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A Passion for Traditional Craftsmanship

An established Boston architect follows his heart to a fulfilling new career - with an unforeseen twist

By Wendy Killeen

Photography by North Bennett Street School, Miguel Gomez-Ibanez, Dean Powell

Architect Miguel Gomez-Ibanez was walking past the Boston Architectural Center on Newbury Street in Boston one day in 1996, when he noticed an exhibit of handcrafted furniture in the window.

"I went in and I said, 'Wow, if I could do that, I would feel like I was an accomplished person,'" recalls Miguel. "I decided I'd rather make furniture than be an architect."

The exhibit featured the work of students at the North Bennet Street School in Boston's North End, a 121-year-old institution that teaches traditional craftsmanship in everything from furniture making and bookbinding, to locksmithing.

Miguel sold his Boston firm—MGIA Architects, which specialized in restoration and adaptive reuse of historic buildings—and in 1997 enrolled in a two-year cabinet-and furniture-making program at the North Bennet Street School.

He was forty-eight and had been an architect for twenty-one years. "It was my midlife crisis," says Miguel, of Weston, Massachusetts.

Still, it was not an easy decision. "I was kissing goodbye a lucrative profession and saying hello to I didn't know what," he says. "It was very risky, but if I had made a big mistake, I could go back to architecture and work for someone else."

But, he says, "I never went back."

A new challenge

After graduating from the North Bennet Street School in 1999 and creating high-end furniture on commission for several years, Miguel returned to the school as executive director in August 2006. He is the first graduate to hold the position.

"I love being here," Miguel says of the school, which is housed in a nineteenth-century brick building next to the historic Old North Church in the heart of the North End. "Part of my job is to wander around the school every day. It's hard to imagine people pay me to do that, but they do."

The four-floor facility has workshops and classrooms where students are taught traditional hand skills and craftsmanship in eight areas: bookbinding, locksmithing, carpentry, preservation carpentry, jewelry making and repair, piano technology, violin making and restoration, and cabinet and furniture making.

The goal is for graduates to be able to make a living through their trade or craft.

"Our mission is to keep traditional skills alive and viable," says Miguel. "We expect our violin makers to go out and make violins. We expect our cabinet makers to go out and make furniture."

Miguel oversees a staff of thirty-five. There are 150 full-time students and another 500 who attend workshops at night, weekends and in the summer. The average student is "a thirty-year-old career changer," says Miguel.

"We don't encourage people to come here from high school," he explains. "We don't feel they know enough about who they are and what they want out of life, and there is a higher likelihood they will leave."

Touring the school, Miguel greets students by name, asks about projects they are working on and offers tips. To one student struggling with a screw that is the wrong size for a table he is making, Miguel advises, "Make your own screw." Visiting the violin department, he comments how it's the one department that "always has nice music



Miguel Gomez-Ibanez left behind a twenty-one-year career as an architect to attend the North Bennet Street School in Boston and become a furniture maker. He became the school's executive director in August 2006. Photo provided courtesy of North Bennet Street School.



A writing desk crafted by Miguel Gomez-Ibanez features a design based on seventeenth-century formal gardens. It is made of walnut, ebony, mother of pearl, Carpathian elm, and oak burl veneer.

Photo by Dean Powell, provided courtesy of Miguel Gomez-Ibanez.

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playing.”

And he asks Elizabeth Rideout, a bookbinding student from Pennsylvania who found the school on the Internet, “Are you happy?”

“Happier than I have ever been,” she says.

“I know what you mean,” replies Miguel.

Making the transition from architecture to furniture

Miguel, fifty-seven, grew up in an intellectual, academic family, on the grounds of Wesleyan College in Middletown, Connecticut. His father, who emigrated from Spain, was a chemistry professor at the school. His mother, born in China to American parents who were medical workers, lived overseas until she was eighteen.

Miguel graduated from Wesleyan and got his degree in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania. He was trained in the Navy as a carpenter.

He moved to Boston in 1976. MGIA Architects, of which he was a principal, was involved with many high-profile historic restoration and new building projects at schools, including Harvard University, Simmons College, Wheelock College, Williams College and Brandeis, all in Massachusetts.

When he decided to sell the firm and study furniture making, his family—including wife Fay Larkin and four children—said, “Go for it,” Miguel recalls. “Most everyone else just shook their heads, especially clients.”

But, for Miguel, the business side of running an architectural firm had superceded the artistic endeavor. “I was writing letters and making phone calls,” he says.

And, he explains, “As an architect you can design a building, but it’s really a committee operation. It’s not your building, it’s someone else’s building.”

The jump to furniture making, says Fay, “was great because Miguel was able to do something creative, which he hadn’t been able to do in a long time.”

School and beyond

After enrolling in the North Bennet Street School, Miguel continued to commute to Boston by train, as he had while working as an architect.

But, he says. “I commuted in blue jeans.” He smiles as he recalls a person he regularly saw at the train station asking if he was a venture capitalist. “It was his imagining of why someone looking like me would go to work dressed in blue jeans every day,” says Miguel, a distinguished-looking man with gray hair and glasses.

There were other departures from his former career.

“I was confident I could do it,” he says. “But, I didn’t even know what being ‘good at it’ meant. Now that I think I am okay at it, I have lots of friends I think are a lot better, even more skilled and talented.”

The depth of the experience was also more than he anticipated. “I expected to learn a skill,” Miguel says. “What I didn’t expect was that in the learning of the skill, my life would change so much. When you become so involved in the making of something, it actually is transforming of who you are and how you think,” he continues. “It’s not writing a letter or working with a committee. It’s just about you and what your hands can accomplish.” And, as it turns out, his hands can create unique and lasting beauty.

Miguel’s furniture can be found in private homes, as well as in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, which commissioned him to create a gallery bench. One of his pieces traveled the country for three years as part of the Cabinets of Curiosity exhibition. And, several pieces decorate his 1913 home.

“My typical client is a person with a house full of antiques who wants contemporary furniture that won’t look out of place,” Miguel says.

His pieces—while not reproductions—are inspired by the furniture of the 1600s and 1700s. “I start with a historical form and do something different,” he explains.

One example is a writing desk made of walnut, ebony, mother of pearl, Carpathian elm and oak burl veneer. The design on the outside of the cabinets is based on seventeenth-century formal gardens. The cabinets open to reveal the desk and twenty-six drawers, each displaying a miniature oil painting by artist Joseph Reed of the botanical alphabet from A for apple to Z for zephyr lilly.

Miguel’s furniture sells for between \$5,000 and \$25,000.

“I’ve always had complete confidence in him that whatever he would do would turn to gold,” says Fay. Still, she says, “I never take it for granted. I have no idea how anyone could do what he does.”

“There’s a whole school of people,” says Miguel. “If you believe



Shaker table made from cherry and built by David Flanagan at the North Bennet Street School. Photo provided courtesy of North Bennet Street School.



Roundabout chair made from cherry and built by Jeff Scotto at the North Bennet Street School. Photo provided courtesy of North Bennet Street School.



The inside of a writing desk made by Miguel Gomez-Ibanez includes twenty-six drawers, each displaying a miniature oil painting of the botanical alphabet, from A for apple to Z for zephyr lilly, by artist Joseph Reed. Photo by Dean Powell, provided courtesy of Miguel Gomez-Ibanez.

it is talent, then you believe only a limited number of people can do it. And, I don't like that thought. I'm inclined to say it's not talent, but rather focus."

With his new job at North Bennet Street School, Miguel has stopped accepting commissions. But he still aims to work in his studio, a "concrete bunker" in Waltham, Massachusetts, one afternoon a week and on weekends. His goal is to create five wedding chests, for his four children—ages twenty-three, twenty-five, twenty-eight and twenty-nine—and a godson.

"It's really fun, my idea of a good time," Miguel says of creating furniture. "I have to make sure I don't lose contact with the making part of it, the part that connects me to the students."

A career twist

When the executive director job at the North Bennet Street School became available, Miguel was appointed to a search committee as an alumni representative.

While developing the job description and discussing the skills needed, Miguel, and others, gradually realized he was the man for the job. He was one of seventy-five candidates considered in a national search and appointed in a unanimous vote of the Board of Directors.

"We were looking for someone with good leadership qualities and a good understanding of craftsmanship, which is so important to us at this school," says Burton M. Harris, president of the school's board. "Craftsmanship is what we are all about, and Miguel understands that and has a passion for that."

Burton, of Swampscott, Massachusetts, has a story similar to Miguel's. He retired from practicing law in Boston to attend the cabinet- and furniture-making program at North Bennet Street, graduating in 1997.

He said Miguel is the perfect leader for this time in the school's history and as it considers expansion. "We are looking at the strength of who we are and building on that with new innovations and new ideas," says Burton, adding that Miguel "is a first-rate guy, smart, and with a good personality and an ability to describe what the school is about."

Andrew Glasgow, executive director of The Furniture Society in Asheville, North Carolina, says Miguel—who was president of the nonprofit for three years—"brought a great deal of stability to the organization at a time of significant growth."

The mission of The Furniture Society, founded in 1996, is to advance the art of furniture making by inspiring creativity, promoting excellence and fostering an understanding of the art and its place in society.

Of Miguel's new position, Andrew says: "It's a big job, but he's a very dedicated person. He doesn't do things 90 percent." And, Andrew says, "He's not an ivory tower administrator, which makes him a joy to work with." Passing through the classrooms and studios of the school, Miguel says: "I don't feel like I'm an administrator. I'm not just walking around here large and in charge. I'm one of them, one of the students. That's where my heart is."

Wendy Killeen is a freelance writer from West Newbury, Massachusetts, and a regular contributor to the *Boston Globe* and *Accent on Home & Garden* magazine. She can be reached at wdkilleen@comcast.net.

Learning Craftsmanship at the North Bennett Street School

In 1885, Pauline Agassiz Shaw founded the North Bennet Street Industrial School in Boston's North End to teach immigrants the skills they needed to find jobs in their new country.

There was training in carpentry, cabinet making, and jewelry making, as well as education for children, social services, and recreational activities.

The school is housed in an early nineteenth-century brick building on the corner of Salem Street and North Bennet Street, next to the Old North Church in the heart of the North End. The building was once a church and then a sailor's retirement home, and now has three attached smaller buildings.

The school has evolved, but remains committed to training people for employment in traditional trades that use hand skills, along with emerging technology. Its mission is to preserve, advance and promote a better understanding of craftsmanship.

Students' work can be viewed in a first-floor, storefront gallery at the school, 39 North Bennet Street Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Thursdays, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.; and Saturday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. The work includes jewelry, hand-bound books, furniture and accessories. Books and tools formerly used by students are also for sale.

An annual show of student work takes place in the spring. Call 617 227-0155 or visit www.nbss.org for the date, which is yet to be determined as of press time, and location.

For more information about the North Bennet Street School, visit its Web site at www.nbss.org.



A gallery at the North Bennet Street School, which is open to the public, displays and sells students' work, including jewelry, hand-bound books, furniture and accessories. Photos provided courtesy of North Bennet Street School.

Students at the North Bennet Street School perfect their craft.

