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We interview people who start things, who follow their dreams, who live life passionately and on their own terms. Then we type the interviews and post them here. The conversations are incredibly inspiring to us – we hope you find the same.

JUNE 8, 2009

Matthew Fairbank Design, or MFD

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Over the course of this interview, [Matthew Fairbank](#) coined the terms “academically roofed” and “wood nerds,” making him my new linguistic hero. On top of having a brilliant way with words, he also has a brilliant way with bandsaws, and wood, and metal, and lacquer.



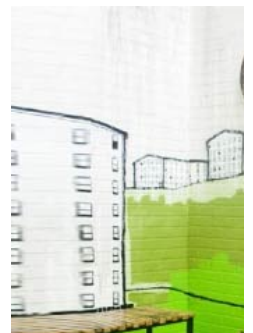
One of the reasons we started our blog was because it was so hard for us to transition from art school into trying to run a business. You went to art school – you know!



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Going from college to the real world was awful. Awful. College was not even an approximation of the real world. It was not even 1% similar. And I'm not saying that my degree was a wasted effort, but nothing I did really prepared me.

We always say that graduating art school feels like landing face-down on the cement.

It's like you were just academically roofied! You're waking up from like a bad night out, and you're thinking, what the hell just happened to me?

That might be the best analogy EVER. What led you to furniture design?

Looking back, it all makes sense. My mom was an antique store owner. I grew up around that – the decorative arts, in a really broad sense. And I was always building things, like tree forts. While the other kids had a one-story tree fort – I had to build a five-story tree fort. I had to outdo every other kid on the block. I made little trap-doors so you could climb up to the higher levels. And in high school I designed and built the sets for the school plays. Now, I can see that I was already on the path to being a furniture designer, I just didn't know it.



Fife tripod lamp by MFD – spun brass shade, ebonized oak legs, & brass feet

Where did you study?

I went to RISD, and, like so many people, had no idea what I wanted to do. Growing up, I was exposed to a narrow view of what fine art is. Ceramics was exotic. So I went into RISD thinking, "If I'm going to go to art school, I guess I'm going to be a painter."

And then the summer between freshman and sophomore year, I met this amazing woman named Megan. She was in furniture design. Her car literally broke down in front of my house. I was kind of handy, so I helped her jump-start her car. We got to talking, and she invited me over for dinner. I went into her apartment, and it was full of all this furniture she had made. I was so impressed!

"You mean furniture design is also an art? Artists make furniture? I thought furniture came from a factory or something!" It's incredible that I was so naive at that point of my life. I started calling the furniture department and begging them to let me in. The program was a great experience. There was a core group of us that really became

“wood nerds.”

I love that term! Wood nerds!

Yeah, like, “Ooh, check out the finish on this surface!” Or, taking a human hair and trying to squeeze it between the joinery in a table. If you can’t get your hair in it, then you’re good. So I was one of the wood nerds.



Barrett writing desk by MFD – leather, bronze, and walnut

What did you do after school?

I came to New York. I’ve been here for six years. I can’t believe I’m saying that!

I got a job working for a hotel company, designing hotel interiors. Going from wearing shellac-encrusted jeans to dressing in a button-down shirt and tie every day and working in a cubicle was total culture shock. The people who I worked with were all branding experts, and that job was an immersion in how companies brand themselves. We were designing collections of furniture to go into different hotels, depending on where they were. For a coastal hotel, we would do a coastal scheme. That was so foreign to me. Now, it makes so much sense, but coming out of college I had no awareness of how the world organized itself.

So I did that for three years. Then I continued the brand education – I went to work for [ducduc](#). And that was the total opposite extreme, because it was a startup company.

What was working for a startup like?

I showed up for work the first day and we didn’t have computers or seats to sit in. We literally took an open floorplan of a loft in SoHo, built walls, painted, set up desks. Man, you could not get a more complete crash course on how to start a business from the very beginning. And then once we were set up, we started prototyping furniture. We produced 5 lines of furniture, and it was basically just four of us. Because it was just us, we did everything. We designed the postcards, we designed the website, we designed the furniture. Everything you can possibly think of.

So when did you start [Matthew Fairbank Design](#)?

Sort of on the sidelines of all of that stuff, around 2005, I decided that I was going crazy being away from the shop. My sanity depended upon having more hands-on experiences. So I decided to look on Craigslist for people out there who were looking to share space. I met this guy who was a guitar maker, and we rented an illegal woodshop on the Lower East Side. I had that shop for a couple years. No ventilation, no light, no freight elevator... You had to carry everything. Imagine carrying a 4’ x 8’ sheet of plywood up a stairwell as narrow as a fire escape. One time I made a project and I had to cut it in half because it didn’t fit out the door.

Oh boy. That’s a design challenge in and of itself.

That’s an ongoing challenge – getting pieces into elevators and stairwells.



[Otley chest of drawers](#) by MFD – pickled oak cabinet & hand rubbed lacquer drawers

Can you describe what [MFD](#) does?

Well, from the time of the Lower East Side shop, I've been making furniture for other people. A homeowner comes to me and says, "I saw this coffee table but it's not the right size. Can we do some things differently?"

I'm both a designer and a fabricator. 90% of what I'm asked to do, at this point, is other people's designs. Maybe there will 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." Sure, that would be a lovely day. But for now, I'm billing myself as a custom fabricator who also designs his own collection of furniture.

At [BKLYN Designs](#), the pieces I showed were suggestions for what I could do – but they could be any size, any shape, any color. It could be your own design. I really just wanted to show that I do a lot of materials. I specialize in lacquer, I specialize in solid wood joinery, I specialize in metals.

How did [BKLYN Designs](#) end up for you?

The show was great. For me, personally, it was kind of a benchmark. It really forced me to crack down and do all the official stuff for my business, like getting an [EIN number](#). In addition to that, the feedback has been tremendous. From consumers, homeowners, and also design professionals – architects and interior designers. Although I'm finding that a lot of this feedback isn't materializing into anything yet. Since it was my first time doing the show, I can't gauge if it's because of the economy, or because it just takes time and a lot of follow-up work, or because [BKLYN Designs](#) is a great PR show but not a great business-generating show. So it's a lot of things that I'm trying to figure out.



Rhodes chaise lounge by MFD – saddle leather, bronze nail head, & pickled oak frame

It's probably a combination of all of those. Although, in our experience, you have to do a ton of follow-up work after a show. Lots of emails and phone calls to actually hammer things down.

There's one client that came out of the show, who I started doing two pieces of furniture with, and now she's got about five more that she wants me to bid on for her. That's incredible. Even if it's just that one client, that's worth it.

Right now I'm still working 3 days a week for [my day job](#) that I've had for the last 3 years. And then I'm [MFD](#) two days a week, plus weekends. I think the secret for me has been always being really transparent about what I'm doing. I'm not trying to appear bigger than I am.

Would you like to have your work produced by other people, or do you want to stay both the designer and the maker?

I think both! Do I outsource things? Of course. Do I do lathe turning? No. Do I do my own veneering and cutting joinery? Yes. I think I do more myself than a lot of designers do, and that gives me the advantage of quality control.

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