

Workshops in the city

AROUND THE WORLD, THE BOOM IN GROUP SHOPS
IS A BOON FOR URBAN WOODWORKERS

BY JONATHAN BINZEN

BROOKLYN, N.Y.

Woodwork in a warehouse

Canadian furniture maker Reed Hansuld has seen all the advantages and difficulties of group shops up close. He worked in six such shops—in Toronto and New York City—before he and three friends founded Liberty Labs, a collective workshop in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn, last year. Joined in the venture by former publishing executive John Koten, who provided a no-interest loan and a dose of financial savvy, the group formed a corporation with nonprofit status and a mission to provide affordable shop space to emerging designer-craftsmen. Then they spent three months converting raw space in a warehouse on the waterfront into what Hansuld hopes will be “the best place in the city to make this kind of career happen.” In addition to a collection of superb machines, Liberty has six bench rooms for its 16 craftsmen, a kitchen and dining area, office space, and professional photo gear available to anyone in the group. All members pay the same fee, and it covers use of the space, utilities, internet service, and maintenance of the machines. Routine tasks in the clean-as-a-whistle shop are divided into discrete jobs, which are rotated among the members weekly. For all the amenities the shop offers, one of its biggest assets, Hansuld says, “is just having other people around doing the same thing. We help and critique each other—and feed off the creative energy.”



A group shop grows in Brooklyn. Brooklyn's Liberty Warehouse, named for a certain statue just offshore, is home to a multitude of craft shops, including Liberty Labs (left), a 16-person collective. Members there include Pat Kim (rockets, below) and Jon Billing (textured cabinet).





BEIJING, CHINA

Toward a new dynasty

According to 28-year-old Chinese furniture maker Li Chen, in his country, despite its long history of exemplary furniture making, “people don’t think of woodworking as something happening in the present. They think it ended in the Ming or Qing dynasties.” Chen hopes to change that. After studying furniture making at Rochester Institute of Technology for three years and then spending a year assisting John Sheridan in his San Francisco Woodshop, Chen returned to China, where he joined forces with Wu Wei, an accomplished furniture designer who had been conducting woodworking classes for five years in Beijing. This year Wei and Chen renovated a space in Beijing where they design furniture and also offer short courses in the basics of woodworking. In 2017, drawing in part on Chen’s experience at the San Francisco Woodshop, they plan to introduce a membership system, renting bench space and access to the machine room to individuals and small businesses, making something of a hybrid school and collective shop. In a city with such high rents, it will be satisfying to offer more affordable access to a full shop. But there’s more to it than that for Chen, who says, “the ultimate goal is to popularize woodworking in China.”



Craft in China. Li Chen (teaching at left) and his partner Wu Wei renovated a space in Beijing where they design furniture and teach introductory woodworking. They also intend to create a membership system for individuals and small businesses.

EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND Creative corner

In 1995, when Isabelle Moore graduated from Parnham College, the English woodworking program founded by John Makepeace, she returned to her native Scotland in search of shop space. Then as now, workable spaces for furniture making were scarce and expensive in Edinburgh, but she found a home in a group shop at the Albion Business Centre, a former soda bottling plant in the center of the city. The building's imposing neighbors include a 20,000-seat stadium for the Hibernian Football Club, which accounts for "the chorus and stamping of fans in the stands that reverberates through many a weekend working in the shop." Twenty-one years on, Moore, who travels frequently for residencies and teaching, still maintains studio space there, though in a different shop. In the years since, development in the area "has gone bonkers," she says. The Albion is filled with small creative companies, and in addition to more than a dozen furniture makers, there are other shops with leatherworkers, jewelers, glassworkers, guitar makers, even a gin distiller and a taxidermist.



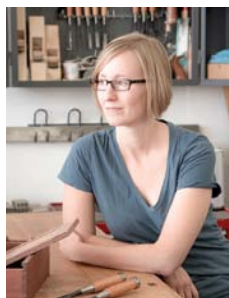
Scots shop. Set in the heart of Edinburgh and in the shadow of a soccer stadium, the Albion Business Centre houses a wide variety of small creative businesses. The collective woodshop at left is home to a dozen makers, including Namon Gaston and Alasdair Campbell (table, below), and Isabelle Moore (rocking bench and stool).





LOS ANGELES, CALIF. Elevated craftsmanship

When Laura Zahn moved back home to Los Angeles after spending a year studying furniture making at the College of the Redwoods in northern California, finding a place to work wood in the city was a struggle. She eventually rented bench space at Offerman Woodshop and enjoyed



her two years working there so much it prompted her to found a group shop herself: "I wanted to be able to offer other furniture makers what I was looking for when I moved back to L.A.—quality tools, a bench to call my own, and a community of furniture makers." She's done just that with her Allied Woodshop, a well-equipped

collective shop on the 10th floor of a downtown building with a broad view of Los Angeles. Zahn owns the machines and sublets space to six other furniture makers. Not content to provide shop space for a handful of furniture-making colleagues, Zahn has also set up a program of monthly workshops for beginning woodworkers, taught by members of the collective. The idea behind them, Zahn says, "is to share our love of the craft, to increase exposure to what we're doing, and to educate people about what it means to make custom furniture."



Going up. Laura Zahn's Allied Woodshop is a collective workspace on the top floor of the Allied Crafts Building in L.A.'s garment district. The shared machinery is geared toward fine furnitery making, and the space is home to seven woodworkers.