

# Meet the makers: Scott Friedman

# The Colorado Craftsman

**Scott Friedman talks to Vanessa Austin Locke about his journey from architect in NYC working on the World Trade Centre to woodsman in the Rocky Mountains to craftsman in Colorado**



"I recall feeling a bit frustrated that all of my architecture projects ended with the construction of a 1/8 scale chipboard model." Furniture allowed him to take an idea from conception to absolute completion. When he moved on to architecture at some of the larger firms in Colorado his experience was that of a small cog in a big machine. "I wanted to be involved in the early stages of design, structural engineering and of course construction."

Following eight years in architecture, which included a stint in NYC working for Studio Daniel Libeskind on the World Trade Centre redesign, along came the 2008 economic downturn.

With the construction and architecture industries tanking, he went to live on a ranch in the beautiful Rocky Mountains, spending his days alone, felling trees. "A touch of simplicity amidst the red tape and code reviews of my previous job." When winter came and the snow was too deep to work he headed to Central America. Four months, eight countries and a lot of soul searching later he returned to the States with the idea of starting a furniture studio. His love of travel is the inspiration for his studio's name, Gitane (pronounced zhee-tahn "zh" like the "s" in treasure) which is French for 'gypsy'. "Part of the fun that I get to have is naming each piece within my collection after a place that I've travelled to and gained some inspiration from."

## **Inspiration**

Aside from nature, which will always be his greatest inspiration, Scott describes how the materials themselves are an inspiration to him.



He tends to find his inspiration for the design of each individual piece within the program or function itself, however, "a love of the materials and finding a way to express their qualities and beauty has always been a starting point for me."

Growing up Scott used to see his father build furniture, which was very inspiring for him. He describes how his father would cut a cherry tree and create an entire bedroom suite that would impress any woodworker. "I saw that this hobby of his was art and sculpture while also being functional and personally rewarding."

Scott Friedman is currently designing a 100ft<sup>2</sup> + built-in storage system for a couple in Boulder, Colorado. They need two armoires, the equivalent of a chest of drawers and as much additional storage as the space will allow without appearing excessive.

The piece will be solid hardwood and may incorporate glass and laser cut steel with cut-in pattern work. He's also working with several local micro-breweries in the area. The micro-brew scene has been growing very quickly in Colorado so he's been getting to know "those folks" by marketing beer sampler flights and tap handles to them.

His earliest exposure to actually designing and building furniture was in the design 'shop at the University of Kentucky, College of Architecture.



With regards to contemporary inspiration a client recently showed Scott some images of built-in projects by a studio in Seattle, Washington by the name of Kerf Design. They design and build beautiful shelving and cabinetry from high-end plywood, plastic laminates and hardwood veneers. "I normally work in solid hardwoods and don't give much consideration to the potential beauty of plywood, but these guys have taken it to the next level."

### Design and process

Approximately half of Scott's work is speculative or designed and built for his line of furnishings. He also enjoys working on commissions as well, but finds that designing for his collection has the potential to be more efficient. He tends to build a lot of jigs and fixtures in the fabrication process, which are often project specific so if he has the opportunity he'll build

more than one piece at a time. When it comes to collaborating with clients he has a similar outlook to many designer/makers, "I find that at times the design can become a bit diluted. If I'm the only person involved in the design process it can be easier to maintain the purity of the end product."

That's something that a lot of furniture makers seem to relate to; design is often the most important part of the process. "I'd like to think that design comes first in my process. I'm very technique driven in the 'shop but most of my projects start in the sketchbook. Having said that, I find myself designing at times with a high degree of technique. I tend to be structurally driven when approaching a design. I consider the program and function first of course, but once I have the rough considerations for function established I almost always jump to questions such as 'what kind of structural forces are at work here?'"

If I'm designing a piece of casework for instance, I give a great deal of thought to how the case will be elevated off of the ground and allow that solution to inform the entire piece. The Coban Buffet is an example of this process. ▶

### The Coban Buffet in oak

### The Coban Buffet

*The Coban buffet twists the eye with its apparent a-symmetry. It's a combination of new and found materials. The base is constructed from entirely found objects, on a farm in fact. The rusted plough heads, mounted on heavy, weathered timber beams are set in sharp juxtaposition, old against new and Scott describes it as, "a unique response to the dining room buffet casework type." The casework is constructed from bent laminated corners, oak hardwood, sliding glass doors and custom fabricated metal drawer pulls. Traditional wood joinery – blind splines and doweled connections – are used in order to maintain the craftsman's integrity in this piece. Mid-century modern meets mid-western farm perhaps? "My work is often referred to as mid-century which I can't say I am necessary happy about, because I'd prefer not to be categorised in a style that's decades old. Having said that I have a huge appreciation for that style, in how it moves away from revivalism and towards a more pure response to what it was they were designing and the materials with which they were working." Whatever it is entirely delicious and tres chic.*



**Monarch Coffee Table in walnut**

- ▶ When making, after the program's been established he begins with a series of loose sketches. Once he's established an idea, which he'd like to explore in depth he models it in the computer with SketchUp.

He used to build lots of scaled physical models but finds that playing with the proportions is so much quicker in the computer. He typically goes back and forth from sketching to modelling at this point until the design is finalised. Since the computer model ends up being precise he doesn't do construction drawings any more.

Instead he builds directly from the model. At this point he builds any necessary jigs and/or fixtures, gathers the materials and, "starts making dust."

When it comes to the ever-illusive creative process, while being highly responsive to the program and structural forces that act upon it, Scott admits that he's at his best when he's sketching very loosely. He finds that the subtle imperfections in a quick, loose sketch often give way to new ideas. Although he's had a formal education in architecture which included a lot of artistic drawing and sculpture, it seems that he has the

intrinsic and overriding instinct that's often channelled through the hands of a born craftsman rather than the cerebral, ethereal thought process of an artist. "The craft side of me seems to run a bit more deeply."

### **Exhibiting**

In the past Scott's exhibited his work alongside other architects, showing a variety of mediums such as painting, sculpture, jewellery and textiles. He likes showing in this set-up because of the diverse crowd it draws as well as the non-competitive environment. He's exhibited at the International Woodworking Fair design competition in Atlanta with his Ton Sai Coffee Table. That was very exciting but a bit larger than would normally suite his personality. He's hoping to get involved in more competitions in the near future though.

When asked what he thinks about the future of furniture making he's philosophical. "Perhaps the current and previous modes of fine furniture making may go away. It isn't something that concerns me



**Beer sampler flights for the growing micro-brew scene in Colorado**



**The Coban Coffee Table in red oak**

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though. I think of it more as evolving but I suppose that's more of a stylistic response. If the question was, "will the art of working with one's hands in a skilled, artistic and highly crafted manner disappear?" then my answer would be no. I think that working with our hands is an innate faculty, which won't easily be left behind. There are so many contemporary designers out there doing amazing things with modelling software. Some are working with materials other than wood but some are merging contemporary means, with traditional materials and methods, which creates beautiful results.

Yes, sometimes the envelope gets pushed too far but one can always come back to a good place of balance." And balance, like the Coban Buffet, seems to be the key word here for this thoroughly modern, diversely experienced, but ultimately old-school maker. If that's not too much of a contradiction in terms... Well, luckily for us two opposing truths can exist at the same time. *F&C*

**Biscayne Bay Coffee table in walnut**

