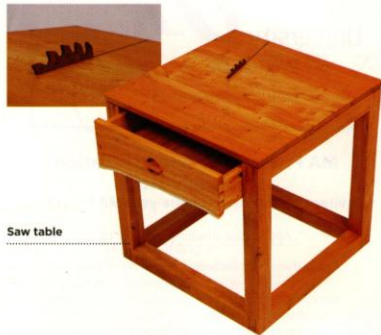
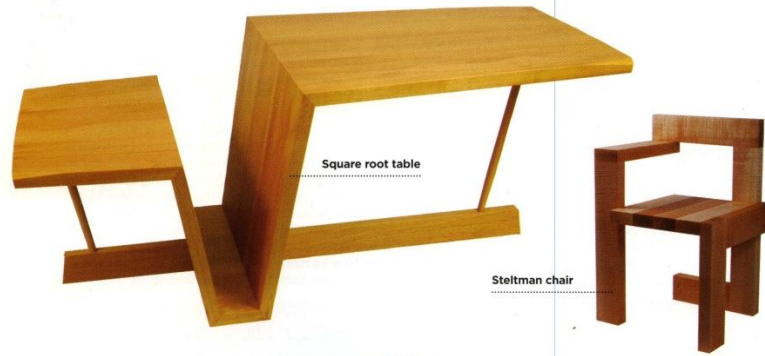


in profile



Saw table



Square root table

Steltman chair

Sawdust memories

Yukon woodworker Paul Gort replaces speed with whimsy

BY LEOPOLD KOWOLIK



Paul Gort

Frank Lloyd Wright called machines the “intellect mastering the drudgery of earth,” a way to “emancipate human expression.” Of course, in 2010 that sounds somewhat naive, and as the English sociologist Richard Sennett notes in his 2008 book about material culture, *The Craftsman*, after a century of experience with industrial machines, wariness of technology seems increasingly sensible.

Yet, as the British art historian Kenneth Clark argues, fearful conservatism can also endanger a civilization. So the way forward has to accommodate our insatiable appetite for technology as well as the need to retain our humanity.

Paul Gort is at the vanguard of this effort. When first looking at Gort’s work, two contradictory ideas come to mind: “I’ve seen this before, and “this is different.” Gort’s furniture is like all the furniture around, yet unlike most furniture around.

Gort, a native of Whitehorse, is an adherent of the slow furniture movement. One branch on the “slow tree”—along with slow food and slow money, for example—slow furniture is about reconnecting consumers with materials and counteracting our mass-produced, homogenized world.

“What the slow movement allows you to do is take a look at the real cost and sustainability of products,” Gort says. From Gort’s perspective, the problem is obvious: machines make things too quick and easy, taking the challenge out of the work. “You can just about do it in your sleep. Pick up a handsaw, though, and you’ve got to think about what you’re doing.”

Of course, while “it’s a really nice way to build a piece of furniture,” it’s, well, slow. And with a limited client

base, like Gort’s in Whitehorse, the associated costs of slowing down are not borne easily. So there are compromises. For Paul, that means “allowing machines to do the less important work, then using hand tools to do what really matters. It’s sticking to the traditions of the practice while making that compromise.”

There’s an element of stewardship to what Gort does. He sees himself as “preserving these traditional techniques in the same way that the small farmer preserves a certain variety of apple. Something may be lost if we don’t hold onto it and celebrate it.”

By breaking down the process into component steps, Gort continually learns to refine not only his skills but also his aesthetic sense. “The piece I built on day one is nothing like the piece I built on day 1,000,” he says.

It is in the uniqueness of every piece that the appeal of slow furniture is found. While in mass manufacturing, uniqueness is an error, in slow furniture it represents the value of human labour. It also allows Gort the freedom to pursue witty variations on standard furniture pieces, such as a coffee table that looks like a stack of pallets, or a side table with an inlaid carved wood buzzsaw poking up through it. The pieces have whimsical touches that would be scrubbed out in any mass production system.

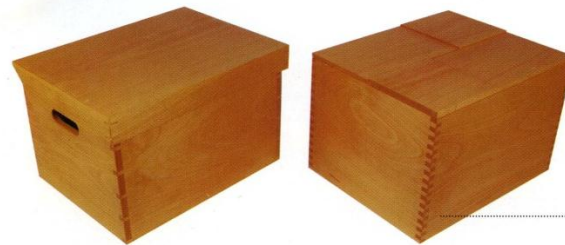
But Gort recognizes that for most people out there, cost is still the primary concern. Even if you’re not buying furniture like Gort’s—and, let’s be honest, few of us can afford to reject mass production outright—slow culture can still offer new ideas in terms of bringing our economy back to a human scale.

Ultimately, Paul Gort’s compromise may not be as much an alternative to the mass-produced as a counterpoint to it. He shows that we can bring things back to a human scale without rejecting the machines that make life more livable.

“It’s not until things have disappeared that people will lament the loss,” he says. The public may not care about the disappearance of artisans from our society today, but “they may care in the future.”



Pallet table



“These low side tables are meant to look like cardboard boxes. The first is a bankers box and the second has a lid made to look like folded cardboard. Constructed using solid wood and traditional joinery they blend fine craft and industrial design—elevating forms that are typically used to contain more treasured items into enduring pieces that can stand on their own.” — PAUL GORT