



Alvaro and Marc at benches in a shared workshop

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How workbench sharing works

When Marc Fish swapped banking for the riskier business of furniture making he developed a plan that would benefit himself and other makers. Andrea Hargreaves reports

If your workshop is at the end of a road which hosts such unglamorous industries as aggregate supply and car breaking, at a south coast port that has seen better days, then you have to try extra hard. In Marc Fish's case that meant, among other tactics, cashing in on the excitement of last spring's Brighton Festival, posting large signs along the route so that visitors, who could be forgiven for thinking that their sat-navs were way off course, took the trouble to find him and the seven other full-time makers hiring space in his workshop.

And come they did, and spent money, admittedly mostly on low-value items made for the purpose, but, welcoming glass of wine in hand, they were introduced to the huge variety of furniture styles produced by several makers with very different

approaches. It's called making contacts, something Marc's very good at.

But how did he jump the divide from banking to entrepreneurial furniture making? In Marc's case it was by following his creative streak. Now 37, Marc realised he had "artistic tendencies" at school but ignored them. However, after seven years in the bank he got involved in classic cars and set up a company for which he did all the bodywork. He progressed to making metal furniture before realising that, with some training, he could do with wood what he was doing with metal. Two City & Guilds' courses down the line and he was getting there but it took a John Lloyd course – paid for by selling his beloved 21ft boat with 4.3 V6 225bhp engine – to finally put him on track. "That was the best four months of my life. I

learnt a lot," he recalls.

Up until then he had been selling furniture around Brighton the hard way, going into shops and touting his wares. "I soon learnt that you have to make appointments, that people won't just see you there and then," he says ruefully. "It was quite an education doing that. That was in 1999. I had some sort of success in shops but in 2003-2004 started seriously training."

Shops and benches

By that time he was already sharing space with two other makers, and three years ago went for it big time by taking premises on a Newhaven industrial estate with three shops providing space for all the machinery any woodworker could want and workbenches for each maker.

Not only does he share his workspace with Avery Howell, Simon Featherstone, Clive Merrett, Mark Hazell, Derek Jones, Alvaro Rodriguez and Henry Tenent plus part-timers Clare Scully, Annette McDonald and Darcy >

Meet the lads



Left to right: Mark Hazell, Simon Featherstone, Marc Fish, Derek Jones and Alvaro Rodriguez

The makers who share Marc's space revel in individual ideas. For Brighton Festival Derek Jones had stationery boxes in birds' eye maple and ebony, lined with boxwood, and on a much larger scale a hammock-shaped chaise longue in cherry and sycamore for a very reasonable £450.

Clive Merrett showed his flat-pack CD/DVD bookcases in solid ash and walnut, sold either as natural finish or oiled and costing from a modest £130, and Simon Featherstone displayed a hall cabinet with drawer.

Mark Hazell went down the reclamation route with mahogany or sapele – he's not sure which – salvaged from an old school workshop, and used with 1.5mm birch ply for an interestingly shaped double-sided cupboard.

Alvaro Rodriguez, originally from Germany where he received a thorough training in joinery and carpentry by fitting out luxury camper vans, is inventive and a believer in the powers of electro-magnetic energy. His portfolio discloses commissions ranging from wall units with cunning doors concealing contents and revealing chosen objects to bunk, desk, wardrobe and step combos for children's bedrooms, and when I called he was working on his

Dream Weaver bed, so called because it is designed for sweet dreams, with no metal to obstruct good sleep. Instead the components are pegged together with wooden dowels. He is currently devising a bed with pockets for crystals.



In a tent erected for Brighton Festival Alvaro demonstrates how his bed is jointed with wooden dowels



Mark Hazell made this cupboard from recycled materials

Dench who rent on a one-day-a-week basis, but he runs furniture-making and related computer-aided design courses too.

So what, apart from cash, does he get out of the arrangement, and what do his fellow makers stand to gain?

"We are all self-employed and all do different things. We get skill sharing, a lot of learning from each other. One guy, Derek Jones, has had 25 years' experience. What's really nice is that we can ask each other for help. In some ways it's a really modern apprenticeship; it's the future for furniture makers. If you want to stay small you can. Clients like the fact that you do all the work yourself, but to have a workshop on my own would be impossible. I set it up three years ago. I love it. It's my absolute passion."

While it is clear that Marc is an artist-craftsman first and foremost, it is equally clear that he has his business hat firmly planted on his head. Take his website for instance: helped by his partner Vanessa – mother of their 11-month-old son Willow – who is a web designer and handles his media needs, he has constructed a site that enjoys a big response and that he rates as a prime selling tool, along with personal recommendations.

Networking

"Put 'cabinetmaker' into Google and my website comes up on the first page. The keywords are properly done and link to other sites. I joined all the social networking sites which link us back. 'Cabinetmaker London' does us well and gets me work with architects. For instance I got work with the British Film Institute doing counters for the bookshop."

While his favourite periods are Art Nouveau and Art Deco and his exhibition work shows a romanticism which harks back to more leisured and mannered times, he is pragmatic enough to work with whatever his customers want, be that a pair of curve-fronted glazed cabinets with cutlery drawers and lift-out trays in his favourite Macassar ebony together with rippled sycamore and for which he charged a total of £27,000, or a Monopoly set coffee table complete with – and he sourced these himself – 1940s' cardboard tokens, cards and paper money in a sectioned drawer.

When we visited he was about to resume work on an exhibition piece, a super-wide Writing Consul Table in mahogany, standing on delicately Gothic-arched maple legs. "I'm going to rip off the back," he says determinedly, pointing at an immaculate piece of work. He explains



Marc wants to rip the back off this table to insert buttons which will operate a pair of writing tables

that instead of a plain back he is going to insert buttons which will operate two old-fashioned writing tables, not for writing long letters but for quick *billet-doux*. "People use emails too much," he muses.

Typically he has two types of work on the go, a commission from a client and something for himself. On display for this summer's Brighton Festival was a cabinet-on-stand made while training at John Lloyd's workshop. It features tiny drawers inside a cupboard; these are fitted with magnets and open via a neat little magnetic stick device. Sweet.

Exotics

When I comment on his use of exotic woods, often mixed with European hardwoods, he

says that while he loves them himself, so too do his customers who often aren't too bothered where they are sourced.

He uses Timberline in Tonbridge which checks sustainability. "I also ask clients if they want me to use reclaimed or sustainably sourced material. My view is not to waste it and to use it wisely. There is a big shortage of Macassar ebony this year."

The same Macassar ebony and sycamore combo is seen in his boxes. £1,500 would

Right: Curve-glazed display cabinet by Marc Fish is part of a set in Macassar ebony and ripple sycamore

Below: Cutlery drawer in a larger cabinet which is part of the same suite



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY MARC FISH UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED

Helping each other out



Wall cabinet by Luke Miller

Luke Miller, based in Little Horwood, Buckinghamshire, has experienced workspace sharing from both sides. In business for seven years, until recently he rented space in another workshop until he felt the time was right to set up on his own.

He says: "This has a great advantage in the early years as there is less risk involved, as you are not investing large sums of money in equipment, as you would by setting up your own workshop.

"I have space to rent two benches out to other furniture makers. This basically offers the use of the workshop space plus all of the large machines including dimension saw, planer thicknesser, pad sander, overhead router, mortiser, spindle moulder, pillar drill, spray booth, veneer press and bandsaw, giving the hirer use of a fully equipped workshop without the large investment and benefiting me by helping out with the running costs.

"It also gives the opportunity for me to contract some work out to the hirers, helping them out if they require the work as well, allowing me to increase my turnover and get help on the jobs that need extra hands.

"I have found that this arrangement has served me very well in the past where I have rented and hope it will continue to work well in the future."

Contact Luke at L Miller Furniture on 01296 714772/077 6989 8243 or email him on luketothefuture@yahoo.co.uk

buy a Gentleman's Box to remind the buyer of times "when people dressed for the theatre", its interior housing compartments for such esoteric items as bow ties and watches. I fell in love with a Lady's Correspondence Box in Swiss steamed pear and quilted Kevasingo (rotary-cut bubinga) veneer with padded leather interior.

The chocolate brown and black of Macassar ebony is absolutely right for his writing sets which come complete with distinctive Mont Blanc ink bottle and demi-lune blotter.

I also admired a massive cherry bowl which Marc says could be the biggest of its type in the world. Measuring over 2ft across, it originated from a tree that was felled in slices and was carved with a chainsaw disc, then sanded and waxed. Pure sculpture.

If Marc's example is anything to go by, workshop sharing should benefit not only the makers themselves but communities that are ripe for revival and could do with the attentions of an entrepreneur or three. **F&C**



Marc's Cabinet On Stand...

Contact Marc at The Workshop on 01273 531611, email him on info@fishcontemporaryfurniture.com or go on line at www.fishcontemporaryfurniture.com

Marc's business plan

While training with John Lloyd, Marc met other students who were having difficulty finding space and equipment to work. He spent the next two months researching and getting advice about workshop sharing and setting up, coming up with a package that includes: business advice and an introduction to Business Link (a Government-funded organisation that runs courses on book-keeping, marketing, tax, employment etc); design and construction advice; access to a 50-title library including DVDs; list of discounted supplies; free exhibition space and advice; and discounted materials (buying in quantity means saving up to 60% on items such as glue).

Following up an advertisement in F&C for bench space in Devon with James Morley, he got in touch. James, who has since closed his scheme, said the hardest part in getting established was insurance and health & safety.

"Boy, was he right," recalls Marc. "It took some two months to get any insurance company to even listen to my ideas. Most of them, after spending 10 minutes on hold and 20 minutes answering questions, said the business description was not in their book of



If you want to make money by furniture making you need a multi-stranded business – and a van to do it in

businesses. What a surprise, as there is only a handful in the country!"

Regarding health & safety, for peace of mind he paid for an adviser to visit The Workshop, then spent four months from the end of January 2006 setting up the work spaces, installing machines and completing a mountain of admin. All bench space renters are given a two-hour health & safety induction and sign to say they are happy to use the machines.

"Unfortunately this does not stop users doing something silly or stupid which can be a constant worry," he says. "Users continue to receive help as and when they need it."

More than two years later and the proof can be seen in the furniture they make.