

The world of the possible

Darren Loucaides meets Nick Thwaites, whose singular vision enables him to see the possibility written in the small print of wild grain



Words: Darren Loucaides Photos: Dave Roberts Studio photos: John Melville

“When you’re in a different country, you think you can do anything; for some reason everything seems possible”

In my hands is a waney-edged piece of burr elm the size of a door-stop sandwich that has been sanded and polished so that its marbled grain compels you to pick it up, run your fingers over its glassy surface, and explore the plumes of its figure’s billowing flames. “That burr,” says Nick, noticing my curiosity, “was in the firebox. I pulled it out in an idle moment, planed it up, polished and oiled it. It was doing that that made me think of trying this.” ‘This’ is a small table that uses assorted off-cuts of elm: individually, its

parts were essentially useless, but assembled, their characters and colours create a spectacular visual whole that’s greater than the sum of its parts. Many of Nick’s projects start this way. He hits upon the kernel of an idea that he’s keen to pursue, then allows it to grow by contemplation until it provides the inspiration for a design. It’s a revelatory process by which Nick sees possibility where others might see impossibility, and which enables wild patterns and knotted growths to be transformed from seeming difficulties into design features. And it works - it was this outlook, in fact, that played a crucial role in his decision to become a furniture maker in the first place. You see, up until five years ago he was a corporate lawyer with a 20-year career behind him...



East meets west

The story starts in Japan. After university, and before going to law school, Nick spent a year there teaching English. He enjoyed his Far Eastern experience so much that on his return he applied to law firms with offices in Tokyo. He joined Linklaters in 1988, qualified in 1990, and three years later was back in Japan. He then spent 12 years abroad, working in Singapore and Thailand as well as Japan; while in Singapore he also met his wife, Sharon, who was working at another law firm.

In 2005, however, Nick returned to England with Sharon, exchanging a life in the Far East for a lifestyle in which they could become involved in the local community around Awliscombe, near Honiton, where he now lives. "It's something that I never had growing up," he says. "I was always abroad, moving around; my father worked in the tea trade. I lived in India, Sri Lanka and Kenya as a boy. Then I came back and went to boarding school from age eight." He pauses, pensive. "We wanted our children to be rooted," he affirms.

Paradoxically, while Nick came home in search of stability, he also returned to make a



Desk

Oak and elm

"I made the desk and chairs for the same clients as the side tables (see below). This piece was to go in a study with oak bookcases on the opposite wall, and the customers wanted oak and a solid wooden top rather than a leather skiver. The panelling on the ends, which you can see as you come into the room, references the bookcases; I suggested the elm.

"In many ways it's not especially complicated, but there's a lot of work in it. For example, I wanted to make the legs look as if they run up into the top, which they don't, so they're cut from the same stock. The top and bottom layers of the top are both solid; it might have been possible to limit the bottom piece to a strip around the edge, but I wanted to have the end-grain showing, and I thought it would look rather poor if there was a hole underneath the desktop.

"I was quite pleased with the drawers, particularly the leather lining and the pen tray. I thought, you only actually need a few millimetres' depth for pens, but a drawer of that depth wouldn't look right. The inside tray, then, was a good use of space, tho' it was tricky to get it perfectly fitted without affecting the fit of the drawer; there was a lot of fiddling around. I was pleased with the walnut handles, too, and their sycamore plugs. They curve two ways, they're nice to hold, and are clearly handmade."



Small table

Elm and wenge

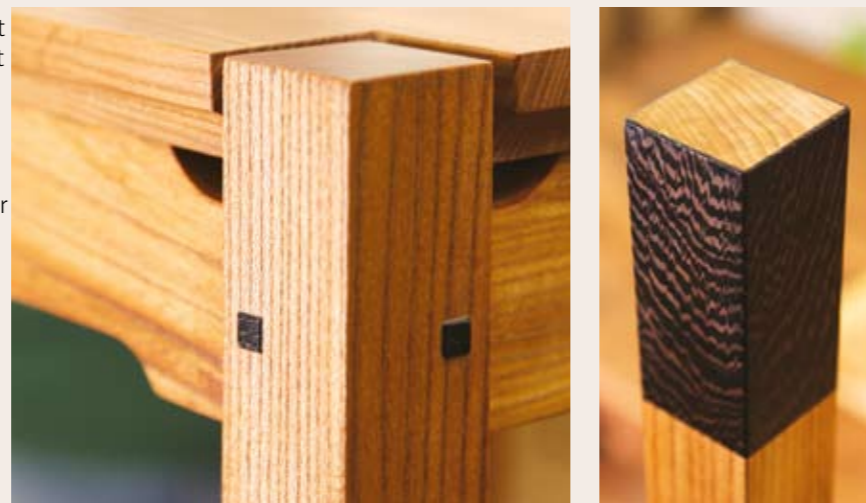
"A lot of my pieces start with me wanting to try out a particular idea. In this case I wanted to use elm boards from early projects; just off-cuts, really. I'd originally discarded them because of their knots and wild grain, but this also gave them a lot of character, which I thought could be worked into a piece.

"For the veneered 'shoes' on the feet of the legs, I cut a shallow rebate around the end of each leg, glued the slices of wenge into place, one opposing pair at a time, and then planed them flush. The shoes help to emphasise the slight taper on the legs, but it made for tricky work cutting the tenon shoulders on the rails, because they weren't square. Another difficulty was that I wanted the rails set back – really they sit closer to the inner than the outer sides of the legs – but this doesn't leave me much room for the tenons.

"The crossbanding set into the top again came about by experimenting with some elm. I noticed some wonderful end-grain with lots of the colour that you get with elm; there's even some green in there. It wasn't difficult, but you have to be methodical, and using end-grain rather than the usual long-grain pieces throws up some issues.

I routed a 40mm channel and planed the end-grain slices individually to width, using a shooting board for this and, critically, for the square or mitred joints between pieces. The glue was applied to the trench rather than the slices, so that they wouldn't expand before they could be fitted but even so, as soon as I inserted them they started buckling; I had to apply cauls and cramp them immediately. I did the job in stages, tackling one corner first, then working on its opposite, and so on.

"I actually made three of these tables; two for a customer, and the wildest one for me!"



career change: he left the law and began a year-long course with Chris Faulkner in Dartington. For many, this sort of change might appear fraught with difficulty, but Nick's ex-pat life allowed him to see things differently: "When you're in a different country, you begin to think that you can do anything; for some reason, because you're not at home, everything feels possible."

Optimism is one thing, of course, but actually acquiring the skills necessary to set up a business is quite another. He'd never done any real woodworking before, "[but] I thought that I could always go back to law and make furniture as a hobby," he remembers. "In any case, it would be a good year!"

In the event, Nick proved himself to be more than capable. One of the early tasks that Chris set him was to make a side table. Although this bears many of the hallmarks of the master's style, it also incorporates an interesting quirk that belongs to the apprentice Nick: a downward curve to the top's underside. Chris told him that this design was too complicated and that he shouldn't attempt it, but Nick insisted. The success of the piece not only proved Nick right, but also demonstrated that the course had succeeded in producing a confident, competent designer, and in 2007 Nick set up a workshop of his own adjacent to his Georgian house in Devon.



Side tables

Black walnut and glass

"I made these pieces in 2009. The legs are curved both at the sides and out to the ends. The stretcher shows a bit of Krenov's influence, and was surprisingly tricky to make because of the cut-out in the middle, which goes down to such a narrow point. My solution was to make it in two halves: starting with a board of the necessary width, then cutting it lengthways down the middle so that I could shape the two halves using a template, after which they were glued back together. Because they're two halves of the same board, the glue line is invisible.

"The tables may look simple, but because the glass isn't flexible the table sides need to be perfectly parallel or the top will rock in its rebates. To stop that happening if the wood moves over time, I deliberately made the fit of the glass quite tight; to install it you flex the two pairs of feet inwards by a few millimetres spreading the top just enough to receive the glass and grip it in place."



But why furniture?

The obvious question, of course, is what made him think he could make furniture in the first place? To answer this we have to travel back to Bangkok, where Nick became acquainted with a local workshop that made furniture to a decent standard for an irresistible price. "They wouldn't get everything right," Nick recalls, "but they'd make a good job of it for the money." When Nick and Sharon moved into a large empty house in Bangkok, he took the opportunity to indulge a long-held interest in furniture by designing pieces of his own. Though he makes no great claims, as he says, for the pieces, this was clearly the point at which his path to the workshop began.

"I'm quite surprised when people say, 'Why furniture?'" Nick elaborates. "For me, it was a case of, 'Why not?' It seemed like the perfect blend of art and science: the technical aspect of joints and wood mixed with a creative dimension. It's universal, ancient and traditional, much more of a real world than fine arts." You can see, then, how Nick's decision to make furniture his career came about through a gradual process that is now mirrored in his approach to projects: "I find designing slow," he admits. "I think I've got an idea, then I put it down on paper and it seems like nothing. Very often the difference between that 'nothing' and something that works is very small but it involves hard grind - hours and hours of what seems like very unproductive time. Sharon will tell you that, quite often I'll come back to the house halfway through a day in the workshop and say, 'I don't know how I'm going to do this.'"

Because Nick tends to design pieces that are



Coffee table

Wild English cherry and ebony detailing

"This was one of my very first pieces, made in early 2008, and I'm very pleased with it. It involved an awful lot of work, which these days I would factor more into the price! It was for a large, fairly formal drawing room with some quite gothic pieces in it, and a magnificent Victorian bookcase in particular. Though your attention may be drawn by the legs themselves, I feel that it's their domed octagonal tops that reflect the table's surroundings; creating their regular sections divided by nice crisp lines took a lot of time and care. When I first did these, it was the end of the day, and I thought they looked fine. The next day, the low morning sun raking across the work showed up every little imperfection, so I spent more time on them. If I need to do real detail work, or fine finishing, I always do it in daylight.

"The junction between the top of the table and the legs was another area that was difficult to get right. The top fits around the legs rather than notching into them, which would leave vulnerable short grain above, and perfecting the fit just as the mitre comes together was fiddly. That's why the dovetail keys are there: though movement is unlikely given the size of the mitres, they help to prevent the joint opening up if the wood shrinks. I also like the fact that these keys are not only practical but decorative, too."

new, at least to him, the challenge lies in figuring out how to make them, and how to make the fullest possible use of their three dimensions. For example, he's currently designing a dressing table that will be made from rippled sycamore, ebony, pear, and mahogany or rosewood. Although its basic design follows fairly classic lines, Nick has brought plenty to it that will keep him on his toes. The legs, for instance, will appear to break through the top, while he's given a lot of thought to the shape of the desk in order to avoid flat, purely rectilinear forms. The edges of the mirror frame, meanwhile, are very thin and will be flush with the mirror itself. The curved gallery will have secret dovetails, which aren't easy to cut without a straight reference

edge. There are also drawers on two levels and all the sides are curved, while the frame needs to be such that it will support everything.

"It took an enormous amount of time to design," Nick points out. "I spent a long time thinking about it as I don't like sending off a design to clients before I've worked out how I'm going to make it," he says. Perhaps it's a legacy of his legal training, but approaching tasks with patience and consideration is what seems to underpin everything that Nick does. And because of the time Nick invests in this contemplative process, because he sees opportunities and not just obstacles, remarkable things can happen during the design process.

One of the most captivating elements in his

lectern, for example, is the contrast between the sapwood and heartwood on the piece's walnut sides. This feature stemmed from a practical problem - is there any alternative to the waste involved in cutting away all the sapwood? Nick's answer was to transform the sap into an attribute, which lends the piece some sense of the original tree's shape. He plans to do something similar with a project he's working on at the moment - a rather sculptural rocker made in yew. The contrast between the creamy sap and fleshy heartwood is what makes the timber so sublime; building that characteristic in a rocking chair is unconventional and will lend the work one of its focal points.

Lectern

Walnut and ripple sycamore

"I made this last summer. It was commissioned by the head of the Hong Kong office of the law firm I used to work for. He's a litigator and likes to do his work standing up, which isn't as unusual as you'd think: quite a lot of people worked standing up - Ernest Hemingway; Winston Churchill. They tended to have normal desks raised on longer legs, though, whereas a lectern that can be used

not just to carry books but to write on needs to be robust enough for it not to wobble or tip when subjected to lateral forces. In particular the base needs to extend back to the point where a perpendicular line drawn from the centre of the writing desk would meet the floor. Then it needs to look elegant too. I spent a lot of time looking at lecterns and writing desks, and like any furniture maker I have to think about the mechanics, engaging in a bit of amateur engineering! My solution was that outward sweep of the sides.

"The dovetails are obviously a design feature, but they're the strongest means of linking the sides to the top. There are a lot of chamfers, too - with a lectern there's a natural tendency to grip the sides, after all. The walnut (supplied by Whitmores in Leicestershire) is from Croatia; I couldn't find a supply of English walnut in this size and quantity. Cutting out all that sapwood would be wasteful as there was so much of it, and after some thought I decided that it would actually create a nice contrast; you can see more of the shape of the tree. I think, with things like this, you look at the finished piece and ask, 'Does it detract from it, or enhance it?'"



Selling your skills

While Nick can clearly draw on creative resources of his own, he does associate with and bounce ideas off other makers. He's secretary of the Devon Furniture Makers Association which, in July, is putting on an exhibition at RHS Rosemoor. In preparing his exhibit, Nick has been leaning on the advice of his elders: "One of the oldest members of the DFM said that, when making a piece of furniture for an exhibition, never make something that you don't want in your house" - a reflection on the difference between a piece made to showcase your skills, and a skilfully made piece that will sell. Not that grandstanding is Nick's style, mind you. "Sometimes, you see a piece by a virtuoso and you'll know that the guy was thinking, 'Look what I can do', rather than 'What's the furniture supposed to do?'" Of his own flourishes - the plentiful supply of through dovetails in his portfolio, for example - Nick says, "I do like my furniture to shout 'handmade'; that's my one vice, I guess."

More than a signature

I'm not suggesting that turning flaws into features is Nick's signature, more that it epitomises the way that he sees things as a designer: that he is able to allow unexpected things to happen, even letting them take pride of place in his work, is a mark of the depth and intensity of thought that goes into his materials and designs. His pieces are compelling because they capture beautiful moments: a feeling had one bright afternoon in the 'shop; the lightning strike of realisation; a woodworking doodle that returns a reward. All of these can be read in the small print of a piece's grain, and fill Nick's work with humanity.