



Homeland Ingenuity



How do American companies maintain handcrafted detail while producing fast enough—and in large enough quantities—to satisfy profit margins and consumers accustomed to instant gratification?



KOHLER
Workers in the foundry manufacturing center at Kohler headquarters in Wisconsin start on the first step in the cast-iron process. The company's collaboration with designer Jonathan Adler yielded four new hues to its range of enameled cast-iron sinks (below right), adding yellow, green, turquoise, and bright blue to its existing collection of 24 colors.

Do you know how and where your own coffee table was made? If you answered, "It was handcrafted by a midsize American producer," perhaps you've wondered how homegrown companies compete with those offering more affordable products manufactured overseas. In most cases, it requires walking the line between custom and standardized.

It helps if you live in a place like Charleston, South Carolina, a port city with a strong craft tradition. Most of The Urban Electric Company's 75 employees are involved in day-to-day lighting production at their headquarters in North Charleston, yet most have no background in the necessary coppersmithing. Instead, they're makers: jewelers, sculptors, and auto body workers who want to make a living using their hands and who have been trained in a yearlong apprenticeship program. "In the '80s and '90s, the idea of making something with your hands wasn't something people were thinking about out of high school," says president and founder Dave Dawson. "But it's coming back."

Kohler, the plumbing giant that manufactures its cast-iron sinks in a Wisconsin foundry dating back to 1873, is able to offer its standard line in 28 colors because it doesn't need to keep inventory on all of them. "If we were making them overseas, we'd have to limit that to five or six colors like our competitors do," says Adam Horwitz, Kohler's director of marketing and development for kitchens. As soon as the company's designers note a color trend is cresting, they can add it in time for the next selling season.



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THE URBAN ELECTRIC CO.



AMUNEAL
The family-owned fabricator has operated out of factories in Philadelphia's historically manufacturing-heavy Frankford neighborhood since 1970. The team makes highly specific custom pieces, like hand-welded jewelry displays (below) and an art installation by Sarah Sze, as well as its new line of off-the-shelf hardware and accessories, like the Burner Stand mirror (left).



Accompanying this nimbleness is heightened quality control. Housing the design, engineering, and manufacturing branches under one roof allows for quick pivots. "If there are glitches, we can adjust things the next day," says Thomas Moser, the Thos. Moser founder whose company's craftspeople have been making American cherry furniture using traditional joinery for 40 years in a workshop in Auburn, Maine. "When you order something by the container load, there's nothing you can do, and it's maybe seven or eight weeks until another shipment."

Aiding local economic sustainability is another priority for U.S. manufacturers. "We make business decisions with community in mind," says Heath Ceramics co-owner Robin Petravic, who took the helm along with wife and business partner Cathy Bailey in 2003. The company's Sausalito headquarters added a new outpost this year, a tile-manufacturing facility in San Francisco's northeast Mission District, that has required hiring ten more full-time staff, with more to come as Heath expands into the former commercial laundry's entire 60,000 square feet.

This investment in community is faultless, but it's no good if no one's buying your product. How do local producers compete with those who employ cheaper

labor? One strategy: Build your brand to supersede competitors'. Philadelphia-based magnetic shielding manufacturer Amuneal expanded its focus to include custom fabrication for architects and designers under the direction of the founders' son, Adam Kamens, in 1999. Since the company's legacy is innovation, the readymade furniture and hardware line it launched this spring features a few only-at-Amuneal tricks. The I-Beam table's reclaimed wood top is sprayed with metals, then ground and polished, and the artisan-applied metal on the Workbench mirror originated from the company's library of nuanced finishes. Competition is less of an issue: "We've picked things that are not easily made overseas," says Kamens. "There are aesthetic barriers of entry and a complexity that would be difficult to match."

—Caroline Tiger

THOS. MOSER
Thomas Moser (whose Ellipse Dining Chair is shown at right) cites the sense of pride that comes with knowing he's created worthwhile employment for a community. He recently hosted a dinner for employees who'd been with the company for at least 20 years—43 people showed up.



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THE URBAN ELECTRIC COMPANY
Owner Dave Dawson learned that handcrafted isn't everything when he got feedback from clients who love the company's lighting fixtures, like Steven Gambrel's Suffolk chandelier (left), but not the wait. He shifted some production to readymade (above), and now the factory builds the raw bodies of more than 30 popular models in advance.



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