

Behind the Scenes

with Kurt Hertzog



Philadelphia Woodworks

A lifelong resident of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with only a few short absences, Michael Vogel studied to become an architect. After learning that being an architect really didn't please him, he ventured into the business world for ten years. It took him to Manhattan for a while and then he returned home to Philadelphia. A hands-on kind of person, Michael had always enjoyed making things. The schools and university that he attended always had facilities that allowed him to enjoy his passion for creating. Now, at this point in his life, he had no space for a workshop and no access to his previous shops at school. He searched in his area for some way to fulfill this need, to have the use of tools, equipment, and the space to work. Finding nothing, he explored the idea of creating a neighborhood or public workshop.

Still working full-time in the finance world, Michael began his research on the who, what, where, and how of such a facility. He knew the why, but needed to understand the rest of the puzzle, such as finances, insurance, tools, infrastructure, and more. His search produced two such businesses in the United States that were willing to share their expertise with him. With these two willing coaches, Michael made the leap into creating his dream. He left his job in May 2011 to devote full-time to the planning and execution of a member-driven woodworking facility.

By mid-July 2011, he had located a suitable space and signed the lease. The building had a prior life as a factory and then as a furniture showroom. When Michael took the keys, he had one-and-a-half months of cleaning to even begin the rehab. Needing a total rehabilitation to turn the space into a workshop, Michael had a great deal of support: his friends, family, neighbors, potential members, and other volunteers pitched in to assist with the design, electrical, HVAC, legal, and more.

Philadelphia Woodworks has 8000 square feet and includes an art gallery, lumberyard, 5500 square feet of workshop, support offices, and storage. Although he had already opened for business, the official opening was set for April 22, 2012. A large crowd joined Michael for a day-long Grand Opening celebration with food, drink, demos, mini-classes, and tours.

Philadelphia Woodworks is based on a membership model. As a basic member, there is a "pay for the day"

pass, an "evening" pass, or a prepaid "flex card" allowing by-the-hour usage. Modeled after a fitness gym, there is also a monthly fee membership available that allows unlimited usage of the facility whenever it is open. Being open six days a week, closed on Monday, there are plenty of hours available for those desiring large amounts of shop time. And the monthly subscription is a great value when compared to the cost of equipping and maintaining your own shop.

Filling the needs of everyone from the casual woodworker to the space- or funds-challenged, Philadelphia Woodworks is uniquely positioned. The woodworker or woodturner can join if only to take classes. Each class is formulated to not only teach the fundamentals required for a particular aspect of woodworking, but it can also culminate in a finished project. Michael and his staff create the classes with the end goal that the participant takes home their creation. The facility features local artisans and national/international teachers and demonstrators. Even the experienced craftsman can make the conscious decision to leave the equipment purchases, maintenance, and mess out of life. Running the math, the home hobbyist is challenged to make any financial case for buying, housing, and maintaining such a wealth of equipment at home—particularly with the depth and breadth of the equipment and facilities available at Philadelphia Woodworks. The guidance available and the camaraderie also add a huge amount of value to membership.

Currently (September 2012), Michael has expanded into some of the open space previously used for staging and storage to create a woodturning studio. Set up for demos, classes, lectures, and special programs, this space can be used without impacting the rest of the facility, leaving that area open for membership usage. The woodturning studio has eight fully equipped woodturning stations with mini-lathes and all the support equipment for materials preparation and tool sharpening. There is even a complete cabinet for the storage of penturning equipment and supplies. With sixty core clients and growing membership, Michael sees the facility being capable of easily supporting membership in the 250-member range. When they approach that number, he and his staff can adapt and expand into currently unused space as needed.

From a safety perspective, there are programs where members actually take a project class and receive instruction on the various pieces of equipment needed for that project. At completion, they are allowed to use that equipment in their open shop time. If they need to use additional pieces of equipment as time progresses, arrangements can be made for instruction and safety checkout on that equipment or additional project classes can be selected that include them. The project classes serve several purposes. They whet the appetite of the member, provide instruction and guidance on various pieces of equipment, build the safe use of equipment repertoire for that member, impart the necessary skills, and have them leave with a finished project.

The day that I spent with Michael and his staff at the Grand Opening was an enlightening day. He has an interesting business model with wonderful execution. The facility is absolutely a no-compromise operation. The planning, layout, equipment, and operations indicate the level of thought and dedication to customer satisfaction that went into the business. From the time-saver to the library, everything is well done. Open space, great equipment, knowledgeable staff, and enthusiasm were the norm, not the exception. It is a great implementation of a needed facility. You can find out more about Michael and the Philadelphia Woodworks at www.philadelphiawoodworks.com. If you are ever in the Philadelphia area, I'd suggest that the Philadelphia Woodworks is a must-see for any woodworker or woodturner.



Fig. 1. Situated in the Manayunk section of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Philadelphia Woodworks is one of the few woodworking membership facilities in the country.



Fig. 2. Philadelphia Woodworks was created in an older facility that had been a factory and then a furniture showroom. The space needed complete rehabilitation for use as a workshop.



Fig. 3. My "Behind the Scenes" visit accidentally coincided with their Grand Opening celebration, which featured ongoing demonstrations throughout the day. Here, a local historical shipbuilder demonstrates the art of steam bending.



Fig. 4. The audience looks on as the shipbuilder explains the process while the plank is being steamed in preparation for bending. The mezzanine provides a great vantage point for observation.



Fig. 5. From a woodworking and woodturning perspective, every base has been covered with the top-shelf equipment provided in the facility.



Fig. 8. Examples of completed projects were on display throughout the facility. There was a gallery of work as well.



Fig. 6. One of the demos during the day was how to use Google SketchUp as a design tool for woodworking and woodturning projects. This free program is an incredibly powerful and underutilized tool.



Fig. 9. This is just part of the on-site lumberyard. Members can bring their own materials or buy any necessities on site. It truly is a one-stop facility for their woodworking members.



Fig. 7. Of course, there were munchies provided at the Grand Opening. Local dignitaries, current and prospective members, and the curious stopped in to watch the demonstrations and peruse the facility.



Fig. 10. These are some of the pieces of special woods available. The wonderful crotch pieces may perhaps someday be built into beautiful and unique coffee tables.



Fig. 11. In addition to the power tools available on the floor, there is plenty of bench space for layout, handwork, and assembly. The entire shop has great lighting, including plentiful natural lighting.



Fig. 14. The Philadelphia Woodworks has full-size woodturning equipment and has since configured some of its expansion space into a wood studio complete with eight fully equipped mini-lathes.



Fig. 12. Adjacent to the bench area, there is a comprehensive collection of hand tools. If it is used in woodworking or woodturning, it is almost certainly available here for use.



Fig. 15. No Grand Opening or demo would be complete without the famous Saw Stop "hot dog" demonstration. Here, the saw is being prepared for the demo.



Fig. 13. The floor plan was designed to allow spacious working areas. The feeling of openness makes it very comfortable. The mezzanine has a lounge, storage lockers, and library area, as well as a great view overlooking the entire shop floor.



Fig. 16. The Philadelphia Woodworks is laid out and fully equipped for several hundred members. This space is for future expansion. The woodturning classrooms and turning studio have already been located here.