

# MOVING ON

Scott Schmidt leaves the furniture big time behind

BY SCOTT GIBSON

It is three days before the moving truck is due to arrive, and Scott Schmidt is wrapping a two-foot-tall vessel made of wenge into a cocoon of plastic bubble wrap. His benches are piled with tools, half-filled cardboard boxes, and bits and pieces of furniture not yet finished. With the help of his sister, Julie, he is boxing up the accumulation of nearly two decades of furnituremaking in this New Hampshire shop, and it is a lot more than an afternoon's work. He moves on to a sagging overhead shelf and pulls out jigs for making furniture parts and then, behind them, rolled-up drawings long forgotten. He looks around the room, taking in the cabinets and drawers he has yet to unburden and says, "I'm going to be fine, don't you think? I mean, I do have the weekend."

At 45, Schmidt has become a technical virtuoso as well as a skilled furniture designer. Some of his work—collaborative pieces he built for designer Ed Weinberger—sold for as much as \$45,000 in New York in the late '90s. But Schmidt has had enough. He's not only leaving his shop, he's leaving the business. A young furnituremaker not long out of Boston's North Bennet Street School will take over this enviable space with its high ceilings and big windows, and with it the collection of woodworking equipment that took Schmidt years to assemble.

I had learned of this strange turn of events a few weeks before, when Schmidt called to tell me he was moving to Baltimore.

Baltimore is my hometown, but I don't often meet people who are moving there. "What's in Baltimore?"

"Nursing school," he said. "I'm going to become an operating room nurse."

## A RISE TO THE TOP

I had admired Schmidt's work for a long time, ever since his wenge trestle table appeared in a 1996 issue of *Home Furniture*, the now-defunct furniture design magazine published by The Taunton Press. He had left

some of the edges rough, just as they came from the bandsaw. Extensions at each end of the table were supported by wood box beams that slid from beneath the top on strips of Delrin plastic. The engineering was very precise, ingenious, and the contrast between the dark, polished top and the ragged edges of the trestle gave the table a completely unexpected look. Schmidt seemed to have tremendous control over how materials and textures might be combined.

Three years later, in November 1999, came a long story in *The New Yorker*, not a magazine known for its interest in studio furniture or its makers. It may have been unexpected, but the piece was vintage *New Yorker* reporting, detailing Schmidt's partnership over many years with Ed Weinberger, a former venture capitalist from New York who had turned his attention to furniture design. The furniture pieces were extremely difficult to build, but Weinberger had found an able ally in Schmidt, and the magazine ran out 13 pages of text describing their efforts in advance of a show at the Barry Friedman Gallery in New York. This was the sort of fanfare only a few contemporary furnituremakers—a Wendell Castle, maybe, or Garry Knox Bennett—would ever hope to see.

Schmidt worked out of 2,500 square feet of space, two rooms, on the first floor of a converted brick factory in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Locally, the place is called The Button Factory for its one-time role as a producer of mattress buttons. Its three floors are now filled with artisans: photographers, writers, woodworkers, jewelers, a maker of tracker organs, a luthier, a paper maker. Schmidt had settled in comfortably. His space was filled with big, old machines, work in progress, jigs and fixtures, a Maori war club, a pile of old suitcases, some of which contained animal and bird bones, and other curios too numerous to catalogue. It had the feel of a place where a furnituremaker had been exceedingly active and productive for a long time and might be expected to stay.



PHOTOS THIS SPREAD BY SCOTT GIBSON

All of it made Schmidt's announcement very curious. Why was it, I wondered when I got off the phone, that an artisan who had reached the pinnacle of his trade would now decide to close up shop and just walk away?

## SETTING UP SHOP

Brought up in Newburyport, Massachusetts, Schmidt for a time went to art school in Boston, but in 1980 met a furnituremaker named Bill Turner who had graduated from the North Bennet Street School. They hit it off, and Schmidt started what was essentially an apprenticeship with him. In furniture, Schmidt found an ideal melding of art and the process of fabrication.

"When I was in art school, I was interested in the structure of things and how they went together. I was also interested in



Moving day. Scott Schmidt packs up his long-time shop space at the Button Factory in Portsmouth, New Hampshire in preparation for a move to a new home—Baltimore, Maryland—and a new career—nursing.

sculpture,” Schmidt says. “When I met Bill, he was doing it. The process of building furniture was all about that, so I got very interested in learning it, and that took me in an entirely different direction.” Schmidt got into the North Bennet Street School when someone unexpectedly dropped out of the program—a rarity—and finished the two-year course in 1985. He immediately found a place in the Button Factory, taking a small shop upstairs, then moved to the first floor with a friend when it became available. Large portions of the building were empty at the time. They paid \$300 a month in rent.

“At that time,” he says, “I was just trying to make a living. The kinds of pieces I

wanted to do were not necessarily what I was doing, but I was actually very fortunate to just make furniture through all that time. Because most of my work then was locally-based, it was more traditional furniture. Not necessarily what I wanted to do, but there were challenges, so it was fine. I really wanted to make a living doing this, and all my money was going into tools, machines, supplies. To save money I was literally living in my shop.” Schmidt built a few Shaker-style pieces, a cherry corner cupboard, and continued to turn out the same kind of work that had helped him get through school—libraries, built-ins, very straightforward cabinetmaking.

If his work at the time seemed conven-

tional in comparison to what would come later, it did provide hints of an eventual technical mastery of design and assembly and a willingness to tinker. His major furniture project at North Bennet Street, for example, was an adaptation of an 18th-century architect’s desk he had seen in a book and later tracked down at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, where he was taken to a basement storeroom and allowed to measure it. His version had a hinged, square top that ratcheted upward with the help of complex internal parts. He substituted claw-and-ball feet for the originals, added carving to the pedestal’s supporting column, and laid up his own mahogany plywood top. He even found a way to include mitered dovetails.

All the while, though, Schmidt was experimenting, especially with ways of combining unconventional materials, a pursuit

that would really blossom in the 1990s. “I was always interested in mixing materials,” he says. “I didn’t want to do only wood furniture, and I really didn’t want to just put brass bales on a bureau.”

Then, in the late 1980s, came a pivotal encounter. Schmidt met Weinberger through a woman who was opening a gallery in Brooklyn, New York. She described Weinberger as a “guy who wants to do stick furniture” and teamed him with Schmidt’s shop partner at the time. But his partner decided within a year that Weinberger’s designs were essentially “unbuildable” and turned the work over to Schmidt. “It was very odd stuff,” Schmidt recalls. “It was extremely Escher-like. You think you’ve puzzled it out and then you realize you can’t go there. It was a real challenge to figure out and ultimately, for the person viewing it, it didn’t look challenging at all. It just looked like stick furniture.”

Schmidt found Weinberger a “brilliant” designer. He had been diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease a few years earlier, and it added an unexpected dimension to the furniture, as well as a strange undercurrent to

their relationship. Even with his visual and technical skills, Schmidt was challenged to bring Weinberger’s design ideas to fruition. The work must also have been alluring in some mysterious way, appealing to Schmidt’s tendency to look for ideas on the fringes. Schmidt thought that Weinberger’s medical condition affected, at least to some extent, the way he put his ideas on paper, making sketches expressive in a way that exact architectural blueprints were not. The object for Schmidt was to decipher the “gestural point” that Weinberger was making.

“It was frustrating at first,” he says. “But his intent in the design was clearer because of the quality of his drawings. He would get up in the middle of the night and draw for hours, an amazing amount of work. [Later, I would] flip through it and see from one page to the next how he had changed it and how the idea went from here to there to here as it grew until he had one page he would rip out and put in the mail and send to me. So it was that kind of thing: Here’s the map, here’s what I want to do. I would take that and try to draw that into something that had to be such and such a size

and fit in the parameters of a piece of furniture. And it was frustrating: often, it did not want to go into the box, but my job was to make it go, to try to build in such a way that we didn’t compromise too much from his original gesture.”

It took years before the two men were really in synch with each other, but the collaboration would eventually stretch to 17 years. Schmidt says they sometimes worked for six or eight months to develop a prototype for a single piece. It was a very slow process, not driven by the usual pressure to get something to market. Weinberger seemed uninterested in showing the work immediately, intending instead to build a body of work. Their first serious show was

**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT—**

“Drafting Table” (1984); mahogany; 29” x 26” x 26”.

“Trestle Table” (1986); wenge; 29” x 38” x 62”/84”.

“Tool Box” (1983); walnut, white oak; 12” x 32” x 18”.



PHOTOS THIS PAGE BY ROB KAROSIS

CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT—  
“Tina’s Chair” (2002); wenge; 40” x 18” x 18”.

“Tina’s Chair” (2002); imbuaya; 40” x 18” x 18”.

“Heppelwhite Chairs” (1985); mahogany,  
upholstery; 39” x 18” x 21”.

at the Friedman gallery in 1999, one week after *The New Yorker’s* article appeared with just a few photographs and a sketch of their work.

“It was outstanding,” Schmidt says. “They had never had anything like it. This gallery is on the third floor of a building, and there were so many people they were lined up down the stairs, out the door, down the street, and around the corner. It was just unprecedented. I think partly because there was just one photograph in the article, people just didn’t know what to expect, and everyone wanted to see what all the talk was about.”

The success of the show in New York led to a lot of orders, and then an offer for another showing, this time in Paris. Schmidt’s work with Weinberger at times accounted for nearly all of his output; the momentum of events became consuming. “I had to hire people to work with me here,” Schmidt says. “I had to find other shops to make pieces that I couldn’t have done in here. It was extremely busy. It was probably the busiest time of my life. It was,” he adds, “the prolonged agony of success.”

#### AN ERA OF EXPERIMENTATION

Schmidt was also pursuing non-Weinberger projects. He experimented with methods for combining unexpected materials, and he looked for ways of mimicking the proportion and balance he saw in natural forms. “I guess when you think of it, you think of what you’re drawn to in nature are those odd juxtapositions of materials,” he says. “For example, if you look at a horse, you’re drawn immediately to this glassy, huge, beautiful eye surrounded by odd other material—skin, hair, those combinations of seemingly disconnected materials that make a lot of sense in an animal or a bird. I wanted to bring something like that into furniture in a way that wasn’t going to be loud.”

Schmidt started seeing possibilities in a lot of ordinary objects, including the piles of dust that would accumulate around his



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PHOTO BY LANCE PATTERSON

lathe or bandsaw after hours and hours of repetitive work. “You’ve been standing there doing the same thing over and over, and suddenly you look down and you have this absolutely perfect, uniform pile of dust on the floor, and it’s all purple if you’ve been working with purpleheart, or it’s all ebony, and it’s something we usually sweep up and throw away. But it’s such great stuff; it’s got great texture. So I saved it—first in bags and then ultimately in Tupperware containers—and filed it away, with the intention of sometime doing something with

it. I played around with different ideas, but the best one was to plasticize it; basically, to cast it.”

His thinking found form in pieces like the “Landing Table,” which combined a base of unadorned blackheart with a shield-like composite top made from a variety of dusts and particulates held in a matrix of epoxy—purpleheart, ebony, bubinga, walnut shells, bronze and copper alloy. The table top wouldn’t work nearly as well, he says, in wood. “In stone,” he adds, “it makes a lot of sense. It takes you to a place where

you might think of early stone weapons, axe heads and things like that, that a piece of wood would never do for you. But stone is just too heavy, it's got a lot of other problems to it." The epoxy composite was laid up over a core of Baltic birch plywood, then shaped with rasps, a die grinder, and finer and finer sandpaper until it was completely polished.

Once Schmidt began tinkering with particulates, he couldn't stop. He asked the jewelers in his building for their metal filings. He visited machine shops. On a trip to Maine to visit his friend Bill Turner, he stood on a beach and immediately noticed piles of crushed mussel shells and barnacles. In Portsmouth, he went across the street for a cup of coffee and was drawn to the color of green coffee beans. Although the beans are normally ground after roasting, Schmidt wanted them milled into a powder while still green. They were hard enough to break the shop's grinder, but Schmidt got away with a

half-cup and used the coarse powder sparingly in a variety of cast composite furniture pieces.

He looked for clues to furniture design in bird and animal bones, not making a literal translation but trying to adopt the same sense of shape or proportion or transition from one curve to the next. "You can look at something and look at it, or you can look at it and *see* it," he says. "I guess I was really interested in seeing things, not just looking at things. There's a difference." One of the most powerful objects he owns is a Maori war club, in which he sensed some quality he wanted to bring to his furniture. "I could give you the same mass, relatively the same shape of an object that I just cut out on the bandsaw," he says, "and it wouldn't at all be the same thing. It would just be a chunk of wood. There's a very subtle approach to it that communicates intent, and I think that is what really distinguishes fine objects, period. This is another level of design. It's almost

like the design grows out of the intent and not just out of design for design's sake."

Furniture pieces of the 1990s—his "Talus Tables," "Pier Tables," "Northwest Coast Nesting Tables"—also relied on extremely careful, highly-engineered construction. The base of the "Landing Table," for example, has no mechanical fasteners and no glue. It is held together by an ingenious system of wedges, tenons and notches that lock the table's components together. For his "Pier Tables," Schmidt reoriented conventional construction techniques by making all of its pieces from vertically-oriented components. That is, even the grain of the table aprons was vertical. The tables were actually made from four L-shaped pieces glued together at the corners and topped with interlocking endgrain pieces. And it all looked effortless.

#### A LONG MARRIAGE THAT ULTIMATELY FAILED

Problems, however, were brewing. As Schmidt and Weinberger raced into new projects, the very pace of the work began feeding Schmidt's doubts that he would have a long-term future as a furniture maker. Part of it was the money. "There almost was no budget," Schmidt says. "No one asked, 'Well, how much will that cost?'" But the bigger jobs didn't mean more profits. In a good year, his shop would gross \$150,000, but Schmidt was putting in 60-80 hours every week. He was paying for materials, employees, sub-contractors, rent, insurance, maintenance, and all the other expenses of running a shop, leaving Schmidt with between \$20,000 and \$25,000 for all those hours. Schmidt was in love with the process of designing and building furniture, not the juggling of time and budget. "I started to realize you can only make so much money in this business. It's a lot of work, a lot of overhead. And this kind of custom work is



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#### CLOCKWISE FROM TOP—

"Talus Tables" (1998); blackheart, hemp, composite of various sawdusts, shells, coffee beans, mica, and bronze; 23"/32"/40" x 16" ovid triangle.

"Pier Tables" (1998); wenge, glass, hemp; 27" x 14" x 14".

"Nevis Table" (1999); bleached live black locust, composite top of resin and volcanic ash; 25" x 32" x 19".

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totally involving. I mean, I've started projects and then the very first day I'm off budget because I got involved in it. But to me, that's the whole point in doing it. If you're not going to get involved, what are you doing? If it's just going to be a job, there are other jobs that pay well and make more sense. I could never find that place where I felt like I was enjoying work, enjoying the process and making what I thought was a good living. For years it didn't matter, but then I had kids and started thinking more about them and less about me and suddenly I began to see the picture differently."

His work with Weinberger was at the same time exhilarating and debilitating, a buoyant ride at the top of a big wave that Schmidt found increasingly difficult to manage. "I wasn't getting the pleasure," he says. "I was actually getting a tremendous amount of stress, bad stress, the kind of stress that hurts you over time. It was a matter of having a lot of responsibility and not enough authority, a whole lot of balls up in the air at one time, and certainly not getting a chance to do any of the art any-

more, because so much time was spent just dealing with customers. The "art" became negotiating with people—putting this one off and getting this one satisfied. That was not what I wanted to do."

Schmidt says Weinberger, who later was awarded a Rome Prize fellowship for his work, clearly wanted to continue designing furniture. But the relationship seemed to be imploding. Schmidt wanted out.

#### AN ENCOUNTER WITH A SHAPER

This thought may have been pushed along by a serious accident years earlier. On a Friday afternoon in 1993, he was finishing up a run of chair arms, a complex shape with a deep cove cut along one edge. He was tired. As the last arm in the batch passed over the shaper, something grabbed, pulling Schmidt's left hand into the cutter. It nearly severed one finger and mangled two others. At the hospital, the surgeon told Schmidt that the standard procedure after reattaching the finger was to sew the damaged hand to his body for a number of weeks to help it heal. What did Schmidt prefer, he asked,

CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT—  
"Neo-Classical Desk" [and drawer detail](1987);  
dyed ash; 30" x 46" x 26".

"Landing Table" (1997); blackheart, hemp, composite of semiprecious metals, sawdust, stone; 35" x 52" x 18/".

"Hall Table" (1986); wenge, granite; 36" x 42" x 14".

"Nesting Table" (1999); imbuja; 24" x 20" x 13".

sewing the hand to the chest or the groin? He told him to think about it while he went out for lunch.

When the surgeon returned, he had some news. Over lunch he had read an article detailing a new type of procedure, one that did not include the surgical attachment of hand to body. By Monday, a bandaged Schmidt was back in the shop at work. No matter how uncomfortable or foolish it was, Schmidt thought he had little choice. Rehabilitation and additional surgery took years. It was, he says, "a very tiring process" but it ultimately restored most of the function to

## Where does the time go? Notes on the design-build process.

A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO I was given the opportunity to design and make a set of nesting tables. The customers were interested in my work, although they said that they were not interested in anything “modern.” This could have been discouraging, but I took it as a challenge. I enjoy making things that are contemporary, but have a feeling about them that connects to some older (ancestral? tribal?) aspect of our consciousness.

They had seen one of my composite-top tables and thought that the material was interesting. After visiting their home and seeing that they had a marvelous collection of paintings and sculpture, as well as many pieces of fine furniture, both old and new, I began to design a piece that

were explored. In the end, I was asked what I would like to do. On the spot I told them of my interest in the oddly-balanced ovoid forms of the Northwest Coast Indians and of my travels to British Columbia to see the totemic sculptures and paintings there. This began a conversation about form, positive and negative space; then the clients remembered they had a small wooden box which had contained a gift of smoked salmon. Embossed and painted on its sides were these same salmon/trout head patterns I had been trying to describe. This became the basis for a new plan: I would draw from that aesthetic and design something that would be functional, rugged but light and open, and not too loud.

remembered that they were in a show prior to delivery, and so I went to the exhibit, in an historical mansion in Portsmouth, and even though it was night, I found a key and went inside. It was dark—when I found the tables I could not quite see how they looked. But I could feel them. I picked one up and explored the shapes in the dark. My hands found this odd corner detail, a notching where the bone-like side joined the top. I was completely captivated by this discovery, and as soon as I woke up, I drew what I could remember of its shape.

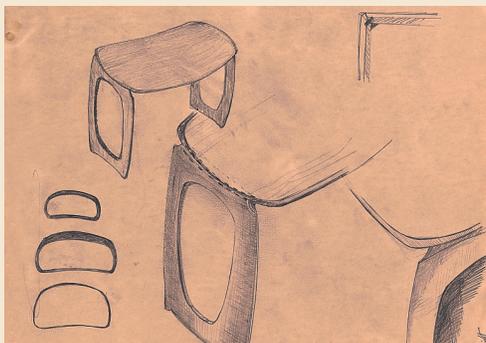
I went into the shop later that day and made a full-scale mock-up of the table. I had the oddest feeling as I did this, as though I had done this before and knew just what it should look like. I completed the model and took it to my clients. They liked the idea, the form, how they nested, but they were not sure about those notches. I tried to explain the need for a fine detail, how the notch worked to express the transition, how it allowed for more shaping of the sides, and then I told them my dream. Well, how can you argue with a dream?

They let me make the tables the way I saw them. I used hard maple to keep them airy and bone-like. I resisted stitching the corners (a traditional Northwest Coast technique for similar folded cope-mitered construction). One of the owners was a surgeon and the concept of open stitches on a tabletop disturbed him in a non-sterile kind of fashion.

Altogether, the nesting table commission took about 3 months of elapsed time to produce. Of course, I did other things during this time as most often the nature of projects involves overlap, but considerable time was required to conceive, draw, model, engineer, build, shape, and finish the three tables. With the exception of the top surface, all other surfaces required hand shaping to execute the changing radii and planes. This is a good example of a design that looks simple and uncomplicated, but in fact is very time-consuming to achieve that look.

I was able to sell the design again several times with variations of texture, material, and size so that some of that initial investment was recouped. Still, I would be surprised if I ever made more than \$15/hr after expenses. Such is the nature of passion and craftsmanship.

—Scott Schmidt



Original middle-of-the-night sketch.



“Northwest Coast Nesting Tables” (1999); maple; 24” x 20” x 13”, 22” x 18” x 12”, 21” x 16” x 11”.



Detail of “Nesting Tables” in wenge.

in some way connected what they had with what they thought they liked about my work.

I made a number of attempts to incorporate a composite table into my design but got very frustrated. When I finally thought I had something worth looking at, we arranged to meet. I traveled an hour to their house and then realized that I had left the sketches in the shop. At that point I confessed that I must not have really liked the direction things were going: “could we start again?” I asked. What followed was a conversation about the nature of design and the challenge of working with someone (client or maker) without really knowing where things might go. Issues of trust and accommodation, of control and creative responsibility, and of course, cost,

Having this freedom did not mean that the design came easily, however. I would get close to something only to find it too contrived, or too involved, or just too expensive to make. I settled on an idea, but still felt it lacked something and was having a hard time knowing what that was. It was then that I had a dream.

Over the years I have discovered that dreams can be a place where problems can be resolved in ways that our waking mind is too busy to consider. Many times I would go to sleep in a mild panic over something or other and find myself working it through in a dream, often in rather odd ways.

So, I had a dream. I was in the future. I wanted to see the nesting tables that I had made. I

his hand. The prolonged experience also got him intellectually interested in medicine at the same time that the underlying flaws of working as a furnituremaker were becoming more apparent. "There were times when I watched something going on in the hospital and thought, 'I could do that. I could make a jig that would probably do that better,'" Schmidt says. "One of my thoughts is, and most likely this will happen if I end up in an

**CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT—**

"Vessel #1" (2002); wenge, hemp, glass insert; 23" x 10" x 10"

"Vessel #2" (2002); ebonized white oak, hemp; 23" x 10" x 10"

"Horn Speaker" [one of pair] (1997); cherry, steel, phenolic, aluminum, graphite-impregnated PVC, Baltic birch plywood, HDF, woofers, mid- and high-frequency drivers; 72" x 46" x 28" each.

"Meditation Table and Kneeling Benches" (2001); wenge (table), imbuaya (benches); 16" x 42" x 18" (table), 8" x 21" x 7" (each bench).

OR as a nurse, I will inevitably design tools because that's where they get designed. But you have a group of people who really don't have design experience—they're nurses, they're doctors."

Back in high school, Schmidt had worked in a local hospital as both a janitor and orderly, which gave him a solid grounding in how hospitals work and an admiration for both patients and those who cared for them. But his conversion from furnituremaker to student nurse crystallized last summer as his father-in-law lay dying in a hospital. He asked for a root beer float, and Schmidt went off to find him one. He wandered down the hall and mostly by instinct went into a staff lounge where he knew from his high school experience he would find the ingredients. He made the float. "Walking back to his bed," he remembers, "I realized I could see myself doing that."

Part of the attraction is his general fascination with process. "I don't care what it is," he says. "If you came in here and told me you were a groundskeeper at a local cemetery I'd be into it. Process is the whole intrigue to

me, and there's certainly a ton of process in medicine that is very interesting."

Later in the year, the decision made to leave full-time furnituremaking, Schmidt planned a move to Baltimore. The city is home to Johns Hopkins University, a branch of the University of Maryland, and a community college where he could take math and science classes before applying to nursing school. Baltimore is also a lot closer to Tacoma Park, Maryland, where his wife, Jane, is producing director for the Liz Lehman Dance Exchange. Jane had been telecommuting with the Dance Exchange for several years while they lived in New Hampshire. She flew down occasionally but basically managed the job long distance. Then an opportunity for a new role came up. It would mean a move, but with Schmidt free of the Button Factory it could be done. Soon they were packing.

**A MIXED REACTION**

News of his decision to change careers soon seeped out. Schmidt got a taste of the reaction he was likely to get when he broke the



TWO PHOTOS BY REID PLOUFFE

PHOTO BY GEORGE BARKER

PHOTO BY BILL TRUSLOW



PHOTO BY GEORGE BARKER

Scott Schmidt at his bench in the Button Factory, 1989, carving legs for a mahogany sleigh bed.

news to his 9-year-old daughter. She burst into tears and told him she couldn't imagine him *not* being a furnituremaker. "It was the only way she had ever known me. 'Okay,' I asked, 'what's the other reason?' 'Just don't be a nurse,' she said. 'Nurses are girls.' She sort of summed it all up there."

He got the same reaction at the North Bennet Street School when he went down to give a talk on furniture design. He was describing some of the things he wanted to make, and it finally dawned on the class that he wasn't talking about making things that were necessarily functional. "They said, 'How are you going to support yourself with that because there's no market for it,' and I said, 'Well, I'm going to become a nurse,' and the whole room cracked up. They thought it was a great joke, you know, and I laughed with them for a while, and then I said, 'No, seriously, I'm going to be a nurse.' Dead silence."

Among his artisan peers, Schmidt found shock, then acceptance, and in the end, maybe even a little envy that he had managed to find something else to do that promised better emotional and financial rewards. "Someone came in who more or less said I was betraying the craft," Schmidt says, "that it does not bode well for the others left behind. I don't know what to say about that, but I say let's have a dose of reality here. There's very little talked about in the arts and crafts world other than the work itself, right? Not many people are talking about how far in debt they are, how really hard it is to do this. Do they have insur-

ance? What's their retirement plan? What's their net like? How do they survive a finger accident like I did? That's real life. It makes me wonder if most people in the art world are on trust funds. Why isn't this conversation taking place? Maybe I'm all wet. I probably am. My view is just limited to my own experience, but for me, to get what I wanted out of what I was doing, it was not financially fulfilling, or ultimately worth the time that it took."

Shock among those who knew Schmidt soon subsided. Even some of those who harshly criticized Schmidt for abandoning the trade later returned to say that they, too, could think of nothing better than what he was about to do, taking his life and just flipping it around. It prompted him to think that more than a few artisans had become trapped by their lives, identifying themselves as artists and unable to break free of that *persona* even when the life proved hard and unsatisfying.

DROP BY FOR PIZZA

Packing day brings visitors to Schmidt's shop, people who have heard he's leaving in a couple of days and want to wish him well. Two of his friends show up late in the afternoon to help him organize what remains of his equipment; eventually they move to Schmidt's wood room. It had looked deceptively empty but now yields hidden artifacts, including the very chair whose arm had sucked Schmidt's hand into the shaper. He had assembled it and put it on a shelf, and Schmidt now sets it aside, to make sure he

takes it with him.

Much of the work would not get done this afternoon. But at 5 o'clock, Schmidt is invited down the hall to a big cooperative woodworking shop where his Button Factory mates had brought in pizza and beer. He visits with the two dozen friends and fellow artisans who have gathered, many of whom will obviously miss him.

The next time we're in touch is by e-mail, six weeks after his move. He is taking algebra, which is coming hard. Ahead is biology and anatomy. The Button Factory seems far away. He's caught between past and future. Life as a furnituremaker was not easy and Schmidt is anxious to move on. Still, he has managed to find a house in Baltimore with a free-standing shop of roughly 150 square feet where he continues to work as much as 20 hours a week to finish a few pending furniture commissions. Woodworking, it turns out, had been about much more than furnituremaking, and so might his transition to something else.

"It could be liberating, and it could be terribly frightening at the same time," he writes. "Part of succeeding in your craft is that at some point your craft begins to support you. That can mean financially and emotionally. I think that emotionally I always felt good about the work I was doing. I have pieces I can look at right now, and there's a certain sense of completeness, because whether anybody else likes it you know that it was a rich, complete moment. That piece worked, and it supports you in some fashion because you know that you're capable of creating that."

"It is odd to have so totally left that reality behind. It has caused me to have all sorts of difficult conversations in my head. Conversations easily drowned out by power tools and phone calls. Having the shop set up next to my house is great, though. Just a couple steps away and I am in a capsule of my old world."

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