

A desk for every home

My daughters are getting to the age when they believe that they need their own desks - the kitchen table will no longer do for homework apparently. They are right of course: everyone needs a desk. It should (in my view) be simple: an uncluttered surface, just enough drawers to store a few of your favourite things: pens, writing paper, an iPad or laptop, none of which are bulky, so the drawers do not have to be deep, meaning that your legs fit comfortably underneath. In fact the whole thing should be light and airy - just surface, support and sculptural elegance.

Then, conveniently, last year, I received two desk commissions at around the same time. I had the beginnings of the design in my head and after three days - and a stack of paper and an inch or two of pencil lead - I had worked it into a shape I was happy with. If you received my last Newsletter you will have seen the drawing. Here is the real thing.



Three drawer desk in oak and English cherry.

The commissions were for two very different spaces, but this worked in both. Its form (if not its construction) is simple; it is rock solid and it will last for ever. And while the elements that define this desk - the sinuous Zs at each end, the gentle vertical curve along the front edge - are fixed, each desk can be customised: one or two drawers instead of three for example; a thick leather writing surface set flush into the top, or different timbers: this is oak with English cherry drawer fronts but many other combinations would work well.

Originally conceived for teenagers heading towards their first serious exams, and to last them all their lives, I'd like to think this desk, uniquely configured to suit its owner, has a place in every home.

Dressed up



I cannot, hand on heart, say that everyone needs a dressing table. Indeed even having space for one might be considered a luxury: they are a wonderful indulgence, so when a commission comes along it is exciting. This table, completed shortly before Christmas, was for a house built on a bluff commanding a bend in the River Wye. In the garden stand the romantic ruins of a marcher castle casting a stern shadow over any turbulent Welshmen on the far bank.

I hope it doesn't sound too fanciful to say that some of these influences are threaded into the design of the dressing table: in the solid walnut legs that buttress each side and the winding S-curve of the front. With lid down it is compact and richly dark. Only the pale centre of the handle ring hints at what lies inside. Raise the lid

and the ripple sycamore interior, set on three levels to accommodate a battery of different sized pots and bottles, glows as the lights come on.

In a piece that is fairly well stocked with challenges for the maker, the drawer handles probably top the bill: a split ring of Indian rosewood, its inner edge undercut to provide purchase for the fingers, around an inset disc of ripple sycamore. Setting it into a single, flat, drawer front would be interesting, dividing it between two concave drawers needs to be handled with real care and precision. It's not just showing off: handles are your physical connection to the furniture, and it is here, above all, that I try to go beyond the standard solution.

Wood technology

Rough diamonds:
English walnut boards.



The timber for the desk and the dressing table came from some of my regular suppliers and arrived ready to start work on, but I sometimes use timber that I have bought 'green', such as the English walnut that I am using for my current project, sawn from the log at a small mill in North Devon. Properly stacked under cover for four years, the moisture content dropped to about 18 per cent. However, as anyone who has had a wooden floor installed knows, once brought indoors, the moisture content of wood falls further, tending towards an equilibrium range around 9 - 11 per cent. (in the UK at least). While wood will always shrink and expand as its moisture content falls and rises, and properly constructed furniture will cope with this, it is important to get down to that equilibrium range before starting work. Most furniture makers will agree that timber movement is the single most troubling issue that they face.

One way of dealing with this issue is to bring the timber into the workshop several months in advance, but that isn't always possible, so I recently acquired a kiln. The name is slightly misleading: unlike the pottery or charcoal versions, this just warms the wood slightly with three (old style) 60 watt lightbulbs, the real work being done by a heavy duty dehumidifier, which maintains air circulation and gently draws the moisture out of the boards. The key is not to rush things: if the moisture gradient (the difference between the surface and the core of the board) becomes too steep there is a risk of cracks opening up on the outside or even the collapse of the cell structure in the centre.

The kiln, acquired from a fellow furniture-maker in North Devon, looks like a giant chest freezer and weighs about half a ton, so manhandling it on to and off the trailer, was a wonderful exercise in Stonehenge engineering.

Information technology



(left) Slim drawers and a comfortable arm chair. Fabric by Rapture & Wright - a.k.a. my brother and his wife - recently included in *The Sunday Times*' list of the UK's 30 top artisan designers.

(below) The lid opens to reveal lights, a mirror and the glow of sycamore.

If you find these newsletters interesting and would like access to more frequent updates from the workshop, please visit my facebook page (below). If you are on facebook, you can "like" the Nick Thwaites Furniture page or click on "Follow" to receive my occasional posts (you won't be bombarded). Likewise my new Pinterest page, where I will collect designs that appeal to me, as well as all my own work.

As always, if you like what you see please share it with others. Nick Thwaites Furniture has no ambition to conquer the world, just to reach that small proportion of the global population who may aspire to own a piece

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