

CRAFTING ORDER FROM CHAOS

FURNITURE & CABINETMAKING TALKS TO
CHRIS O'DELL, FOUNDER AND HEAD OF DESIGN
AT WOODCHIP WERKS IN TORONTO, CANADA

How did you first get interested in furniture making?

I've always been interested in the design of things – how things are put together and why. I grew up learning by taking broken things apart, fixing them and putting them back together. To this day, I love learning and working with my hands. Creating has always been a part of my life.

How did you train?

'YouTube University'. It sounds silly, but a lot of my design, joinery, build process and detail work, as well as tool selection and set-up, all came from a constant need to know more and learn. Online, community-style learning is very powerful and helped me at every step. It still helps.

What was the first project you completed?

When I first started woodworking I had no access to milling machinery, so plywood furniture design was my focus. My first piece was the Wally – a bedside table made from Baltic birch with hand tools and a circular saw. It included half lap and mitre joinery.

What made you decide to set up your own furniture business?

Years ago when it was time to upgrade my furniture I decided, as a project, I would make my own. After friends and family kept purchasing the pieces I made for myself, I figured it was time to design and make for others.

How did you go about it?

I started in my garage like most of us. But when I decided to do this full time I needed more machinery and space to build. I found a shared workshop that I could rent a worktable in. I got to use all the big milling and finishing machines without having to buy them. It was a really good way to get started without spending a fortune. From there, I built a website and social media presence and got to work.

What inspires you and where do you get your ideas from?

Risk takers. People who will give an idea a shot, knowing it's not common or is out of their comfort zone. Seeing people create something amazing that requires risk-taking is so inspiring to me.

My design ideas come from the way I look at the world. When I'm sitting in a doctor's office, I'm trying to see what kind of joinery the reception desk has. I'm always paying very close attention to all the pieces and parts that the world and life are made of.





Is there an ethos or a guiding principle behind your style?

I would say purposeful or concerted design. I want to make sure every angle, material choice, joinery decision, finish selection, all the lines and feelings my work includes is deliberate. My work, commissioned work in particular, is thoughtful. I want people to take note of the things I took note of about their personality or their home and feel a kinship to the piece or pieces.

Tell us about how you work – what type of tools do you like to use?

I would say I'm a bit different than most. Very rarely will I plan or draw out design steps to refer to. I mainly go on feeling. I build in a layer cake kind of way. I think through the order of things and usually start with whatever task is going to be the most fun at the moment. I really enjoy the negentropy from the milling process. Turning rough disorder into smooth and shaped order is really rewarding. The tools I think are most important are measurement tools – rules and slides. They are key to every project, big or small.

Are there any you avoid?

Hand planes. I feel like the precision of the detail I shoot for can always be better accomplished using tools that offer more accuracy.

Tell us about your workshop – what is the set-up, how long have you been there and will you be staying?

My shop is about 1,200sq ft and was just a storage unit when I found it. I spent the first two months building it out, from the electrical to the dust collection, with full 8 x 10ft cleat walls. Eighty percent of my tools are hanging on a cleat wall behind

my worktop. Drawers and cupboards are where tools go to die. Cleat walls are a way to organise yourself that also allows your tool collection to grow and move with whatever project you're working on or whatever task is at hand. Because the projects I take on can vary in scale, that kind of flexibility is vital. Besides my SawStop [tablesaw], all my milling machines are on castors.

How does your design process work?

It typically starts with a pencil and paper, but some ideas have been birthed on pizza boxes and napkins. If the work is a commission, I always want to see the space it will live in and meet the client I'm building it for. I can learn a lot about a person's taste and overall spatial mood from a quick visit. Plus, I really like meeting new people and hearing their stories. Once I have a better understanding of the space and the person, I'll either create a detailed 3D digital rendering or head straight to the shop to begin creation.

Which woods do you most like working with?

I really love walnut. The richness of the grain and colours lend themselves perfectly to fine furniture for any space. It also smells great being cut in the shop.

Do you work with other materials as well?

I work with everything from high density foam to metal, acrylic, glass and many more. For me, wood is the most easily manipulated while still being incredibly strong and long lasting. I find wood to be the most satisfying as it has, to me, the most use cases. You can make a bed, a bathtub and a toothbrush from the same tree.





What sort of finishes do you prefer?

I find Danish oil to be the finish I turn to most often. It has fantastic durability while maintaining a natural look and feel. For shop furniture and storage I use a paste wax. It's very durable and quite inexpensive, plus it's great for slideless drawers.

What is your favourite project you have worked on?

Copperfield is a hand-carved, slated partition wall made from walnut. The 20 nine-foot slates each sit almost an inch apart, creating a beautiful but also useful partition. This piece was my favourite because it really forced me into a high density learning headspace. Functional art was a daunting target for me. Getting to experiment and flex my creativity with this one was really motivating. It was hands down the most detailed and time-consuming piece I've ever done.

What is the most challenging project you have worked on?

I would say Crescendo, the wall-mounted baby grand piano bar. Woodworking is an additive process: we make parts and add them together to make a whole. Crescendo, however, was more reminiscent of sculpting – I needed to remove material and parts without breaking or ruining the piece. And in this case, removing all of the components including the 140-year-old finish without damaging the veneer was very challenging. Although the most challenging, it was a great experience and I learned a lot about how I look at our craft fundamentally.

I also learned a lot about my own capabilities and how far I can push them from that project. Most of all, it was humbling. The keyboard alone had over 800 separate handmade parts. I can't even imagine how craftsmen in 1885 were able to build a piece like that without modern electric tools. It was so fulfilling to discover that kind of craftsmanship in a hands-on way. Every part of that project, from finding the piano and getting it to

my shop, through all the deconstruction, design, to the simple order of operation, was out of my comfort zone. I learned and grew with each step.

Would you rather work with challenging found materials or with more simple wood and boards?

It really depends on the desired outcome. I will always try to use reclaimed material or repurpose something if I can. Every time. However, in certain cases, like if I need to be sure something can handle the weight of a person or people, using stock, hand-chosen boards gives me the confidence of knowing what I am working with.

Do you prefer working commissioned work or your own collection?

I would say commission work because I love to meet people. Getting to create a solution that is unique every time is the best way to grow as an artist. It also helps me expand my problem-solving skills. This is the foundation of my work. It's also why I've never done the same piece twice. I would say 95% of my work is commission-based. Since I started Woodchip four years ago, I haven't really had any down time. I don't see it changing any time soon, however I do love the chances I get to just make and design for the sake of it.

How do you go about working on commissions?

It really depends on the client. I would say most people aren't sure what they want so a full-time, commission-based maker is as much a consultant as they are a designer or builder. Walking clients through the decision-making process – and the cost – of custom work is mandatory. Some clients want the surprise of something conjured up in my mind based on their few requirements. In other cases, clients have designed and imagined

their dream piece of furniture or decor. My job is always to bring the design into reality based on physics and tolerances of the piece and where it will live. I work heavily with the client to keep their dream alive while filling in any detail or augmentation that I would know but a client might not.

Do you draw a boundary between furniture and art?

Furniture is utility in physical form. It can be beautiful but it has to be useful. A dining tabletop stored standing up in a basement isn't furniture to me. Art, on the other hand, really only has one defining characteristic: thought. The amount of time I think about something or the feeling I experience in and around something will determine whether I think it is art or not. Its purpose is to lead your mind down a path. The path is your own, but the point is to pay attention to the journey. A piece of furniture or decor can be art if it provokes you to stop and look for a while, if it breeds contemplation, if it makes you feel. For me, art is a mirror for your mind and soul, it helps you look inward. Furniture can be art, but it must have physical function.

What are you working on now and next?

Another piano deconstruction, actually. A person who came across the article about Crescendo sought me out to transform their grandmother's heirloom, but broken, piano into something new. We decided to repurpose the piece to create a dining table that she can enjoy and use more regularly. Despite not having had any real experience with pianos before Crescendo, I've really enjoyed tackling the challenges it has brought my way. Next up, I will be settling a bet I have with myself. I firmly believe that the way shop furniture is built by a lot of us can be super useful and beautifully elegant, and contend for spots in our homes. As I mentioned, my shop is built on a French cleat system. This year, I

will be incorporating this concept into fine furniture making for the home. I've done a few successful projects this way and want to continue the trend.

Where do you see your work going in the future?

I want as many people as possible to enjoy my work. I'd love to try creating public art installations – bigger projects in more public locations – and to continue to create both furniture and art for everyone.

Have the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown affected your business?

Absolutely. At first, many people were mandated to work from home and needed to update their space accordingly. I couldn't keep up with all the extra work. This past year, however, was much slower. And while it was a trying time for most small businesses, it did afford me the time to work on personal, passion projects like Crescendo, projects that allow me to make for the sake of making, which I'm thankful for. I think the long-term impacts of Covid-19 will apply to the kind of projects people enquire about. Working from home doesn't look like it's going away. People are seriously contending with the need to add a room or office space to their home that was never considered before. This makes for some exciting furniture and spatial design times ahead.

What do you do when you're not working?

Any and all things active. Sports and being outdoors are key for me. Also chasing around my parrot, Aldo. I've had him for almost 10 years. I love birds.

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