

# Artisans MAKING MODERN

WITHOUT NEW WORKERS RISING THROUGH THE RANKS, CRAFT WOULD BE IN CRISIS. COMPANIES MAKING HANDCRAFTED HOME FURNISHINGS ARE LEADING THE WAY IN SHAPING THE NEXT GENERATION. BY KAITLIN PETERSEN



“When we started, no one aspired to this kind of work,” says Dave Dawson, the founder and president of Charleston, South Carolina-based custom lighting company The Urban Electric Co. A lawyer by trade, he started the business with his wife 15 years ago. “At the time, the big furniture companies were moving to the Philippines, textile mills were closing across North Carolina, and a whole generation of kids hadn’t taken shop class in school,” he says. “American manufacturing was on the ropes.”

The search for employees to carry the torch for bespoke, bench-made product is happening across the country. New apprenticeship programs—more regimented than those of the past, with established curriculums and goals—have been a wellspring of new talent. “Without those skills passing on, craft dies,” says Dawson.

As the president and CEO of Chaddock, a Morganton, North Carolina-based furniture brand, Andrew Crone met young people who no longer considered furniture making a viable career. “These kids had seen their parents get laid off because a lot of furniture was

**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A welder in the McKinnon and Harris workshop in Richmond, Virginia. An artisan at McKinnon and Harris plots complex curves by hand. A McKinnon and Harris craftsman with a piece of the company’s aluminum outdoor furniture. At The Urban Electric Co., a craftsman constructs a light fixture.**

going overseas,” he says. He realized that he needed to win over the hearts and minds of young students years before they were ready to join his company, which still manufactures 90 percent of its lines in-house. “We started bringing middle and high school students to the plant to get them excited about the industry,” he says. Students start their tour where the raw lumber comes in, then follow a piece of furniture through the entire production process. By Crone’s account, the tours are working: “The students are amazed by the technology and the types of jobs we have here.”

Chaddock is also partnering with neighboring furniture manufacturers in Burke County, including Bernhardt, Duralee, EJ Victor, and Lexington Home Brands, on a training program for high school students that launches this January. (There’s a similar program nearby, pioneered by the likes of Century, Sherrill Furniture and Vanguard.) Operated through a community college, the program includes two or three semesters of training and an internship. The hope is that students will take the courses, excel, and want to stay on as employees. “They learn the vocation and get some hands-on experience,” says Crone. “If they’re qualified, we’ll hire them. It’s a great transition from school to a full-time job.”

Often, a company’s skills and manufacturing methodologies are so specific that management prefers to train everyone from scratch. “A lot of what we do is applied fine arts,” says Dawson of The Urban Electric Co., who looks for passion and talent over previous experience. “We want to see a demonstrated capability with your hands.” That could mean woodworking, jewelry making or tinkering with BMX bikes. Some applicants are right out of high school; others have a four-year degree or have attended technical school. (Dawson says that the company has had a lot of success with sculpture majors.) “Beyond that, we’re looking for an excitement and passion for what we’re doing—people who get giddy when we give them a tour of the shop.”

After 12 to 18 months at The Urban Electric Co., apprentices become craftspeople. From there, it’s another four to six years to advance to a senior craftsman, and another three to five years to become a master craftsman. (The company has eight master craftspeople in the shop and employs about 40 apprentices at any given time; currently, half of the craftspeople in the shop are women, including one master.) That career path is important to Dawson’s employees. “Advancements at every level are really celebrated,” he says. “We make an especially big deal of our master craftspeople—a



plaque on the wall, a party—because it is such a rarefied, respected thing. It’s not just about skills. It’s their ethics, being an example for the company, and being a good mentor.”

No matter the company, it takes at least a decade to become a master craftsman—years spent at the bottom, then slowly working up the chain of command, learning and teaching along the way. Celebrating the company culture is an intangible essential to success, says Philip Perrine, a master craftsman and head of facilities at McKinnon and Harris. He’s been at the Richmond, Virginia-based luxury outdoor furniture company for 20 years and has played a significant role in mentoring the its workforce. “A lot of manufacturing jobs are on the coarse side, but we don’t have that here,” he says.

“It’s more of a family environment, which makes it much easier to pass along information. Those of us who are older want to share what we know, and the people coming up are eager to learn new things. It’s somewhere between craft and caring, and that sentiment works itself into the furniture.”

The apprenticeships of old were often one-on-one relationships. (“Here’s your mentor, here’s your apprentice—hang out for a year,” says Dawson.) But today, they are structured and rigorous. At McKinnon and Harris, new hires rotate through all areas of the factory in a 90-day program. “They spend time in fabrication, where we’re looking at people’s skills,” explains Kevin Smith, the company’s workshop manager for the past 11 years. “Then

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they go to the fabrics department, which is very disciplined—that tells you about someone’s attention to detail. And then they spend four weeks in the finishing department to experience the furniture once it’s ready for the client.” Successful apprentices then specialize within a specific department. “We do lose people in that first 90 days—the program is not for everyone,” he says.

The work is hard, but often inspiring. “We’re very proud of the way we build,” says Smith. “Handcrafted’ can be misleading in this day and age, but as soon as people come into the shop, they relate straightaway to the fact that these pieces really are handcrafted—the average chair takes about 40 man-hours.” Each piece produced by McKinnon and Harris is emblazoned with a bronze nameplate that is signed and dated by a craftsman. “We make our furniture the hard way,” says Perrine. “It’s the old-fashioned way, but that’s because we’re making it the best way. People don’t come in because they’re looking for a job. They’re looking to contribute to making beautiful things.”