

A Case of drawers, 2003

Four catalysts brought this piece to life and influenced its shape. First, my growing interest in the history and the design of Campaign furniture. Second, the finding of a discarded metal filing cabinet that lured me to give it another chance. Third, the old beams belonging to a demolished mill in Worcester. I picked one of them, and discovered an old and beautiful heart pine beam which I used in this piece. Lastly, my decision to adopt architectural themes present in the environment that surrounded the filing cabinet in its previous life.

Steel, heart pine, mahogany, brass, 29 x 19 x 16 inches.

This “case” of drawers was inspired by campaign furniture, whose heyday was in the 19th Century. Campaign furniture categorized a group of portable furniture, that although domestic in appearance, could be quickly and easily be knocked down, then packed, shipped and reassembled in a new location. Thanks to its clever and adaptable design, campaign furniture was as much appreciated by explorers, emigrants, civil servants, and colonists as it was by naval and military officers.

Campaign furniture was designed to take up minimal space once it was packed. Before transit, a piece’s components were dismantled, folded up and placed into boxes built to carry them: Furniture legs and armrests were unscrewed from their seats and backs; tabletops were folded up together with legs and aprons. In some cases, campaign furniture closely resembled other furniture popular at the time, and included elaborate shapes, carvings, and in the case of sitting furniture, upholstered seats.

Chest of drawers were typically made from detachable box-like compartments, each housing two or three drawers. These compartments were stacked one on top of each other, or could be used separately, for instance on tabletops, creating an ad hoc secretaire. Chests of drawers also included detachable feet that could be unscrewed and stored in one of the drawers. Special pine crates housed all of these components while the chest was in transit.



Picture 1:
An old metal filing cabinet; thrown away by the Harvard Physics department.



Picture 2:
Old growth heart-pine, salvaged from the ruins of a 19th-century mill in Worcester, MA. Used as main material for this piece.

My Case of Drawers is a modern adaptation of campaign furniture. The project began when I found an old metal filing cabinet that had been thrown away by the Harvard Physics department (picture 1). I thought of building wooden drawers to fit in the empty shelves of the cabinet. The challenge was to figure out how to make the drawers glide freely on the shelves. I decided to build wooden tracks to be placed across the shelves, in order to provide a buffer between the wooden drawers and the metal. The size of the drawers was determined by the size of the shelves, which turned out to be perfect for storing stationery, silverware, and (of course) files.

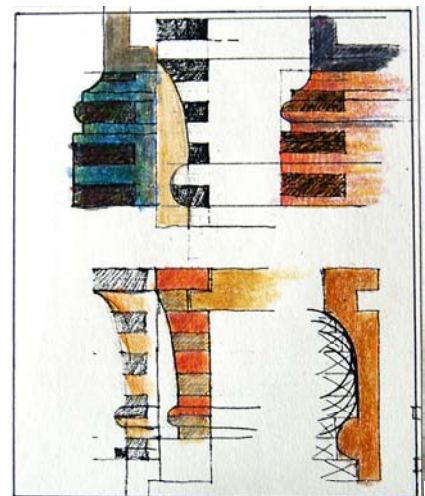


Drawing 1:
An exploded view of the found filing cabinet and its new additions.

Architecture and furniture making

The history of furniture design goes hand in hand with that of buildings. In the design of furniture it was common to borrow from the vocabulary of architecture. Components and details that constitute the structure and facade of the exterior of buildings seeped into interior design details such as moldings, pediments and false pillars. Over time, architectural elements were integrated into furniture shapes and motifs. Architectural proportions, used to dictate ratio and relationship between building parts were gladly accepted as standards for furniture design. “Golden rules” that were cherished by architects and masons were embraced by furniture designers and woodworkers.

From the beginning, the formal yet modest gray filing cabinet I had found reminded me of the lean design typical of modernistic style buildings. Later, while designing the new piece, I introduced to it components and motifs found in neo-classical architecture, the style that governed the building that housed the old cabinet until it was discarded. In its reincarnation the new piece is a reflection of its old habitat as well as a birth of new furniture.



Picture 3: A scarcement in the corner of a building near the finding place of the filing cabinet.

Drawing 2: A sample from my sketchbook, interpreting architectural details to be used at the base and crown of the piece.

Box joint and quoin masonry.

The box joint, or finger joint, is one of the strongest ways to join two pieces of wood in a square angle. It creates a corner, built up from many interlocking fingers. In his book “Wood joiner’s handbook” Sam Allen tells us that box joints were used extensively in mass-produced products of the 19th and early 20th centuries, such as coffee grinders, telephones, scientific instruments and packing boxes.



Picture 4:
The Case of Drawers’ components:
Crown molding or Box, drawers,
base, drawer stops (cleats) and
glides as well as the original
filing cabinet.

The architectural equivalent to the box joint is the stone quoin used in the construction of walls. The visual effect of quoin masonry resembles that of the box joint. The structural reasoning behind both the quoin and box joint is similar: to strengthen the corner of a building or of a wooden construct.

While contemplating the design of the new piece, I explored, photographed, and drafted the cornices, belt courses, tables and scarcements of the buildings surrounding the Harvard law school yard. These buildings incorporated quoin masonry, making for a prominent visual effect. To establish a similar effect in the new piece, I used the box joint to create a figurative quoin. I used it in the traditional way, to join the drawer parts, but I also harnessed it for the construction of the piece’s base and its crown molding, or box. (Drawing 3)

The case has six drawers. Each drawer has two ends, one made from mahogany and one from heart pine, giving each a different appearance. Both ends are equipped with sunken brass handles—so either can serve as the front of the drawer. (Picture 5 and 6)

The drawer stops (which prevent the drawers from sliding off their tracks) are made of a wooden cleat fitted with a magnet. The cleat is removable so that the drawer can be taken out. The crown molding on the top of the case is



Picture 5:
“Case of drawers” with pine
front facing us, exposing
brass black sunken handles.

actually a box that can be removed. It is fastened to the case by a set of magnets, so it is easy to take out and put back in place.

When the case's parts are dismantled, each can serve a separate purpose: the crown molding can be used as a tray, the drawers can be used as open boxes, and the metal case can be used for filing.

With all of its parts simple to dismantle and reassemble, the case of drawers is thus a piece of contemporary campaign furniture.



Picture 6:
Drawers turned 180 degrees reveal mahogany face, exposing shiny brass sunken handles.

A salute to campaign furniture (or how the “Case of Drawers” travels)



Picture 7: A special carrying case with matching dolly



Picture 8: The case of drawers is placed on the dolly.



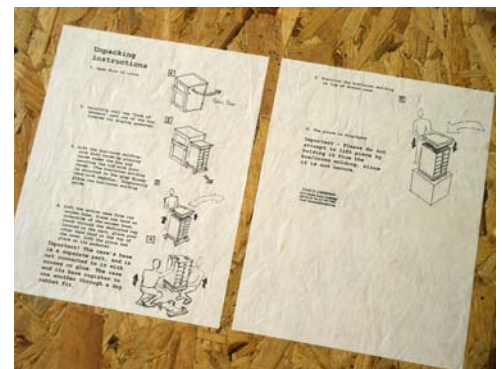
Picture 9: The crown molding or box is placed on the case.



Picture 10: the case of drawers is rolled onto the carrying case.



Picture 11: The case of drawers is ready for shipment.



Picture 12: unpacking instructions with illustrations.