designer's notebook

# Out of Nakashima's shadow

A CHEST DESIGNED WITH DEFERENCE AND DIFFERENCE

BY STEWART WURTZ

I built this chest of drawers for a couple near Seattle who have been avid collectors of George Nakashima's work since they bought a live-edge dining table from him in the early 1980s. Nakashima's vocabulary is a powerful presence in their modest waterfront home, and I wanted to honor this in the furniture I created. But I also wanted to bring my own sensibility to the project.

At heart, Nakashima's furniture is about celebrating the material: what the plank has brought to the piece. I really respect that, but deferring to the wood leaves a lot up to chance. I wanted this chest to have a similar emphasis on great wood, but I wanted the form, not the wood, to be in control.
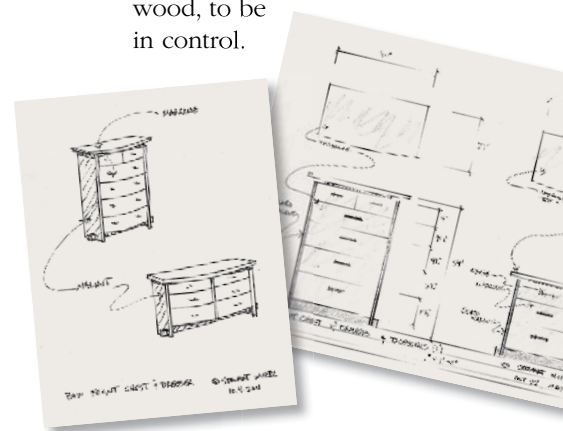
I begin my designs by making rough concept sketches. These are gestural drawings, quick and informal, done in my sketchbook. Rather than pinning down details, I try to envision the overall design and capture a sense of what the stance and feeling of the piece will be. Even when I make presentation sketches for the client to review, the drawings are still fairly loose, because I think a freehand sketch is much more personal

Photos: Timothy Aguero

than a scale drawing. When I get the go-ahead, I make scale drawings to refine details and proportions. And when it's time to build, I make full-scale working drawings.

This tall chest was part of a suite of furniture—a bed, two low dressers, and the chest—and I used the same materials throughout. I made the top and the drawer fronts from madrone, and framed the drawers with a carcase of claro walnut. The rich dark walnut, with its flickers of red and green, brings out the warm peach tones of the madrone and provides a contrast that accentuates the structure of the chest.

I slightly bowed the front of the chest to echo the curve across the top of the bed's headboard. I've always admired the bowfront form in period furniture, and I wanted to try using the concept in a modern context— no drawer dividers, no beading, just a clean and simple sweep of drawer fronts. I bent-laminated the drawer fronts, sawing the madrone into veneers and creating a cascading series of bookmatches down the front of the piece.

To keep the chest from looking heavy and monolithic, I designed the top to float above the case, tapering toward the ends and extending far out over the sides. I created the top's taper by shaping the underside to a curve that harmonizes with the curved drawer fronts.

I made an overt nod to Nakashima at the base of the

Details elevate the design. The curved taper and wide overhang of the madrone top give the whole chest a feeling of lightness. A walnut riser block creates a dark reveal below the top. The wenge pulls (center) are curved counter to the bow of the drawer fronts. The traditional joinery in this contemporary piece includes through- and half-blind dovetails (bottom).

chest, where I ran the toe kick right through the sides of the carcase, linking the parts with bridle joints. Nakashima used interlocked geometric forms on many of his table and cabinet bases. Here, in addition to acknowledging Nakashima, the detail lightened the chest and kept it from appearing blocky.

Despite its sleek, contemporary surfaces, the chest is traditional in its construction, with through-dovetails at the top of the carcase and wedged through-tenons and blind tenons joining the bottom to the sides. The curved drawer fronts are all half-blind dovetailed to the drawer sides, a labor of love that left me cross-eyed.

As the chest neared completion, I didn't have a concept for the pulls—I only knew I wanted them to reflect the bowfront form. I settled on handles with an arc that runs counter to the curve of the drawer fronts, giving a small amount of tension to the design. I made them from wenge and fixed each handle firmly to its shank with a single exposed steel pin. □

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Stewart Wurtz builds custom furniture in Seattle.