (1986) account of the social life of commodities suggests that value changes through social relations and circulation. A responsible evaluation therefore avoids assigning fixed meanings to stones or metals without contextual evidence. It asks designers to explain why a material is used and what histories or relationships its use invokes.

5.3 Cultural and ritual relevance

This dimension assesses the relationship between jewellery form and the social, ceremonial, or narrative contexts with which it is associated. Relevance is not measured by the number of traditional motifs included. It depends on the depth and accuracy of research, the quality of attribution, and the designer's ability to interpret cultural references without flattening their complexity. Postcolonial critique is useful here because it draws attention to the power involved in representing cultures and producing authoritative descriptions of them (Said, 1978).

5.4 Emotional durability

Emotional durability concerns the capacity of an object to remain meaningful through use, care, repair, adaptation, and transmission. It differs from physical durability, although the two may reinforce one another. A technically robust object may still have little personal meaning;

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conversely, an emotionally significant object may require careful repair to remain usable. This dimension encourages designers to consider comfort, maintenance, repairability, adaptability, and the potential for heirloom narratives. It also broadens luxury from short-term display toward sustained relationships between people and objects.

6. Application: "Roots of Heritage" Couture Jewellery

To demonstrate the proposed framework, the paper uses "Roots of Heritage" as an couture jewellery concept. The design language combines a central lotus-inspired composition, paired peacock-like curves, leaf forms, floral geometry, and pearl drops. The proposed material palette includes gold-toned metal, ruby-coloured focal stones, green enamel, clear stones, and pearls. The techniques represented in the concept include filigree-inspired metalwork, enamel detailing, stone setting, and assembly of suspended elements. These are design intentions, not claims that a specific artisan lineage or regional tradition has been authentically reproduced.

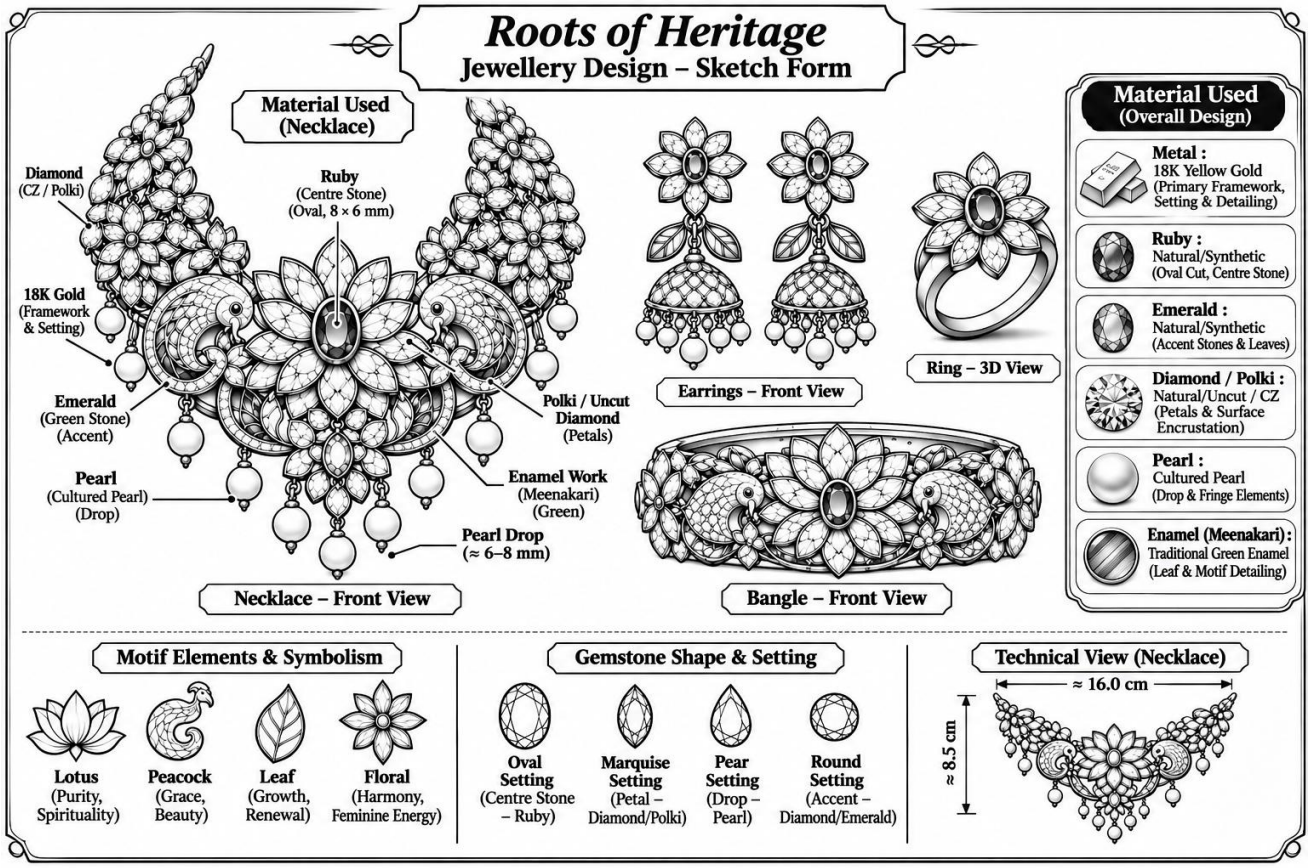


Figure 1. "Roots of Heritage": conceptual black-and-white jewellery sketch showing necklace, earrings, ring, bangle, motif elements, gemstone settings, and an indicative technical view.

The necklace is organised around a central floral-lotus form, with symmetrical side elements and suspended pearl-like drops. The earrings repeat the floral vocabulary in a more compact vertical arrangement. The ring translates the central motif into a single focal setting, while the bangle carries the pattern across a continuous band. This coordinated set demonstrates how a shared visual grammar can create collection coherence without requiring every piece to repeat the same composition.

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6.1 Mapping the design to the four dimensions

Framework dimension	Application to the design
Craft authority	The design should be developed with the participation of skilled jewellery makers. Process documentation should identify the contribution of metalworkers, enamel specialists, stone setters, and finishers. The sketch is a starting point; fabrication feasibility and craft decisions must be negotiated with makers.
Symbolic materiality	The proposed ruby, emerald-green enamel, pearls, clear stones, and gold-toned metal form a symbolic palette. Their meanings must be explained as project-specific design intentions and checked against the relevant cultural context; they should not be presented as universal meanings.
Cultural and ritual relevance	Lotus and peacock references are used as interpretive motifs. Before production or publication, the designer should identify the specific sources of reference, distinguish pan-Indian visual associations from region-specific practices, and consult relevant practitioners where the work claims a living cultural connection.
Emotional durability	The set is conceived as a coordinated heirloom-oriented collection. Design development should address secure settings, comfortable weight distribution, repairable joins, replaceable components where feasible, and care instructions that support long-term use.

7. Implications for Jewellery and Design Pedagogy

A decolonised approach to jewellery education requires changes not only in the examples presented to students but also in the criteria used to assess design quality. If students are evaluated predominantly on novelty, visual polish, commercial appeal, and technical finish, they may learn to treat cultural research and craft knowledge as secondary. The proposed framework suggests a more plural assessment model in which process, context, authorship, and long-term value are visible components of design judgement.

7.1 Proposed assessment criteria

Assessment area	Indicative evidence
Research and cultural contextualisation	Quality of source research; specificity of cultural references; accuracy of attribution;

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	evidence of consultation where appropriate.
Maker engagement and process knowledge	Documentation of making stages; recognition of specialist contributions; feasibility of construction; reflection on tacit and embodied knowledge.
Material interpretation and responsibility	Rationale for material selection; provenance transparency where available; consideration of sourcing, waste, repair, and material life-cycle.
Design coherence and technical resolution	Relationship between concept and form; wearability; structural integrity; comfort; quality of setting, finishing, and assembly.
Narrative and emotional durability	Clarity of the object's narrative; potential for care and repair; relevance to users; capacity to sustain meaning beyond trend cycles.

These criteria are intended to complement, not displace, technical and aesthetic assessment. A student should still demonstrate proportion, composition, ergonomics, structural soundness, and material competence. The difference is that these qualities are evaluated alongside contextual responsibility and craft knowledge. Assessment should also avoid treating any single cultural tradition as internally uniform or requiring students to reproduce heritage forms as proof of cultural authenticity.

7.2 Studio-based learning strategies

- Process-led documentation: require annotated sketches, prototypes, material tests, and records of design decisions.
- Maker dialogue: include structured conversations or collaborative sessions with practising craftspeople, with appropriate acknowledgement and compensation.
- Contextual research: ask students to identify the origin and use of motifs, distinguish documented history from contemporary interpretation, and cite credible sources.
- Critical critique: discuss who is credited, whose labour is visible, which values are prioritised, and how the object may circulate.
- Reflective evaluation: ask students to explain how their design addresses craft authority, symbolic materiality, cultural relevance, and emotional durability.

8. Discussion

The proposed framework broadens luxury by treating it as a field of negotiated values rather than a single market category. It retains the explanatory relevance of status and distinction while resisting their elevation into universal standards. Veblen (1899) and Bourdieu (1984) help explain how luxury becomes socially legible through expenditure and taste; postcolonial critique asks how the authority to define legitimate taste and cultural value is historically distributed (Said, 1978). Craft theory and material-culture scholarship then provide resources for recognising forms of value that emerge through skilled production, material relations, and object biographies (Adamson, 2013; Appadurai, 1986; Dormer, 1997; Risatti, 2007).

The four dimensions are interdependent. Craft authority without cultural accountability may celebrate skill while ignoring the histories from which a design borrows. Cultural relevance without

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maker recognition may reproduce the very invisibility that decolonial approaches seek to challenge. Symbolic materiality without provenance or contextual explanation can reduce cultural meaning to a marketing claim. Emotional durability without attention to construction and repair may remain aspirational. The framework therefore works best as an integrated set of questions rather than a checklist in which one strong dimension compensates automatically for weaknesses in another.

The "Roots of Heritage" illustration also demonstrates a methodological caution. A design may use recognisable cultural motifs and craft techniques, but visual resemblance alone cannot establish cultural authenticity, community endorsement, or ethical collaboration. Those claims require contextual research and, where relevant, engagement with knowledge holders and practitioners. The framework thus treats cultural situatedness as a responsibility and process, not a stylistic label.

The model also has implications for the commercial field. Brands and independent designers may use craft narratives to differentiate products, but the ethical quality of such narratives depends on transparency about authorship, labour, sourcing, and cultural references. A decolonised luxury position should not become a new premium label that merely monetises heritage. Its credibility depends on whether value and recognition are shared more fairly across the design and production chain.

9. Theoretical and Practical Contributions

The paper contributes theoretically by integrating four strands of scholarship into a jewellery-specific framework. It connects status and distinction to postcolonial questions of representation, then places craft knowledge and material biographies at the centre of luxury evaluation. Its practical contribution is a set of design and assessment questions that can be used in studio briefs, collection development, curatorial interpretation, and critical review. The framework is deliberately adaptable: researchers may refine the dimensions for different regions, materials, jewellery traditions, and institutional settings.

The paper does not claim a new universal definition of luxury. Rather, it argues for evaluative pluralism: luxury should be assessed through multiple, context-sensitive forms of value, including but not limited to market prestige. This approach makes room for culturally grounded and craft-led practices without assuming that all heritage-based objects are automatically ethical, sustainable, or superior.

10. Limitations and Future Research

The principal limitation is the conceptual nature of the study. The framework has not been empirically tested, and the design has not been fabricated or evaluated by jewellery makers, users, or cultural practitioners. The literature base is selective and primarily theoretical; it should be expanded through region-specific scholarship and practice-based research. Future studies could conduct expert interviews with artisans and designers, comparative case studies of couture jewellery collections, participatory design projects, and student-assessment trials. Such work could examine whether the four dimensions are sufficiently distinct, whether additional dimensions are required, and how the framework can be operationalised without reducing complex cultural values to simplistic numerical scores.

Further research should also investigate how the framework addresses sustainability, labour conditions, intellectual and cultural property, repair economies, and the circulation of motifs through global markets. These questions are especially important where jewellery uses culturally

significant forms or techniques that may be appropriated, commercialised, or detached from their communities of origin.

11. Conclusion

This paper has proposed a decolonised luxury framework for evaluating couture jewellery through craft authority, symbolic materiality, cultural and ritual relevance, and emotional durability. By drawing on postcolonial theory, sociology of taste, craft studies, and material-culture scholarship, it has shown why price, scarcity, and brand authority are insufficient as exclusive measures of luxury. The proposed dimensions recognise that jewellery can derive value from skilled making, contextual material meanings, cultural relationships, and the capacity to sustain attachment over time.

The "Roots of Heritage" concept translates the framework into a coherent jewellery collection while emphasising the need for responsible cultural research, maker recognition, and technically informed design development. For education, the framework offers alternative assessment criteria that place process, authorship, context, and durability alongside aesthetic and technical achievement. Ultimately, decolonising luxury is not simply a matter of replacing one style with another. It is a critical reorganisation of how value is defined, whose knowledge is recognised, and how creative practices are evaluated.

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