

# THE PURSUIT OF MATERIAL ADVANTAGE

John Makepeace OBE is one  
of Britain's foremost furniture makers  
and the founder of Parnham College  
(which celebrates its 40th anniversary this month).

Here he elaborates on a creative journey that's far from complete, his working ethos  
and why he hates the term 'handmade'...

As a child I recall whittling skirting board. In the post-war days you were lucky to get any wood at all – it was hard to get timber to restore buildings – but my father managed to get a length of skirting, and I would work away at the off-cuts. I don't really remember what I made – boats I suspect.

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Parental influence can be very curious. By my teenage years I was in a carpenter's workshop as much as I could be – and gleaned more understanding of the design scene by visiting countries like Holland and Denmark. My belief then, though, was that I would go into the church – but then my father died in my last year at school. That was fairly disruptive. I got to know myself a bit around that time, and I suddenly thought, 'I don't really want to go into the church – I want to make furniture.' I think father wanted me to go to university. It's really hard for people to know themselves when under that sort of pressure.

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Why don't people pay a really good employer to train them? When it came to my training, no one would

have me at first. I tried established workshops such as Gordon Russell's, and eventually I paid to work with somebody from 1957 to 1959 – Keith Cooper at Lychett Matravers. That seems odd but actually is a hugely sensible idea.

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My big break? Projects such as Liberty's Centenary Dining Room, and those for Heal's and Harrods were important, as were the 120 rooms we did for Keeble College, Oxford, but the latter were not really the direction I was seeking to go in, in the longer term. Makers have to be motivated, and making is really about exploring – there's nothing worse than just repeating yourself.

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Great Britain was really depressing in the late Fifties, so it's fortunate that I got to work my way around America [as a youth]. The States had this wonderful can-do sense. The British post-war mood – the inclination to look backwards, not forwards – had a very long tail. Fear today drives a lot of our recent political decisions.

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You have to be a rebel, really, in this world, but you need to understand

convention before you can kick it. The desire to challenge what's possible is something you grow towards. Initially I was very happy to make things that were effectively slight variations on things I'd already seen. That's how you learn. We don't start necessarily by being very original – we start by understanding materials, processes. Then, once you feel fluent in those, you begin to push against the conventions.

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If a client knows exactly what they want, they're best off going and getting exactly that made, to put it rather curtly. People have brought me photographs of what they wanted in the past and that doesn't really excite me. Patronage comes when people know what the making will be as an activity, but they don't know how it's going to be resolved.

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I bought Parnham House in 1976 and immediately we had to set up a charitable trust, raise the money, convert spaces into workshops, recruit the staff, enlist the students and get started on what was then called The School for Craftsmen in Wood. I can't think how the hell

we did it in 12 months. Integrating forestry, manufacturing, design and business when I ran the college between 1977 and 2001 was another huge challenge.

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I get asked a lot about the fire at Parnham\*, but I just don't want to think about it. It was a grim chapter. I find regrets just don't lead anywhere. They're a negative force. Pass things by and get on.

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I once had the lovely experience of working with the engineer Sir Ted Happold, who used to demonstrate wood's properties with a matchstick. If you hold each end of it and try to pull it apart, you'll find it hugely strong in tension. Squeeze it between your thumb and first finger length-wise, and you'll find it hugely strong in compression. But place it between your thumb and your second finger, and pressure it from the side, and it'll snap easily. So when we use wood in buildings as beams and joists we play to its weakness. When you bend timber – as has been done in Parnham's Hooke Park campus, the outside of the timber is in tension, the inside is in compression – you play to its strengths.

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Parnham College will always push the boundaries, and one of the lovely things they're doing now is actually 3D-scanning trees, including their branches, then taking this compression and tension and space-scanning into consideration, building those into a structure as joists in strong arch forms. It's thrilling when you begin to understand materials and think freshly about that.

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Nature seems to be incapable of creating ugliness. Function is not just physical but philosophical.

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The phrase 'handmade' is one I really detest. It's used so much in advertising, yet the phrase is inherently compromised – it's a stretch of the truth. If you work with timber, you are not going to fell a tree and carry it by hand. There is always

a machine – it's going to be machine sawn, it's going to go into a kiln, and be carried by lorry.

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We've recently been doing some digital [carving] work that wouldn't make sense if you did it by hand. Digitally, you can achieve a certain subtlety in the change in curvature. Technology is an entirely positive force, and offers so many new possibilities. I don't see machines as compromising individuality. If they're producing results that speak of the skills of today, then I find that exciting and relevant. I can't ignore technology. Why would I when it enables me to make something I could never have done before?

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A human-centred approach is focused on the user's needs rather than the needs of a machine. Take

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the Bauhaus movement: it's focused on finding a language to express machines. Why would I want to do that in the 21st century? Machines can do anything we can imagine.

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The history of the world is one of taking things to the edge of what's possible. That's what craftspeople have always done. It's about bringing everything you possibly can to human endeavour. It takes patience and persistence. When you're learning, you know how difficult it is, and once you achieve success, then you're coming from a higher standpoint, so you view what you've done as part of a bigger scene. And I'm still learning. Every mistake is a good lesson.

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Being on a constant learning path is so wonderfully human. When a company says, 'We've got no time for that' – when you take away the desire to perform well – there's no longer

any reason to live. All you're going to do after that is to work for the money or the time off. Unless people are working at their peak they're not happy. So you've always got to be on edge, reaching for the next level.

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Originality comes not for its own sake – it comes because what exists is not good enough, or is just good enough – and that to me is a similar kind of death to that mentioned above. Unless you're critical you can't move on. If a client wants to commission something fresh, is imaginative enough to realise that things could be better – better in terms of functionality, appropriateness, use of materials, quality; everything – then that is the start of a whole adventure between the client and that maker. Happily, we now have higher expectations of the things we live with.

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The round mud buildings found in parts of Africa are a wonderful expression of family as an entity. We've got used to families being fairly diffuse, whereas in oriental or African countries they're very much about supporting one another, and the whole building expresses that so powerfully. A circle is the shortest wall to contain the maximum amount of space, and makes so much sense in human terms. It doesn't suit manufacturers so well – it's more expensive and difficult, so they would like us sitting in a line, as we do on sofas – but that's a case of the tail wagging the dog.

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There are always going to be people who stand apart, who don't want their life to be dictated – they, the people likely to step aside from the mainstream, are the people who will change the world.

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I am not very good at looking back – history is really not my scene. I think one has to always be looking forward...  
*Beyond Parnham is out now: [beyondparham.com](http://beyondparham.com); [johnmakepeacefurniture.com](http://johnmakepeacefurniture.com)*

