

design

Arntzen's furniture stands the test of time

Wood and metal present in almost all his creations

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ARNT Arntzen brings to sculptural furniture what jazz great Roland Kirk brings to a sax: bold and textured creations rich with surprise.

The man really has a way with wood and aluminum helicopter blades. Mixed media rules. Inspiration is at play. His signature pieces meld high-tech metal surfaces and organic wood grains with startling fluidity. The finishes are impeccable and the work, while whimsical, is always functional.

If you've ever pattered about Vancouver's annual Eastside Culture Crawl, you've probably passed through Arntzen's Strathcona neighbourhood workshop. It's a 1,200-square foot Mad Max affair.

A stack of vintage solid brass shoeshine fixtures Arntzen discovered at a local scrap yard tumbles out of one corner. Elsewhere: a bunch of bronze ship door knobs, fire hose nozzles, turbine pieces, a stainless steel conveyor belt, perforated sheets of copper, airplane propellers, chopped up helicopter rotors, and floatplane struts threaten apocalyptic action from various nooks and crannies.

Long ago, the space once housed the Montreal Bakery. Half of the floor is cement. It's perfect for the metal work. A travel hoist spans the shop. Arntzen lets it do the heavy lifting. Big hospital operating

lights, recycled from Vancouver General Hospital, bring on the illumination needed for the fine work.

A beat-up old wooden floor and the assorted tools of the woodworking trade define the rest of the shop. A nine-foot long stroke sander, a homemade job he got through the Buy and Sell, gets a lot of business done.

On this day, a massive slab of burl wood Arnt bought from a guy on Hornby Island dominates one wall of the room. It's the essential stuff of creation to come.

Down the hall, stacks of slabs Arntzen and his father milled from salvaged logs climb to the ceiling. Many are the windfall of local winter storms. They're dried very slowly to keep them whole.

Arntzen is a North Shore original.

Born at Lions Gate Hospital, he spent his childhood in Lynn Valley. Arntzen grew up in a house that his father and mother built on Draycott Road near the intersection of Mountain Highway and Lynn Valley road. The house was built in 1958, around the time he was born. Still standing, the house has since moved from its original location to across the creek.

Sawdust has been a constant companion from Day One.

He credits his father for his passion for wood. His dad worked as a carpenter and teacher. The house was filled with homemade furniture. Arntzen's habit of re-using, recycling and salvaging materials



is inspired by working with his dad. "We weren't a wealthy family. We tended to re-use things if we could. There was a lot of salvaged wood in that house. He salvaged the maple floor from an old dance hall in Victoria. All the walls and the ceiling were made out of salvaged yellow cedar, two by sixes, tongue and groove."

Lynn Valley forests were Arntzen's playground. "We spent a lot of time in the woods, roaming about. We were immersed in it from an early age. I've always had an affection for trees."

And then came his metal age. At about 12, Arntzen helped his father build a steel-hull sail-

boat in the backyard. "I always wanted to be a sculptor. When I was helping my dad make the steel sailboat, at the end of the day there were always these odd bits of scrap metal lying around. I'd get the welder and weld them all together into sculptures and set them up in the backyard to rust," Arntzen recalls.

The sculptures are long gone, but the boat remains afloat and based at Saltspring Island.

"Some guy has been living on it and it's almost as original as when we built it. Thirty-six foot deck, 45 feet overall. I saw it a couple of years ago. The original sails and sail covers were still on

it," he says.

In his teens, Arntzen and his father renovate several East Vancouver houses and further honed his woodworking skills.

In the early 1980s, he and his brother-in-law built houses on Cortez Island. "I learned how to slab up logs, to cut them with a chainsaw into large planks. That always fascinated me. So when I got into furniture making, I wanted to do that again, to use large slabs of wood."

Time spent in Los Angeles later that decade brought it all together for Arntzen.

He was working on houses while his wife and fellow artist Valerie attended theatre school. "I just got more and more interested in design. I had a friend there who had a nice house and he had really interesting furniture. I always knew I wanted to do furniture and while I was down there I was exposed to a lot of modern design at museums."

Designers Charles and Ray Eames, Frank Lloyd Wright, Marcel Prouer, Mees Vandro, and also the Bauhaus design movement caught his attention. "What I really like about it is it was innovative. It was all about using new materials and doing new things, simplicity. It was very form-conscious yet still practical. What struck me most is they all seemed to be charting new territory and looking into the future."

Vancouver Eastside is a little hotbed of sculptural furniture designers. Arntzen's friend Peter

Pierobon, also born and raised in North Vancouver, has a studio nearby. Ben Burnett, Zillion Design is in the area. They're all pushing boundaries, each with a unique aesthetic voice.

Says Arntzen, "There are more people in Vancouver building wood furniture and I'm really happy to see that. When I do the Culture Crawl and they asked me how I got into doing this, I tell them it was a gradual process to the point where furniture took over my life. It's easy when you do it that way. I'm seeing more people doing this and becoming successful at it."

Arntzen challenges himself to build furniture that will stand the test of time and trends.

His earliest work was all metal. He soon found the results too cold and austere.

Says Arntzen, "Then I started salvaging wood and it was natural to do metal bases for the wood. I found you could do unusual things with metal that you can't do with wood. Almost everything I do has metal and wood in it. I just love that contrast of silvery grey metal with warm wood and organic grain. They complement each other. The metal works as a picture frame for the wood and the wood is much more functional, as a table top for example, or seats for a chair."

He always uses solid woods for longevity and never uses veneers. "You can keep refinishing solid wood, or you can just let it age naturally and it gets a beautiful patina or it gets all scratched

up. Wood looks good when it's scratched, metal doesn't, so I try to keep the metal down lower and the wood on top," he says.

He begins with found objects. Propellers are turned into all sorts of things. "They're such a beautiful shape, all solid aluminum. I couldn't do much with them when they were just straight propellers, but then I figured out how to bend them." The flow of a compound curve brought possibilities.

And so did the cone shape, which led to an iconic piece he's produced at least 30 times over in the past decade: the rocket table.

"I love the look of riveted metal and I always wanted to build a rocket ship. Then of course I needed to make it functional, so I figured out how to do the table. I found a roll of very thin copper sheeting in the scrap yard one day. Wood seemed an easy surface to nail metal to so I turned a torpedo shape on the lathe and started nailing bits of copper to it."

Arntzen could easily finish his career churning out rocket tables, but he's calling it quits after the next three. The rocket is holding him back. "I'm dying to do some new designs," he says.

He'd like to further explore the design possibilities of aircraft parts. And a yard full of wood slabs calls for more big pieces like dining tables and desks.

Some of his latest work incorporates bits of helicopter rotors. Twenty-five foot long blades sat in the shop for a while until he

could figure out what to do with them. He made benches out of the first ones. Desks, bars and chairs followed.

"They're just such a gorgeous shape. They are the classic example of form following function. It's not designed to look pretty, yet it is. You rarely get this teardrop shape in anything else, only in things that are aerodynamic or water dynamic. It's such a modern, high tech piece of equipment. I just love that. I have so many designs that I have yet to build with it," he says.

Arntzen tends to work with local wood. "The types of trees I get to work with around here are limited but very interesting wood. Because of the West Coast climate they don't grow very straight so the grain is much wilder.

"Visually I love it, so I use techniques that allow me to work with it. Because maple is very common here, that has been my primary wood. In the last five years or so, a lot of elm trees have been blowing down when the big storms come. So I got really turned on to elm, which is a darker wood. It's stunning and very tough," he says.

Private commissions are driving Arntzen's business these days. He's also represented by galleries including Jenkins Showler in White Rock, Wood Co-op Gallery on Granville Island and Mountain Galleries at Chateau Whistler. Visit his website at www.arntarntzen.com