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Furn



Grand Rapids furniture
factory worker, 1903.

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The once and future king



GRAND RAPIDS USED TO BE FURNITURE CITY FOR THE RESIDENTIAL MARKET. NOW IT'S FURNITURE CITY FOR THE OFFICE MARKET — AND FOR "GREEN" DESIGN.

By Curt Wozniak
Photography by Michael Buck

Historic photos courtesy
Grand Rapids Public Library

OVER THE YEARS, FURNITURE FASHIONS HAVE CHANGED like clothing fashions: One style comes in, another goes out. One color comes in, another goes out.

While economics, not tastes, dictated the rise, fall and eventual reinvention of the furniture industry in West Michigan, a marked color shift also has taken place.

The home furnishings industry that christened a Midwest river town "Furniture City" has lost the luster of its "golden age," but the global office furniture manufacturers now headquartered in the region hope to shape a new "green" legacy for metropolitan Grand Rapids.

"Because of the diversification of our industry, you can get furniture designers associated with and connected locally to interior designers and graphic designers and Web site developers. ... Some other cities don't have that kind of core design community that this community has. That's what happens in places that are noted for being design centers, and Western Michigan happens to be one of those."

— Max Shangle, Kendall College of Art & Design



MORE THAN 800 FURNITURE COMPANIES engaged in the design and manufacture of wooden home furnishings in and around Grand Rapids from the 1850s to the 1990s, according to Tim Chester, director emeritus of the Public Museum of Grand Rapids. By the close of the country's centennial celebration in Philadelphia in 1876, the industry that grew up on the Grand River, powered and fed by the force of its current, had earned national attention.

"Grand Rapids representatives took part in a big way in the centennial exhibition," said retired Grand Rapids city historian Gordon Olson. "They made special pieces of furniture and shipped them to Philadelphia — and they won awards. They used that recognition as a vehicle to promote Grand Rapids well beyond West Michigan, even beyond the Midwest."

Companies that previously had supplied simple home furnishings to frontier families refined their products, emphasizing high-quality design and craftsmanship.

"When they first started making furniture, West Michigan furniture manufacturers definitely were not on the cutting edge," said Joel Lefever, president of Holland Historic Trust, a nonprofit organization that runs the Holland Museum. "I think it was partly because the critics on the east coast — the sophisticates — criticized this furniture that prompted Grand Rapids to decide to go to the high end and attract designers, high-end decorators and carvers."

As design improved, so did marketing efforts across the furniture industry in Grand Rapids. Max Shangle understands as well as anyone the need to connect good design with good marketing in the industry. He chairs the furniture design department at Kendall College of Art & Design — the school named in honor of David Wolcott Kendall, a cabinetmaker's son who learned the trade and moved to Grand Rapids in 1879 to design furniture for the now-defunct Phoenix Furniture Co.

"If you're going to design good product and manufacture it, you need to get somebody to pay attention and buy it," Shangle said. "That connection between design and marketing, between design and manufacturing, has been part-and-parcel to what we've done here forever."

Grand Rapids' furniture manufacturers began building furniture showrooms in which to display their products. Surviving examples of these structures include the Manufacturers Building at 17 Fountain St. NW (now part of Kendall); the



Exhibitors Building at 220 Lyon St. NW (now part of Amway Grand Plaza); and the Waters Building at 161 Ottawa Ave. NW (now offices). By 1900, thousands of buyers for dealers across the U.S. flowed through Grand Rapids annually to place their orders, and 30 freight trains left the city daily to fill them.

The pinnacle of design for the Furniture City was the period between the 1890s and the 1930s. During this time, companies such as the Charles P. Limbert Co., Kuchins Furniture Manufacturing Co. and William A. Berkey Furniture Co. turned out some of the finest American furniture of the period.

"Grand Rapids' contributions during this period were significant," said Christian Overland, vice president for museums and collections for the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn. "We have a mostly American furniture collection that goes back to the 18th century, and representative in the collection we have Grand Rapids companies from Limbert to Herman Miller."

The residential side of the furniture industry in Michigan largely resides in museums today. Just as a confluence of natural resources, ready transportation and skilled labor helped the industry take off, a perfect storm of factors conspired to end its golden age.

In the 1930s, the Great Depression claimed dozens of Grand Rapids furniture

Above: During its golden age, the furniture industry provided jobs and opportunities for generations of Grand Rapidsians at companies such as Widdicomb Bros. & Richards, which later became the Widdicomb Furniture Factory.

Below: Like most Grand Rapids furniture companies around the turn of the 20th century, the Robert W. Irwin Co. situated workers along the outside walls of its factory to maximize natural lighting.





"When I was younger, it's not as though we talked about furniture all the time. But as soon as I became interested, of course, all my family members would say, 'Well, you know, Grand Rapids and Holland have tons of furniture.'"

— Peter Jacob,
Kindel Furniture Co.

companies among its victims. Those that survived were heavily invested in old, inefficient three- and four-story factories constructed around antiquated power systems. New furniture factories were being built in North Carolina with completely horizontal orientation so that raw materials could be unloaded at one end and chairs sent out to market at the other. Mild weather and cheap labor helped these southern factories prosper, while more and more Grand Rapids factories shut down.

As North Carolina companies surpassed Grand Rapids' furniture output, the furniture showrooms followed manufacturing south.

However, some West Michigan furniture companies had been busy reinventing themselves over the first half of the 20th century.

IN 1915, THE U.S. GOVERNMENT ADDED a 16-story tower to the customs house in Boston, making it the city's first skyscraper. Packing tall office buildings with wood office furniture was, to the architect, akin to packing tinder into a potential inferno. The tower's architect made one fateful specification: He asked that the building have metal office furniture.

"There were very few metal office furniture companies in the U.S. at the time," said Olson. "But one of them happened to be in Grand Rapids: The Metal Office Furniture Co."

The Metal Office Furniture Co. won the government contract and named the product developed for the customs house its Steelcase line.

"The rest," Olson said, "is history."

Steel was a first response to the rise of the skyscraper, but materials research continued — much of it led by West Michigan office furniture companies.

Today the latest seating options coming out of the region contain more recycled polyethylene terephthalate (a fancy name for recycled soda bottles) than elaborately carved hardwoods. But a few smaller manufacturers such as Kindel Furniture Co. continue to carry on that legacy — a legacy entrusted in part to Kindel designer Peter Jacob.

"Kindel has become different by remaining the same, by staying here in Grand Rapids," Jacob said. "When people ask where we are, it's really nice to be able to say 'Grand Rapids.'"

A West Michigan native, Jacob graduated from Kendall College of Art & Design in 2004.

"We're moving from the golden age into the new green age, and West Michigan companies are going to own that. We're doing things around sustainability that not only lead our industry, but lead what anybody in any industry is doing in general.

That's not to be overlooked in terms of how this industry and this region will remain relevant moving forward."

— James Ludwig, Steelcase

"When I was younger, it's not as though we talked about furniture all the time at home," Jacob said. "But as soon as I became interested, of course, all my family members would say, 'Well, you know, Grand Rapids and Holland have tons of furniture.'"

True, but local residential furniture companies such as Kindel are rare — and getting rarer. Long-standing Grand Rapids names such as Hekman and Baker have diminished their local presence in recent years, bequeathing the defense of the Furniture City title to West Michigan's contract furniture companies.

Jack Lewis serves as president of the American Society of Furniture Designers, an organization once very active in Grand Rapids, but whose membership is now centered in High Point, N.C.

"Even though there is little furniture made here of the type I design (upholstered residential seating), there is still a lot of 'furniture blood' in this area," Lewis said. "It is impossible not to appreciate all the history of the industry here and how it shaped Grand Rapids in the early 20th century."

Even after the ups and downs since the 1990s, the Grand Rapids area manufactures more office furniture than any other place in the world. Holland-based Haworth (then Modern Products Inc.) and Zeeland-based Herman Miller joined Steelcase in focusing on the office furniture market in the middle part of the 20th century. This "Big 3" annually represents the region with a major presence at NeoCon, the contract furniture industry's biggest trade show, held each June in Chicago.

"It becomes clear when you look at how large a show that is, and at the large presence of West Michigan-based companies that are actively displaying their furniture at that show," said Ray Kennedy, director of corporate merchandising and customer experience for Herman Miller. "We've definitely got a lot of furniture that's still being built here by some of the largest players in the world in terms of office furniture, so I believe people still think of Grand Rapids as sort of the furniture capital."

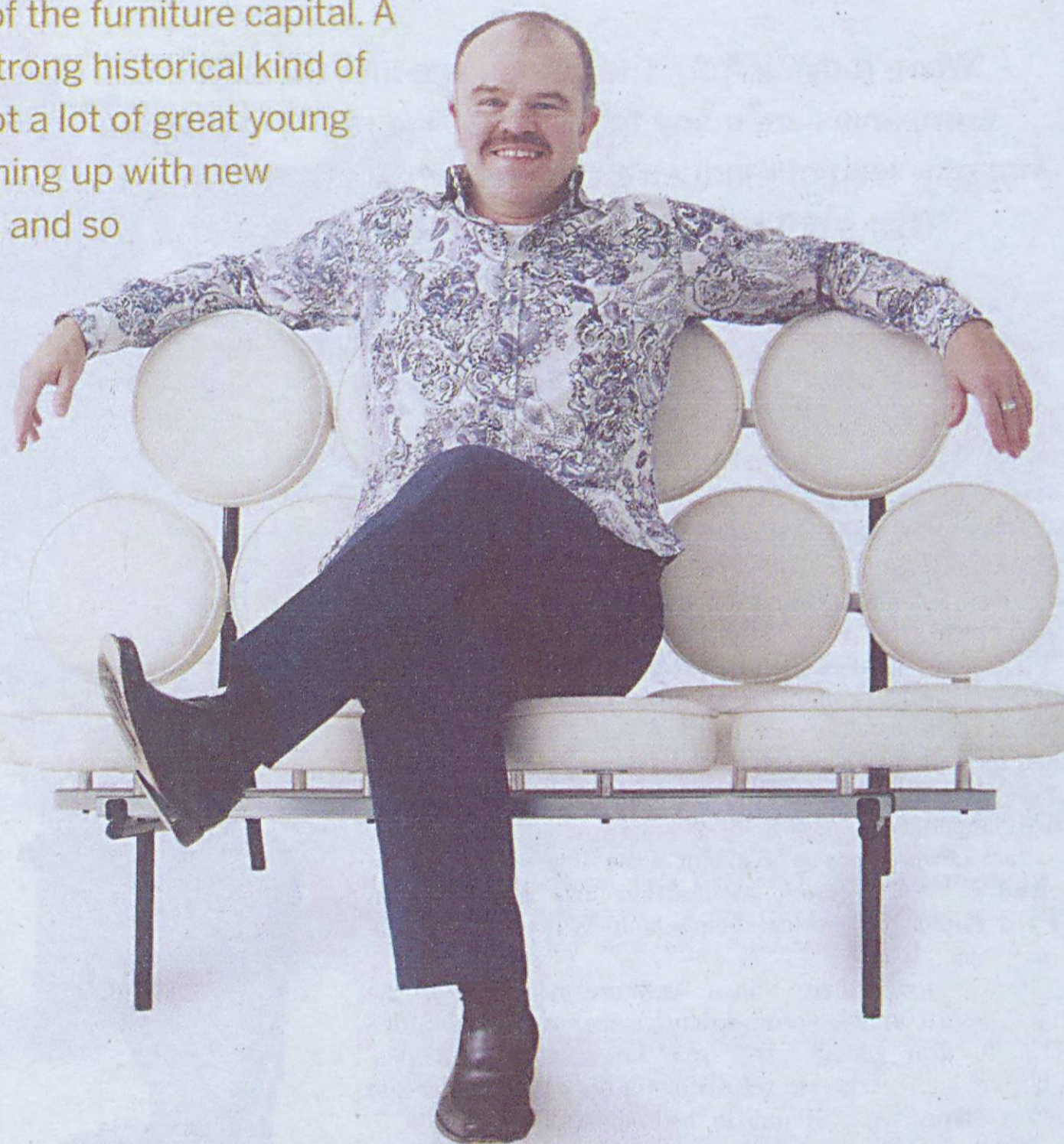
According to Paola Antonelli, curator of architecture and design for the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan, not only has design shaped Grand Rapids, but design has also been Grand Rapids' means to shape the world.

"The wonderful habit and ease that New York has with contemporary art, Grand Rapids has with modern design,"



"From my perspective, a lot of people still think of Grand Rapids as sort of the furniture capital. A lot of that has a very strong historical kind of base to it, but we've got a lot of great young designers who are coming up with new concepts, new ideas ... and so we still are hanging on to that claim to fame, in my belief."

— Ray Kennedy,
Herman Miller



Antonelli observed. "It is very simply part of its genetic code."

AS GRAND RAPIDS CONTINUES TO EXPRESS ITS IDENTITY as Furniture City, the industry seems poised to redefine itself yet again.

The furniture industry in West Michigan has been driven by research and development since its earliest days. Today's office furniture leaders — generations removed from the innovations that replaced water wheels with steam power in the old Grand Rapids furniture factories — have replaced old ways of thinking about ergonomics, productivity and work styles. As designers continue to drive innovation in West Michigan, they've widened their focus.

Improving the office environment: Check. Improving the global environment? Bring it on.

"We're moving from the golden age into the new green age, and West Michigan companies are going to own that," said James Ludwig, director of design at Steelcase. "We're doing things around sustainability that not only lead our industry, but lead what anybody in any industry is doing in general. That's not to be overlooked in terms of how this industry and

this region will remain relevant moving forward."

Ray Kennedy agrees.

"I can't think of a more important component in this industry's future than sustainability and its essential impact, not only on furniture design but also on design for the way in which we live," Kennedy said.

"It's a new challenge for designers: What kinds of new materials can designers explore that achieve the sustainability they're looking for? And designers love challenges. That's why designers are designers. They love to come up with new ideas."

Max Shangle joked that his crystal ball has a crack in it, but as a design educator, he has a clear sightline in terms of the future relevance of Furniture City in the new "green age."

"I think there's always going to be a component of furniture design here in West Michigan, and it's partly because we have such a strong foundation of experience," Shangle said. "West Michigan is an interesting place. We care about design here. We care about sustainability here. We care about urban planning here. And so, design has a place here."

"Will designers continue to come to Kendall and get educated? I know they will. Where they go when they become professional designers? I think the world is an open door." **GR**