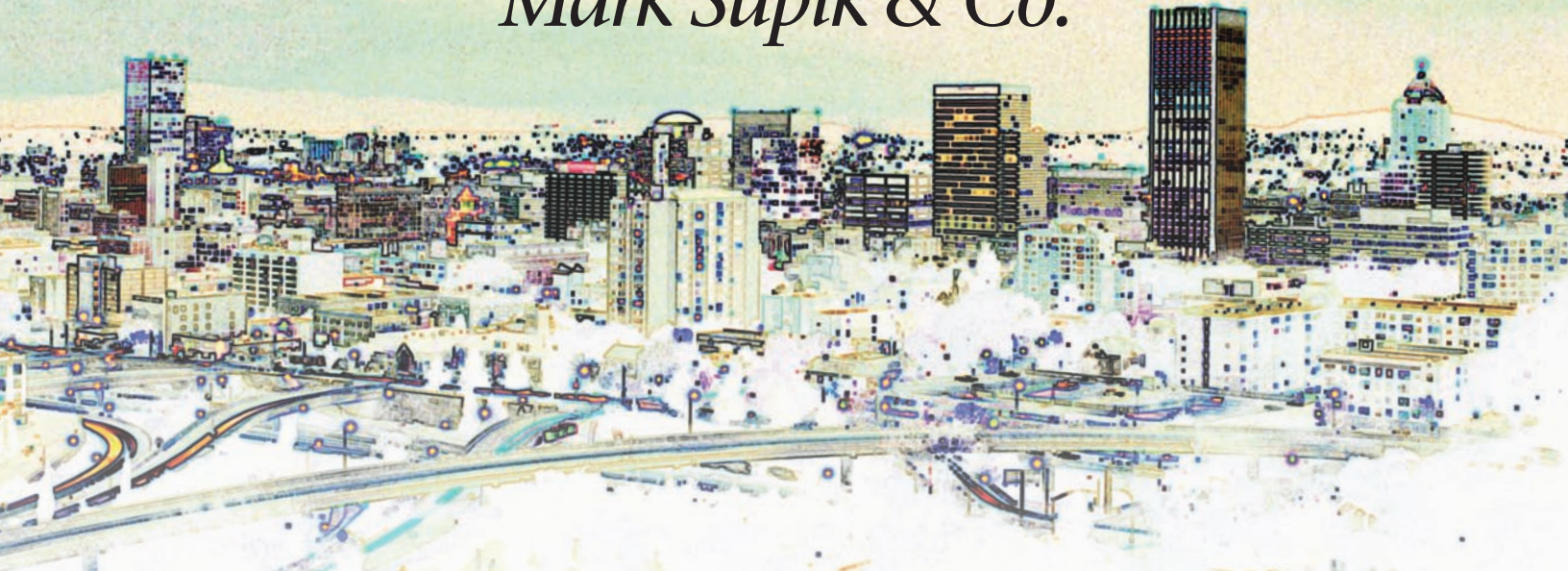


Making It in the City

David M. Fry

Mark Supik & Co.



The big city—a traditional magnet and incubator for artists and artisans—can claim only a tiny fraction of today’s studio woodturners. A reputation for high rents, urban blight, and scarce woodlots has undoubtedly deterred some, while the lure of country and suburban living remains strong, at least in the United States. Why else would New York City account for less than 6 percent of the state’s AAW membership when the five boroughs represent almost half the state’s population? Are central cities intrinsically inhospitable to the craft?

To find out, I paid a visit to Mark Supik & Co., a 30-year tenant of a 5,000-square-foot shop in the Highlandtown (“Hollantown”) district of east Baltimore. Not far away, I-95 and the Tunnel Thruway rose from the harbor depths to carry streams of motorists alongside the stacks, rail yards, and red brick grit of a working port. The shop hunkered down in a 100-year-old industrial building that once housed a veneer

mill and pajama factory. A loading dock served as the street front. Walk-ins usually arrived around back through an open entryway overshadowed by a 30-foot cyclone tower for dust collection, a weathered door advertising dangerous voltage, a convincing 8-foot praying mantis in articulated steel, a reclining 15-foot totem pole of welded 55-gallon drums with assorted grimaces, shiny giant anemometers, and other whimsical metalwork of an old art school friend. During my midday visit I found the total effect fascinating and inviting, but by nightfall—perhaps by design—the sentries and signage might appear a little sinister.

Shop tour

Once inside, I encountered a sight rare among commercial woodworking shops in this part of the country: ten working lathes ranging from a mini model to an American column turner swinging 30 inches and spanning up to 13 feet. A bedless 1943 Model 26 Oliver boasted a yard-long

spindle capable of spinning 8-foot diameters. More than half the lathes were old student or shop grade Olivers retrofitted with variable-frequency speed controls. Off to one side stood the conspicuous concession to modernity, a German Hapfo copy lathe with synchronized router attachment. The crown jewel of the nonturning machinery was an 1876 36-inch band saw converted from line shaft operation. These tools, along with a 12-inch jointer, 24-inch planer, and other weighty equipment, bore continuing witness to what owner Mark Supik called “a 19th-century faith in cast iron.”

Leaving the large machine room and spray booth area, I walked through what may qualify as the nation’s only beer tap “museum”—a long hall lined with shelves of tap handles, from traditional to wildly eccentric (see marksupikco.com/beertaps/beertap_gallery/beertapgallery1.html to sample the variety). The display hall opened into an ample office basking in the shop’s only natural light from a nearby

Working on the company's Oliver 26 lathe, Joe Supik turns a 44" (112 cm) diameter mirror frame for a local furniture studio.

window. The space housed the usual office equipment, business directories, books, and bulletin boards, but also a tabletop assortment of Mark's finished vessels, dozens of turned kitchen utensils like mortars-and-pestles and honey dippers, and a few yarn-makers' drop spindles. Atop the central meeting table that doubled for lunch use sat a 2-foot-diameter endgrain bowl awaiting finishing. Nearby, beer decals covered part of a layout table near the printer. A family job-tracking board hung near the door. Clearly many functions cozily intermingled in this office.

Origins

How different it all must have looked in 1981, when Mark moved into the Highlandtown shop. A graduate in sculpture from the highly regarded Maryland Institute College of Art, he had worked for years as a carpenter and renovation specialist commuting to job sites in the Baltimore-Washington region. Once set up in his new space, he could move beyond finish carpentry to cabinetmaking, millwork, and the woodturning he had been introduced to in school. From the beginning, restoration projects formed the core of his ►



business in a city where pre-WWII row housing with Victorian flourishes was ripe for refurbishment.

In the mid-1990s, the company began to specialize in architectural woodturning. The shop has since produced not only the usual array of balusters, newels, and finials, but also massive columns, straight and curved railings, cornices, and crown moldings. Notable creations have included the new stair spindles in the Maryland State house and a flagpole for the White House.



Labor-intensive jobs such as rope-work, fluting, and spiral stair railings have required complex carving. Thousands of rosettes, furniture parts, pipe plugs, pikes for historic reenactors, gavels, exercise rollers, and baseball bats have also taken shape in the shop.

Pivot point

Turning largely by eye and hand for many years, Mark pared down production time on the lathe, particularly in sanding, by replacing his scraping attack with shearing cuts. Even the increased efficiency from daily practice, however, was not enough for the enterprise to flourish in the long term.

In 1997, Mark made a far-reaching decision. After receiving a rare \$50,000 lump sum payment for a job, he took half of it and bought the Hapfo copier. Unexpectedly, new work slowed during the next few months, and he began to wonder how he could meet his overhead without the diverted cash. The business squeaked through, but the scare left a lasting impression. Not one to buy on credit, he subsequently steered clear of large purchases that could deplete basic operating funds. Fortunately, for more than a decade afterward, the Hapfo has proved its worth not only in architectural turnings, but also in the emerging beer tap market.

In recent years, Mark has again pondered tooling upgrades that might lead to another leap in efficiency, but without the six-figure investment in a CNC (computer

Plaid Dad reflects Mark's sculptural training and attention to detail. This beer tap was painstakingly assembled from dozens of elements arrayed, turned, and carved into a statement of high camp.

Collection of Daniel Scarpino

numerical control) machine. Since the company's inception, he has relied on his mechanical aptitude to salvage, retrofit, and profitably exploit technology, such as the antique cast iron on his shop floor that others left behind. Now, with tool-savvy nephew Joe in the business, one tempting option is to purchase for pennies and recondition older automated technology that could cut the shop's production run time by a factor of ten or more. Without regular jobs of 5,000 items, however, such highly complex tooling does not currently promise to be a wise investment. Although the Supik shop produces many thousands of pieces annually, they tend to cluster in jobs of a few dozen. If clients need large quantities, they can buy stock spindles from offshore suppliers for \$2 each.

Tapping the foam

If long-standing economic forces have been pushing the business toward automation, a new avenue for custom work and creative expression has also opened up. Few other niches in the expanding market of "artisanal" products have generated as much activity as craft beer from microbreweries, brewpubs, and regional breweries. The total number of U.S. craft beer producers now hovers around 1,500. These newcomers distribute their premium stocks through thousands of bars, restaurants, stores, and private clubs. A single connoisseur's pub might keep as many as 20 kegs on tap. Individual consumers also order tap handles for their home "kegerators" and keg bars. In short, the market for beer taps is awash with opportunities for imaginative woodturners.

Mark Supik & Co. produced its first beer tap in 1991. It was a natural move for a firm flanking Brewer's Hill, Baltimore's famed home of

simple turned shape selling for under \$20, a stock handle with custom label for \$85, and an ambitious custom turning or carving for several hundred dollars.

Selling spindle and spin

Even with the large volume of orders, tap sales have generated a much thinner profit margin than the architectural work, which plunged with the nation's mortgage crisis. The need for further diversification once again nudged the company into unfamiliar terrain. While attending the 2007 AAW Symposium, Mark struck up a relationship with California turner Jerry Kermode, who ran a woodturning school. That exposure encouraged Mark to launch weekend classes at the Baltimore shop once a month. By joining and participating in several turning clubs in the Baltimore-Washington-Annapolis triangle, he cast a wide net for prospective students. In addition to offering basic woodturning instruction and occasionally bringing in well-known artists like Mark Sfirri, he also introduced a creative lure to attract students who otherwise might have no interest in woodturning. At trade shows and craft fairs, he would say, "Look, I can sell you a tap handle for \$19, or you can spend a day in my shop and make your own for \$150." Surprisingly, many have opted for the workshop. The same approach has yielded similar hands-on choices among fiber artists looking for drop spindles to spin yarn. The Supiks now travel to sheep and wool festivals in the region to market both their products and process.

Vessels

The recent foray into teaching has provided Mark with an additional excuse to turn bowls. He displays and sells his work through the company's website and gallery, the Creative

Public interest in beer making has now reached the point that Mark can often detect when the young voice on the phone is emanating from a dorm room

Alliance Gallery, and at regional craft shows. In the shop, his simple endgrain vessels, often with flaring natural edges, stand in sharp contrast to the shiny figurative taps on display nearby. His attraction to the understated look in bowls may explain his current interest in turning white pine, a species long neglected by vessel makers. Last year he resolved to make 100 bowls from a fallen specimen on family property. To date, he and his students have produced close to 90.

Dollars and cents

How do the various income sources tally on the bottom line? With the general economy still climbing out of recession, Mark Supik & Co. generates about 65 percent of its revenues from architectural turning, 30 percent from beverage taps, and 5 percent from workshops. Sales from Mark's one-off vessels may also account for a few percentage points, but he doesn't bother to do the math. The taps remain in demand, but market realities seem rather inelastic at present. For example, with the

shop's current hourly rate of \$65, production of a simple stock beer tap costs approximately \$1 for wood, \$1.25 for the ferrule coupling, \$1.50 for labeling, \$0.75 for finishing, and \$15 for labor. The total is slightly higher than the \$19 item price. More elaborate taps, however, can yield a net gain.

Clearly, reduced labor hours per unit offer the greatest opportunity for cost savings and increased profit, not only for beer taps, but also for architectural work. In today's unsettled economy, modest investments in clamping racks and other solutions to production bottlenecks make more sense than purchase of high-volume automated lathes. Mark is also convinced that the company can cut labor hours through honed turning skills. In-house workshops with Mark Sfirri (pad foot production) and Alan Lacer (skew sharpening) have already yielded valuable techniques for shop use.

Deep roots can prove decisive in a turbulent economy. A Baltimore native, Mark can draw on a vast web of local knowledge, contacts, and resources to finesse difficult times. Even so, during especially lean periods, he and his wife, Nancy, have postponed depositing their own paychecks until work picks up so that the family crew and shop overhead get paid. Although deferred payment can create strain, it is not altogether different from taking out a line of credit to meet company payroll, a very common practice in business.

Kindred spirits

Most of the people who work for Mark Supik & Co. share the same last name. Son John and nephew Joe, along with Mark, do most of the turning, while niece Danielle Craven-Slaski usually carves, casts, assembles, labels, and finishes the beer taps. Having grown up ►



(Above) Production floor becomes classroom in one of Mark's weekend workshops.



Photo: Anna Santana

Vessel turning offers Mark the opportunity to create without specifications. The beefy tailstock here sits atop a 1920s American (brand) lathe.



(Left) John Supik takes advantage of the generous span afforded by one of two salvaged long-bed lathes in the shop.

(Below) Huge machines allow Supik & Co. to handle oversized jobs that few trade shops can accommodate.



The Hapfo copy lathe has ultimately paid big returns on a dicey investment through its speed, accuracy, and capacity to produce high volumes, as well as fluting and rope molding.



around the shop, John has developed a level of motivation and proficiency in the craft equal to his father's, while Joe can draw on his varied background as an arborist and tool mechanic, as well as a degree in fine arts. With little formal training, Danielle has become an accomplished designer and sculptor in several media. A compulsive knitter, she is largely responsible for company

connections with the fiber arts community. Mark himself averages about 25 hours a week at the lathe and devotes the rest of his time to estimating jobs and managing the business.

The arrival of Nancy at the company in 2007, after her retirement from teaching computer skills in Baltimore's primary schools, has dramatically affected the look, operation, and

outreach of the business. One of her lasting achievements has been to organize and expand Mark's office—for years a crowded cubbyhole. In the process, she has developed a strong company Web presence with pop-ups and videos, coordinated custom client designs, and orchestrated collaborations like the pine bowl project. She has also engaged the public and local



(Above) After meeting California woodturner and teacher Jerry Kermode at an AAW symposium, Mark invited him to demonstrate before three Maryland chapters, shown here. The friendship inspired Mark to open his own school.



(Left) Cousins John and Joe Supik stand behind the products forming the core of the company's business: spindles.

(Right) Danielle paints one of the new Edgar Allan Poe beer taps celebrating a famous Baltimore resident. For intricate taps like these, a master that is turned/carved in wood can be used to make cast copies.



(Left) The first half of 2011 saw a surge in architectural turning orders, but sales of beer taps also remained a steady source of income.

(Below) Darning eggs, drop spindles, and nostepinnes make great woodturning projects for beginning students. Here, Danielle Craven-Slaski (far right) appears with participants in the Fiber Arts Tools workshops.



arts community with her blog and frequent presence at shows, festivals, and other events. Her experience in adult education has likewise proven invaluable in the launch and evolution of the company's teaching program. She and Mark, together with the younger family members, bring to the company a diverse and intense blend of skills and interests that competitors might well envy.

Roots and survival in the city

With economic restructuring now underway nationwide, Mark Supik & Co. and many other small firms obviously face an uncertain future. Across town, one of Baltimore's fabled woodworker suppliers, Skarie, Inc., recently retired its 62-year-old name and familiar lines of trade shop tools and reemerged as a distributor of CNC plasma, laser, and water jet machines. With such changes afoot, the Supiks are mounting a full-court press to stay in the game while retaining their love of woodworking. That explains the company's forays into product-oriented teaching and trade show markets, as well as the family's strong ties to the Highlandtown Arts District and Baltimore's Creative Alliance of artists and educators.

Would moving the shop to the country improve the financial outlook? Mark is not convinced: "We considered buying family property in Harford County, but the rent is inexpensive here, and we really get along with the landlord. We are well-positioned in east Baltimore to serve our customers" along the I-95 corridor between New York and northern Virginia. Indeed, a network of clients, students, and vendors radiates in all directions.

For denizens of Highlandtown, business considerations represent only one attraction of a central location; many others abound. Where else could family members amuse themselves during breaks by visiting the hobby

Fanciful metal sculpture greets visitors at the main entrance around back, enlivening the stern industrial façade. Mark's restored 1953 Chevy panel truck is used for lumber pickup and deliveries.



Countless restorations in the greater region call for vintage balusters not available in commercial catalogs. Supik & Co. provides custom spindles with no minimum order required.



supply shop upstairs stocking chemistry sets, microscopes, and radio-controlled model airplanes? Not far away beckon the Walters Art Museum, the American Visionary Art Museum, and a host of educational institutions and skilled-trade groups. In short, city living serves up a rich cultural and intellectual menu difficult to imagine anywhere else. It also continues to be a familiar and comfortable shoe for Mark, who walks and pedals to work. Of course, the urban core is not an environment that appeals to everyone. With only seven names listed for Baltimore, the *AAW Resource Directory* underscores this reality. But the

remarkable longevity and community impact of Mark Supik & Co. suggest that woodturning can thrive in the heart of the metropolis. For at least a few of its practitioners, Baltimore truly remains Charm City. ■

During the last thirty years, David M. Fry has worked as a bowl maker, production turner, and woodworking instructor in the Washington, DC area. He has also coauthored two books for Doubleday/Anchor, edited manuscripts for a scholarly biomedical press, and written for NASA and other Federal agencies. He occasionally juries woodworking shows and writes about craft.