

2 DESIGN: Education

Object lessons

Boston

North Bennet Street School is helping to keep American craft alive. We meet the students stepping away from screens and turning their hands to traditional craftsmanship.

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“There’s something fundamentally human and satisfying about working with one’s hands,” says Sarah Turner, president of the North Bennet Street School (NBSS), which was founded in 1881. A metalsmith and jeweller, Turner is standing in its spacious lobby in Boston’s historic North End neighbourhood. The room doubles as a gallery that showcases handmade objects including a wooden Windsor chair, a Queen Anne writing desk and leather-bound books. These are just a few examples of what the students here can learn to make.

When MONOCLE visits, the students have just returned for the semester and the red-brick building, a former printing press and police station, is buzzing with the sounds of people tinkering. Some 150 full-time students are enrolled in the school on programmes in everything from bookbinding to violin-making and repair, preservation carpentry, furniture-making, piano technology, jewellery and locksmithing.

Courses at the NBSS are taught using the Sloyd Method, a 19th-century Scandinavian teaching system designed to cultivate hand skills. The school’s motto – “A good life, built by hand” – reflects this tactile approach. Any modern machine tool that’s used in these workshops is there to supplement handheld ones, not replace them. “We are creating a generation of people who are capable of using the latest technology but who can also use the tried-and-true methods of old-fashioned hand craftsmanship,” says Turner.

As niche and Old World as it sounds, inquiries into courses at the NBSS have increased by 45 per cent over the past three years. Turner has her suspicions as to why. “People are reconsidering how they want to live and we shine a light on an appealing alternative.” Students, she says, are attracted to the idea that it’s possible



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1. Carving a chair leg
2. Cloth for bookbinding

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1. Student Haniel Wides
2. Furniture-making students at work

to swap today's screens, offices and tertiary academic courses for a seemingly bygone way of life: plying hands to a trade and building a viable career in the wood shop or bindery.

First, though, one must become a master craftsperson. No former experience is necessary but those who are admitted must commit themselves to punctuality and put in the hours – sometimes 10 hours a day, five days a week. Despite these rigours, they arrive from across the US and range from recent high school graduates and career-changers to retirees who are ready for reinvention.

The first class that MONOCLE visits is preservation carpentry. Here, students learn how to maintain historical buildings – a fitting course for a state and city with so many pre-20th-century buildings. In a large, light-filled room, students mill around heritage window sashes that they are repairing under the watchful gaze of their instructor. They will clean the panels, rebuild them with linseed-oil putty and paint them, before the sashes are returned to Memorial Hall in Charlestown, Massachusetts, an 18th-century landmark.

Among them is Matthew Horn, who left a steady, senior-career technology job at



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Google to study here. “I feel way more alive working with my hands than when I was staring at computers all day,” he says. Not far away is Maya Meltsner, who relocated here from Washington in order to pursue her passion. “I left my job where I worked as a legal administrative assistant for five years,” she tells MONOCLE, while manoeuvring around a sash with utmost focus. “And before you ask, no, there’s no going back.”

Elsewhere in the building, in a hushed, slightly darker room, we find the bookbinders. “This is a very Boston programme,” says instructor Jeff Altepeter. “So many poets and writers come from here: Emerson, Hawthorne, Alcott.” Looking around the room, we see a quintessentially bookish crowd: eight people at their lamplit desks, surrounded by stacks of paper and books. Here, they are busily repairing cloth and leather bindings.

Most books today are bound mechanically but collectable editions and leather volumes are often still put together by hand in small batches. Many of these students will go on to be the US’s future binders, who will keep this tradition alive. Among them is India Patel. “I used to work for a private press,” she says. “Though I was dealing with books, no one told me that there was this pathway that involved making them physically.”

As niche and romantic as these industries might seem, graduates leave the NBSS with a strong chance of securing employment: the school maintains a 70 per cent employment rate across the board, with some courses boasting closer to 90 per cent. “This is not an art school; it’s a trade school,” says Turner. “Jobs are paramount. These industries might sound obsolete at a time when everything is increasingly digital but there’s still a need for them. We’re replenishing the talent pool.”

The NBSS’s practical ethos can be traced all the way back to its founding in 1881. Women’s rights and education reformer Pauline Agassiz Shaw set up the institution in order to train immigrants, who were arriving in Boston in their millions in the 19th century. While much has changed since then, the NBSS maintains its original emphasis on hand skills and its commitment to education and jobs.

Woodworking has always been a key focus of the school. Ask any wood-based craftsman in the US and they will almost certainly be familiar with the NBSS. So it is fitting that the furniture-making course is by far the most



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- 1. Student’s chair
- 2. Crafting a mirror
- 3. Furniture maker
- 4. Timber-frame model
- 5. Carpentry instructor Michael Burrey

popular programme. Its headquarters is found on an upper level in a large, U-shaped room.

Today some 20 students are working among the scent of woodchips. In the workshop, Ian Hallowell, who sought out the NBSS as a “college alternative”, is working on a small but highly detailed 18th-century shaving mirror. Another student, Haniel Wides, is at the back of the room, crafting a music stand. “There are things that I was so intimidated by when I first walked in here but now I don’t think much of it,” says Wides. “It feels almost indulgent to have this time to push your skills as far as they can go.”

Back in the lobby, as she sees us out, Turner laments the fact that we weren’t able to take in all of the school’s offerings – locksmithing, jewellery-making, violin-making, the US’s last piano-technology course – in one day. It’s a good reason for us to return. Thanks to this school, such crafts and trades have a more secure future.

As Turner accompanies us through the gallery of handmade objects, her parting words are on the role that the NBSS plays in the fabric of Boston. “We sit in a city that has world-class higher education and a long, proud, blue-collar history,” she says. “We are a kind of bridge between those very powerful identities and we attract people from both of those worlds. It makes North Bennet very special. There’s an interplay here that I don’t know exists elsewhere.” — 
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Trading up: America’s skills revival

The US is desperately short of people who can confidently rock a toolbelt. The construction industry reports a shortfall of 300,000 skilled tradespeople, from carpenters to welders, and the scale of demand is triggering a renaissance of the trade school. Enrolment in vocational construction courses is up by almost 20 per cent across the country, according to a report last year by the National Student Clearinghouse. No trade-technical college has the brand recognition of a Harvard or a Yale but the calculation for many prospective students of a skills-based programme is simple: less debt, rising salaries and a surfeit of work, especially given that there are 40,000 national infrastructure projects in the pipeline.

Meanwhile, there has also been a resurgence of so-called craft schools – such as the NBSS – around the US, where students learn how to make things with their hands using time-honoured techniques handed down the generations. The Penland School of Craft in North Carolina, for instance, teaches how to shape wood, work metal and throw clay amid the grandeur of the Appalachian mountains. Penland was founded in the 1920s but, like many such schools around the US offering courses in artisan trades, it has seen a surge of applications in recent years as people seek a new skill that they might turn into a business.

There’s still a stigma attached to the idea of ditching a bachelor’s degree in order to take a different path. But students often report a sense of satisfaction and purpose that comes with learning by doing. It’s increasingly being integrated into forward-thinking architecture programmes around the US, with design-build schools, such as Rural Studio at Alabama’s Auburn University, leading the way. Such approaches teach students how to build a house, from the electrics to the foundations, as well as draw on. Many architecture firms now seek graduates who know their way around a construction site. For those students willing to roll up their sleeves, now is the time to do a roaring trade. — CL



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