

A personal angle on the trestle table

SCALE MODELS AND PROTOTYPES
OFFER VIEWS NOT POSSIBLE
ON PAPER

BY EBEN BLANEY

Eight years ago, after having built pieces to suit other people's preferences for many years, I set out to find my own furniture style, my own design voice. I'd been frustrated at times when I was asked to build pieces that I thought were overly embellished, so I challenged myself to simplify. For me this didn't necessarily mean complete austerity, but a directness of design in which the visual details of a piece arise from structural and functional requirements rather than being added as pure adornment. This dining table with tilted trestles was one of the first major pieces I built in my quest.

Just before beginning the trestle table, I had made my "wedge" hall table (top right, opposite page), a piece that exemplified the direction I wanted to go with my work. The design of the hall table, with its radically angled plank leg, was prompted by my experience working on timber-frame structures: In those buildings, filled with vertical and horizontal lines, the angled bracing had an exciting visual power, a kind of arrested energy. I hoped that the hall table could provide a similar jolt when placed in a typical rectilinear room.

When it came time to design the dining table, I began thinking about trestle tables. I had built a few in the traditional Shaker manner—legs connected by a knee-high stretcher and secured with tusk tenons—and admired the structure. As I began drawing to explore a different approach, I had my hall table in mind, and I tried tilting the trestles outward. That created angles and openings that I immediately responded to. At the same time, I lowered the stretcher to the floor, and I liked the airy expanse above it and the more minimalist appearance that resulted.

I laid out a trestle full scale on a piece of ¼-in. MDF to find what I thought was an attractive angle of lean. Then, using solid wood and hot glue, I made a quick ⅛-scale model so I

Evolution of an idea

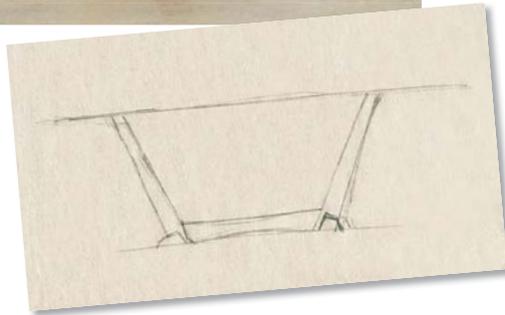


Eben Blaney's leaning trestle dining table (left) sprang from his earlier hall table (above), adopting its angularity and its pared-down elemental style. When he designed a second dining table (below), he borrowed the tilting trestles but pushed the design in a different direction with heftier components and a prominent arched stretcher.

Dialing in a design



Space at the table. When Blaney began drawing to explore the idea of a dining table with tilted trestles, he was attracted by the trapezoidal negative space between the trestles, the tabletop, and the floor-level stretcher.



The proof is in the prototype. Having made an initial scale model, Blaney followed up with this prototype in red oak to test the concept at full size. It convinced him that he had the overall angles right, but that the plank trestles needed more mass.



Common scale. Blaney builds $\frac{1}{8}$ -scale models to see his emerging designs in three dimensions. Using solid wood and working fairly quickly, he joins them with hot glue and leaves out fine detail.

could see the overall form in three dimensions. I liked what I saw, but there were details that I couldn't resolve on paper or in the scale model, so I decided to build a prototype out of some red-oak lumber I had on hand.

As I built the prototype, one challenge I confronted was the feet. Like the feet of a more standard trestle table, they needed to be long and large enough to provide stability and strength at the connection to the uprights. But I wanted them to have a sleek profile and to express some of the slanting action of the trestle. If I angled the top face of the foot so it was perpendicular to the leg, it looked fine from one angle but rather clumsy from another. I needed to do some exploring full-scale, so I

milled up softwood blanks and began shaping and sculpting sample feet with a handplane and a spokeshave. After several attempts, I arrived at a solution I liked, a combination of curves and sloping transitions along the length of the foot and a compound angle at the ends.

As I completed the prototype, I was satisfied with the feet, but in relation to them the single-plank uprights lacked sufficient visual mass. To remedy the problem, I decided to try framing the planks with pairs of legs. I borrowed the shape of the legs, with their inverted taper, from the hall table. Rather than rebuilding the prototype,

I made a second scale model. Liking what I saw there, I did another full-scale drawing and worked out the details of the connections.

Then the rest of the design decisions started to fall into place. I captured the stretcher between the feet, making the connection with mortise-and-tenon joints and angling the stretcher's ends to match the slope of the inside face of the foot. I suspended the stretcher about $\frac{1}{2}$ in. off the floor and heavily beveled the top edges where some

contact from shoes was inevitable. I also beveled the underside of the top to enhance the effect of airy lightness.

I was happy with the way the leaning trestle table came out, but when I got a commission for another dining table, I pushed the concept further. In the new table (previous page, bottom right) I used tilted trestles but added an arched stretcher, beefed-up components, and exposed, interlocking joinery. A much larger top—4 ft. by 8 ft.—allowed me to increase the scale of the legs and eliminate the panels between them. I tapered the inside faces of the legs to enliven the negative space they framed, and extended the curved stretcher so it passed between them. With this table too, I made drawings and a model and worked out the sculpted feet in lumberyard softwood before going "live" with walnut. □

Eben Blaney builds custom furniture in Edgcomb, Maine.

