



Trice: Artist carves new life into old CPS furniture

Desks, chairs get a second life at hands of a craftsman

By: Dawn Turner Trice

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Since the closing of about 50 schools in the Chicago Public Schools system, hundreds of desks, tables and chairs have been sidelined. Ordinarily, many of them would have been destined for landfills or turned into mulch. But Chicago artist and master woodworker John Preus (rhymes with "Royce") will be rescuing some of the material and working his magic.

If you see the work on which he's collaborated, particularly a whimsical installation at the 30-room Huguenot House in Germany where staircases flow out of dead-end walls and a wooden fishing boat was reconfigured into a rickety turtle, you become a believer. Preus hopes to get a group of people — from accomplished artists to current or former Chicago public school students — involved with either updating the CPS pieces by making minor changes or completely dismantling them and fashioning something new.

"A year ago, we got about 20 desks from a school that was going to be demolished," he told me. "We took them back to the shop and took the drawer box parts and made rickshaws, and I made a rolling cabinet that's a tea service cart for artist Theaster Gates." Among other items is a countertop at the Ugly Mug Café in the Noble Square neighborhood that Preus created from melamine CPS tables. These tables had been common in the school system before they were replaced by office-y, fold-up numbers.

CPS spokeswoman Keiana Barrett said Preus' project falls in line with the school system's preservation of murals that came out of some of the shuttered schools.

"Some of the murals are (in storage) and we're making sure that they were removed and treated in a way that will allow them to be reinstalled" in some of the remaining schools, she said. "The arts division is developing a curriculum around them." Preus said there's a lot of "social memory" embedded in these items, particularly public school furniture, where it's not uncommon to find messages kids scrawled in the wood. He said it's important that the history isn't lost.

"There's a constellation of things you can make out of a desk," he said. "We want to make this a light industry project where CPS students can learn a trade, how to manage a project and be part of the transformation of the educational landscape." Many of the teachers' desks, which are solid oak with a natural finish, are sturdy and were constructed around the 1960s. The bigger ones have two banks of three drawers and the smaller ones have one bank. Most have a laminate top.

The students' desks are mostly metal. Some will be saved and others are headed to the scrapheap. But the ones Preus is hoping to revive are gun-metal blue with legs curved around the top — a bit more stylish compared to the others. "They look really strange and I like the

color,” Preus said. “I’m imagining them as table bases.” Preus said many of the teachers’ oak chairs are modest, designwise. But the vertical slats on the back are reminiscent of the Shaker style and may lend themselves to some interesting creations such as wall boxes, shelving, screens, picture frames, benches or artwork.

There are also children’s chairs made of a Baltic birch plywood as well as wooden cubbyholes from kindergarten classrooms. “The fact that (the chairs) are all the same blocky shapes and have a standard hue speak to me of a kind of socialism, like what you see in Eastern European architecture,” he said. “Many of the classrooms had a lot of the same items and they look kind of Army-issued.” But if you consider the objects as raw material, anything is possible.

Preus, 42, grew up in Minnesota and completed undergraduate art studies there, believing his focus would be on painting and drawing. But by the time he graduated from Gustavus Adolphus College in 1993, he felt adrift. He began to figure out his direction when he ran into a family friend, a master hand-tool furniture maker, who offered Preus an apprenticeship. “While I was fabricating for him and working on his pieces, I started taking on my own projects on the side,” Preus said. “I wasn’t thinking of it as contributing to my art life. It was just a decent way to make a living.”

But in 2002, he came to Chicago to attend graduate school. While at the University of Chicago, where he received his Master of Fine Arts degree, he met another artist, Sara Black, and they founded Material Exchange, an art collaborative they ran from 2005 to 2009. He began to meld his knowledge of woodworking with his art. “At the center of our work was the premise that there seems to be a lot of waste in the world and a lot of need and we tried to connect those things,” Preus said.

They approached theater companies seeking pieces from dismantled sets. They went to art galleries looking for materials left over after exhibitions closed. They also asked manufacturers for scraps that fell off the assembly line. The idea of using wasted material flows through Preus’ for-profit and not-for-profit work, whether it’s the elaborate cubes he fashions into furniture or art or the tiny pub (seating about nine people) that he built in a Hyde Park community arts center.

He said he’s not sure yet how much of the CPS furniture he’ll get because he hasn’t locked down a place to store it. And what will come of it may depend mostly on inspiration. “In a lot of cases, I might see something and have a visceral response,” he said. “In some cases, it’s a beautiful wood or something stylistic that moves me.”