

Design Q+A

Meet Urban Tree: Founder Q+A

The company specializes in preserving the unique character of urban trees



Urban Tree began with a big gust of wind. John Metzler started what was then Urban Tree Forge in 2008 after a microburst of wind in a 300 acre, heavily wooded old Pittsburgh cemetery. Metzler saw the piles of very old trees and decided he wanted to do something with them. So, he started milling trees and using them to build furniture. Metzler died in a tragic accident in 2010 and Jason Boone was among those who picked up work Metzler started. Boone ended up founding Urban Tree after a transition period. 360 sat down with Boone who shared how the company has evolved since then.

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360: You use the phrase “tree to table.” Where does that come from?

Jason Boone: Usually, when I build a piece of furniture I can say, “this tree grew on 5th & Amberson” or something like that. We're not going out into the forest and cutting down trees. These are city trees and yard trees that are coming down for reasons out of our control whether they're old or sick or in the wrong place or someone's getting an addition—whatever it may be. Pittsburgh is an old enough city that the trees here have been allowed to really mature and have a pretty long life. We have an abundant stock of large material.

360: How is John Metzler's legacy evident in your company today?

JB: John Metzler got the spark going and built up an inventory. He was a happy go lucky guy that walked down the street and said “hi” to everyone. About two-and-a-half years after he started, I entered the picture. My background is in architecture, but I grew up on a farm in Missouri and had a woodworking hobby as a kid. I was working with some pretty high-end design firms in the architecture field, but I was getting bored and restless sitting behind a computer all day. I decided to pick up woodworking again, and started making wooden sculpture as creative outlet. I met John and started renting shop space from him on nights and weekends. I was there giving him a hand while working on my own ideas and trying to figure out a way to get myself unchained from the computer. Then in May of 2010, John was out in front of the studio carving on a log when a trailer came unhooked from the vehicle towing it, hit and killed him.

360: How did you end up picking up the mantle of the company that became Urban Tree?

JB: I had been spending so much time there and was very familiar with everything going on at the studio, so I was able to step in and help the family finish up some jobs that needed to get finished. The tragic nature of the accident, and the fact that it occurred on a really prominent road in Pittsburgh, made it a big news story. The community really rallied around us. The phone never stopped ringing with people asking us to do jobs. Coincidentally, I got laid off about a month after it all happened. So, I just kept going. There was a year or two transition period where we worked things out with the family. Eventually, I bought the stock of wood from them, changed the name a bit, and was able to keep John's idea going.

360: Why do you think Urban Tree has been successful for eight years now?

JB: Part of it is that Pittsburgh people are Pittsburgh proud. They really like the idea that they have a piece of Pittsburgh as their table. That definitely been one of the hooks. And then another big part is that we maintain very high standards. We try to overwhelm people with the quality and craftsmanship. We try to over deliver. We've been able to create a reputation. Most of our growth has been due to word of mouth.

360: How do you source these urban trees?

JB: People either call us or we hear about a tree that has come down. We have a lot of relationships around the tree community. We have a couple thousand square feet stacked floor to ceiling. We try to mill a couple of trees a month and then once a year we ship them to the kiln. We recently bought a new mill that allows us to mill more than we can use so that's opened up opportunities for growth. Eight years in, we've polished all the processes down where we can really crank some stuff through the shop when we've got direct delivery targets. It feels like it's growing naturally and we're reaching a point where we can start looking outside Pittsburgh.

360: How would you describe your design aesthetics?

JB: Our design ethos is that when we complete a table, it almost looks like we didn't touch it. We know all the techniques and craft. We have all sorts of methods to fill cracks or fix rotten spots. But we really want our table tops to look as if they had been peeled right out of the tree and then polished like a piece of marble. What makes the urban material unique is that it's not straight-grained, clear veneer wood. That perfect veneer stuff used to be the best you could get. But it's so common now. When you see a piece of wood that has cracks, knots, splits and has been pruned and grown over, it looks real. People respond to that.

360: Is there something specific about the trees in Pittsburgh?

JB: Pittsburgh is special because it's this old, monied city. Back in the 1890s, it was one of the richest cities in the country, so people had estates and planted lots of trees. That kind of history is part of the reason John could start this. There's also the geography. Pittsburgh is a major city in a major hardwood growing region. Everything grows here. Within a three hour circle of Pittsburgh, you can get almost any kind of tree that grows within the country.

360: What has you excited right now?

JB: We're working on a corporate lobby in San Francisco that we'll be cladding with slabs. It's going to be a very unique way of using the material. The whole bottom edge will be a live edge and then the surface will keep the texture of the wood. The entire front is going to have waves and ripples. It'll be a tactile experience where you can run your hand on it and feel the movement of the tree.

In general, we're exploring adding more texture or a bit of our own fingerprint to our work. Our prototypes are composed pieces as opposed to just letting the lumber do all the work. We're starting to have confidence in our own design and craft to compliment the wood itself.

360: What's the wildest project you guys have ever worked on?

JB: When Uber set up a major office in Pittsburgh, they asked us to do 60 pieces. For four of those, they brought us F-16 titanium jet engine turbines and we designed steel bases with glass tops to hold and display the engines under the table. It didn't even have a piece of wood in it. That was definitely the strangest thing we've ever been asked to design.

URBAN TREE

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