

# LASTING LEGACIES: *THE FURNITURE OF VARIAN DESIGNS*



## Case Study: Varian Designs

Forest Dickey dreams of Celtic castles and deep Scandinavian forests — shapes and materials he tempers with the alluring landscape of northern California. These forms find resolution in impeccably built wooden and steel chairs, tables, benches, and desks — all handcrafted homages to his European heritage and artful celebrations of the people who inspire him, such as his late grandmother, Varian, and his daughter, the namesake of his firm's new Fiona Desk. The boutique furniture design and manufacturing company that Dickey founded in 2008, Varian Designs, is rooted in San Francisco. It's the place that gives birth to these sculptural dreams.

Back in Wisconsin, Dickey's early years were filled with creation; he's from a long line of makers and builders. Dickey received degrees in fine arts and art history from the University of Chicago and then spent a year in South Korea teaching English. When he returned, he rekindled his early love of woodworking with a furniture class at the University of Wisconsin and secured his master's in fine arts in furniture design and woodworking from San Diego State University.

### Building a Business

Although designing furniture was his passion, it took some time to transform this love into a career. Dickey realized he could realistically build a viable business after selling much of his early work while still at San Diego State. He added business classes to his course load and started Varian Designs as his master's thesis project. From there, it was a leap of faith. "I've always been privileged with a certain amount of stubbornness and naivety and basically told myself, 'go do it, and see if it works,'" he says.



After graduation, Dickey moved Varian Designs to San Francisco where his wife was studying. Dickey now shares 8,000 square feet of space with five other small businesses. It's a full woodshop that includes offices and a showroom. The model is progressive in that each artisan shares the monthly financing and maintenance of the machines and tools, yet no one is in direct competition. They refer business to each other and even proffer ideas that enrich everyone's work.

Dickey gets new business primarily through referrals and people who find him online, as well as yearly design trade shows. Recently, Dickey fielded a request from a prop manager with the hit NBC show "Parks and Recreation," who wanted to use Varian's Lofn Chair in one of their episodes. Dickey was already a fan of the program, so he happily offered up the chair. "Actually, one of the lead actors, Nick Offerman, is an accomplished woodworker both on and off the show, so I thought it was kind of cool," he says.

Dickey's work not only struck a cord at NBC, but it is also featured in prominent homes and businesses both in the Bay area and far beyond. To date, he's created 14 designs across three collections, which are all made to order.

While much of his earlier designs employed reclaimed materials like fallen Wisconsin timber, he shifted away from that practice because of cost and uneven quality. Today, he sources most of his materials from certified, sustainable forests throughout the USA, but he still crafts with high-quality, urban-forested wood and barn wood when clients request it. Even aged redwood wine tanks have made it into his shop, bringing the added benefit of filling the space with a fragrant scent.

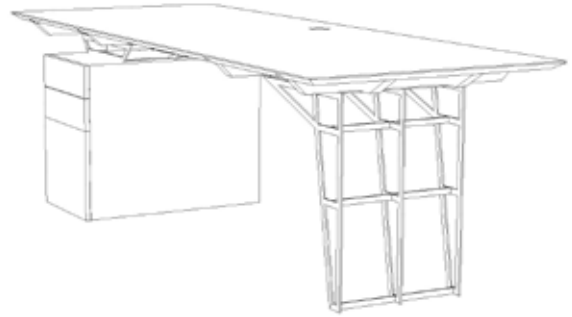


*Varian's Lofn Chair made its network debut as part of a set on the hit NBC show "Parks and Recreation."*

## Inner Inspiration Takes an Outer Shape

As for Dickey's style, it's always evolving. "Early on, the aesthetic was very architectural," he says. "I was looking at how the timbers were being joined together with steel to allow for larger buildings and structures. My newer stuff is much more inward-looking. It's less influenced by architecture and exterior things and more just coming straight out of my head." As he absorbs various outside influences, Dickey melds traditional ideas that stand the test of time but are outfitted for the way we live today.

His best seller, the Bartizan Desk, was born of a merging of concepts. The name refers to an overhanging castle turret commonly found in Scotland while the amalgamation of steel and wood materials takes inspiration from the bridges and landscapes of northern California. The shape itself recalls a bridge touching land. A steel girder supports one end of the wooden desk, which can be crafted from walnut, oak, or cherry. "I like the combination of the cool steel with the warm organic wood," Dickey notes. This contrast makes a pleasing synchrony, a statement about the strength of two different materials working closely together. The white space between the steel beams visually lightens the piece, but the materials are beautiful and powerful in their own right — structured and strong like a fortress.



*Influenced by the way bridges leave the land and touch down in water, the Bartizan Desk provides an inspirational setting for daily work.*

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His most recent work is a departure and an evolution from earlier lines. He calls it modern and Scandinavian. The Fiona Desk is a great example, featuring an innovative pocket for an iPad or other device that's carved right into the surface of the desk. The iPad thus becomes part of the desk itself when it's tucked in or held upright when in use. Dickey finds inspiration in the simplest of utilitarian objects saying, "Scandinavians have such a simple and pure aesthetic. From the stock of a rifle to a milking stool, all proportions, shapes, and forms are carefully considered and executed." He tries to keep the same values in his furniture.



*Designed for the way we work, the Fiona Desk can be built with or without the integrated tablet storage space and stand.*

## Putting it All Together with Vectorworks

To create the iPad pocket, Dickey exported DXF and DWG files to a local 5-Axis CNC operator. The spot was carved within 10 minutes, complete with angled slot and ridge to hold the aluminum lid. This process, Dickey says, would have taken at least three hours for him to accomplish with a router and template. "CNC technology isn't doing anything that the hand can't do; rather, it's just making it much easier. So this means that Vectorworks software lets me design the way I think, and make my workflow cheaper and faster."

A Vectorworks® Architect user since 2002, Dickey says the software helps him save time during both the design and manufacturing processes. He therefore relies heavily on technology to craft his timeless pieces, noting, "Vectorworks has helped me solve all of my design challenges and works really well for what I need to do." His process is straightforward. He starts with notepad sketches, imports them into Vectorworks, and refines the details through 3D modeling. Next, he creates a prototype with a physical model, updating his revisions in the Vectorworks model as he makes them. "The flexibility allows me to finely tune the details of each piece," he notes. For large pitches, Dickey uses the integrated Renderworks® module to create graphically rich renderings with a hand-sketched look that lets people really envision the details. "This step is crucial to obtaining client buy-in, and the images look great, too."

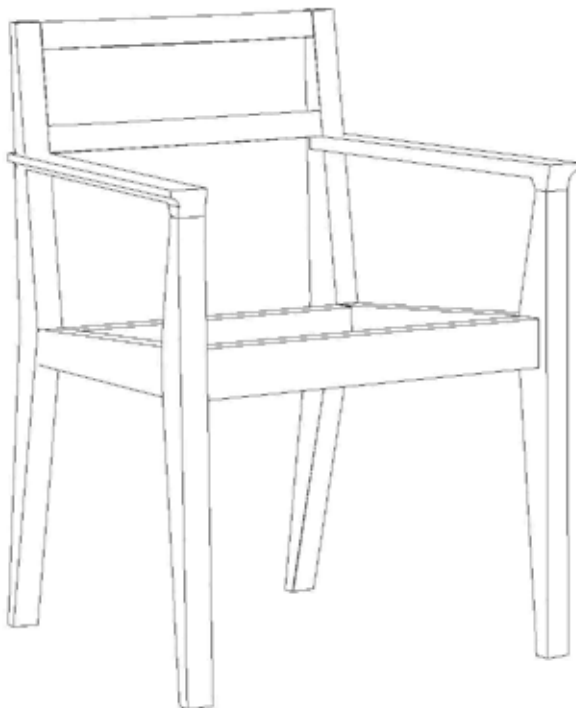
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*"I try to ignore design trends because I think the best work is always far ahead of anything that is trending.*

*A really good design is one that can stand alone because something like that will always look good in a variety of environments. That means making something that's unique."*

*- Forest Dickey, Founder and Lead Designer, Varian Designs*

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## Looking Ahead for Generations

Varian Designs' original tagline heralds Dickey's enduring approach: "Designed for you. Built for your grandchildren." His work is built to last, and that's expressed in this sentiment. "I wanted a way of articulating both that this was contemporary and modern work, as well as heirloom quality." Dickey hopes to continue evolving his business with original, high-quality pieces. "I really love what I do and the way I do it, so while I may incorporate other materials such as stone, I don't see myself ever leaving wood."

In addition to custom designing his furniture, Dickey hand-delivers pieces to clients within 50 miles. So as his business expands, how will he maintain this level of attention and meet the demand for these handcrafted designs? Right now, one full-time employee accomplishes the majority of the production and several other part-time workers assist in other capacities. Dickey envisions more evolution here. "Things are changing right now. I'll always maintain a shop in which I'm prototyping and building custom pieces for the right customers, but the product lines will probably be produced outside our shop in the years to come."

But not to worry — he will remain an integral part of the ageless beauty that is Varian Designs. "If I don't enjoy making something or designing it, I typically just don't do it," says Dickey, which fortunately means he'll be dreaming up and making heirloom furniture for grandchildren and their grandchildren for a very long time.

"There's a legacy to my work, both in its inspiration and its effect," Dickey concludes. "Growing up with a father who inspired creativity and a prolific mother who has made everything from beaded jewelry to installation sculpture inspired me to create a business grounded in the idea that a well-designed piece of furniture is one that will remain just as fresh and interesting in fifty years as it was the day it left our studio. I strive to create designs with longevity in style and that can become legacy pieces that multiple generations can enjoy and appreciate." Dickey has clearly built a business that is worthy of his parents' encouraging spirit and his grandmother's beautiful name.



*Varian Designs' founder and lead designer Forest Dickey follows his inspiration to create furniture that is unique, referential, comfortable, and timeless.*

## Acknowledgements

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