

A man with glasses and a grey t-shirt stands in a workshop, holding a camera to his eye. He is wearing light-colored, paint-splattered jeans. In the foreground, a wooden stool holds a wooden crate. The background features a large window with a diamond-patterned mesh, a workbench with various tools, and a framed picture on the wall.

Ma y hew Fairbank:
Furniture
for Keeps

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Above: Back and front views of Onavaillu Dining Chair, 2010, viridian green leather, espresso walnut frame, antique bronze nail heads, 34 x 19 x 18 in.

Opposite: Fairbank puts on his headphones as he prepares to trim drawer faces.

“I want to make items that are going to be heirlooms. I want to convince people that furniture can be an investment.”
—Matthew Fairbank

“A wobbly line here, a slightly askew handle there, reminds the consumer that the product is made by hand.” This is the late British design historian Peter Dormer in *The Meanings of Modern Design*, published in 1990. Writing on the studio craft movement, Dormer describes imperfection as the individual maker’s ramshackle bayonet in an era of mechanization. “The handicrafts of the 20th century,” he wrote, “oppose rather than serve or enhance industrial design.” Twenty years later, young makers are only too well aware of this historical battle line, and it has certainly been drawn for the Brooklyn-based furniture maker Matthew Fairbank.

Fairbank embodies this opposition, on the one hand, making one-of-a-kind tables, chairs and the like through his line, Matthew Fairbank Design, and on the other, having designed furniture for assembly lines and scaled production for sleek commercial entities. “There’s that inner war in me. Am I just a designer, or do I really love doing what I do in a physical sense?” But perhaps posing the question is enough to make a sort of peace with it. So far in Fairbank’s short career, the 28-year-old designer has managed to embrace the divide by adapting to the nuances of client demands, outsourcing to vendors and manufacturers when he needs a hand, and simultaneously pinching from the industrial design world as inspiration for his own idiosyncratic craft. It’s almost as if the battle line has been breached, or at least approached in less reactionary terms.

Like other Rhode Island School of Design furniture students taught by John Dunnigan and Rosanne Somerson, Fairbank learned that anything that can be made with a machine can also be done by hand. In his first semester, a “no power tools” rule forced him to see this, and Fairbank recalls falling into a shop-clique of kids so obsessed with quality that they would “try to pass a hair through the joinery to test whether it was tight enough.” He fondly calls his group the “wood nerds.” But after graduating from art school’s happy laboratory in 2003, Fairbank struggled to find work in a world that, he discovered, often cared less than he about beautiful handmade furniture. Like any adaptable maker, Fairbank instead took an internship and then a job designing interiors with a massively massive corporation, Starwood Hotels and Resorts. One of the largest hotel chains on earth, Starwood owns the Sheraton, Westin and W brands. It runs 992 properties worldwide, or 298,500 hotel rooms. Every year this means hundreds of thousands of chairs and tables put into production.

At this scale, Fairbank’s concept of furniture as a set of discrete objects expanded into a world of cohesive interiors. Lighting, mood and surface texture became more of a factor, and he was introduced to a range of industrial design methods and materials. “We designed the guest rooms and everything in them—floor coverings, bath accessories, headboards, ballroom stacking chairs and



Opposite: Erland Breakfast Table, 2010, Michelangelo marble slab, ebonized oak frame, satin brass accents, 30 x 38 x 28 in.

Below: Red Fife Tripod Lamp, 2009, spun aluminum shade, lathe-turned candy apple oak legs, aluminum, 60 x 18 in.

Right: Fairbank's studio with Onavaillu Dining Chair on worktable.



nightstands were all part of our repertoire.” Everything was manufactured overseas and Fairbank found himself alienated from the production process. “There was a massive disconnect,” he says. After a few years, Fairbank joined DucDuc, the children’s furniture company. Working as a junior designer, he and a few others prototyped DucDuc’s first four lines. It was a crash course in small-line production: “From rocking chairs to bunk beds, I was designing and building simultaneously. These two processes definitely informed one another. I traveled many times to my boss’s wood shop upstate to build the prototypes I was drawing on AutoCAD.”

Suffice it to say, Fairbank has had ample experience with logistics and project management. But the way he tells it, being a maker was destined. A chance encounter with a furniture maker, whose car broke down in front of his parents’ house one summer, and a hand-me-down fetish (his mother is an antiques dealer) seemed to have sealed his fate. So after years working with interiors and industrial design, in 2005 he made a return to the studio, taking a part-time job to make ends meet. “My sanity depended upon having more hands-on experiences,” he said in an interview with the Design Glut blog last year. Fairbank has kept his current shop on the crumbling end of Metropolitan Avenue in the Williamsburg neighborhood for a year now, sharing the second floor of an industrial-use building with two other woodworkers. In one corner, >



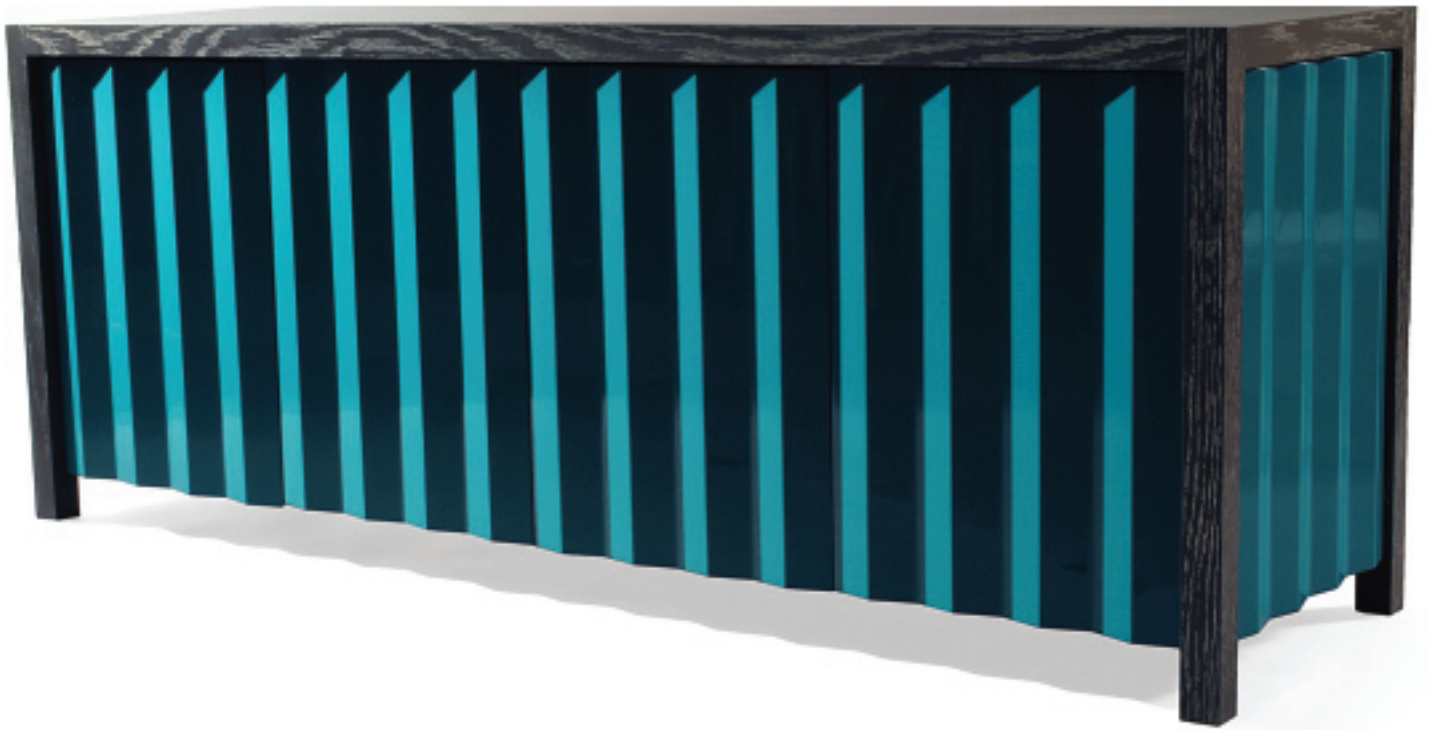
Left: Fairbank flush trim routing the edge of a veneered drawer face. The material core is plywood and must be veneered on all surfaces.

Opposite: Apollo Console, 2010, dark cerused oak finish, hand-rubbed lacquer finish, 27 x 84 x 20 in.

Below: Barrett Writing Desk, 2009, which references old library card catalogs, navy leather, solid walnut, antique bronze hardware, 30 x 60 x 24 in.

“I like the idea of making furniture that incorporates the fundamental functions of furniture while making abstract references.” —Matthew Fairbank





Fairbank points to a marquetry cutting machine, based on an 18th-century model, that his studio mate Peter Davis engineered himself. Paul Chandeysson, working on the other side, is influenced by Biedermeier. Both, with years of experience behind them, assist Fairbank when he encounters a problem executing a project. “Just to see this going on in a shared studio is the closest real-life model to the wonderful cross-pollination that happens in college,” he says.

In Fairbank’s portion of the studio, a three-leaved dining-room table, a work in progress, overpowers the space. It is still unprimed oak, with a squarish modern apron and Queen Anne legs, white and freshly scraped. I keep looking back at the table and at Fairbank, trying to grasp that this was made by him. Not a brawny man, he is dwarfed by it. The piece, as it turns out, was a challenge passed on to him by a demanding customer. “They wanted something with a neoclassical leg on a minimalist form. I’m challenged by my clients all the time; the work is always more demanding than I think it’s going to be.” What’s more, Fairbank had never made a leaf table before, so it was a process of trial and error. He bought two or three commercial sliders for the underside, but they didn’t support the weight of the tabletop. Besides, they felt cheap. He referenced some *Fine Woodworking* articles online and made his first sliders. Success. The result is an underside with three sets of wooden glides as beautifully crafted and considered as the rest of the sturdy,

flawless table. But it took weeks of head-scratching. Fairbank hopes that his customers will take notice. He wants to change the culture of disposable furniture. “When you’re buying at West Elm, not only are the materials substandard, but the cost of designing has been amortized,” he says. “I want to make items that are going to be heirlooms. I want to convince people that furniture can be an investment.”

Though a lifetime growing up around handcrafted American furniture pieces in his mother’s shop gave Fairbank a magpie eye for odd historical details and an appreciation of fine carpentry, his furniture displays a highly polished urban minimalism, informed by the works of Philippe Starck and Donald Judd. And while the Apollo Console, an extreme statement credenza with a hand-rubbed turquoise lacquer finish and a dark cerused oak, has an easy industrial modernity to it, the process is in fact, for Fairbank, a painstaking one. After applying tinted polyurethane lacquer, two coats of primer are applied, then three coats of lacquer. Each coat takes 36 hours of drying time before another application. After the final lacquer coat is applied, the surface must be wet-sanded starting at 400 grit and progressively with finer papers all the way to 1000 grit. The surface is then buffed with a wheel with a polishing compound equivalent to 2000 grit, bringing the finish to the shine of glass. ▶



Left: Fairbank marking a mortise and tenon location for the leg of a desk.

Below: Euclid Vase, 2010, white slip-cast porcelain, hand-painted gold glaze accents, 7¾ x 9½ in.



Opposite: The Osiris Chandelier prototype hangs next to Fairbank's clamp rack. Below it sits a discarded prototype of a table lamp shade.

"I like the idea of making furniture that incorporates the fundamental functions of furniture while making abstract references." Barrett Writing Desk, one of Fairbank's most successful designs is a simple ebonized desk fitted with drawers that look like old library card catalogs. The card catalog, a fixture that the outspoken library preservationist Nicholson Baker once called "expressive of needful social trust and communal achievement," brings a civic element into the domestic realm. Or, one could just cram junk into it. Either way, the piece is perhaps expressive of a desire to acknowledge the value of scholarship outside of institutional constructs.

Fairbank's work expresses a sort of manic eclecticism that many call postmodern, but his works express none of the inside-joke feel that goes with that term: "I don't think I fit into the ironic design quotient. I would never make a fruit bowl *out of fruit*," he says. It takes some gall to avoid the temptation of a clever punch line, and perhaps Fairbank's past work as a commercial designer has led him to considered decisions about fulfilling the needs of his clients over expressing virtuosity.

"I'm both a designer and a fabricator. Ninety percent of what I'm asked to do is to work with other people's designs. Maybe there'll come a day when I say, 'These are the pieces that I make. If you want to buy one of them, that's great, and if not, you're shopping at the wrong store.' But for now, I'm billing myself as a custom

fabricator who also designs his own collection of furniture." I suspect he has held these conversations with himself before, taking a careful approach that allows him to do work that challenges him while also running a business.

While Fairbank prizes doing his own woodworking, he uses vendors for upholstery, metal, glass work or industrial materials, while outsourcing jobs like lathe-turning. He looks to connections from his jobs with industrial and interior designers, as well as local vendors in the loose network of Brooklyn craftspeople. The borough's craft renaissance has energized him, but he and studio mates have begun to feel the effects of gentrification on the industrial areas where artists and makers keep studios. "The fire department is coming around more and calling us on technicalities more. There is pressure on work spaces here. A lot of the aspects that made Williamsburg desirable as a place to be for artists are threatened."

The times have been hard in general for makers, but Fairbank, indefatigable, draws on all of his experiences. He told me that he designed a chandelier for the annual showcase BKLYN Designs after asking a friend who works at a high-end showroom probably the most honest question makers in these times can ask themselves: What sells? ✦

Mimi Luse, who lives in Brooklyn, writes for The Brooklyn Rail, Art Papers, Black Book magazine and The L magazine.

