

Local woodworker blends past and present by salvaging downed red oak for new Waldron desk: www.heraldtimesonline.com

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BLOOMINGTON — The new desk in the foyer of the Ivy Tech John Waldron Arts Center is not only an example of furniture as art — it's got quite a story, one that makes use of historic images and destroyed trees.

If you walked into the Waldron when the building went up in 1915, the desk would look right at home. But the handcrafted work of art is also thoroughly modern, being ADA compliant, and incorporating local wood, much of it recycled.

Since Ivy Tech Community College purchased the Waldron building in the spring of 2010, artistic director Paul Daily has wanted a desk that would complement the building's design and accommodate both the administrator and security guard who work the lobby. But all that Daily could find were pieces that either looked out of place or were too large or expensive.

"When we first started looking at desks, the one we found that we really loved, we could have gotten a car for cheaper," Daily said.

A solution emerged when Daily connected with Nancy Hiller, a Bloomington woodworker who was excited about the prospect of doing something historically influenced for the former city hall.

"I rarely get to do anything like this," Hiller said. "This is a cool project for a wonderful old building."

Hiller, who owns her own woodworking business, NR Hiller Design Inc., is also known for her books. The most recent is the new IU Press book, "A Home of her Own." She's spent the past weeks installing her newest creation into the Waldron lobby.

Since Hiller couldn't find any documentation about the Waldron building's original front desk, she approached Elizabeth Schlemmer, manager of the genealogy library at the Monroe County History Center, to see if she could find anything comparable.

Schlemmer was able to find images of local desks from around the same time, but none seemed quite appropriate for the Waldron.

"The desks fell on different points of the fancy/formal/simple spectrum," Hiller said.

After some digging on the Internet, Hiller discovered OfficeMuseum.com, an online gallery of photographs of 20th century office interiors.

Amid the images was a black-and-white photo from a French jewelry export business, taken in 1915. In the center of the office sat a simple, elegant paneled wood desk. Hiller printed the picture and used it as her inspiration as she started sketching designs.

The oak Hiller used for the desk is all from Indiana, and it's all either been salvaged or recycled. Hiller hastens to point out that the wood is pre-consumer recycled material; that is, it came from scraps from other projects, rather than post-consumer materials.

"It's an important ethical distinction," said Hiller, who is preparing a pamphlet about the desk's origins for people who are interested in the recycling and local resources that went into its creation.

Every piece of wood in the desk has its own story, and Hiller's favorite comes from the countertops, which are made from an oak that fell down in Seminary Square Park, at South Walnut and West Second streets, during the massive wind storm in May.

Lee Huss, Bloomington's urban forester, said that most of the city trees he takes down are rotten, but when he has something salvageable, he tries to make it available to local woodworkers.

"I jokingly refer to it as my Leave No Log Behind program," Huss said.

So when the red oak fell down, he was pleased to donate it to the Waldron desk project. "The city is interested in the fact that it's going back into the building that used to be the city hall," Huss said.

Trina Sterling, the administrative assistant who works the front desk, appreciates the Seminary Square connection, as well.

"That's the most exciting part of it — it's using things from that horrible tragedy and having something beautiful come out of it," she said.

Furniture maker Nancy Hiller and Reno Reynolds, an Ivy Tech technician, install a massive desk she designed and built for the Waldron lobby. It is constructed with locally grown and recycled oak. Hiller says: "The design of the desk is 100-percent period authentic, based on a 1915 original with glorious panels, simple moldings, shaped brackets and corner plinths with pilasters." David Snodgrass | Herald-Times



Nancy Hiller's good pup watches as the master works.
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Furniture maker Nancy Hiller aligns part of the desk that she built for the Waldron.
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This shot shows the desk as it looked as it was being installed in the Waldron lobby. David Snodgrass | Herald-Times

