



# WOOD FORUM

Newsletter of the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association

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## Where Art and Woodworking Meet

by Art Hofmann

On Tuesday May 6th we will continue with this year's series of monthly meetings. The subject of the meeting is Art, Studio and Post-Studio furniture, whose boundaries our presenter Russell Baldon of California College of the Arts will tease apart for us.

For some of us, studio furniture is an idiom with which we are neither familiar nor comfortable. Furniture that takes its cues from the art world, it is intended to mystify, provoke, or make a humorous or whimsical point and still fulfill its normal function as a dresser, table or chair. Design concept becomes a paramount issue, and the pieces are often shown in art galleries, perhaps because of their close association with sculpture and other fine art.

Russell Baldon is the ideal person to orient us. He grew up in the central valley of California where he designed and built wooden toys for his family-owned company. Upon moving to San Francisco in 1984, he earned a Bachelor's degree in furniture from the California College of Arts and Crafts (pre-name change.) He went



*Russell Baldon*

on to receive a Master's of Fine Arts degree in furniture from San Diego State University in 1997. Along the way he studied and worked with some of the nation's leading furniture makers, including Garry Knox Bennett, Gail Fredell, Wendy Maruyama, and Tom Loeser. Currently he maintains a cooperative studio in Alameda, California and is the chair of the Furniture

Department at the CCA in San Francisco, where he taught for the last twelve years.

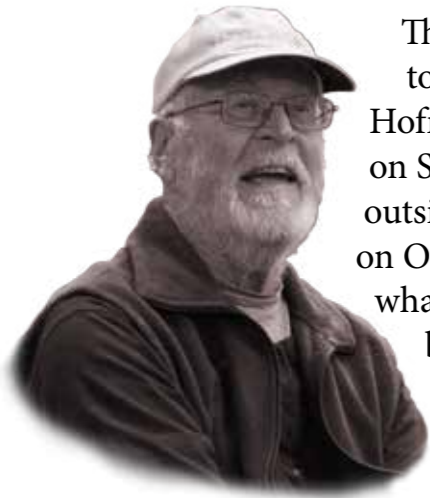
Along with his own work, Russell will share the work of other artists, his students and a selection of work from around the world to illustrate current trends and concepts of furniture design in the post-studio furniture world.

Mark your calendar: Tuesday, May 6th, 7 pm, at Cotati Cottages Clubhouse. Be there or be .

Directions: Cotati Cottages is located west of the H'wy 101 and H'wy 116 interchange. Take Highway 101 to Gravenstein Highway (116 West) exit. Head west towards Sebastopol about ¼ mile to Alder Avenue. Turn right on Alder and then turn right on the first street which is Ford Lane (Cotati Cottages sign). Proceed to the end of Ford Lane and park in the gravel parking spaces. The Clubhouse is the small building on the northeast corner of Ford Lane and Starr Court. There is limited parking near the clubhouse. If the gravel parking area is full, please park on the east side of Alder Avenue.

# Oakland Trip Draws Members Out of the Woodwork

by Art Hofmann



The April meeting was brought to order by Program Chair, Art Hofmann, at approximately 11am on Saturday, April 5<sup>th</sup> standing outside of Paul Discoe Designs on Oakland's Magnolia Street, on what turned out to be one of those brilliant California spring days that follow rainy periods. Art explained that he was pinch hitting for our Chairman,

Bob Moyer, who was dealing with a family emergency. Art held up a copy of the latest *Fine Woodworking* magazine, pointing out that it features California achievements; in particular, a two page spread devoted to the award winning pieces from our last year's *Artistry in Wood* show. Also featured is Laura Mays of College of the Redwoods, as well as Craig Thibodeau of San Diego, whose pieces have taken prizes in our past shows. Art also mentioned the new website that is in progress, an effort that is being shepherded by Michael Wallace. The committee has met several times, and though it has not zeroed in yet with lots of specifics, it is busy viewing other websites, particularly those of other woodworking clubs, scrutinizing their best elements as possibilities for our own.

We had a good turnout for the meeting, about thirty in all including guests. The assembled crowd moved into the Paul Discoe Design property, which occupies most of the block, well over an acre of this intensely urbanized section in West Oakland's industrial district, scruffy and tough, semis steaming everywhere, and graffiti on almost every vertical surface. There are piles of redwood logs stashed high, shipping containers, buildings, mountains of sawdust from a sawmill housed in one massive building. An area near the entrance to Paul's refuge has raised vegetable beds, one of them covered by a chicken coop; nearby, a large concrete tank filled with water houses a fish raising effort; center stage is Paul's effort at modular-based green building, the Rikyu house, and, and, and...



The property - all of it Paul's - is also home to six or eight other enterprises, including a pottery working in the Japanese style, a woodworker, a metal fabricator, a maker of essential oils for soap, a cabinet maker, the previously mentioned sawmill, and a Korean restaurant. Taken all together, it forms a very yeasty compound situated in west Oakland's industrial area, with signs of work, experimentation, and ferment wherever one looked.

The group reassembled in a courtyard that leads to Paul's inner sanctum, his office, conference and work rooms. Stepped shelving on the left supports dozens of specimen trees in pots, many several decades old,



Paul Discoe

and most of them fully qualified bonsai. Lovely potted bamboo grew to the right. The atmosphere was pleasant and sunny after many days of rain. John Lavine, the ex-editor of *Woodwork*, who had read about our excursion, joined the group and greeted Paul.

Paul began by telling us a bit about the present place, namely that he had bought it around 2000. Paul grew up in the Bay Area, the son of lefty parents, who grew up arguing Dialectical Materialism with adults. He gravitated to Daoism, and then got the idea of being one with the masses during the hippy era. He wanted to get into custom home building after getting an apprentice carpenter's certificate. Slowly, he found himself turning to Zen Buddhism, influenced by Alan Watts on KPFA; a four day sojourn to Tassajara turned into four years and being ordained as a Buddhist priest. The Suzuki Roshi then sent Paul with his wife and six months old son, Ben (who was present at today's meeting) to Japan to train to become a carpenter in the Japanese fashion. Paul liked Japan and trained as ordered, living and loving the life. On returning, Paul worked at the Zen Center in San Francisco and did the famous Greens Restaurant. Then came a span of time in Austria, where he built a meditation center. Returning



right after the Loma Prieta quake, Paul opened up his own business, Joinery Structures. In the 'eighties Paul had worked for an up and coming executive named Larry Ellison, who, on completion of that project, passed Paul on to his friend, Steve Jobs. Paul bought a hundred Port Orford cedar logs in Oregon. The job was completed at his shop, taken apart and assembled on site. Things had to fit perfectly upon delivery. All pieces were numbered and taken as a completed product to the site. Paul cited a saying of a Japanese carpentry saint named 'Lefty' Jingo: *Make a mistake, cut off your arm!* Living with this proverb "ups the ante in terms of concentration," Paul added dryly.

Other projects soon followed for Paul in Woodside. At some point in the not too distant past Paul decided to retire from Joinery Structures, so he moved to the current site. He had decided to erect a sawmill, which we later viewed, to make lumber for a modular house, Rikyu. The lesser wood was used for construction, and the best of the wood, about 20%, for furniture. He designed the house and a line of furniture, both of which did not do well commercially. The year was 2008, when fiscally, things hit bottom.

Paul then did some restaurants and bars, one of them being Ippuku, a Japanese restaurant in Berkeley that serves uniquely Japanese food, grilled items, no sushi in sight. Ippuku's website gives a good idea of what Paul achieved there: <http://www.ippukuberkeley.com/home>. The lesson seems to be, if one thing doesn't work, try another.

Currently Paul is interested in working out a scheme of aquaponics, where fish and vegetables are raised from restaurant waste right on the site of the restau-

rant, which harvests and uses both, a vision in ultimate recycling. On the practical side, the sawmill is producing an outdoor seating arrangement for UCSF at China Basin, large wedge shaped sections of pine for back rests, which, Paul assured us, when pressure treated will outlast pressure treated fir.



Paul is fascinated by trees. He's had his bonsai trees longer than any wife or pet. A grandmother got him started with a book given to him as a boy when he had polio. He grows trees, cuts them down, cuts them up, uses them in buildings and furniture and burns the scrap.

Inside his work room, Paul expounded on woods. The large table there was made of elm, which is used extensively in Japanese woodwork. He likes Monterey cypress, which he says is a fabulous wood, and Port Orford cedar and black acacia. A large case of Japanese tools is mounted on the wall near the door, tools he acquired in his sojourn in Japan, many of the makers long gone. Back in the day these tools were everything a Japanese carpenter needed, to build an

entire house. Paul showed us a copy of a very good book he has to his credit: *Zen Architecture: The Building Process as Practice*, which is unfortunately out of print, but still available at higher than the original price on Amazon. This book details some of the projects that he was involved in, like the Ellison house and grounds, which all the visiting top Japanese business executives still want to visit. Paul is particularly proud of one incident, where the president of Toyota visited Ellison. Very impressed

with the buildings and the gardens, which were all in strict Japanese style but on a larger scale than is usual for his home country, the industry boss asked about the builder. Informed that he was a Californian, he exclaimed loudly in Japanese, "That is a lie." We all laughed at that one, and Paul did, too.

For a Swiss client, who is an ordained Buddhist priest, and a fan of Burning Man, he designed a portable Zen-do, a small meditation center for the overwrought participants to regain their composure.

In those days Paul was a fan of cardboard, so he designed a building that could be set up or taken down in one day. It has worked well for eight years. The last part of the book is about process.

Paul pointed to the drawings for the modular house, where all 300-plus pieces are designed, cut, ready to put together. This has not caught on, he says, because he is not a good salesman.

Projects in the pipeline include a teahouse in Woodside for an overly wealthy person; another teahouse for Yale University's sculpture garden; a coffee shop for Embarcadero 4 in salvaged wood; plus several more restaurants. The "fish thing" has proved difficult and disappointing, one disaster after another.

"The spectrum of the undertakings is rather large."

Members posed some technical questions, which Paul addressed. Asked if he experienced difficulties in obtaining permits for his projects, he replied that working with municipalities is a challenge but not impossible. All of his buildings go through the engineering process, and meet standards for heat





loss and other codes. Paul's son, Ben, prompted his dad to go into a complicated story about a building with thatched roof. After some trial and error, Paul's team made panels of thatch roofing that passed fire code tests. Bouncing off the inevitable question of nails or no nails, Paul told the following: during his time in Japan, Paul worked on two buildings, one with all-wooden joinery, one assembled with bolts. Paul asked his teacher about this, who told him the one with the wooden joinery would last 300 years, the one with the steel bolts, cheaper to build, would only endure 150 years.

Eventually the group moved out of the design room and on to the Rikyu house on the west side of the compound. It is modular in nature, not in terms of the Japanese tatami mat system, but in terms of 4x8ft sheets of plywood, the American system. The cost Paul reckons is around \$250 per square foot. Much of the wood is recycled. It can be configured variously, and is energy efficient. The emphasis is on using materials that were as sustainably produced as possible, i.e. reusing wood from the urban forest, or recycled wood. Efficiency was another goal, since many woodworkers could work on making the parts. From the designers point of view, the objective was to create a space conducive to a peaceful balanced life. The Rikyu house has not caught on, and is a disappointment to Paul, another noble experiment, which may someday have its due.

As the house is currently occupied by one of Paul's friends and co-workers, we moved on after a cursory viewing to the sawmill part of the operation, past piles of sawdust, a small mountain of logs, and a large concrete fish tank. Once inside the cavernous sawmill, we saw machinery for cutting logs into slabs, including a Woodmizer and a vertical chainsaw mill, plus a complete wood shop to boot. Mark Tindley spotted something here: "Anyone who missed the two enormous and fascinating planers in the corner of the sawmill section needs to turn on their radar for these visits. One had an unusual upper feed belt that looked like a tank track and the old-school spiral cutter heads must predate the Byrd Shelix by at least 50 years." Scrap from this facility goes out to a plant where it is burned for electricity. We saw huge trapezoidal shapes of pine, the back rests of the seating that will go to UCSF. Final dressing and shaping of the seating will be done by hand. Paul insists the pine will last indefinitely with pressure treatment because the material is so porous it will absorb the chemical all the way to its center, whereas in fir, it penetrates only 1/4".

At that point, we broke off and traveled by car to Joinery Structures at 2500 Kirkham Street, several blocks west. When we reassembled in front of that building, Paul resumed, telling us that he still owned Joinery Structures, and that his step-son and some long time

employees still work there, churning out products.


The plan is to transfer ownership to them, though this has not yet transpired. After working in several other settings in 1995, Paul bought the building, which was basically gutted by vandals and in terrible shape. The street was unpaved and filled with garbage when they started. Jerry Brown, who was mayor at the time, had the street paved for Paul, an old lefty.

Inside, we were confronted with another cavernous structure, this one also fitted out with big woodworking machinery. A hip rafter assembly from a tea house hung on the wall near the entrance, the product of a class in Japanese joinery that Paul taught on the premises sometime in the past. The air was heavy with the scent of Port Orford cedar emanating from several stacks of lumber at least three feet high, intended for two Japanese houses that are in production. Paul tried making shingles from off-cuts and scrap, but no one wanted them. He waved in the direction of a dry kiln, and pointed out the bench pieces for the UCSF project. One area contained a bandmill that could handle pieces 40' long, 30" wide, and in another area stood a huge right angle (20" wide, 12" high) jointer that produced timbers simultaneously squared on two surfaces, which then required only two passes through the big planers to be perfectly dimensioned, an efficient layout.

They do not have a sanding machine, instead using a large machine called the Super-Surfacar, which features a big fixed knife below, and a power feed that pushes the wood against the knife. Wood is sliced off as if it were a giant hand plane. It cuts through knots and all. The thickness of shaving can be set to produce translucent shavings. The machined wood does not have the wavy pattern that hand plane produces, and thus not the same feel. Some things are still hand planed.



A few final things: a small tea house, 10 feet square, was in evidence. It is for sale. Paul brought it back from Japan in the past and set it up once, and almost had it sold, but the buyer backed out. There was a model of a torii gate in quarter-scale, intended for the Ellison job, and which would have been thirty feet tall. A few more questions and answers, and it was time to bring things to a conclusion.

Art Hofmann thanked Paul on behalf of the organization, noting that all of this had sprung from one man's dedication, labor and inspiration: a remarkable lifelong achievement. Paul invited us to take some scrap home to help bring a nice smell to into our cars. And with that, we made our way to our vehicles and went off into the shiny day. 

*Photos in this article are by Jeff Rice, Philip Barlow, & Jose Cuervo*

Paul waved at an enormous “back room” that was devoted to their inventory, stacks of wood reaching for the ceiling. He pointed to one bundle that had been dimensioned, and marked on one end to indicate the square surfaces and were “ready to go.”

The issue of stickers came up as we migrated from one part of the shop to another. They use grooved stickers to minimize the contact surface with the lumber being dried. Especially if things are steam dried, Paul says, they can get sticker burn, which penetrates the wood for some ways, and is very hard to deal with. Someone called his attention to the lovely stack of Port Orford cedar we had admired on the way in. We were told it was intended for doors, windows, and rafters.



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Wood Forum is the monthly newsletter of the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association. Please feel free to submit articles and photographs for inclusion in the publication. You can send your submissions to the Wood Forum Editor at [joejakey@comcast.net](mailto:joejakey@comcast.net) or at [SCWAMESSAGES@gmail.com](mailto:SCWAMESSAGES@gmail.com). Advertisements are also accepted with a per-entry cost of \$5 per column inch.

## Membership Application

I would like to join the SCWA to meet other people interested in the craft, the art and the business of fine wood-working. Enclosed is my check in the amount of \$35 for the annual dues. I understand that this fee entitles me to attend monthly meetings and to receive the Wood Forum newsletter by email or via the SCWA's website.

I am enclosing an additional \$15 to receive the Forum by regular mail.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

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