



'We try not to do anything that is not exceptional.'
— Richard Oedel



This Federal-style secretary showcases Oedel's skill at synthesizing traditional elements with new design techniques and wood combinations.

Cooperative Capitalist

Former manufacturing CEO, Richard Oedel takes a cooperative approach in his career as a fine furniture maker.

by Brad Walseth

After he spent 20 years successfully buying, running and selling manufacturing businesses, Richard Oedel decided to change course. He enrolled in Boston's acclaimed North Bennett Street School's two-year furniture making program, where he used his business skills, love of working with his hands and experience in historical preservation to embark upon a new career opportunity.

"Furniture making had the great advantage of having very few or no employees," Oedel recalls. "It also had the advantage in that I knew I would be reasonably good at it. And chances were pretty good that I could also pick my customers."

Oedel says his experience at North Bennett Street was indelible. "I spent two solid years making all sorts of great furniture and learning from some wonderful people." He also spent his summers between school sessions interning with master New England woodworkers John Logattuta and Jere Osgood.

After running a shop in Salem, MA, for several years, Oedel moved to Boston 2-1/2 years ago and started a company based out of a 5,000-square-foot space within a 1-million-square-foot complex in the city's Fort Point Arts District. The space is a cooperative shop, which Oedel shares with six other partners in the company, two of whom are teachers in North Bennett's furniture making program.

Fort Point Cabinetmakers is a limited liability corporation (LLC). "I set up the company as a loose conglomeration of people who have been around for 23 years," Oedel explains. "We created an LLC to make this work on a professional basis. All of us are partners, but we work individually, so there is no problem in terms of us being contractors. We end up contracting out work to each other, depending on what we need. We don't have any employees *per se*.

"It works very well," Oedel continues. "We haven't had any situation where we haven't been able to fill any orders because we didn't have the manpower, and we always have a group of people interested in any project that comes in."

The shop is outfitted with an 1895 lathe with an 8-foot bed, standard planers and panel saws, but Oedel estimates they spend 70 to 80% of their time on bench work. The group also does not hesitate to utilize outside help from the vibrant Boston community. One project recently found them using a laser cutter for the first time to produce the intricate latticework on a Chinese *étagère*.

Fort Point Cabinetmakers does little marketing, relying instead on quality word-of-mouth business. "We don't want a huge amount of business; we just want really good business," Oedel explains.

He works closely with his customers, who he says are often educated over a long period of time in a design aesthetic. These clients may be looking for something they have seen in a museum, but in most cases he does not simply strive to replicate the original.

"I like to take great older designs," he says, "and modify them with different things that would never have been created originally." He points to a Federal-style secretary as a "design synthesis of several pieces from the era" that features an original combination of contrasting woods and unique muntins.

Oedel also is an active member of The Furniture Society, an organization that he says provides invaluable insights into modern furniture making business and design for its members.

The venture-capitalist-turned-furniture-entrepreneur still strives for excellence, as he says in his own words:

"We try not to do anything that is not exceptional." ❄



This console table features a 1920's Art Deco flavor. The table's lyre is vase-shaped and Oedel has used hand cut South American rosewood veneers, maple burl top and ebony and holly stringing.



This Chinese *étagère* allowed Oedel and his partners the opportunity to use a laser cutter on the intricate lattice work.

To see more of Oedel's work, along with that of other custom woodworkers, visit www.iswonline.com.