



'Patience' cabinet made from maple burl, ebony and shellac

# In the workshop with Karen McBride

Brian Greene speaks with a Canadian perfectionist

**K**aren McBride might not call herself a perfectionist, but many would. It seems there is no other way to achieve what she achieves. If a piece of furniture looks impossible, it's got her attention. Everything she builds is out of the ordinary. Her pieces are new and fresh and she has never built the same piece twice.

## Background

A native of Canada's national capital, Ottawa, Karen came to professional furniture designing and making relatively late in life. After training as an engineer with a stint at auto mechanics, she spent many years as a successful computer systems consultant. How did she go from puttering with cars and computers and hobby woodworking to becoming a designer-maker of very fine furniture? She says it was

"an incredible combination of everything".

Years of restoring and refinishing antiques as a hobby gave her an appreciation for the well-grounded, classic lines of antique furniture. Her sense of the artistic and an interest in design combined with a talent for resolving mechanical problems has always been there.

The first items of furniture she made were Windsor chairs. "I made two and then I did a course with Michael Dunbar in New Hampshire to learn how. That's the way I learn!", she explains.

After building her shop she realised that, while furniture making gave her the freedom to follow her muse down whatever rabbit hole caught her eye, it was never intended to be more than a hobby. Serendipitously, Karen saw a flyer for a new furniture making school,

Rosewood Studio, opening just outside Ottawa. "It seemed unbelievable that here was a school minutes away from my door offering courses where I could learn the skills I was only just starting to appreciate."

In 2003 she took some courses at Rosewood and worked there at weekends assisting instructors prep for their courses. Her time at Rosewood enhanced her machine and hand tools skills and introduced her to the work of people like Garrett Hack, Michael Fortune and other top flight designer-makers who later became friends and mentors. "All of a sudden the pages of *Fine Woodworking* came alive for me", she says.

At that point Karen was still working full-time as a computer systems consultant but she began professional designing and making part time.

## Mentoring is critical

Her time at Rosewood was followed in 2005 with a three-month internship with Michel Fortune in Lakefield, Ontario, commuting home at weekends for two and a half months to the 50-acre farm she shares with her partner, Nonie. The time with Fortune was intensive and formative and Michael continues to be an important mentor to Karen. She says of him: "His love of machinery, his business sense, the methodical way his projects move through the various phases of production as well as his design techniques have had a big effect on the way I work. I very definitely see projects take shape in my mind first and worry later about how to build them."

Garrett Hack of Vermont, a veteran teacher at Rosewood, also shaped Karen's development as a furniture designer-maker. They have a lot in common. Both are engineers, they live a similar farming lifestyle and share a love of vintage machinery. They are both very emotional with big streaks of perfectionism and an almost insatiable curiosity. "Garrett is a true friend. He believes in me, supports my direction and has always been there for me when I have a technical issue with a project."

Jack Forsberg is an Ottawa area architectural millwright with a passion for vintage machines. "Jack has become a great friend" Karen explains. "I really appreciate his very well-developed design sense based on his historically sensitive design-build work. He has a huge knowledge of vintage machines and the ability to solve mechanical problems. Moreover, he understands what working from the heart is all about."

Karen explained that the support from these more experienced makers has been an immense help in her career. "Mentoring



Like her mentors, Karen has a passion for engineering and vintage machinery

has been critical because the work is so emotionally difficult. What does working from the heart mean? It's working as well as you can, doing the best you can. It means leaving nothing on the table because a part of you goes into every piece – you never get it back."

Very much related to this, Karen believes that developing confidence in yourself as a designer-maker is the single most important

aspect of the studio furniture maker's personality. As she sees it, to do truly great, original work means having the confidence to be vulnerable and to fail over and over again. That is how we learn and move forward.

## Design ethos

Asked where her design ethos is rooted and without hesitation Karen immediately mentions the Art Nouveau and Art Deco



◀ periods, especially the work of Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann (1879–1933). “I really appreciate the practitioners of what I call ‘nouveau art nouveau’, the furniture sculptured with cleverness, particularly the work of designer-makers like Marc Fish, Jere Osgood, Joseph Walsh and Matthias Pliessnig. Their furniture really moves me because it goes beyond what seems possible. It reminds me of why I choose to make furniture. This is what it’s really about: beautiful curves, complex mechanical issues, the seemingly impossible.”

**Rinse and repeat**

Wendell Castle advised furniture makers about not being in a hurry to build the first good idea; to not leave the design process too early. Otherwise, we can’t know that what we have is, in fact, the best. Karen’s creative process is like that, pretty intense.

“The most important tools in my shop are pencils and erasers. I test idea after idea. I go down the rabbit holes. Sketch, draw, model, make full-scale mock-ups; full-scale drawings, prototype, rinse and repeat! The drawings, models and full-scale mock-ups are easily half the work. I do it over and over many times until I get it right. I don’t rush to a solution, any old solution. That’s not what I’m after. I plod on, trying out all the ideas until I come up with the best solution. It’s a never-ending and addictive pursuit of the illusion of the design originally imagined – perfectly formed. That’s what I mean by rinse and repeat.

“If you give up you’ll never get the



**Karen uses both power and hand tools**

breakthrough you’re looking for. It’s inside you and you have to keep at it until it comes out.”

From there the making takes over. Karen’s shop is set up with large industrial machines, all of them capable of doing remarkably precise work. She favours machine processes but also uses hand tools when

that’s the best approach. “I do whatever works!”, she says.

Karen is well known for her curved work, particularly steamed work. She also favours the seemingly limitless possibilities of veneer and a vacuum bag. Almost every piece will feature a turned element, whether major or minor.



**Much of Karen’s work features turned elements**

**The Log Shop**

Karen’s studio shop is a log house on a 50-acre farm about 30 minutes outside of Canada’s national capital. Never one to take the easy way, Karen bought, disassembled, moved and reconstructed a 19th-century two storey log house. She and her father Jim, along with other helpers, worked on and off on the project for five years.

“I wanted to create a really nice, inspiring place to work. It was a great project and a huge challenge, but it was very definitely a bad business decision. However, the shop is built in a way that allows for conversion to a residence in its next life. Maybe the studio will be my legacy.”

A three-part series of articles about Karen’s shop can be found here: [www.woodkiltonstudio.com/about.php?s=3](http://www.woodkiltonstudio.com/about.php?s=3)



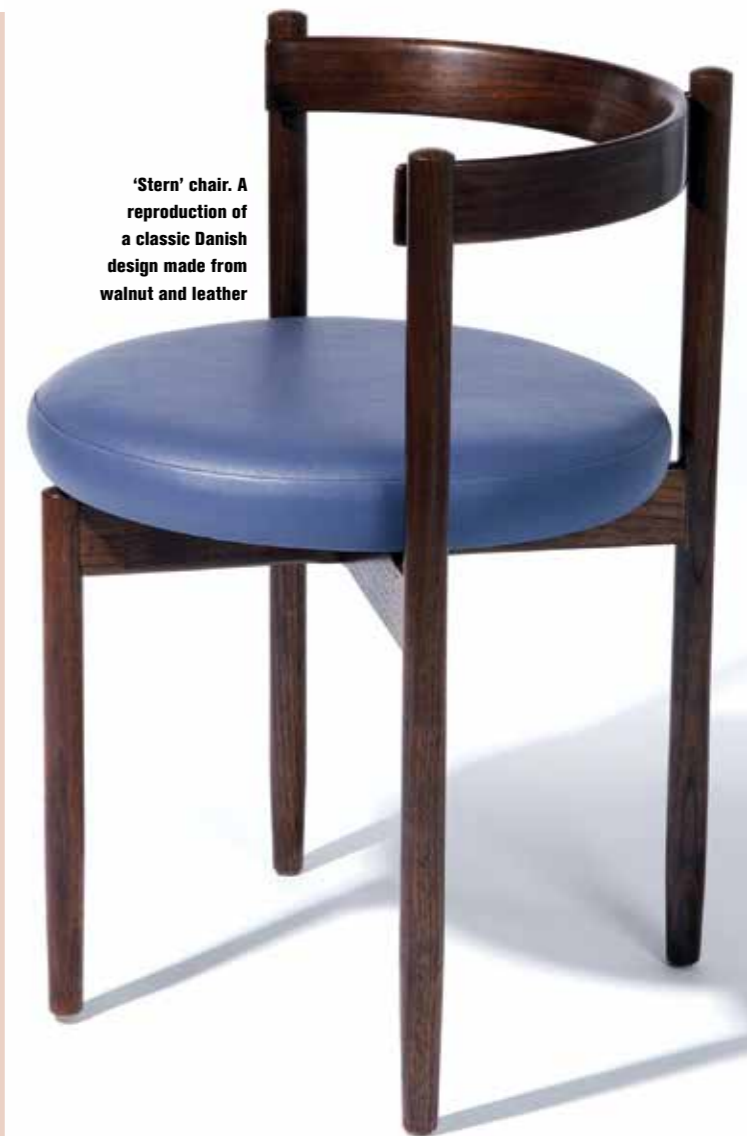
**Karen dismantled, moved and reconstructed this 19th-century log house**



**Moving and reconstructing the log house took five years**



**The shop’s white oak stairs feature a hand-carved inscription: “Perfection is achieved not when there is nothing left to add but when there is nothing left to take away – Antoine de Saint-Exupéry”**



**‘Stern’ chair. A reproduction of a classic Danish design made from walnut and leather**



**Two solid walnut side tables are attached to the veneered walnut headboard of the ‘Feather bed’**



## Collaboration

Building the shop to a high standard reinforced for Karen the importance of collaboration. Her father Jim, now 80 years old, has been coming to the shop every Monday since retiring in 2000, first working on the building, now helping refurbish the massive pieces of vintage machinery that turn up on her doorstep with regularity.

Karen's apprentice, Ginny Honeyman, works with her three days a week. "I have always worked on my own. It's nice to have someone here with me to bounce ideas around. The give and take is wonderful," Karen says.

Karen is also involved in a major creative collaboration for the first time. Working with Ottawa portrait painter Paul Wyse they are creating an art piano for Steinway and Sons that is expected to be unveiled later this year. "This is a big commission and it's been a fantastic experience. I couldn't have asked for a better colleague. We've been twice as good together as we would have been working separately. Trust is a huge issue and we have that in spades. It's neat to have someone push you to the limits. The process has helped me do my best work. As a result, my design and making skills have grown well past where they were before."

## What does success mean?

The good news is that Karen has lots of work. She has been making furniture professionally for about 10 years with a very carefully thought out plan and approach.



'Nonie's bed' made from Karelian birch veneer, walnut, shellac, acrylic medium with water-based dyes and varnish

She's learned to design furniture and run an efficient business. Like most studio furniture makers, she struggles to balance efficiency with perfection in order to be profitable. Giving up the security of part-time consulting work has helped her sharpen her focus.

A mix of furniture repair work, usually antiques, as well as commissioned pieces, keeps the shop humming. The repair work is fairly lucrative, often interesting and usually fits in around the bigger projects.

It all seems to be working for her because Karen has enough work without the time and expense of speculative work and exhibitions.

## The 100+ year rule

Karen is the first to say she is never satisfied unless the design and the execution are the best that she can do. For her, it's always about the integrity of the design. "The pieces I make have to last at least a 100 years."

It's a tough standard. *F&C*



Karen in her workshop

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