



Garry Bennett's Un-Trestle Table

Unconventional design is a portrait of the man

BY ASA CHRISTIANA



Garry Bennett has a few complaints. One is people using his middle name, Knox, which stuck somehow despite his best efforts. Another is people who know him only for his “Nail Cabinet,” a fine case piece with a nail driven into it, which appeared on the back cover of *FWW* #24 and drew a small avalanche of letters, both pro

and con. All I could get out of him on the subject was, “I planned to make a precious thing less precious.”

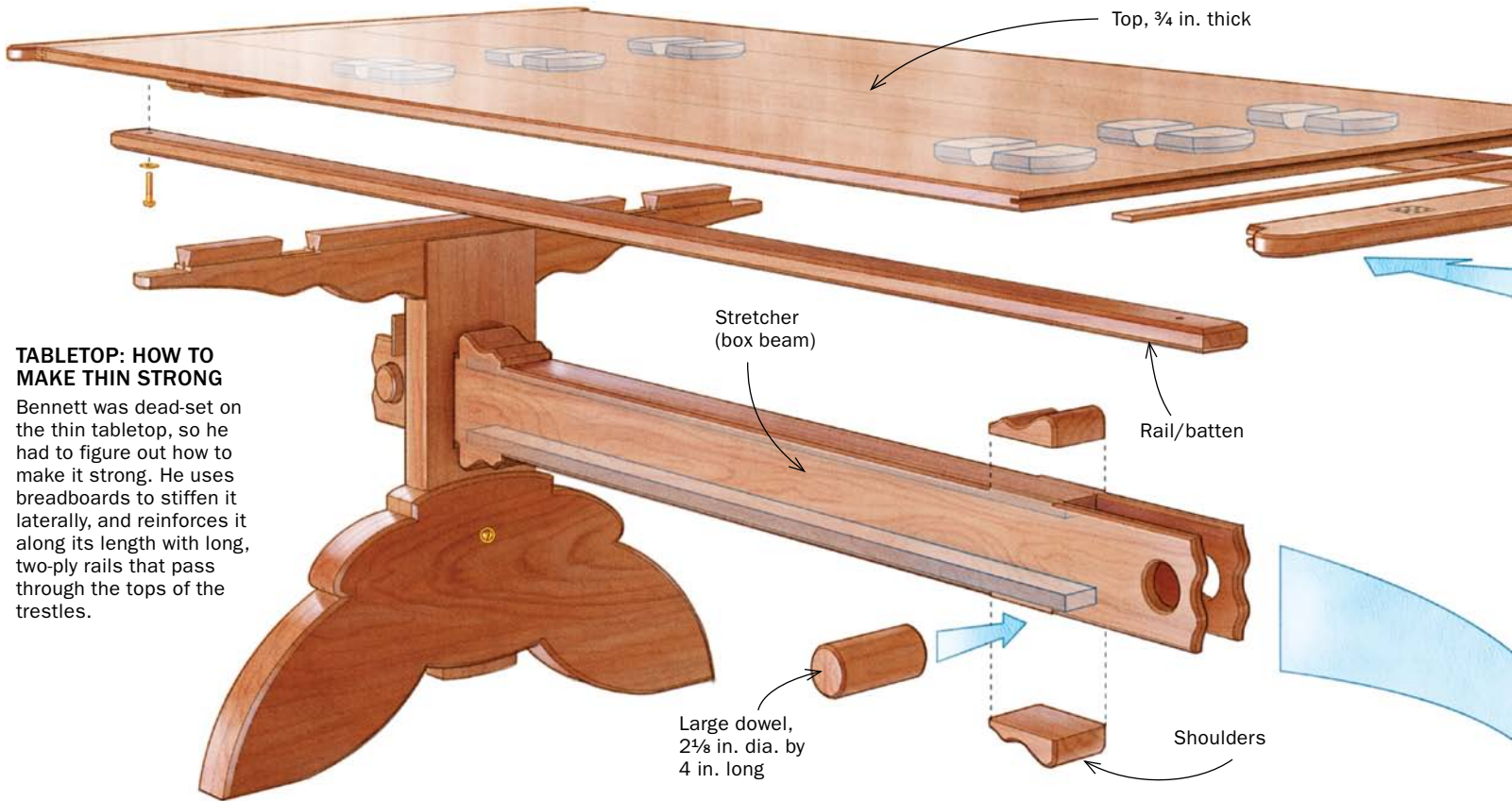
But what he seems most concerned about is the shrinking numbers of fellow studio furniture makers, those who attempt to make art and work purely on spec. “My kind of guys are dying off,” he says.

To understand how Bennett has avoided commissions and been



left alone to follow his muse, you have to know his story. Trained at California College of Arts and Crafts from 1958 to 1962, he worked as a sculptor, painter, and jewelry maker through the '60s and '70s. In 1967, he created a small line of “roach clips” on a whim, and sent samples to “head shops” (remember those?) around the country, trusting owners to return the proceeds or unsold product. Within weeks, he had a pile of cash and a stack of orders. Sometime later, he began to stamp out peace signs in his 70-man shop in Oakland, Calif. As the first business to mass-produce each of these hippie essentials, he made a lot of money. So when he turned his attention to furniture in the mid-'70s, Bennett had some advantages: a big nest egg, art training, metalworking skills, and plenty of space to work in.

From the beginning, Bennett's funky, mixed-media

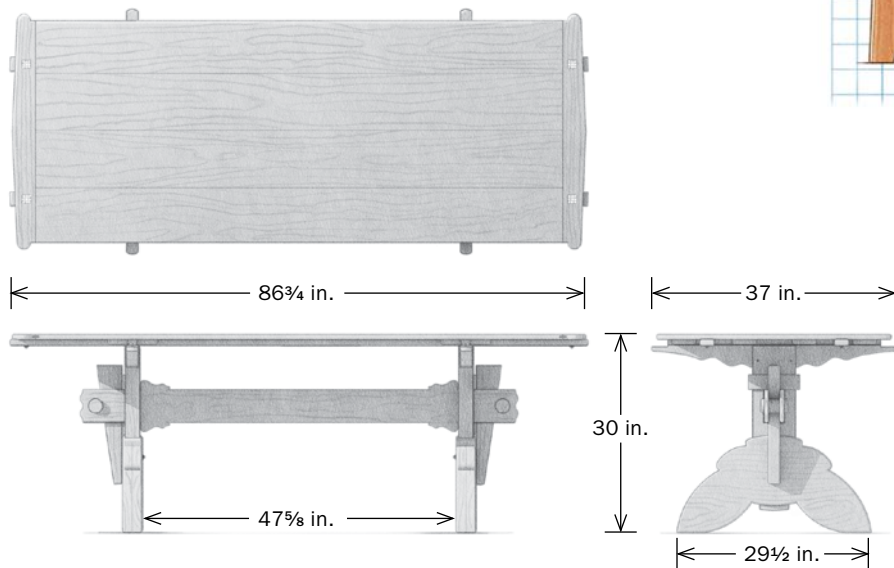
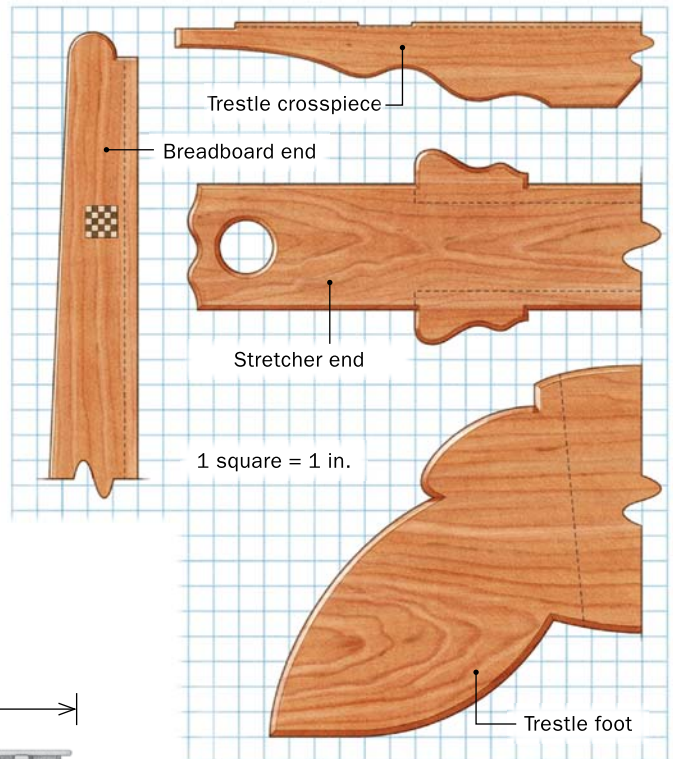
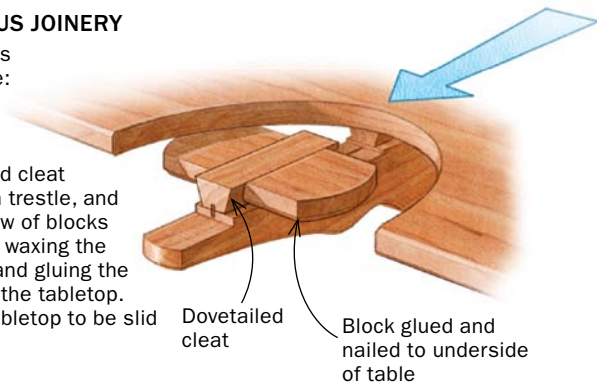


TABLETOP: HOW TO MAKE THIN STRONG

Bennett was dead-set on the thin tabletop, so he had to figure out how to make it strong. He uses breadboards to stiffen it laterally, and reinforces it along its length with long, two-ply rails that pass through the tops of the trestles.

MORE INGENUOUS JOINERY

The thin top poses another challenge: attaching the base. Bennett solved that by gluing a dovetailed cleat to the top of each trestle, and then nestling a row of blocks against the cleat, waxing the mating surfaces and gluing the blocks directly to the tabletop. This allows the tabletop to be slid off the base.

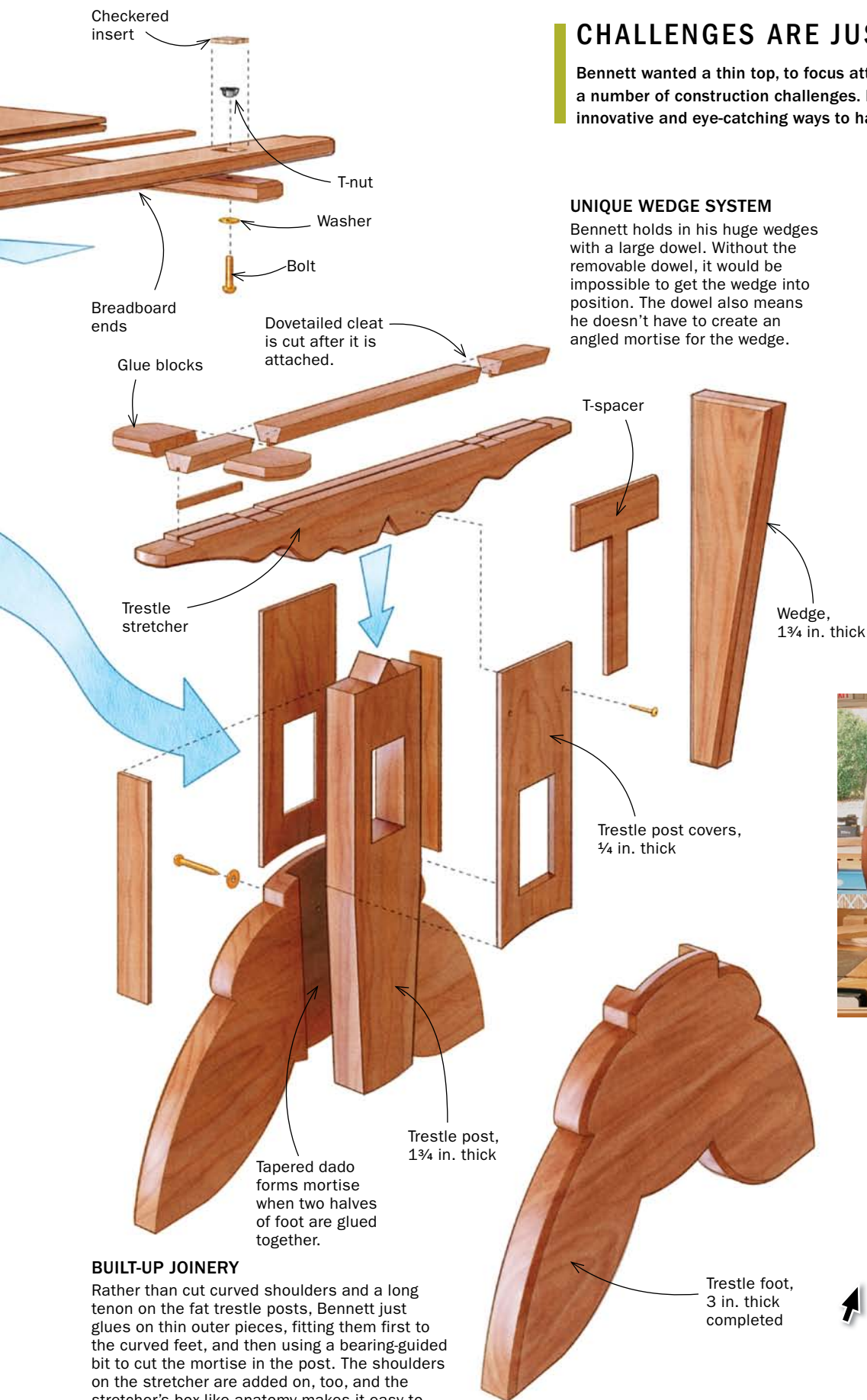


OVERALL MEASUREMENTS

Bennett works by feel, dry-fitting the base to see exactly how far apart the trestle should go and how big to cut the tabletop. But he never compromises function, and always designs the table for eight people: at least 7 ft. long, with the trestles roughly 4 ft. apart, leaving a comfortable overhang for a sitter at each end. The width is between 30 and 38 in.

CHALLENGES ARE JUST OPPORTUNITIES

Bennett wanted a thin top, to focus attention on the base, but that choice created a number of construction challenges. He overcame each one, and also found innovative and eye-catching ways to handle the joinery below.



UNIQUE WEDGE SYSTEM

Bennett holds in his huge wedges with a large dowel. Without the removable dowel, it would be impossible to get the wedge into position. The dowel also means he doesn't have to create an angled mortise for the wedge.

A rare occasion

Aside from his shows at galleries and museums, it is rare to find Bennett outside his beloved Oakland, let alone teaching a class. But he has made a few exceptions over the years, each time to build a trestle table for charity.

The most recent of these events happened in 2008, at Marc Adams School of Woodworking, where he recruited some of the school's skilled regulars to help him build another example of his versatile table. "[The project] is conducive to a lot of people working on it, because



it's big," he says.

Associate art director Kelly Dunton and I spent a week with Bennett in Indiana, taking notes for this article and shooting video to document Garry's generous, down-to-earth presence, and the heartfelt spirit of the event.

—A.C.

Online Extra

For a free video of our wonderful week building this table with Garry Bennett, go to FineWoodworking.com/extras.

BUILT-UP JOINERY

Rather than cut curved shoulders and a long tenon on the fat trestle posts, Bennett just glues on thin outer pieces, fitting them first to the curved feet, and then using a bearing-guided bit to cut the mortise in the post. The shoulders on the stretcher are added on, too, and the stretcher's box-like anatomy makes it easy to extend two sides for the wedge joinery.



Audacious lines. “Checkerboard Trestle Table” (1985) has especially beautiful curves, and an eye-catching stretcher.

BENNETT’S CHANGEABLE TABLE

Garry Bennett built many versions of his trestle table in the 1980s, in materials ranging from wood to steel and aluminum, and together they offer a window into the furniture maker’s fearlessness and imagination. They also show how an artist, once he or she finds a fruitful design, shakes it and works it over until every possibility has tumbled out.

Bennett came to furniture making via art school, as opposed to traditional woodworkers like James Krenov and Tage Frid, who entered through a classic apprenticeship. “Some people rely on technique too much,” Bennett said. “It doesn’t always look good, but, jeez, it’s well put together.” As for the future of fine furniture, he made one prediction: “It ain’t gonna be all wood.”

Fun with joinery. The trestle joinery system is very versatile, as seen in this desk, table, and bench (from left to right). Bennett is as comfortable working metal and glass as he is wood, and he treats each material with equal thoughtfulness.



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pieces were a big hit—a rare thing in the studio-furniture world. For 20 years, everything sold out. At 76, you can still find him in his studio every day, creating usable art, lubricating his muse with gin, and entertaining his artist friends.

Bennett’s best piece?

Bennett’s creativity extends from jewelry, where he made his start, to lighting and furniture in an ever-changing parade of materials and modes. But his trestle table hews closest to “fine” woodworking, and it is the piece he has repeated most often. It is also the one project he has taught at workshops.

With an art-school background, like fellow studio furniture pioneers Wendell Castle and Judy McKie, Bennett came at the trestle form the same way he came at the craft of woodworking, by ignoring its rules and standing it on its head. He traded in the usual thick top for a paper-thin one, setting it on a cartoonishly massive base. The result is an artist’s playground, with curves and joinery that invite interpretation. “The way I work, I don’t think a lot,” Bennett said. “I work pretty emotionally: ‘That looks good, do it.’”

Other than sketching curves directly onto his workpieces, Bennett uses no drawings as he builds: “I have an idea in my head, and just start working it.” His focus always is lines and shapes, as opposed to wood or joinery. “I view all my work as line. When I’m working on a piece, I’m looking at it dead-end for line [from the end], dead-on for line [from the front] and three-quarter view [at an angle].”

Follow in his footsteps

I spent the better part of a week with Bennett in Indiana, at both benches and bars, and it was one of the highlights of my career with *Fine Woodworking*.

While Bennett admitted it is much harder these days to sell artistic furniture made on spec, I left inspired to follow his lead, to trust my own intuition for both design and construction. As a hobbyist, with no pressure to make money from my work, I have no excuses.

In that spirit, Bennett is sharing his table design with you (see pp. 78-79), to inspire you to ignore the rules and dare you to create art. □

Asa Christiana is the editor.

