

Even MDF has a grain.

I am writing a text about a pursuit of an understanding of craftsmanship. The image the word arises is of a gnarled old man stroking his silver beard whilst gently polishing something with dovetails in it. However I think the truth may be a bit more interesting than that.

The process of hand making built in furniture drives you inexorably towards using medium density fibreboard, generally known by its acronym MDF, which as a wood purist you would regard with contempt. Not wishing to think of my work as contemptible has led to a process of analysis of what MDF really is and what working with it really means.

Having worked with a variety of woods for over 20 years I have come to the conclusion that wood hates you. An unromantic theory I grant you but one that seems to be unarguable when you consider all the ways that wood can and will stitch you up given half a chance.

However the stubborn determination of wood not to play our silly games has come up against our ingenuity and willingness to use limitless violence Symbolised perfectly by MDF. So what we've done is to take your basic tree, ideally intensively grown and then clear cut to minimise any annoying wildlife, and grind it up into tiny bits. We then mix up the bits with the same amount of urea formaldehyde, which is a toxic but cheap and effective adhesive, in a giant blender before squirting it into a box and crushing it flat. The resulting sheet gets trimmed to size and added to the pile ready to be used up. However I am going to claim that MDF can still be well used rather than just used up. Used by someone who through his tools wants however tenuously to feel a bond with countless brothers firmly based in ancient traditions rather than as if floating in an individual bubble making merely money. Wants to believe that the industrialising of our environment has only made our connection to the earth harder to see not destroyed it altogether.

It's with the trimmed size that I will start trying to reconnect MDF with the long tradition of craftsmanship in wood.

2444 x 1222 x 18mm

These are the most common dimensions for a sheet of mdf. They are also dimensions which, in their imperial form of 8' x 4' x ¾", would have been recognisable to any carpenter going back as far as you can go. The change from an imperial way of measuring dimensions based upon the ergonomics of the body itself to a metric measuring system based on mathematical convenience disguises this connection, but is a change of description rather than spirit. There are other clues that these dimensions were not selected because they simply suited a manufacturing process driven by the needs of capital. For a carpenter of average build an 8' x 4' sheet is as wide and long as you can pick up and walk with and 18mm thick as heavy as you can carry without that uncomfortable feeling that the bones in your wrist are separating. 8' is as low as you want your ceiling to be and 4' fits the 16" joist centres you'll find if you pull up your Victorian floorboards, or measure the distance between the cut nail fixings which would only require pulling up your carpet, or you could just take my word for it that the historic thread of these dimensions at least remains as a connection to dimensions defined by the nature of wood itself.

Another way I would like to reconnect this apparently bland and featureless stuff with the wood from which it came is by explaining how it still has a grain to be worked in specific ways and still has

to be understood and engaged with on its own terms if it is to be used well. Whereas timber has a grain like the intertwining of straws, MDF's grain is like layers of paper which makes the hard smooth face and the soft dull edge of MDF very different beasts. They take a fixing differently, react differently to the insertion of a chisel and take a finish in very different ways. In the same way that you must treat the long grain and end grain of a piece of timber completely differently if you want to successfully make anything from wood, the surface and edge of MDF require very different treatment. This fact that MDF still has a grain to be read, even if this reading is similar (mdf does come in a range of densities) for every piece, is another thread connecting those who use MDF with care today with all those who have used materials with care in the past.

One of the best descriptions I've heard of MDF is that it has no memory. what it means in practice is that 18mm MDF is no use for unsupported book shelves. This will be apparent about a month after installation as your shelves take on the shape of a banana. In contrast Pine shelves, whilst also deflecting under load are always trying to get back to the shape they remember being. This fibrous memory is why wood often bends in irritating ways when it is sawn. Imagine a tree grown on a slope with the wind in its face which had compensated by having shorter fibres on one side in order to better reach the sun. Once this counterbalanced strain has been removed by ripping then the individual bits relax into a nice comfy curve. It is the faint echo of this tendency for wood to start doing its own thing once it is re-sawn that I can hear sometimes when I'm cutting MDF that's been in the rack for a while. It binds on the blade forcing me to pull it back and restart the cut. It's annoying as the edge will heat rapidly releasing the delicate aroma of burning MDF. This makes it harder to sand and gives the offcut a curved edge which will be tricky to reuse. Yet it cheers me up as it shows that even after all that's been done to it some of woods obstinacy remains at the heart of MDF, however faint, this echo of memory is another thread connecting it to its roots.

If you find yourself looking at ill proportioned fake panels on clumsy boxes beside the fire place then you are in an ugly front room..hopefully not your own! The fact the mouldings used to fake up the panels have a lineage traced back to the Ancient Greeks adds insult to the injury. When you add in the pointlessly curved framing at the top unrelated to anything else in the room then you have furniture that will steal a little piece of your soul every time you see it. And don't even get me started on fluted columns! But I would like to claim that MDF can be used honestly, if with a whiff of postmodern hipster irony, even with Greek mouldings! If I make the panel at the correct depth and the framing the right width to suit an Ogee moulding deep enough to have some character and surround the doors with subtly detailed flush framing. If this framing is scribed neatly to the walls and the finish encourages you to run your hands over it. If the clients possessions look at home displayed on the well-proportioned shelves that will never bend then they pay me the ultimate compliment 'It looks like it has always been there'. My individual self has vanished into work that even if stylistically very different stands with that which came before. Every piece of the work has been sufficiently considered and well-practiced to seem inevitable and therefore give no clue to my personality. The marks of tools have all disappeared through their own sharpness or through the orderly process of construction. I can walk away from another happy customer, proud to know i am unknown MDF craftsman.