

# Material Practice: Furniture

## INSTRUCTOR:

Prof. Steven Mankouche  
mankouch@umich.edu



Thonet 214

## COURSE PREMISE:

A material practice is one that takes fabrication into account from the beginning of the design process. Part of developing greater control and precision in such a practice comes from understanding the physical restraints of materials, experiencing their limits and points of failure, and discovering new possibilities. Through historical research and direct engagement in the craft of making, material thereby can become a discursive element, providing a critical source of feedback in the design process. Fabricating permits us to directly experience the behavior of a material, opening the design process to opportunities we might never have envisioned. When bridging scales from objects to buildings, experience using a material allows one to design with more control and greater precision. As architecture pedagogy today predominantly exists in a digital realm where scale is fluid, if non-existent, designers move from model to full-size building components “seamlessly”. While digital output has made the shift in scale particularly effortless, it has riddled much of the artifacts, objects and building components with all types of reality/gravity based and other craft problems. Even when adopting engineered materials like plywood, steel, plastics students run into grain tear out, problems of tool angle access, intruding support structures, burn marks, the inability to have internal right-angle cuts, etc., etc. Most often these projects at best end up in the realm of a “prototype”, and at worst are incomplete, non-structural or dysfunctional models.

## COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course tries to take on this problem by allowing students to engage fabrication through a tactile understanding of material from its point of harvest to its finish. This semester we will use furniture as the modality to experience material practice. My position on architecture is that it scales from object to city. Furniture is a major moment within the scale of architecture, crucial in the education of an architect. While icons of modern furniture such as Eames, Saarinen, Ponti, Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Aalto etc., were not known to be furniture “makers”, they all experienced fabrication directly during their education. This material practice enabled them to have a much closer understanding of the furniture they designed. It also enabled them to gain material fluency when working with the crafts people and manufacturers producing their furniture.

In this semester course students will be fabricating chairs, many of them. Emphasis will be placed on quick iterative work. Students will be encouraged to make as a way of designing rather than designing to make. Classes often will be split into two parts. One part will be seminar based and the other will take place in the Taubman/Stamps wood shop. In the seminar students will be introduced to all types of modern and contemporary furniture, from Thonet to Molino, Stark to Wanders, Jongarius to Uriquola, etc. etc. The workshop component of the course will be predominantly analogue and wood based covering fundamentals such as: hand tools, milling, joinery, turning, possibly steam bending, lamination and finishing.