

“Don’t make furniture.... Invent it”



This is the motto of Marc Fish of Robinson House Studio who takes some time out to talk to Vanessa Austin Locke about inspiration, aspiration and aesthetics

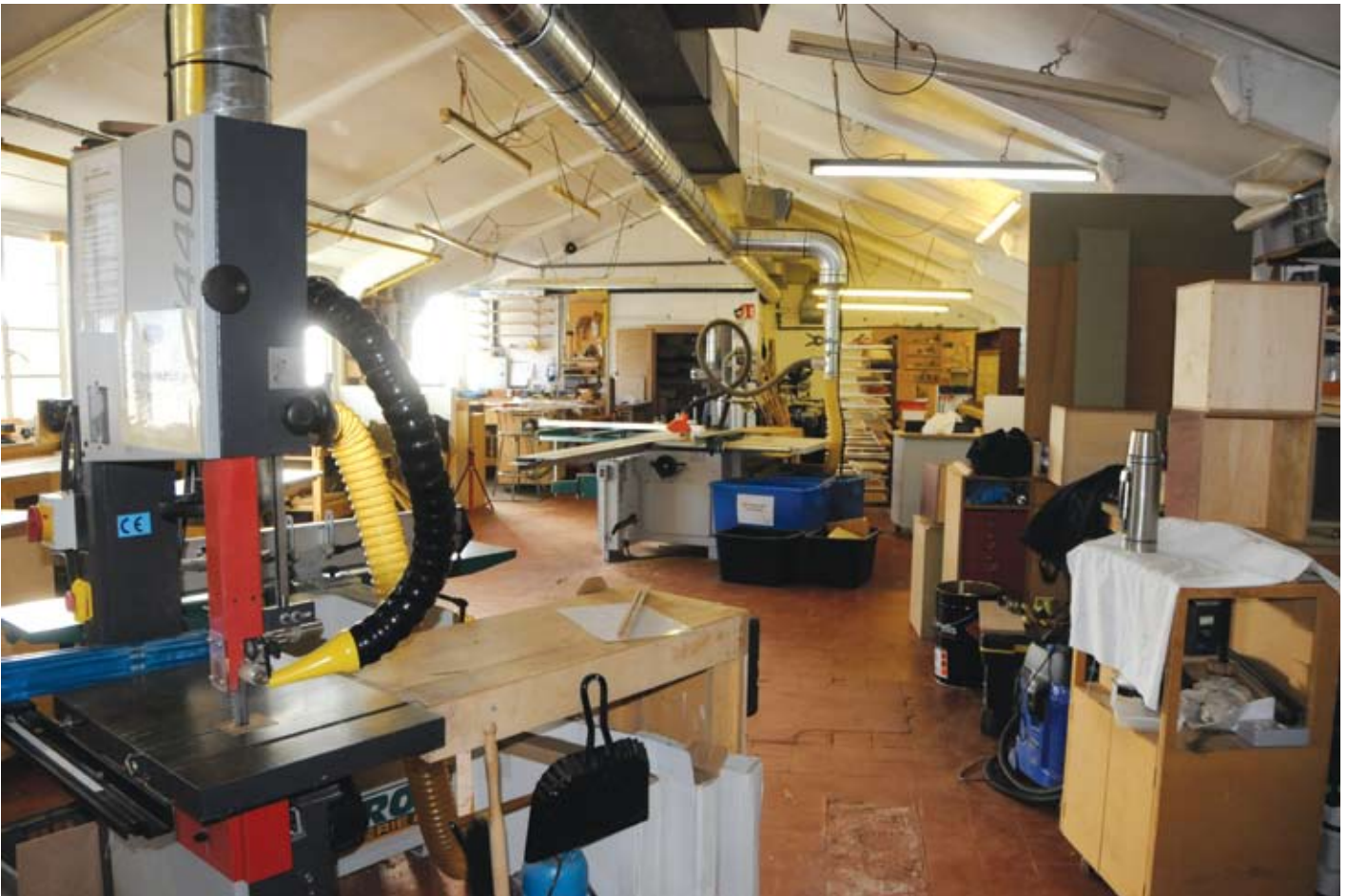
Marc Fish's workshop and school is situated in the dockland of Newhaven, East Sussex, overlooking the estuary of the river Ouse. It's a busy, industrial area tempered by the sea and surrounding countryside, which gives it a gentle charm set against the heavy machinery and boat yards. Marc's not one for the rustic arts and crafts countryside, preferring instead the grind of industry, cities and urban living.

Robinson House Studio moved into its new premises in July having been driven out of its old home by the controversial incinerator that's taken up residence in the harbor town of Newhaven. The building had been uninhabited for two years and was derelict. Fifty years ago it was where the school dinners for the children of Sussex were made and shipped out from. Now it's a warm and lively studio, school and workshop with a gallery set to open next year.

The Workshop

Marc's terribly proud of his metal-working area which gives him, his colleagues and students the ability to turn their own work and not rely on others. The metal working lathe will also do wood turning to a much finer degree of accuracy and the milling machine allows them to cut into the metal rather than just turn it. When we were there they were turning aluminum handles for a workbench.

As for the workshop, it's very clean and tidy and there are strict rules about cleaning up. Sometimes there are up to ten people in the workshop so it's important that everything is kept spic and span. As far as machinery goes there's a bandsaw, a planner thicknesser, a tablesaw, a dust extractor, a crosscut saw, a vacuum bag and a spindle moulder, which apparently scares most people but Marc likes it. Everyone's got their own router table and there are eight resident, self-employed woodworkers



who often collaborate with one another and Marc is able to sub work out to them when necessary. It's great for his students to see a real working environment and the whole process from client through to making and then delivery.

The School

We arrived just after a visit from Richard Williams and James Ryan who were visiting Marc because one of his students, Chris Funnell, is up for a Guild Mark (see *News & Events*). This is, of course, wonderful for Chris but is also an accolade to Marc, his mentor. So what of the school and Marc's approach to teaching?

The Wendell Castle quote written up in the workshop sums it up rather well: "If you're not making mistakes, you're not making anything." The 12 week course is an introduction to basic techniques and practices and covers hand tools, glues, abrasives, machinery, health and safety, hand power tools, joints, templates, drawing, cutting lists, ordering timber, timber study, veneering, laminating, curves, power carving and finishing. It's essentially a cabinet apprenticeship squeezed into a very short period of time and students will design and complete a project of their own by the end of the course.

The follow-on course takes a big jump to a much higher level and covers own project work, CAD (computer aided design), design history, setting up a workshop, metalworking, exhibiting, clients, stationary, websites, photography, portfolios and marketing. 40 weeks in duration, this is where the real

challenges begin. "It's not always easy to say to a student 'we know you can do all these traditional things but now we want you to do something that's really hard and you might fail on that but if you don't try you won't get anywhere.' We want them to try and push the boundaries a little bit. We don't want to be putting out

Once a school dinner factory, Robinson House Studio is now a busy school and workshop

The workshop is situated on Newhaven's Dockland





Machinery includes a bandsaw, a planner thicknesser, a tablesaw, a dust extractor, a crosscut saw, a vacuum bag and a spindle moulder



In house metal working is a luxury provided by this metal working lathe

- replica arts and crafts furniture." These courses are different to the ones you get in colleges, which are essentially starter courses. Marc's courses are a big commitment for those who really want to design and make beautiful furniture to a

level of excellence. Students are tutored by Marc exclusively with the exception of visiting lecturers who give specialist seminars on subjects such as sketching and CAD. While he teaches, Marc will generally be working on some exciting,

commissioned project so the students get to see the entire process from conception to completion.

Inspiration

When asked about his inspirations Marc waxes lyrical. "Inspiration is all around you. You don't have to go far to find it. It's on a lamp post, it's a little bit of industrial design, it's a seat bench, it's part of a car as the car goes past, the back end of the car, the light... It's architecture. It's product design. It's nature. It's blossom. That's what inspires me. Woodworking doesn't inspire me. Wendell Castle is quoted as saying 'If you look to furniture design for furniture design you won't get anything new.'"

Castle's obviously a big inspiration but Marc also mentions Wharton Esherick, Thomas Heatherwick, Joseph Walsh, Gareth Neal and John Makepeace. "Makepeace has crossed the barrier between art and craft. He charges art prices for his stuff and I think the reason he crossed that barrier is because he quickly realised that design is the most important thing.

Work ethic

Marc thinks it's a pretty dull time in furniture making in terms of design and he stopped calling himself a cabinetmaker years ago. "Furniture and cabinetmaking is still very woody and so separate from design, architecture and industrial design. The rural workshop, in my opinion is a really bad thing because they're stuck out in the sticks and they don't see what's going on and if you look at industrial design, stuff's coming on immensely. If you look at the quality of the technology that's being used and here's us still worrying about dovetails." This seems to be something that sets Marc's course apart, this relentless gaze into the

Inspiration: Wharton Esherick



Rail Sofa 1959 cherry and poplar

Have you heard of him? Not too many people have in the UK, but, according to Marc, he's the most influential furniture maker of the last hundred years. He was born in 1887 in Philadelphia. "You look at his stuff and you think 'I've seen that before' and then you look at the date and you think, 'no I didn't, this is 40 years prior to everybody else.'" He studied painting at the Philadelphia Museum School of Industrial Arts and his furniture was derived from the Arts and Crafts style, decorated

with carving. He was influenced by Rudolf Steiner along with German Expressionism and Cubism. He exhibited hundreds of times throughout his life and his work is now on display at The Met and The Whitney. Marc's right, if you look for the chain, it's there: Esherick, Castle, Makepeace, Walsh... It begs the question 'who's next?' "He was a pioneer. He said I'm going to make this because it's what I want to make and I don't care if anyone buys it. That's what I find inspiring."

future and pushing of boundaries. One of the most interesting comments he made was that his favorite pieces were the pieces he made before he really knew what he was doing, before there were rules and therefore limitations. The fact that he's recognised this has allowed him to revert to his early attitude of invention and possibility, now armed with all the skills and knowledge he's gained over the years, which has resulted in some astonishing pieces of work. "You've got to stop thinking that a chair has four legs and then maybe we'll make something new."

A good example of the results of this attitude towards his work can be seen in the L'Orchidée desk in rosewood (*Aniba rosaeodora* var. *amazonica*), which uses some groundbreaking techniques for example mixing wood and aluminum dovetails. "Quite a few makers said it would never work when we came up with it, they said, 'the wood will split' and you think, 'don't always be so negative!' So we tested and tested it to make sure it would work and it works."

In practice

When it comes to clients Marc's selective and doesn't let the client



"If you look to furniture design for furniture design, you won't get anything new"

Wendell Castle



Marc's students get to watch him work on real commissions, from conception to delivery

SPECIAL FEATURE

Marc Fish in profile

► direct him. All he wants to know from them is how big the piece of furniture in question has to be and how much they want to spend. Then he'll visit them at home, get a feel for what kind of people they are and then he asks them to trust him. He argues that it's good to be fussy to avoid being pigeonholed and to give him the opportunity to always be working on something new and exciting. Of course, he's in the fortunate position to be able to do this because he has income from his school and from renting out bench space but there was a point a few years ago when he had to decide to be brave and follow his ultimate ambition, substitute financial reward for creative fervor and suck it up for a few years. It paid off and now he's able to cherry pick his commissions. "People that say they want shelves on the wall... well, If you accept that work then you'll always be making that kind of work and you'll never have time to push the boundaries and make what you want

to make. Of course at some point you have to earn the money and although you can't be idealistic about it, it's important not to lose direction in what you want to be doing."

Marc would say that he stands for innovation, experimentation, high quality and good design. "Furniture design and making needs to be moved forward. It needs to be more aspirational, new techniques need to be developed. There's no media coverage for what we do and that's because it's boring. It's not enough to keep making the furniture we've been making for the last hundred years. Mortis and tenon joints, dovetails on the outside of carcasses...we've been doing it for a hundred years. It's just not enough. It makes me cross." A more passionate or motivational teacher might prove hard to find, at least where cabinetry is concerned.

"Design is first. Impeccable craftsmanship is the very next thing. Here, we combine the two. We don't make furniture, we invent it." *F&C*



Inspiration: Wendell Castle



Dr. Atomic, 2010, Stained Mahogany

For those who don't know, Wendell Castle is an American furniture designer of considerable reputation.

Born in Kansas in 1932, he's often cited as being the father of the art furniture movement, which, according to Marc Fish makes Wharton Esherick the grandfather. He's had a long and prestigious career, receiving many awards along the way and in 2001 he received the Award of Distinction from The Furniture Society. In 1980 he opened the Wendell Castle School in Scottsville, NY, which produced many prominent furniture

makers of today, known in the trade as the 'third generation'.

Castle's work is renowned for being highly sculptural and playful, one table having a pair of gloves and a ring of keys carved into the surface. He moves through mediums with ease and is not solely devoted to wood. He serves as inspiration to makers, designers and artists alike and has truly made furniture making into a fine art.

Go to www.wendellcastlecollection.com for more information

Students, taught exclusively by Marc, are encouraged at all times to push the boundaries of design

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