ALED LEWIS
TRANSITIONS

BY PATRICK DOWNES

"My career in furniture making began in 1978, at eighteen, in a small English village—five cabinetmakers shoehorned into a converted smithy. My bench stood under a window overlooking a walled garden overgrown with brambles. There was a lot of dust. The pub in town was called the Beehive, I remember."

Aled and I are talking over a table at The Waterfront, in Camden, Maine—a long way and many transitions from the Beehive. As a student, I had met Aled at the Center For Furniture Craftsmanship in nearby Rockport. Now, as a friend, I wanted to know how he had come to be there.

"For two years," Aled said, "I cut my teeth as a restorer at Braemar Antiques." Here he learned to value speed, precision and, as Lewis says, the "lines of furniture." He admits some of the work was what he calls "conversion." Essentially, new pieces would be made out of old parts, which still had the impression of age. Ethics aside, Aled was introduced to tradesmen—makers and polishers—whose skill and tirelessness amazed him. "There was Old George, the French polisher, who performed such wonderful alchemy," he recalls. "And Roger and Malcombe, who learned their trade in the High Wycombe factories, home of the British furniture industry in the postwar years." Among these journeymen, Aled made a mere 21 pounds—then about $30—a week.

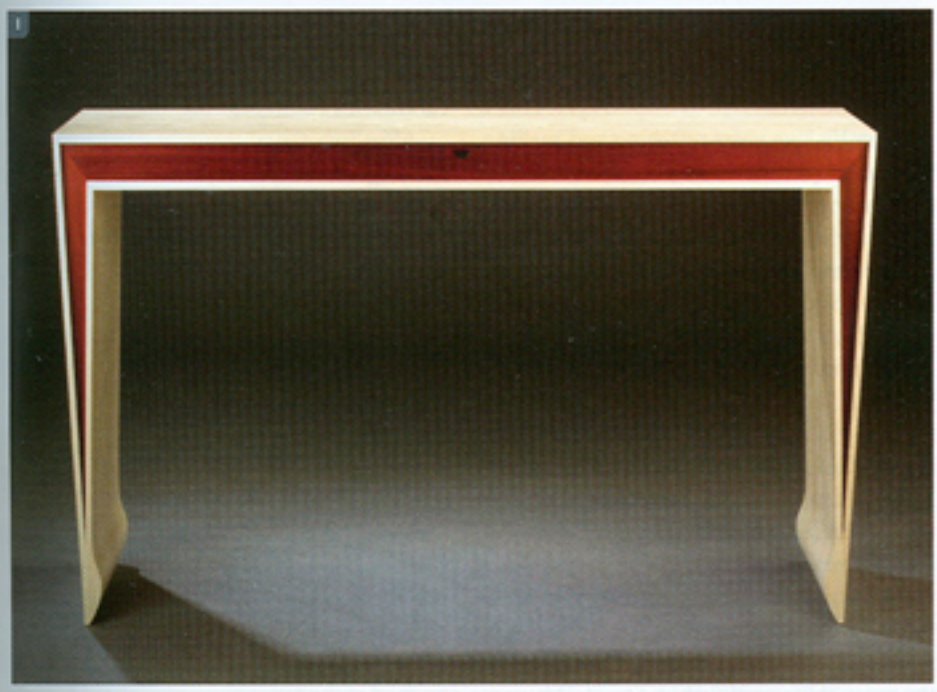
Aled didn't come to furniture making through reading *Fine Woodworking* and idolizing contemporary makers of one-off pieces. "I learned my trade by listening and watching skilled craftsmen," he says, "modest men earning no more than a basic living wage who regarded their skills as a means of providing for their families. Bread and butter. All my life, I worked with people doing it for a living. But without the old soldiers, without people like George,

working in obscurity, people like me won't get taught."

Aled smiled, one dimple deeper than the other by half. "It's strange to have someone writing about me." His modesty is genuine, a reflection of the life he's led as a journeyman himself. He is instantly likable and direct, a man without an enemy. Aled seems almost shy, but not quite. He's up to the odd task of talking about himself.

Aled started life in Wales, on the family farm in Machynlleth. "My father was a great influence on me," he says. He speaks quickly, which is the Welsh creeping in, as if he were adding letters. "He was extremely clever, able to make anything. My earliest memories are of my father fixing things. There was a photograph of him, his arm around my mother, with parts of a tractor lying around, and oil." Aled himself had interests aside from farming: He left school and home at sixteen. "I can't pretend I'm an academic," he laughs.

Still, he inherited his father's industriousness and cleverness. Off in England, he registered at Rycotewood College in Oxfordshire. Operating out of an old workhouse, Rycotewood centered its curriculum on engineering and woodworking. The two-year program had a good reputation, and Aled was employable at eighteen.



1. *En Pointe* (2010); ash, bloodwood
33" H x 52" W x 14" D; photo by Jim Dougan.

2. *Eccleston* (2008); oak, fumed oak
38"H x 17"W x 73"L.

3. *Spice* (1985); sycamore;
72" H x 32" W x 14" D.

4. *Tension* (1989), brown oak, glass, stainless steel
28" H x 34" W x 84" L.

5. *Hefin* (2009); oak, fumed oak
29" H x 39" W x 90" L.

6. *Aldous* (1998); rippled ash
29"H x 32"W x 64"L.

7. *Slipmatch* (2006); oak, fumed oak
28" H x 50" W x 30" D.

8. *Grace and Favour* (2008); maple
18" H x 23" W x 16" D.

FOOTLOOSE

After his two years restoring and making new "antiques," Aled opened a business of his own, working and all but living out of a van, fitting out restaurants, doing odd jobs. A year of making money hand over fist gave him the itch to travel, and he took off, at 21, for America. He hitchhiked from New York to Jackson, Mississippi. From Jackson, he made his way to Arkansas, where he paid for a bus ticket to LA. "Greyhound," Aled says dryly. "I've never been so tired in my life as I was making that trip." After his stay in California, he flew to New Orleans.

In Louisiana, Aled found work at Morton's Antiques, where he was hired as a restorer. He worked, played rugby and made the most of life on Bourbon Street. "My gray hair now," he admits, "is for having lived two years in New Orleans."

His chance for a permanent green card never materialized, and he returned to England. Still only 23, he took work as one of a ten-man production team making limited-batch furniture for the high-end London market. Aled's employer, Archie Shein, would drive each day to the Oxford workshop from London—60 miles—in his Rolls-Royce. On Fridays, he would buy everybody fish and chips. "Unusual for such workshops, each maker was in charge of a particular line of furniture and made it from start to finish, including jigs and templates. I learned to make furniture at speed. It was all about the strange pleasure of seeing how fast you could make a dozen cabinets or twenty dining tables."

After two years, though, Aled again felt the urge to travel, and he faced another transition. He answered an advertisement for makers employed by CI Industries, and they promptly handed him a ticket for South Africa.

"I didn't really think it through," he says now of his South African adventure. Aled was put in charge of a small part of a production factory in Durban. "The machinery was basic and the production methods were crude but effective."

At the height of apartheid, he had blacks, whites and Indians under him. The whites had the permanent jobs. A foreman of sorts, a black man named Sunrise, would ask Aled every morning how many of the non-whites queued at the fence surrounding the factory should be hired as day laborers. "The workers I managed were incredibly resourceful, none more so than Sunrise, my right-hand man, who taught me his methods of bending and laminating wood using a combination of steam, two-part forms and the use of a large Ford truck to provide 'pressing power.'"

After little more than a year, with Sunrise dead, a victim of unrest in those vicious times, Aled broke away from the factory and South Africa. He traveled through Africa, learned to sail, a pastime he enjoys still, and finally returned to England.

PRODUCTION

Aled Lewis had neither a job nor a home. He was a young man, only 24 or so, but he

wanted to settle down. A friend introduced him to Nicholas Dyson, a furniture designer with a Parnham College pedigree. Aled made a piece for Dyson, who then invited him to run his shop. From 1983 until 2002, he did just that.

"I genuinely enjoyed the work. I ran the place." He thinks for a moment. "In a way, that was the mistake."

"In a commercial shop, you very rarely get your own domain," Aled says. "You're fleshing out the bones of someone else's ideas. In industry, you have to get the job done, on time and on budget. If you don't know how to get something done, you get fired. Industry is brutal."

Over the 18 years Aled ran Dyson's shop, he learned how best to get the job done, choosing and refining techniques in the shop. As the director of the shop, he had to keep up with technological innovations in machinery, materials and supplies. Dyson produced mostly commissions and pieces for institutions, banks, universities and corporate offices. "It was an endless conveyor belt of pieces."

Toward the end, when the relationship with Dyson soured, and as he began to explore his own designs, taking on independent commissions, Aled took more pleasure in the idea of running his own shop. "I couldn't face another big commercial job," he admits. He ran Dyson's shop but had little in his own name. For a man who had made rapid transitions in his youth, he faced perhaps the greatest shift of his life, from production manager to independent craftsman.

SHOP AND CLASSROOM

What is the difference and distance between the journeyman and the independent craftsperson? Aled, like many makers, has difficulty defining it. "Some commercial shops have a work ethic that would shame most people," he remarks. But they may provide security and a reasonable chance at carrying a mortgage. Very few furniture makers, after all, go on to become a Maloof, Krenov or Osgood.

"When I left Dyson to follow my own work, I found it very difficult." Aled pauses. "I missed the camaraderie, missed having people make things with me. I worked on my own seven days a week—long days. It's a hard life." A hard life, perhaps, but also an independent life. "I was unshackled from the commercial," says Aled. "Satisfying the tastes of a corporate client is constraining. I'm designing for myself. And I love designing."

It may be merely in this independence, even at the peril of economic disaster, that the lone craftsperson becomes something different from the shop employee.

In his recent work, Aled explores asymmetry, which may be the natural response to many years of regular, symmetrical production work. He wants to look at shape, texture and color. "And I have no interest in veneer. At the Oxford shop, we would veneer a hundred panels in one session using mechanical glue spreaders to keep up with the seven-minute turnaround in the heated press," recalls Aled about his early career. "Having laid acres and acres of veneer, I don't want to use it anymore. I find the ubiquitous

9. *Berret* (2004); oak, slate
33"H x 72"W x 16"D.

10. *Tabernacle Stand* (2003); oak, stainless steel
18"W x 38"D.

11. *Altar* (2002); oak, stainless steel, gold leaf
29"H x 64"W x 32"D.

12. *Mathers* (2001); cherry, rosewood
98"H x 50"W x 26"D.

13. *Emyn* (2003); 39"H x 17"W.

14. *Slade* (2007); 78"H x 130"W x 30"D.

15. *Caird* (2009); fumed oak, bleached oak; 36"H x 58"W x 15"D.

16. *Guardian* (2004); oak, walnut, stainless steel; 82"H x 56" W.

book match tedious."

In such pieces as his *Oak Desk* (7), using bog oak, and *Altar* (11), made for a convent, a piece Aled especially likes, we can see his explorations. There is a juxtaposition of grain pattern or the surprising use of negative space. Still, he does retain his connection to innovative machining. The customized stainless steel hardware, seen in the altar and in his piece, *Tension Table* (4), harkens to industrial inspiration.

Aled Lewis now splits time between Wales and the coast of Maine. At home in Wales, he lives in a 200-year-old house with stone walls two feet thick, a rural home he renovated himself. The greater part of the year, he teaches, putting his nascent independent work on hold. Before taking the reins of the Nine-Month Intensive at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship he had taught primarily within the shop at Dyson furniture, managing the young apprentices, and co-taught a six-week segment during the Nine-Month. He had never had a class of students from varied backgrounds and abilities to guide.

"May of 2008, Peter Korn [director of the Center] called me up to see if I'd be interested in taking over the Nine-Month. I was stunned. I thought, 'I have a business to run, Isobel [his wife] has a business to run, how can we?' But then we asked ourselves, 'Why not?'"

Simple as that. Aled—and Isobel, too, it seems—are adaptable, quick-thinking, and game for challenges and changes, like sitting for an interview, or moving at mid-life from the routine work in the commercial shop to his own home shop, or taking on his first serious teaching job across the ocean from home.

"It's lovely here."

Initially, with customary modesty, he worried. "I thought—what do I know? Even so, he stepped into it, and he realized the scope of his own history. After 30 years of learning, producing and managing, he had become the old soldier, the type of man he had first admired and relied upon for his own livelihood. "I do know quite a lot, actually," he laughs. Aled has become the man who, grateful for his own evolution and resourcefulness, helps others become artisans.

THE QUESTION OF A BUSINESS CARD

BY ALED LEWIS

What do I call myself? You'd think after 30 years of working with wood, making furniture, I'd know. I understand the importance of a professional title. It suggests how I spend my time, and it summarizes, more or less, the approach I take to my work. But am I a studio furniture maker, cabinetmaker, or sculptural artist? I've made and continue to make so many different kinds of furniture that it's difficult to pigeonhole my work into any one category. The titles here won't all fit on my card—even if I had one.

These days we turn our hands to almost anything. We might imagine, as furniture makers, that we are carpenters, joiners, cabinetmakers, chair makers, upholsterers, polishers, and so on. Is there nothing we can't do? At one time, these jobs were discrete, separate and noble professions. I've known men who spent their working lives as polishers, and they were masters of the craft. But I'm not arguing here for the respect we should have and might have lost for tradesmen. That's for another place. I want to know what to call myself here and now.

Many furniture makers now use the term "designer/maker" to describe their profession. It's a relatively new title, having emerged during the craft revival, and has over the last 30 or 40 years become the label that best describes the business I, and many woodworkers like me, engage in. This is a hybrid, a combination of the designer whose ideas and inspirations are informed by his (or her) craft and knowledge of the materials, and the maker, whose methods and skills are guided by the design.

This seems best, this two-word title. When the balance between design and making is right, the outcome is unquestionably good. It fails when the designer strives for that instantly recognizable piece, deluded by the desire for fame and notoriety. We may not be able to describe it, but we know when design has become self-conscious. Likewise, when the making takes center stage, the result can be an ostentatious use of complicated joinery that ruins the design. Whether it has hand-cut dovetails or not is less important than whether it needs dovetails at all. It becomes about the maker and not what he or she makes. So this two-word title wants balance, as if the slash were a seesaw.

Of course, we can't do anything about how different professionals perceive the weight of these two words. To some, design may mean self-expression. It might indulge personal notions, political or social or aesthetic notions that tilt the work heavily toward art furniture, or less functional furniture. For me, self-expression is confined to my knowledge, skills, and design influences and I leave my politics out of it.

I am not solely a designer. I could not cope with being detached from the making process, the hands-on involvement. Neither am I solely a maker, though this is where my career started. I need to be closely involved in the process of conveying the idea to reality, to have the conversation with the client and interpret an aspiration into something that exceeds expectation. Indeed, the independence that comes with being a designer/maker can't be denied. I want to be free to say, "No, that's not what I want to make because it doesn't interest me." In the past, when I've made furniture in line with another's vision, I've just had to get on with it. Designer/makers are largely self-determined.

I strive to make furniture that resolves a design brief elegantly and skillfully, and answers a functional requirement with an aesthetically pleasing solution. For each piece, the technical resolutions are appropriate and sound. I resist the urge to show off my skills unnecessarily and I employ up-to-date technologies where appropriate. I make a living this way, producing special, useful and, sometimes, beautiful pieces for my clients. I fulfill my own criteria for calling myself a designer/maker. My business card wouldn't lie.