

THERE'S NO MAP

by Steve Loar

Being a “model” program sounds so easy. But almost by definition, it means that you are trail blazing, imagining new systems, ways, and even new *reasons* for doing things. In short, imagining what *might be* rather than what is. At a deep personal level it also means committing all of your resources to whatever is necessary to create those new methods and beliefs, and, always, always, in every situation, being a passionate cheerleader for your cause.

The Center for Turning and Furniture Design is a total collaboration between Christopher Weiland and myself. We both had “day jobs” teaching and we both had artistic careers in full bloom, but each of us also had, quite literally, a drawer full of ideas. File upon file of bits of other programs that are intriguing, individuals that are forging new directions, exciting events and diverse tidbits of things that just never seem to all come together in one place but ought to. The Center is about two mature career professionals asking, “What does a person need to succeed and can college be a path to it?” Our bearings are constantly being checked against the old saw, “Most teaching takes old information and presents it in old ways - to prepare individuals for careers in the future.” We want to change that.

Knowing that the future is where our students will have their careers, the Center’s curriculum is being modified, piece by piece to reflect the idea of synthesis. The old and the new, together, not one or the other; a dynamic mix of what seem the most useful aspects of the past and fully engaged with our best guess as to what will be the most useful aspects of contemporary, and even emerging, technologies. Chris and I are drawing our late-career zeal and energy from the creation of a new educational model. We didn’t put “wood” in our title, because who knows what might be turned, assembled, carved, or machined – in the future?

To make a living, most artists and craftsmen have a “bread & butter” production item, or a line of goods, which allows them a bit of time for other work that is more creative or personal. To do this, more and more studios are utilizing limited-production methods that include CNC equipment (computer numerical control). In addition to CNC, success increasingly hinges on a combination of innovative design and an understanding of business practices. Work experiences that engage these contemporary day-to-day realities are the impetus for the creation of “CenterWorks,” an in-house co-op experience that will employ our program’s students in designing, making, and even marketing products.

Working with students of the College of Business, the Center's students will develop an individual business plan, and ideally, a line of artistic and innovative goods that will carry them to a local small business incubator upon graduation. As their company matures, they may establish their own business in the region. To successfully compete in a global marketplace, our graduates will need to embody the qualities that are emblematic of this nation as a whole – the attributes of innovation and risk taking. Our mission is to develop entrepreneurs whose output is marked by artistic designs and fine craftsmanship.

To pursue this idea further, our interest in research and development requires the acknowledgment of the successful “smart failure.” We have every indication that there is a world of companies who will partner with us to sponsor innovative inquiries into the potential of their materials and products from wood to plastic to metal and beyond. A casual internet search of “alternative materials” brought over 138 *million* responses. This is certainly the stuff of future careers, even if wood is still where our soul is centered.

An amazing level of “coincidence” continues to further our endeavors. Chris and I have adopted “recycle/reuse/reinvent” as a mantra. Thanks to the Center's first purchase – a Wood-Mizer portable band saw mill, we've been slicing and dicing many of the trees that are felled on campus. The Center had already processed over 10,000 board feet of prime lumber, as the university began the largest residential housing project in the nation, with nearly 40 trees processed in Phase 1 of a projected four. We rescued thousands of linear feet of prime hard rock maple as two gymnasium floors were replaced. And the Director of the local recycling center turns out to be one of our College of Business colleagues who is advising us on what curricular pieces might be most useful, as well as, how best to realize CenterWorks.

Residencies for artists promise to inject new, fresh - and unpredictable - experiences and insights into the program. This can be a bit harrowing, even in the sacred halls of an art department. Hearty pioneers like Betty Scarpino, who came for the entire Spring semester of 2006 as the Center's first Artist-in-Residence (see Scarpino's essay in this issue of Turning Points), are important ingredients in the Center's multifaceted recipe for the future. It really is about the educational unknown.

A favorite Far Side cartoon pictures the explorers Lewis and Clark having just purchased a map of “The West” from a roadside vendor. As they walk away, their anguished observation is, “Hey, this thing is *blank!*”

Exactly.

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Virtually visit the Center at www.centerworks.us or write <slowtech@iup.edu>