**TITLE: Made by Hands**

*Intro: Range Projects is a new kind of fabrication shop, where design and function are valued as equals.*

Somewhere between the art of inventiveness and the work of manufacturing lies fabrication: a craft in the truest sense.

For a moment, it seemed in danger of being swept aside. So many of today’s young makers are drawn to the digital world, and while their work has endless implications, what they make themselves is technically intangible. So alongside these coders and scripters and programmers is a new generation of old-school makers: fabricators who create functional, beautiful things with their very own two hands.

“People began to feel disconnected from the old-fashioned, ‘blue-collar’ work that results in something palpable. So we’re experiencing a rebirth, a renewed focus on handmade-ness,” says Ray Padrόn, the co-founder of Range Projects in Chattanooga. “And as fabricators, we’re the next progression of that.”

Ray merged his custom fabrication shop with Jason Meyer’s to establish Range Projects in 2013. Jason and Ray spend their days at a studio on a corner of Dodds Avenue, where their work is an intersection of precision and creativity and roll-up-your-sleeves labor.

“We’re not your traditional fabricator who simply knows a trade,” Ray says. “We’re considerate of aesthetics. What we make is not only well made, it’s well designed.”

Range Projects is aptly named: their studio’s work is broad, and the applications of that work, even broader. What comes out of the shop on any given day depends on the client they’re serving. For a wine shop, perfect rows of birch box wine bins with simple steel supports, a show of minimalistic beauty; for a restaurant on the Southside, aluminum signage with water-jet cut letters that somehow becomes part of the building without blending in; for an electronics company, a top-to-bottom tradeshow booth, complete with maple flooring, custom cabinetry, and a modular wall system.

Jason and Ray often collaborate with a team of experts to achieve their clients’ vision, or to guide it. No two projects are ever the same, but their work is always steered by their mutual values: quality craftsmanship, sustainability and purposeful design.

“We’re not just a cabinet shop, or a welding shop, or a furniture shop. We like the variety, and we search for new ways to stretch ourselves,” Jason says. “Some things, though, we do consistently – using natural materials, creating clean lines with little ornament, blending function and aesthetics.”

When you first meet Jason and Ray, you get the feeling that they’ve always known each other. They haven’t: they come from very different experiences and very different places – Ray from DC, Jason from Nebraska. But they mirror each other, in a way. Both are humble and soft-spoken, occasionally finishing each other’s sentences, and they clearly respect each other in a way that can only be reciprocated by someone who shares your very same passion.

Neither started out as a fabricator. Despite his creative streak, Jason was headed down a math-and-science path in college until he enrolled in a sculpture class.

“When I was younger, I always wanted to be an architect but decided I wasn’t creative enough, so I gave it up,” he says. “But I got really burned out in college. I realized I had forgotten myself as a creative person.”

He earned a degree in sculpture and settled in Chicago, where he learned woodworking and began to lay the foundation for his first fabrication company. He wound down the business before he moved to Baltimore with his wife, and at the time, the economy was slumping, so he chose to focus for a while on fine arts. But then, he moved to Chattanooga.

And he met Ray: who, after earning degree in sculpture and design, had moved to Chattanooga and worked as a studio assistant for various artists, taking custom fabrication work on the side. He left, briefly, to earn his Master of Fine Arts, and then returned to town to teach.

“Jason and I decided to collaborate on a project, and we still can’t believe what it’s turned into,” Ray says.

They’re honest about becoming the business people they never thought they would be, or wanted to be. Now they manage a team of eight – which could feasibly triple in the next few years – so they no longer do all of the production themselves. And they’ve surprised themselves by being okay with that.

“It’s crazy to see the position that our success has put us in – creating a place where people can do work they care about and support their families while they’re doing it,” Ray says. “The way I think of it is this: we’re building a business just as we might build a table. I still feel like I’m making something.”

Of course, what Jason and Ray are doing is bigger than themselves or their team or their business. There’s a community of makers in Chattanooga that never really disappeared, but is now coming out of the woodwork – so to speak – and in doing so, they’re embracing a piece of Chattanooga’s heritage that sustained the city for so long.

“There’s so much momentum here around the kind of work that we do. We’ve met a lot of people who have the same sensibilities and who share a respect for the old manufacturing backbone of Chattanooga,” Jason says. “There have always been fabricators, there have always been makers. What we’re creating is new, and it’s evolving, but it’s also about coming back to what was always here.”