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It's not just a business, it's a passion



"OUR WORKSHOP is no different to that of any other small cabinetmaker in terms of machinery and setup. However, we differ in that it is very much a design-based workshop and that we work with a large range of materials. As a result, we produce some wonderful furniture," Charlie O'Donovan tells AWISA-The Magazine, speaking from the Adelaide workshop.

He and Monique Boseley combined their talents in 2008, and since then they have developed two successful online cutting-edge furniture businesses, Retromodern and Senkki, dealing especially in Danish mid-century style sideboards, chests of drawers, and tables. The businesses complement one another in the market place, and moreover offer customers the opportunity to contribute creatively to the design of their selections. Boseley brought the skills of an artistic background to the enterprise having worked in photography and interior design. Boseley explains she looks after advertising, marketing, website design, and "anything that involves the office". O'Donovan manages the workshop, and together they share the design work. He had worked for many years in high-end boat building, specialising in refitting and restoring classic sailing yachts where no two jobs were ever the same, as he recalls, and the standard of finish was always of the highest order. "This is something we aim to bring to Senkki furniture," he adds.

The initial venture, Retromodern furniture, grew out of their liking for

sharp lines, simplicity and general functionality of the Danish mid-century style of furniture as well as their own interest in ecological sustainability. They found and restored some furniture for their own home, discovering in that work, a vocation that let them make both a living and uphold their values. In the Retromodern operation, O'Donovan details, pieces are stripped back, relaquered, and generally restored. Customers pick from a selection of original pieces that would otherwise be discarded, choosing features such as door handles, and type and colour of laminates. "Customers are coming to us with their designs and we build it for them, giving the pieces a unique touch," he explains.

With an effective website, the business thrived and within a year, they were shipping their furniture all over Australia, as well as overseas. Subsequently, the results of a successful exhibition programme and promotional campaign encouraged O'Donovan and Boseley to expand. In 2011 they established Senkki, and extended to new furniture the concept of engaging the customer in creating modifications in the design of any piece in the basic range. The line, for home or business, is inspired again by their love of the Danish mid-century style.

From the choice made by the customer, O'Donovan mocks-up a design in a computer image and returns it for confirmation or alteration, which the customers can achieve if they download the program. Should

customers visit the workshop, they are always pleased to sit down with the client with pen and paper, though, he adds, people nowadays expect to see plans on computer because it speaks of a level of professionalism.

He explains in detail how they use a simple program called SketchUp that serves its purpose very well for both the client and themselves. O'Donovan says, "We still enjoy putting pen to paper as a quick and effective way to hash out design ideas. We also use scaled models to assist with proportion and overall design. From a design perspective I feel it's important not to get bogged down in technology as it can be costly, time consuming and may not achieve the main objective, at least until it has been mastered. I also feel that if technology is not approached correctly, it can in the short term be a drain on the limited resource of a small business. We are keen to embrace technology in a step-by-step manner. Therefore as we grow we will have the resource to implement more computer based technologies into our designs and manufacturing."

As much of the furniture is custom built, O'Donovan explains that the machinery in the workshop is quite basic, including the normal range of power tools, and edgebanders, table saws, and thicknessers. One dimensional table saw is an RGA 150, and a thicknesser is a Griggio FSC400 (over and under with doweling attachment).

The machinery is adequate to satisfy



the present demand. "With our business we're not about going out and buying the expensive equipment. That's not how we work, with a huge debt. We're about meeting our demand, and running a tight ship. So the machinery is old, but it does the job and it does it well. As we grow, we will invest in better equipment, but not at this moment," O'Donovan stresses. Down the track, an investment in CAD and CNC will be a consideration.

In the meantime, they are adding a fourth craftsman to the workshop team, which is bolstered with expert contractors to meet additional demands.

The workshop has a better than a ten percent wastage rate, which O'Donovan says is the 'best practice' rate, and that he achieves it without computer assistance programming. "Wastage can be easily calculated with pen and paper and when we design our items we pay close attention to keep wastage to a minimum on our own designs. Obviously when we custom build for clients, wastage is usually greater in order to meet their requirements. Our wastage with laminate is higher, at about fifteen percent."

Although O'Donovan and Boseley think of their businesses as separate ventures, the work in the shop is run in tandem, and the workshop is not divided into separate areas for Retromodern, and Senkki. The approach to the work is the same, and there are separate work-benches, and dedicated areas and space for

specific tasks, so that a number of jobs can be undertaken simultaneously. Because everything is well organised, O'Donovan is able to restructure the workflow as required. With a small workforce, he says that it is a very hands-on small business, and sometimes there can be a jostle for space and machinery. "No one job is the same as another. We have to take each job as it comes."

A major challenge comes from operating on-line. Because customers cannot view the furniture, their aim was to build a reputation for quality and good service. "A good public relations campaign, word of mouth, clever design and manufacture, and a general trend to purchasing on-line has helped to overcome the difficulty, and because we don't have huge overheads, and we've got a small workshop, we're able to keep overheads down and therefore pass on savings to the customer," he says.

Reflecting on their progress, O'Donovan points out that Retromodern was the start up business, and that the Senkki brand grew from that idea. He adds that as they do not have a production style manufacturing approach and treat each piece as a one off, they have to continually adapt, and explore new ideas. Many businesses would not adopt this model because it is more difficult but O'Donovan says they embrace the challenge. ■

AWISA thanks Senkki for supplying these copyrighted photographs.

