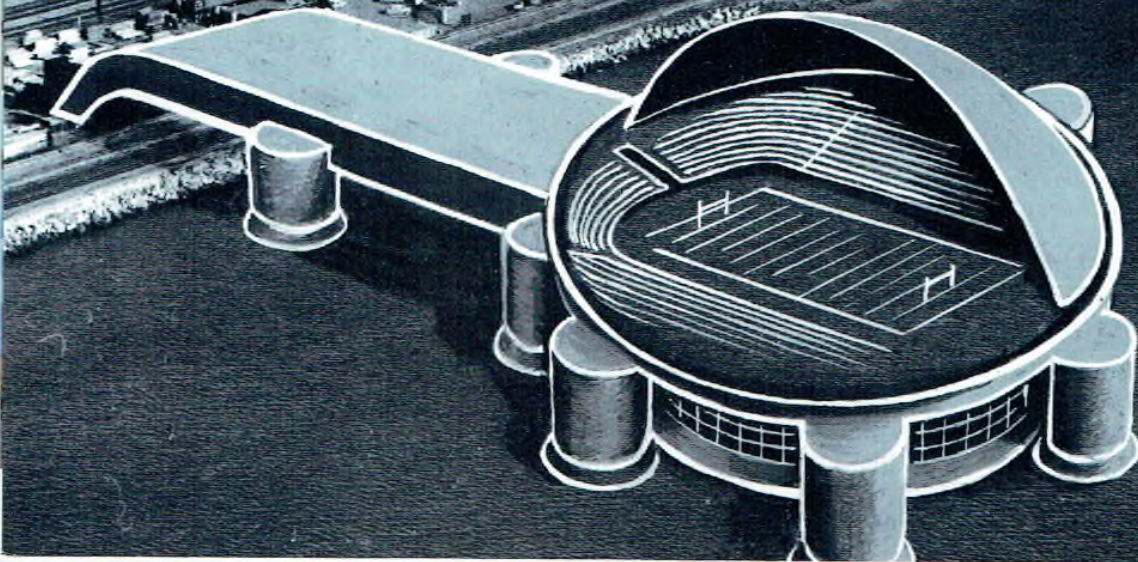


The Seattle Times  
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# PACIFIC NW

## THE ROADS NOT TAKEN

Welcome to Unbuilt Seattle,  
a saga of opportunities missed,  
bullets dodged  
and dreams deferred



## The CREATORS

NK Woodworking & Design always finds a way to create 'the coolest thing possible'



Nathie Katzoff, owner and founder of NK Woodworking & Design, goes over drawings in his South Seattle showroom. "I do very little craftsmanship now, mostly design/art aspect/construction strategy," he says. "I still work in a wood shop every day — that's the most fun."

# CAN-DO Craftsmanship

**T**HERE ARE A FEW THINGS Nathie Katzoff, the 30-year-old founder of NK Woodworking & Design, just is not going to do:

1. **Rely on machinery**, instead of the 30 or so artisan craftspeople working for him, to create incredibly detailed, expertly designed, award-winning architectural works of art: custom-crafted tables, furniture and cabinetry; a retail collection of luxuriously curved wooden bathtubs; intricate staircases as sculptural as they are functional, including one whose wooden railing integrated "delicate, almost-jewel-like steel ribbons," Katzoff says. "A lot of people think we do this on a five-axis CNC machine. Honestly, it sits dormant. With our level of intricacy and skill, we make it by hand — almost everything is all hand-done, even stuff that looks like a machine."



Woodworkers/stairbuilders, from left, Maged Malak Makram Ayad, Jeremy Nugent and Brad Chase, work on a huge staircase that's ultimately destined for Florida. "It'll be a twisted, cool staircase, with glass and leather treads and really beautiful wood and bronze elements," says Katzoff. "It evolved through the process to be as thin and beautiful as possible. We created a computer model, took a twisted shape, and it gave us this map of twisted ribbon and ended up making the coolest thing."



The elaborate handrail of this entry stairway in a Bellevue home is held together by just two or three fasteners, says Katzoff; otherwise it's all wood joinery. "It's really traditional, 2,000-year-old techniques. It was a fair amount of work." Katzoff and his team crafted the staircase in the shop and installed it in pieces. All told, he says, it required 3,000 hours of labor.

2. **Agree to a photo** of those luxuriously curved tubs in production. "At the Kitchen and Bath Industry Show in Orlando, literally everyone at the show said the best thing was the bathtubs," he says. "Lots of people were trying to dissect our process, and we got paranoid."

3. **Spill the beans** on his company's most-exclusive clientele/fan base, which reaches across this country and into others. "Architects and designers find us — there are not many people doing this in the world," Katzoff says. "We work with a lot of rich and famous people now. ▶"



A lot of people make us sign very Draconian agreements; we're good with that privacy. We can't share any, but they're all cool people. Often the people getting our stuff have excitement for the art and are appreciative of the work."

Other than those things, though, almost anything goes. Reality intervenes in degrees at NK Woodworking & Design, but never acutely enough to scrub an *entire* inspired idea.

"We used to get, 'We can't do that' a lot," Katzoff says. "The way I feel about things: People made spaceships; we went to the moon. So we're drawing up plans. We start with the dream — the coolest thing possible — then reality becomes real. Maybe we can only fly into space and not land, but at least we get out of the atmosphere. There's something exciting about getting involved with something that terrifies us, like a roller coaster. We've always found a way."

In retrospect, it's not too surprising that Katzoff found his way to a paying passion that's



**Above left and above:** NK Woodworking & Design custom-crafted the black walnut and white oak stairway, railing and overhead beams in this North Seattle home from locally sourced wood. "The design inspiration was a modern home with a warm, natural feel; connecting with the outdoors; and emphasizing exterior beauty in specific details," says Katzoff. "The contrasting colors were part of the design."



**Katzoff attends a design meeting** in the woodworking showroom. Each eventual work of architectural art begins as a collaborative project with the design team, he says. "Then we go into construction strategy with the owner/designer/contractor. In design, we do a lot of exploration — it's custom art — of what everyone's going to love."



**Ayad takes precise measurements** for the placement of a stair tread while building a staircase. Katzoff says NK Woodworking & Design "really transitioned to a legit company" over the last few years. "What really got the national attention is our design ability — that's my best skill, as creative director and designer."



COURTESY NK WOODWORKING & DESIGN

**NK Woodworking & Design's** mahogany and walnut bathtubs "are the only thing we're turning into a line," says Katzoff. "So many people want the same thing. Each one takes a few hundred hours, and we've been making one or two bathtubs a month." The tubs retail for \$34,000 to \$40,000, Katzoff says; custom ones can cost more.

both entrepreneurial and creative: His dad "has good business sense," he says; his mom is an author, and his brother's a filmmaker. Katzoff grew up in the Boston area and "went to a nontraditional school, where you could pursue your interests and run with what you got interested in," he says (for him: music and arts).

Already working as a carpenter at age 16, Katzoff attended an educational, inspirational

Natural Building Colloquium with some older friends. "It was about natural materials, a lot of timber framing, Japanese carpentry, untraditional construction — a great introduction. It was something beautiful and cool," he says. Except for one thing: "They put me in the kids' tent! I said, [bad two-word combination a passionate, dissed 16-year-old might use]. I'm a teenager! Who would make that call?"

By the time he was 18, Katzoff had joined

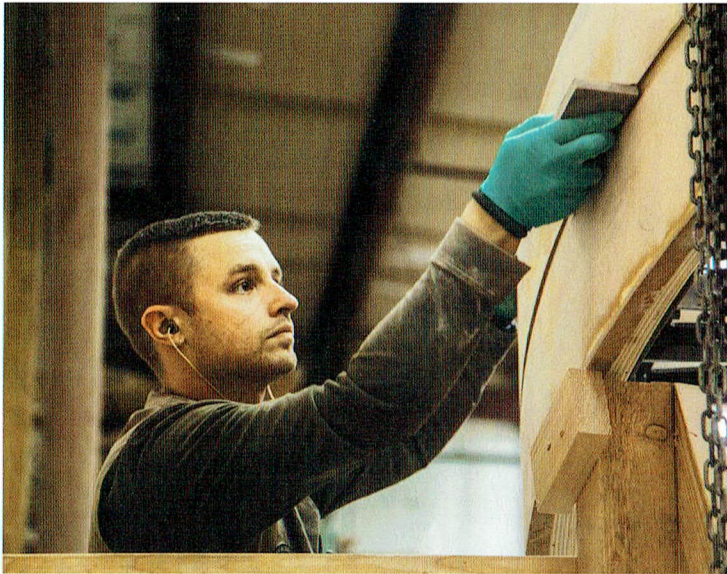
a wooden-boatbuilding program and "fell in love with the building arts." After an artistic metalworking experiment installing bike racks in Ellensburg ("Some people are built to be blacksmiths," he says. "I'm not 6-foot-8 to swing a sledgehammer."), he came to Seattle in 2008 and quite publicly built boats at Miner's Landing on Pier 57. "Like a zoo exhibit, I'd be on display," he says. "I worked pretty independently there, and grew my skills."

Katzoff founded NK Woodworking & Design in Edmonds in 2011 before relocating to 1,000 square feet of space in South Seattle. "We kept taking over bays, and doubled or tripled in size every year," he says. "My dad came and helped me grow the business — from 10 employees to now. I was a pretty rogue teenager; it's very cool to have a working relationship with a parent now."

Katzoff created his first showpiece staircase in 2012. "I just went all out, and it snowballed to masterpiece level: all wood joinery," he says. "It was my first big piece installed."

These days, with three work areas totaling 15,000 square feet and housing 20 to 40 projects at a time (in design, on the shop floor or installation), "We're doing a very unique thing," Katzoff says. "There are a lot of one-, two-, three-person shops, but to find a 30-person company that can do this level of functional sculpture is rare. When someone finds us, typically they want something from us: either, 'Here's a photo or a theme,' or our idea. An architect might want something very specific, and we're fine-tuning. Sometimes ▶

Chase sands the outer staircase before it is covered with a laminate piece of wood. The work is very precise. Everything is measured down to 1/32nd of an inch.



◀ **NW** LIVING

we have to work within a budget. Even if they have \$1 million for a staircase, it might cost \$2 million. There's a lot of strategy: Whatever the budget or timeline, how do we get the most amazing piece — what's the coolest thing we can get?"

Custom staircases, which typically cost "six or seven figures," Katzoff says, can get awfully cool. "One amazing sculptural staircase took 12,000 hours; that would have taken one person six years. We had a year and made this really fantastic piece by hand. Everything we do doesn't have to be an incredible price, but we have become a bit of a hub or go-to for something really special."

(Also a bit of a magnet for accolades: In May, NK Woodworking & Design took three top StairCraft Awards from the Stairbuilders and Manufacturers Association. It was its fifth consecutive winning year.)

For one super-special bathroom, Katzoff says, the coolest thing was not so easy to get. "We once flew to Germany to pick wood for a custom sculptural bathtub that turned into a counter and part of the wall," he says. "The particular grain, the architect's specific desire, was exclusive to the German Oak Spessart Forest, where the wood is auctioned once a year. It's maintained by a guild of people — one of the most expensive woods in the world. We shipped a lot back."

Closer to home, NK Woodworking & Design crafted the breathtaking grand entry staircase in a Bellevue home designed by architect Tom Kuniholm. Made of locally milled walnut treads, risers and stringers, and bracketed by meticulously hand-wrought iron, "It's the *tour de force*," says Kuniholm. The staircase, with hand-forged steelwork and a hand-shaped, carved railing, was inspired by one in the Fairmont Olympic Hotel, he says. "Nathie did the sketches, fabricated and tooled it. He had to make each piece differently, the curve is so tight."

It required 3,000 hours of labor — and, like so much else NK Woodworking & Design creates, it was absolutely achievable.

"All of our work is one-of-a-kind; there's the invention aspect of risk and failure," Katzoff says. "The end result is always beautiful and exciting. We've always found a way. Some have wild mechanical elements, mixed materials, integrated lighting into pieces — a lot of stuff with glass. In the end, we've made everything we've set out to do." ■

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**The Creators**, our new, occasional NW Living feature, focuses on the creative people and places who shape the way we live — stories encompassing a body or form of beautiful architectural work, rather than one particular beautifully designed residence. Know a super-talented, architecturally creative type more people should know? Please email [sdunham@seattletimes.com](mailto:sdunham@seattletimes.com).

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