

HIGH TECH *meets* high art

Carmana Designs of Philadelphia mingles state-of-the-art savvy with a rock-solid dedication to uncompromised craftsmanship.

By Anthony Noel

If one is not paying close attention, it is easy to think that these days, there are two clear choices — and two choices only — for custom woodworking businesses trying to decide how best to produce their work.

Option One is the high-tech road. The premise is, after investing in new machines and the time and effort required to re-train yourself and your employees, you will soon happily forsake highly specified work for less-tricky assignments and predictable profitability.

The other choice is to stick with “old-school” equipment and processes and rely on your wits and creativity in order to do the challenging work you love — and try to make good money doing it.

However, some shops are ignoring “conventional wisdom” and pursuing a combination of these options. Carmana Designs is one of them.

True, Carmen and Anna Maria Vona's Philadelphia, PA, shop, which took overall honors in CWB's 2004 Design Portfolio Awards competition, was built on its owners' dedication to providing top-quality work.

But they soon learned that a commitment to craftsmanship alone was not enough to satisfy the

This piece is unusual because it is all MDF and was delivered to the customer with white wall paint as the finish. The customer contracted a faux finisher to do the woodgrain painting on site.





This library for a home in a prestigious Philadelphia suburb features cabinetry done in sequence-matched and numbered cherry with a dark cherry stain. The project was a challenge, because it was being done as the company was moving the shop into a new building. It was constructed in the new building but had to be taken back to the old building for finishing; the new paint booth wasn't ready.

growing demand for work among their discriminating clientele, which includes some of the greater Philadelphia area's most affluent households and commercial work for companies with household names such as SieMatic, Macy's and Motorola.

So Carmana Designs sought out new opportunities and equipment, hoping to improve both the shop's capabilities and its bottom line. The results are impressive.

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A NEW SHOP

When CWB last visited Carmana Designs' South Philadelphia shop in 1997, the company was producing work in a space totaling 3,700 feet, split between two floors, and was about to add another 3,000 feet of upstairs space.

Carmen had earned that space foot by foot, starting out, as he told us in 1987, with Craftsman machine tools and often sleeping in his first shop because he couldn't afford rent for both a shop and a place to live.

But those early struggles paid off. Besides the nearly 7,000 feet the shop had grown into by the time of our previous visit, Carmen and Anna Maria had ample living space in the same building, and owned and managed investment apartments elsewhere in the city.

Seven years later and a block and a half from the old shop, Carmana Designs is now comfortably spread across 15,000 square feet of first-floor production space, with another 8,000 feet upstairs awaiting refurbishing into offices and showrooms.

About \$150,000 of the capital that made the purchase and conversion of the building possible came through an interesting source, of which a growing number of busi-

*Carmana
Designs*
Philadelphia, PA

Year Founded: 1987

Employees: 7

Shop Size: 15,000 square feet, with another 8,000 to be refurbished

FYI #1: The company took advantage of a municipal mortgage loan program to obtain low-interest funding for new equipment and refurbishing its space to expand the business.

FYI #2: When owner Carmen Vona started the business, he says he often slept in the shop because he couldn't afford rent for both a shop and a place to live.



Carmana Designs built this contemporary wall unit for a penthouse in Philadelphia's Society Hill Towers condominiums, which were designed by famed architect I.M. Pei. The piece is sequence-matched and numbered bird's-eye maple and has a high-gloss urethane finish. About 11 feet tall, it had to be designed in sections according to what would fit inside the building's elevator cab. The black flyover is integrated with halogen lighting.



Foreman Kiko Reece uses the company's Weinig Profimat P23 five-head moulder, one of its first major machine purchases.

boards go through, and I turned to Carmen and I said, 'Buy it.'

"That's when I knew she 'got' it," Carmen smiles.

The company's Quickwood Pro 1100 sander is another case in point.

The machine features four main sanding heads mounted on a rotating spindle. Each head is fitted with two sanding elements. The feed bed moves stock under the random-orbiting spindle and the sanding elements go to work.

"I had seen a smaller model of the [Pro 1100] in Atlanta for around \$60,000, and my [Hermance Machinery] salesman said, 'I've got a used one of these that's bigger over here in [the company's] Williamsport [PA] showroom.'"

After a trial run of the machine at the distributor's showroom, Carmen again got Anna Maria's concurrence that they should buy it.

The company has also invested in a state-of-the-art, \$100,000 finishing room. Featuring a custom-designed heating/air-make-up system and downdraft exhaust, the

Carmana Designs

nesses are taking advantage: low-interest funds from an industrial development authority, in this case the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation (PIDC). (For details, see the sidebar on page 40.)

EQUIPMENT, NEW AND OLD

Carmen knew that finding work to fill the new space would be the easy part, given Anna Maria's education in interior design and her sales and marketing skills. But getting the work out would require new approaches. Translation: new equipment. One of the first machines to catch Carmen's eye was a Weinig P23 Profimat moulder.

"She [Anna Maria] was nervous about the price tag," he recalls. "So I dragged her to the woodworking show [IWF in Atlanta]."

"I couldn't believe it," Anna Maria says. "I mean, they put a rough board in one end, and out the other came a perfect piece of lumber. I watched about five



space can be used "full size" or split in half so smaller jobs can be finished without cranking up more of the room's capability than would be cost-efficient. Finish is applied with a digital readout Satajet 2000 HVLP spray system.

But other acquisitions belie Carmen's dedication to "Old World" craftsmanship, which he acquired during nearly four years of work with Luigi Sammarone, his first employer in woodworking.

"I'm a teacher," Carmen says, gesturing through the glass of his office to the shop floor. "I want to give these guys the same understanding of the trade and the same ability that he gave me."

Toward that end, a decidedly old-school Ferguson veneer press with a 6-foot by 14-foot capacity was recently purchased at auction.

"Being able to lay up all our own panels," notes Carmen, who, for all his attention to detail, is also a big-picture guy, "gives us a lot more control over how the job will look when it's done."

Other recent additions include an SCMI Z45 beam saw, a Brandt Optimat KD57 edgebander, an SCMI gang rip saw and a Mikron M645 multi-moulder.

A Torit HPT dust collector fed by CDM Dust Control ductwork with snap-together fittings makes it easy to re-arrange the shop floor and add or remove machines in minutes.

THE WORKFORCE

Bygone business models would have little tolerance for a 15,000-square-foot custom shop with just seven people at work in it. But Carmana Design's mix of equipment has changed that.

While he is in the market for a couple of additional woodworkers, Carmen's crew of foreman Kiko Reece, Brent Richards, Nick Phillips, finisher George Pratt and himself manages to get



The company's Torit dust collector is fed by snap-together ductwork by CDM. Carmen Vona says it allows quick hooking and unhooking of equipment to and from the system.



This Quick Wood Pro 1100 sander makes short work of detail sanding. Nick Phillips is at the controls.

This kitchen, which won an Honorable Mention award in CWB's 2004 Design Portfolio competition, is plain-sliced white maple veneer. The project includes three curved pantry units. The stainless steel handles are custom-made.



Carmana Designs

the work out just fine. The company has also recently added two full-time apprentices.

"I'm pretty much a troubleshooter now," Carmen says. "I used to help them get set up, but Kiko's gotten so good that it almost takes me longer now to set things up."

He's especially happy about that.

"A lot of guys who call themselves cabinetmakers now are just assemblers," he says. "There's nothing you can't buy already made if you want to, but when you do that it shows in the overall quality of the job. I want these guys to understand that, to think like woodworkers and become true craftsmen."


But why invest in all that production equipment to do custom work? It's a question Carmen hears a lot.

"I've been buying machinery now for the last five or six years and some of it is production [equipment], and people will come in and say, 'Why don't you do more production?'"

"I bought the machinery to ease my workload, not to do production, or to do more work and make less money."

So regardless of the "either-or" scenarios you may have heard, rest assured – there are other options.

Carmana Designs is living proof. ■



Brent Richards works on Carmana Designs' SCMI Z45 15-foot beam saw.

ALTERNATIVE FUNDING

Woodworking businesses today have more options than ever when it comes to financing capital expenditures.

Sure, "old reliables" like bank loans and equipment leases still get plenty of play. But government programs, from hiring incentives for certain workers to credits for rehabilitating former industrial sites, have given small companies other choices.

Local industrial development authorities have proved a popular resource.

Municipalities have recognized that 20 or 50 small industrial operations are just as beneficial to their communities as one or two big ones. So many have established these organizations, whose sole purpose is to make the idea of locating and/or expanding within their jurisdictions too good to ignore.

They do it with a variety of government-backed financing programs.

Carmana Designs credits the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation (PIDC) for programs that hugely aided the company's growth.

"I called [PIDC] to inquire about the funding process before we went to the 2000 Atlanta woodworking show," says Anna Maria Vona, "so we had an idea about where our financing would come from before we started making buying decisions."

Nearly seven months later, Anna Maria and Carmen Vona went to settlement on a \$150,000 obligation through PIDC's Mortgage Loan Program, one of several programs offered.

"The initial qualification process took six months," Anna Maria recalls.

"There was a lot of paperwork. We needed to have our accountant do financial projections, they wanted a bona fide real estate appraisal, we had to submit three years of past tax returns, both for the corporation and personally."

And that's not all.

"Because the funding we received [included] federal, state and city funds, they had to investigate every single account for any monies outstanding," she says. "That meant federal income taxes, federal corporate taxes, state and city income taxes, real estate taxes, net profits tax, business privilege tax, use and occupancy taxes, employee withholding taxes, city water bills, electric bills, gas bills and even parking tickets!"

Credit histories were closely scrutinized, as were machinery leases.

"We also had to do a marketing plan, list all our biggest clients, list our competition and list all our suppliers. They did investigations into all transactions with all our suppliers.

"This is why it took seven long months," she says. "It was an absolute red tape ordeal, but the extremely low interest rate was worth all the work."

Even when an unanticipated "other shoe" dropped at the eleventh hour:

"After everything had been approved and we were all set to go, they told me it is a 'self-funded' loan."

Anna Maria still cringes when she recalls learning what that meant: The business makes the initial outlays and is reimbursed incrementally. That's a harrowing notion when you were expecting, as Carmen and Anna Maria were, to buy the property and begin the extensive work it needed largely with PIDC funds.

But they weren't about to turn back.

"At that particular time in our business," Anna Maria says, "we had gotten a huge deposit from a \$250,000 kitchen job, and we still had some money in our line of credit. We were able to use those two vehicles to pay for everything we needed to pay for up front."

Scary as it might have been, it hasn't stopped Carmana Designs from turning to the PIDC again. The company has just been approved for another \$110,000, to be used on the building's continuing rehabilitation.

— Anthony G. Noel