



From Metres to Millimetres

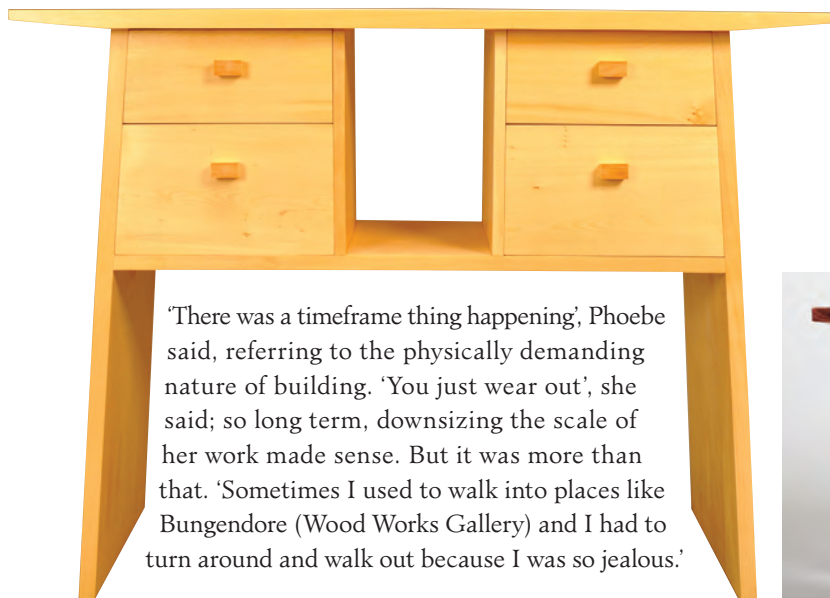
Moving from building and carpentry into furniture making took Phoebe Everill to a much finer place. Story by Linda Nathan.

Phoebe Everill doesn't do quiet and reserved. She laughs loud and often, and it's easy to instantly like her. Fifteen years as a chippie and a builder, mostly as the leader of her own team, are explained by the confidence she exudes — this is a person who can get things done.



Even though she was already skilled with tools and machinery it was still a humbling experience to start out as a newbie at Sturt School for Wood some 4 years ago. In the beginning, for a joke, she wore a power lead as a belt because she couldn't get over the focus on hand tools. 'I thought, this is ridiculous — let me show you what I can do with a buzzer!', she said.

There were pragmatic and personal reasons for moving from the building industry to fine woodworking.



'There was a timeframe thing happening', Phoebe said, referring to the physically demanding nature of building. 'You just wear out', she said; so long term, downsizing the scale of her work made sense. But it was more than that. 'Sometimes I used to walk into places like Bungendore (Wood Works Gallery) and I had to turn around and walk out because I was so jealous.'

Years ago, when things went digital, Phoebe's late father decided to move out of the fine art printing game. In his 50s he did a joinery apprenticeship at Collingwood TAFE and started another career. At home Phoebe was 'the devotee at the end of his bench'. Mentored in hand (and business) skills by her father, and growing up in a house that appreciated and bought handmade furniture influenced the new direction that Phoebe also took in her 50s.

Specialising in house restorations, making built-ins and even 'parting gifts' for clients from leftover building timbers meant Phoebe was no stranger to making furniture, but not at the standard she was aiming for. Although she had loved her career as a builder there was an eventual lack of challenge. 'I don't like saying this', she said, 'but building is so simple. You've got so few elements to worry about. Once you've got your foundations right, you worry about vertical load and that's it. Now furniture...she's a whole new game.'

The hardest thing for her to learn when she made the transition to fine woodworking was accuracy and precision. 'It upset me enormously that I couldn't get it immediately, that I had to go back to a level that I didn't think I needed to. 'I used to make errors in metres but now I make them in millimetres', laughs Phoebe. The sort of accuracy needed for fine furniture can only be self taught to a point, says Phoebe, after that you really need mentors. She looks up to the great teachers she had at Sturt: David Uphill-Brown, Leon Sadubin, Stuart Faulkner and Evan Dunstone.

The Sturt school, situated in Mittagong, NSW, away from capital cities, provides a kind of cloistered atmosphere where total immersion in the craft is possible. Some students take advantage of this and spend up to 60 hours a week in the workshop. Maybe Phoebe's experience of another kind, having once spent years in India in an ashram also contributed to her ability to concentrate, and to totally commit to learning and perfecting new techniques.

Clockwise from bottom opposite page:

Winton Chair in Victorian blackwood.

Saddleback Stool, blackwood.

Phoebe Everill at the bench.

Huon pine and Tasmanian myrtle stereo unit.

Blackwood coffee table with Macassar ebony details.

American cherry and wenge hall table.



Learning at Sturt wasn't just about technique though. One of the reasons Phoebe chose to study there was because then Director Stuart Faulkner convinced her that design, like technique, was teachable and could be learnt. 'From Term 2 on, when we got to design projects, that's when things got really interesting. We all have thousands of images that we find pleasing and we throw them together and suddenly something hooks, and then you play. And for me, it's then on to prototyping. Once I was given the confidence and permission to play I was able to move forward into the unknown, and now design, for me, is just the best fun.'

More and more women are now learning to do woodwork and many teachers and schools report the gender balance of students is starting to equalise. 'I teach woodwork for women classes because there's a niche, there's a demand for it', says Phoebe. 'I love teaching, I'm an absolutely passionate teacher. I love watching the moment when a student is doing something and suddenly gets it, and then says, "Oh my god, is that three hours?" and there's this huge goofy grin on their face.'

Phoebe is proud to be the first accredited female designer/maker in Studio Woodworkers Australia, the new peak

Clockwise from right: Solar panels and soon a wind turbine are part of Phoebe's green workshop plan.

Hand work area.

Phoebe's tool cabinet was made from Huon pine and silky oak.

The machine room features a Felder panel saw/shaper combination.



body for professional woodworkers and at the time of writing had just taken over the Chair of SWA from Peter Young. She feels strongly about the need to build public awareness of fine woodwork and a connection point between makers and buyers. She also feels 'makers need support and mentoring to become self sufficient professionals'. She is currently active in doing PR for the group, a role she also took on because it would extend her skills in this realm as well.

Phoebe's prior business experience is invaluable. It's not just that she's managed a team and day-to-day admin, as well as dealt with clients. Quoting on jobs and pricing processes and materials are skills that are invaluable for a professional furniture maker.

'When I was three-quarters of the way through my first course with David Uphill-Brown and working on my *Winton Chair* we were talking about business practice, and he said there's only one person in this room who is going to make a success out of making chairs. "Phoebe", he said, "how much does that chair cost?" He knew he could ask me because he'd seen me keeping time sheets.'

Phoebe can spend four to six weeks developing a prototype and has no expectation of getting paid for that time. 'If there's no love in it, no passion, then get out now!', she said. Her next step is to make a short production run, timing stages in 15 minute blocks.

'There's no point setting up a machine to do one. If you believe in a product: believe in your design, believe in yourself.' Multiplying time taken by an hourly figure for overheads — around \$65–75 per hour for machine and hand work — and adding that to the cost of materials will give an idea of one end of the pricing equation. To see what the possible price point of a piece might be she will take the prototype to a couple of galleries and ask them. Armed with this kind of research she will feel confident of her asking price and never be apologetic about it.

Phoebe is also passionate about sustainability. Her own property in central Victoria has an abundance of blackwood trees growing on it. The wood she uses is storm fallen, milled on site, and leaves as a finished piece of furniture. Everything Phoebe makes is signed and clients are given a provenance sheet. 'I believe our clients — people who purchase a high end piece of commissioned furniture — expect the story, and the story should be as green as we can make it. At home I have solar panels right across the top of the workshop and I'm about to add in a wind turbine as well.'

If there was ever an advertisement for why someone should take on a woodworking career if that was their heart's desire, then it's Phoebe's own summation: 'Coming from a building background I've never earned less money and I've never been happier, and hey, what else is there?'

Find out more about Phoebe Everill's work and her school at www.phoebeeverill.com, or email p.everill@hotmail.com