

## Meet Miles & May: Founder Q+A

**Brandon Phillips gives us a look inside his unconventional furniture company.**

Brandon Phillips, founder of upstate New York furniture company Miles & May, tends to avoid the conventional. As lead designer, he's created an aesthetic out of the unexpected, creating beautiful pieces from otherwise mundane materials.

360 sat down with Phillips to learn about the history of the company and his distinctive relationship with material and design.

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#### **360: Can you tell us the story behind Miles & May?**

**Brandon Phillips:** I started the company with some friends when we were attending the Art Institute of Chicago. It wasn't a super serious thing—more of a way to avoid getting a job. We were all studying sculpture and painting, and none of us were particularly interested in joining the workforce in a very responsible way. But we started having success pretty quickly, hiring employees and becoming a real company a lot sooner than we'd anticipated.

We were based in Chicago for the first four years before moving to Brooklyn in 1999. I ended up acquiring my business partner's shares and moving the company to upstate New York. We bought a really beautiful, classic farmstead from the late 1700s and spent a few years renovating, but in 2008 there was a catastrophic fire and we lost it all.

Eventually, we found the factory we're in today. It was a shadow of a structure at the time, but within our budget. Unfortunately, we were so focused on rebuilding and reopening our company that we didn't seem to notice there was a recession going on. We had this 65,000 square foot building and not a lot of business. It was one of those lemonade-out-of-lemons sorts of things because we had a lot of time to work on the building.

#### **360: What's your philosophy around the materials you use in your furniture?**

**BP:** I trained as a sculptor and a lot of my early interest in furniture was more material based. I would fall in love with these different materials that didn't obviously lend themselves to a beautiful finished piece. If you're starting out with a gorgeous piece of curly walnut, you don't really have to do anything to it. I don't want to say that doesn't take any skill or cleverness, but it's hard not to make a beautiful piece of wood look attractive.

My original interest was to take something subjectively ugly and try to represent it in a more beautiful way. Finding a really boring material and using form, function and presentation to make it more interesting.

### **360: How do you find your materials?**

**BP:** In Brooklyn, there were a few heavy timber dealers that dealt mainly with construction. I would show up to find that one perfect beam, which was always at the bottom of the stack, and this one young salesman would sit there and patiently work with us to get it out. Now he specializes in reused and reclaimed material, and he still keeps us in mind when he finds something special. For example, he worked with New York City to legally acquire some of the classic manhole covers after the city had replaced them, and we made little coffee tables out of them.

We also have relationships with some smaller logging companies. One of the benefits of having so much space is that it allows us to buy these beautiful materials and warehouse them. Then when the right projects or designs come along, we use them up.

### **360: Tell us a little bit about your design process.**

**BP:** I wasn't computer trained in art school. I just missed the cut off. Kids younger than me were native to computers and I didn't have email until well after college. Because of that, our design process is very physical. We'll design a chair with bits and pieces of wood screwed together and duct tape wrapped around it. I usually work on a physical form first and then I spend a lot of time going back to figure out how to actually make it. It's more sculptural.

Given the size of our company, I really do enjoy that I still get to make things. A lot of our products have a good human relationship because they've been physically created, not on a computer or a piece of paper. Our pieces don't look like a drawing because there wasn't a drawing. That sets you up for more mistakes, but you end up having some really serendipitous discoveries along the way.

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