

## Splinters Podcast

Furniture Design      March 18, 2025

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GR: Hi there, welcome to Splinters. This is Gary Rogowski. Thanks for joining us today. Today's chat is about design. And I have with me two furniture designers. Ashley Piper of Shallow Creek Woodcraft is with us. She's been helping out with the Q&A sessions recently. Hello, Ash.

AP: Hey, how's it going? Gary and Bruce.

GR: And Bruce Branson-Meyer is currently a student with me in the Online Mastery Program. Hi, Bruce.

BB: Hello, Gary. Hi, Ash.

GR: Thank you both for joining me. Interestingly, they have also been working together at Ashley as Bruce's mentor in the online program this year. And to talk about ideas and change designs, I guess. Discuss problems that pop up. But so they're familiar with each other and their work. And I thought it would be fun to talk with them about this design process. It's not something that new woodworkers rush out to do. Usually most folks are happy to just copy something, you know, from a magazine or a book or reproduce a past masterpiece. But there's something about this design process that I think intrigues the three of us, and I just wanted to, or terrifies us, all of these things. But I'd like to talk about the design process in general. And then maybe if we have time, we'll talk in more in specific about a particular challenge that one of us is facing Bruce and his chair. Anyway, Ash, if you'd like to get started, tell us a little bit about your thoughts on design.

AP: Well, I feel like it's an ever evolving thing. I think as I see new designs, as I learn about other people's approaches, even in different mediums outside of wood and furniture in general, I think it creates a path forward. And so I think it's always evolving. So I try to stay very open-minded about it and always consider that there is ways for my perspective to continue to change. I think that also allows more creativity to flow. And that's something that I always want to facilitate, just creativity from all kinds of sources, because I feel like design gives me room as a person to project all my silly, crazy little thoughts about the world and how I perceive that and augment it into furniture.

GR: Bruce, do you want to share some thoughts?

BB: Yeah, I had a life in graphic design for about 30 years so I come from maybe from a little bit different perspective. I think the idea of design is sort of similar across all media, but I came maybe in a

more two-dimensional world to a three-dimensional world. That being said, I have to keep reminding myself that furniture is a subtractive kind of thing. You're taking big chunks of wood and taking pieces off of it, where graphic design is a little bit more of an additive thing. You start with a blank sheet and add things to it. Of course, it can get into three dimension as well if you're talking about product design or packaging, but they all start sort of for me in a space in my head, in a pondering, kind of wandering, searching thing, trying to get a feel for something. I don't really think about, like I don't look at other people's work as much because I think it, it imprints on me, and I don't want to do that. So I'm looking at all kinds of other things in the material world, in the art world. And it's a long process. So, I guess you just keep letting it pile onto you until something comes out, comes out in a pen or somehow so.

GR: Do you find that ideas pop up in bunches, or is it a desert that you go to certain oases, get inspiration?

BB: You know, I don't think the things pop up in bunches, because I'm usually thinking, I may have a couple things brewing at once, but I'm, I'm pretty focused, I guess, on a space. Sort of solving a solution without knowing, you know, or solving a problem, but not, like, technically, more like emotionally, mood-like feeling. What's the feeling that I'm trying to decide? And then labels start piling on top of it, like my, my Moonrise pieces that I did. I don't know. There was just a sense there that I liked this idea of motion and repeating circles and watching the moon. And, and then I applied that almost graphically to a 3D piece. And that's where that sense came from. If that makes any sense.

GR: Yeah. No, no, it makes perfect sense. Ashley, do you have, do you start with an idea or do you start with a function? Where do you start?

AP: I think it depends. I think if it's for a job, if it's for someone who's contacted me, I think the approach is much different than the times that I'm just designing from just pure creativity or riffing off another idea of something else that I have. So I think when it comes to designing for a client, it starts really with purpose, you know, environment, space, and then inspirations that excite me that can apply to those things and tie them together. I think if it's just the in-between times when I have some kind of idea where I don't really have those parameters, it's certainly a different approach because I don't really have any of those other lines to move in. So I can just start winging it and come out with something different.

GR: Does this ever happen to you guys? I just, I had this idea about doing these wall panels, small, eight inch squares. And and I painted them months ago. And they were sitting around on my bench and sitting around on my bench. I don't know, like two weeks ago, I said, I'm doing it. And I sharpened my carving tools. And so they're MDF panels, and they're painted a dark green and then I carve into it and create these patterns, nothing earth shaking, just ideas that had hit my sketchbook. And I just wanted to see them, and, and I realized that it didn't pop enough and I'd add white to the, to the carvings, but I put them up. It gave me this other idea just completely off the wall, just out of left field. It's like, oh, I haven't thought of that before. Do things ever hit you like that? Oh, you seem to find that when I'm working on something, something else shows up.

AP: Yeah, I think that's some of the most fun. And I think that's where the in-between creative is what I was kind of calling it before, even when working on a piece for somebody else. And then you just, I think you're immersed in that, like, what if I change this? Or how could this look different? Like that iterative process, like Bruce was alluding to earlier when we first started talking, you just start to get these ideas generating off of things. And maybe it's just a tangible sense of working with things, and you can see it

easier than that ideation phase before that. But definitely, it'll be like a side quest for a moment where I'm sketching something down and like, wow, this is amazing. It has nothing to do with the other thing.

GR: Yeah. Right. It's fun. Yeah. Bruce, do you have that?

BB: Yeah, I think so too. Especially when there's an offcut or a piece of wood sitting there and all of a sudden you think, "Oh, I see where that belongs. It's been sitting in my shop for months, but now I know that's a side table." And so I may not get to it right away. I'm kind of busy with this class I'm in, but I'll get to it. It's super fun to be inspired in a way it comes to you unbeckoned and that's great.

GR: Yeah, I don't think that happens. It doesn't happen to me often enough. You know, I need a project or I need something to push me forward. But when it does, that is really fun. Yeah, I think it's a gift. You just got to run with it and see where it takes you. And it may go nowhere. That's the other thing. It may just be one of those things that pops up.

AP: Yeah, but I think that's a healthy thing, though. I think it's like fleeting, and you just can expel that, and you feel good about that process. And it doesn't really matter if it's something that means anything to anybody else. I think it's just serving the creative purpose for yourself.

GR: Right. Are there steps that you take to get ready to design? Or is it just, I'm a designer.

BB: Wow.

GR: I go through a process where I try and empty, which is not too hard, empty my brain, you know just doing something really Monday, go for a walk or do the dishes or whatever, and then sit down and start to work on ideas. So I, you know, I try to clean the plate or the counter or the table or whatever that image is before I get started.

BB: I think that I, like you, like to walk and just I guess that's a good way to clear my head. But I'm not sure. I think I said this earlier is I try and put myself in the space where the piece is going to be, especially if it's in my house. Like, and then I can sort of imagine everything around it, what it would be like. And I don't get too into the weeds about, you know, whether there's going to have to be three drawers because of this, or I just start trying to look at it, trying to imagine it in the space. And, and that really helps, I think, bring ideas to me. I do a lot of editing in my head, I think. And that sounds probably a little bit of an excuse for not drawing as much as I should. But at some point, I feel like I've gotten rid of a lot of ideas that were too blurry and focused down on some things that I can really start sketching on. I guess that's where I go. And it may, I don't think about a bunch of different pieces at a time, but I may be thinking about three or four different things throughout the weeks, and then I'll, like, which one inspires me to take forward?

GR: Do you keep a notebook? Do you keep a sketchpad or?

BB: Yes, there's probably three or four around and I really wish I could keep them all in one, but I never do. Or I'll sketch on a piece of paper and shove it in my pocket. I'm really bad at carrying a notebook around.

AP: Yeah, I'm a little opposite. I think I have like little scribbly, rough sketches just around. And that

kind of makes me feel unrestrained. I'll just kind of scribble it down or sketch it down. And then I need to break and return to it. I think it's nice to revisit something, because then you don't feel pressured to just make it work right off that just having the framework of whatever it's going to be is kind of there. And then it gives me the opportunity to augment and just kind of keep building on it. So I like to be outside too. So I'll go find something to go do outside, whether that's farm chores or go for a little hike or just busy myself organizing something else in the shop. And sometimes that's enough of a brain break to come back and look at something and say, 'Okay, yeah, that was a terrible idea. I really don't like that.' And you scribble it out, you know, scratch again, and then, and then move forward.

GR: Yeah. Right. Do you feel that you have a vocabulary of design?

AP: Oh, I don't know. Maybe I need to not look at that through a self-critical lens. Yeah, I mean, sometimes I feel like I do have natural tendencies for the visuals that I like. If that really lends to really being a design voice yet, I'm unsure sometimes.

BB: Yeah, it's interesting. People in our class will say, "Oh, that's Bruce's. That's. You can tell that's Bruce's." And I, there are things that I like and I'm repeating now. I don't know that they're going to be like any my signature piece, because it's just, it's some curves. It's some overhangs that I like. It's some wedge shapes, but they'll evolve. You know, maybe that is your style for a while and you move on to things, but I don't worry too much about having a particular style as much as just making it feel good to me. It's interesting. I heard a couple other builders talking, furniture makers, about sketching and they said, they both of them, and I don't think they were talking to each other. I think it was in different places maybe I read one where they find that they see themselves sketching the same thing over and over and over again. And they say, well, that's when I know I'm there and that's the piece I should be working. And I always thought it was me being in a rut and not being able to have any new ideas. So I'm going to take their thoughts about that. And you know I'm not in a rut anymore. I'm in the groove. I'm ready to go.

GR: There you go. There you go.

AP: Yeah, it's a good perspective to keep. I think if something's a repeating theme, it's because you kind of just need to make it.

BB : Yeah.

GR: Well, I have two thoughts on this. One is that people would say to me the same thing, well, I immediately recognized that as your style. And I was like, that was such a different piece. That was a departure for me or something. But thinking about your style, Bruce, it is very apparent. And it's not detail so much as an overall sense of how the piece feels, really, that I recognize, 'oh, that's one of Bruce's'. And same with Ash's work. But there's a different energy, I guess, to each of your work. And that's perceptible. You can get that. My other thought is this great quote by Fred Astaire, the old time dancer, who said, 'That after a certain time, your quirks, your mistakes become your style.' All the things that you didn't do right, they're now a part of how you're known. So I think too often people have this idea, I know I did, of, okay, so what's the right way to design this piece? What can I do that is correct? There are no rules for that. There are no correct designs. There are designs, and some work better than others. But I think people have this notion that it has to fit a certain way and fit into a box, perhaps. I don't know.

AP: Do you think that's where a lot of people who are new to design end up with very linear designs because it feels like a comfort in parameters or proportions to hit that design mark?

GR: Yeah I don't know about that as so much as not feeling too, too revealed by doing something really, really crazy. The linear stuff, I think, just occurs fairly naturally. You know, you draw a line, you make a box, you know, because I do take exception with Bruce's comment that we're doing subtractive work in furniture making. I find it very additive. We do start with a log. Yeah. Throw away 90% of it to get these several boards flat, square, straight. And that's where the lines, the linear aspect comes in.

AP: Just process. Yeah.

BB: It's more of a mental thing for me when I was, I didn't mean to offend anybody on that. Oh, no, no offense. How you build things, you know? I mean, I have, because I'm still learning the joinery, the right way to do things, I realize a lot of times, you know, I can't just paste something on top of it. I've got to figure out how they how they meld together, you know?

GR: Right.

BB: And that's the thing about my design that I really like is I'm trying to, we were talking about the chair a little bit earlier and how I've evolved it now. I went too far down an engineering path of things, making sure that it was going to come together in a logical fashion. And I lost the life of the chair that I wanted. So I went back to where I had been. And now I have a design I really like and I'm struggling through the construction of it. And that's okay. That comes naturally later on, right?

GR: One hopes. For those of you at home, my fingers are crossed for Bruce. Well, it's woodworking can be either additive or subtractive, I think. Sometimes a little of both in a piece. Joinery for the most part is an additive, additive process. Thinking it through is not creative stuff. It is engineering and can be tedious sometimes. With furniture, I don't find just run into the wood room, grab some boards and cut them up and say, what am I going to make? Doesn't work like that.

AP: Doesn't go well.

GR: Yeah. It's, you know, it's really hard to come at it with that kind of abandon that I imagine painters do. I was going to this marketing seminar and I pitched a ride or gave a ride to this painter. And he was describing his process, which was, you know, think about some stuff and do some stuff. And then one weekend, bang out five or six paintings. Maybe I'm exaggerating two or three paintings, but more than one. And, and I thought, well, aren't you lucky to be able to, you know, I don't know how good his work was, knock out, you know, several pieces in such a short period of time. And I don't know what the gestation period is in order to get to that point. Painting is a very subjective, subjective thing, whereas furniture is has to function at different levels, I think. And whether that's just on the functional level, well, I don't think that's enough. If you're just satisfying the functional requirement, there's opportunities for you as a designer. If someone was just starting out, what would you have them design first?

AP: Yeah, is this a trick question?

GR: I just came up with that. I didn't even write that down.

AP: I've often told people that I really appreciated from your class, that we started with a box, because it's such a simple form. But once you really start analyzing it, your decisions have a larger impact on what that aesthetic is very quickly, from poles, you know, size, scale, shape, to just the overall shaping. And so I think a box is really more challenging than you would think. So I think if you're starting out, it's a good start.

GR: Yeah.

BB: Yeah, I agree that the box allowed a lot of attention to details. I mean, you did the whole gamut from that experience in the, you know, as you see it across the room or across the table, to getting up close to it, seeing those details, touching things. We used Japanese papers in the bottom of it. So that whole is a full experience, you know, whether it's, it helps you work with proportions, which is a really, you know, the first thing I was thinking of, maybe it was going to be like a small cabinet, but a box is basically a small cabinet. So, somewhere in that range really makes sense, because then you can really start looking at proportions, which is almost the basis of design, I would think, and try and get people started in that right direction.

GR: Here are some thoughts I want to run by you and get your take on. Furniture design is so commonplace that we don't even notice it. Most people at all. People forget that pieces are designed. They just kind of appear in a store and you decide, is it not too expensive or expensive enough or beyond your wildest dreams expensive? And then we live with its discovered idiosyncrasies like the door handle's too low for my back now or the piece is too heavy to move around the room when you're trying to place it or the chair fits your body, but not that of your partners. And what your budget is IKEA based or custom made bespoke, however you want to describe handmade furniture, doesn't change the fact that all this work is designed. It's just that it's designed for either the simple or the extravagant budget. I know that I did a little research or read somewhere about IKEA's development of a kitchen, which will take three or four years of design work because they're trying to cut corners here, but still make it look sort of designy, air quotes.

And so there's a lot that goes into 'very simple'. And that extravagant budget piece can be based on production, marketing, sales cost, but style as well. And is it Art Deco, Danish Modern, or is it lacking style as in the Modernists? Clean lines, but no nuance or sense of proportions like the Shakers have. Design is something I don't think we can overlook. Few woodworkers like taking this task on. And I think it is a loss for them. For some, it makes them as anxious as a mathematics problem. For others, it's like deciphering a book from the ancient Greeks. Too daunting. And the familiar lament is often heard: Everything's already been done before. And there's no argument. But I would point out that the same could be said about developing a recipe for bread or writing a novel or sailing around the world. One does it for its own value.

And why not design one's own work? There is reward, I think, in the effort, compensation in the completion of a piece, rarely monetary. It's a, more often a satisfaction of having done something on one's own the pride of ownership. Here, this is what I've done. And we want to be seen for our work. We want to be noticed for it. There's no pricing sheet for that. Our time here is so short that it's hard to fault us for wanting to be remembered. What did I do that caused good comfort or discomfort? And if my latest chair design resembles the chair I sat in recently at the airport lounge, it's not my fault that most bodies are the same. We expect very much the same from our furniture as always. We have an anatomy that tends to repeat itself billions of times, right? The human body is variable, not that variable. And that's no wonder

it's hard to reinvent certain items like the chair. Our tables need flat tops. Our armoires need to be deep enough to hang a shirt.

If we satisfy this need for utility, then what else needs to be done? And this is where it gets interesting. Or as curious creatures, we humans like to try out new things. What if is a very powerful question when designing the arm of a chair? It can lead to interesting or perplexing or powerful shapes that invite investigation. And this kind of sculpting then makes the work of the furniture designer quite intriguing.

Is furniture a useful sculpture? Constantine Brancusi, the sculptor, said about buildings, 'architecture is inhabited sculpture'. So too, I think, is furniture, a type of useful sculpture. We sit surrounded by it.. We welcome its luck when we come home or understand it, if only subconsciously, that it's there. This is the place I belong to. So furniture design that can become then, I think, a kind of musical arrangement of parts and pieces with a rhythm to it, repeated variations or turns of phrase on a column or leg, moments of negative space that help to define the parts themselves. Miles Davis, the great jazz trumpeter, said, 'Don't play what's there. Play what's not there', which is a really interesting thought. And creating that negative space works much the same way as drawing does when you when you're sketching by drawing out a negative shape to find out what is positively there.

Design then I think is a statement of purpose. 'This is who I am and what I stand for. This is what I think makes a difference in the world. And this is how I see things.' It's not a slap dash affair or something I just threw together one weekend. It is an accumulated collection of ideas and shapes and tones that we bring together in new ways to create a body of work. And when done well sings for us long after our voice has gone silent. Pretty cool to be able to do this kind of work. And then we fail and we fail mightily and failure is an absolute part of the design effort. But if we keep practicing, I think we can do some good stuff. And that's what I'm trying to say with design.

BB: For me, that's the most important part. It's so fun. And you know in my situation where I'm not trying to sell pieces, I have that, at least not yet, I have that freedom to spend all my time thinking, designing. And yeah, I don't really think so much about what's going to be left with my name on it, but I do enjoy the process. That's what it's all about for me, I guess.

GR: Ash, thoughts?

AP: Yeah, I think that you're right as far as sculpture. I think that when we think of places we've liked to be like our grandparents' home, those pieces we often walk past them again and again, but there's a comfort in them, there's a statement in them, there's reasons that you want to carry them forward. And sometimes it's not just that it came from that family member, like the significance of the piece one way or another. It just carries forward to creating your environment, like the sideboard in the dining room. It's a piece that's continuously used in moments. And so I think when you go with the custom-designed furniture, you are taking a creative license on that and creating a feeling like if you wanted a more whimsical space, it's more expressive to who you are in your environment. And that's why I think they reach out to folks like us who have different design sense or a way of putting together these sculptural forms to show different parts. Like you said, a whole feeling comes with certain craftspeople, how their body of work appears.

And I think that's relatable because people like to be in that space with it, much like interesting buildings that we find ourselves wandering into and just, you know, wanderlust and, you know, immersed in details

of that architecture, because there's parts of it that just resonate with us or bring things out that teach us new things or are relatable or, you know, just evoke so many different parts of feeling that sometimes are probably hard to articulate, but I think that's where design is really important in that stuff.

BB: That reminds me. I mean, we always talk about considered design, right? That every little piece is considered. That's what makes it unique. You're considering it for yourself, you're considering it for the client. How does this fit? How does it feel? And I sort of look at it as a timeline of connection with that piece and its audience, whoever that may be. And remind myself that what we want in the end is an invitation to experience that work. It's all about experience. It's not about the experience around it, if that makes sense.

AP: I think it creates a symbolism. I mean, like when you go to somebody's house and things are really bright and colorful and funky shapes and, you know, they tend to just kind of be a more joyful person. It's funny how you gravitate to different parts of design that I think mirror parts of yourself or parts of you that you want to show to other people, like modern design, right? It can look so clean and orderly and some parts of it are almost staunch, you know, and serious. And you wonder about what kind of folks seek out that type of design. Is it like a mirroring that happens for that environment? You know, like I was saying about grandparents' furniture. Maybe it's also just that sense of homeiness and connection to, you know, family. That's what you want to mirror out to others. So when you're looking for designers or different kinds of furniture, you might be like unintentionally seeking some of that out to create your space and create that feeling for when other people are involved in it.

GR: Well, there's that whole sense in the book by Witold Rybczyński about Home. And he starts by talking about Ralph Lauren's, I guess you could buy furniture at certain department stores, and he had like four different rooms, like a Maritime room and Western room and had iconic pieces and colors and shapes, you know, in the Ralph Lauren style that fit that, that feeling, that notion. And so you can plug into that, that sense of the familiar and the pleasing, the comfortable. That is another way of designing furniture as well.

GR: I want to thank you very much to both of you for chatting with me about design. This was a lot of fun. There's more to talk about because we haven't talked about chairs yet. Thank you, Ashley. Thank you, Bruce.

AP: Thank you.

BB: You're welcome. Thanks, Gary.

GR: This has been Gary Rogowski for Splinters. Thank you so much for joining us. Please check out the website <https://Northwestwoodworking.com> for information about our setting up shop series and the online mastery program. And if you have questions, please drop me a line, studio at northwestwoodworking.com. We'll do another Q&A and answer those questions. Lots of fun. Thanks very much. Take care. Adios.