



*James Frank's old-world craftsmanship surrounds him in his Manzanita home, a showcase of handpicked cedar and hemlock cabinetry, wide-plank floors, and cedar latticework.*

# JF

## JAMES FRANK

MASTER BUILDER

### HIGH ON A SLOPE ABOVE THE SUGARY DUNES OF THE

northern Oregon Coast, James Frank has grown a mitered forest of hemlock panels and cedar-clad columns inside his home. Walking the rooms of this Manzanita house is like reading a master craftsman's memoir: Chapters carved in a thousand feet of smooth timber trim chronicle skills learned during more than 50 years of custom homebuilding. Every stick of wood furniture here was made by hand, from built-in bunk beds for visiting grandchildren to a dining table inlaid with ebony and African mahogany, a wood whose grain is so exotic it looks more animal than plant. Tall shoji doors, woven with a curved cedar lattice that took Frank eight years to perfect, conceal the master bedroom. Brawny cedar beams span the ceiling like the ribs of an overturned boat.

Throughout an accomplished career that began with an apprenticeship in a Czech cabinet shop and now finds him in restless retirement (he's currently contemplating the development of 18 new condominiums in Manzanita), Frank has fallen in love with dozens of projects—from Pop Modernist cliff-hangers to opulent French country estates designed for the city's elite.

Herman Brookman, Portland's famed master of Byzantine flourish, was one of the first designers to recognize Frank's knack for conquering new techniques. Brookman supervised the young contractor's replication of classical English details in the oak cabinetry of the 1955 Grace Kern House in Portland Heights. "The style was different than anything I had ever done," Frank says of his breakout moment as a 21-year-old employee of the Portland millworking company Nicolai-Neppach. "I enjoyed it so much that I wished the day was longer than eight hours."

Five years later, with the bookkeeping assistance of his wife, Marta, he launched James Frank Construction, a small remodeling and cabinetry business, out of his own basement. His fearlessness in the face of uncommon design caught the attention of a cadre of Portland Modernists, and Frank quickly became the builder of choice



### *The Rising Star*

## ERIC KASTER

### ELEEK INC

When Ankrom Moisan Architects senior associate Gunnar Langhus began refining details for the Art Nouveau-flavored Elizabeth Lofts, he asked third-generation pattern-maker Eric Kaster to develop a prototype for a wall sconce to adorn the entryway of every unit. Soon Kaster was churning out striking hardware and lighting for nearly every surface of the building—11 designs totaling 463 pieces in all—including bronze rain-scuppers outside, Charles Rennie Mackintosh-inspired lobby lighting, and pewter signage for each door.

Since opening Eleek Inc, the North Portland-based design and manufacturing company he founded with his wife, Sattie Clark, in 2000, Kaster estimates that he has added his brand of metallurgical flair to well over 100 residences, businesses, and hotels in the Portland area. "I like to think of my designs as jewelry for buildings," Kaster says. Drawing his artistic vocabulary from the great movements of the past—Victorian, Arts & Crafts, Streamline Moderne—Kaster uses recycled aluminum and bronze materials and renewable energy sources as often as

possible. Each piece begins as a hand-carved wood positive that then becomes a mold for molten metal, which is poured, cured, and finished with artisan patinas. This increasingly rare manufacturing technique, handed down to Kaster from his grandfather Willie, who bought and operated the local company Willamette Pattern Works, gives Eleek's designs their irresistible authenticity.

Kaster's business is booming—largely a result of the company's focus on sustainable building parts, including recycled-bronze kitchen and bathroom sinks and high-efficacy pendant, sconce, and bollard LED lights. This niche, coupled with Kaster's involvement in groundbreaking efforts like the development of the Urban Turbine (see p. 87), means that Eleek's 18-member crew has a workload that's diverse enough to see them through any fluctuations in the real estate market.

"We're bursting at the seams in our current space—our work even spills onto the sidewalk sometimes," Kaster laughs. "It's a great problem to have."

—Sloan Schang

▼ *For architect Richard Potestio's design of the Birch House in Vancouver, Washington, Frank rendered the veiled views of the Columbia River with Japanese-inflected wood screens and metal railings.*

for architects with tough commissions. For arch-Modernist Bill Fletcher he mastered flat roofs and how to pour concrete foundations in the steep West Hills; for postmodernist Willard Martin he learned to work with corrugated aluminum siding; for the history-minded Bill Hawkins he boiled dozens of cedar planks until they were flexible enough to bend into the smooth curve of an exterior wall; and for yet another Modernist, Marvin Witt, he framed and raised a 60-foot-wide, pinwheel-shaped roof atop a 15-sided medical clinic. "The night before that roof was lifted into place," Frank remembers, "I stayed up all night with it, making sure we had the measurements right." It was a perfect fit.

Frank's understanding of the precise nuances of modern design began in the 1940s, when he trained as a cabinetmaker in the German-occupied town of Plzen, Czechoslovakia. At the age of 14, Frank had been given three options for continuing his education: general carpentry, brick masonry, or cabinetmaking. His mother learned that Plzen's cabinet shop was particularly well equipped, so it was there that he received a swift education in the sleek, bent-

wood armchairs, precise joinery, and polished French veneers popularized by Modernist Czech designers like Jindrich Halabala.

When the Communist Party seized control of Prague in 1948, Frank's apprenticeship ended abruptly. His participation in counter-Communist movements marked him as a dissident, so he shrewdly decided to sail his young family to Oregon and continue his work here. "When you're trained in Europe in the traditional style, it's something that sticks with you forever," he says.

His keen appreciation of classical detail has earned him the affection of local patrons such as Harold and Arlene Schnitzer, who hired Frank to orchestrate an extensive remodel and an addition to their estate. And in 1979, his command of old-world design led him to a project that remains perhaps the grandest wedding of Frank's youthful Czech training with his mastery of European style. Jeff Miller, an untried architecture-school graduate, had received an intimidating first commission. "Not only was I asked to design a house, which I'd never done," recalls Miller, "but it was an elegant French country house. This is the kind of project that only your



▼ *Frank served as the contractor for architect Jeff Miller's 1987 renovation and expansion of a 1929 home on Jantzen Island in Lake Oswego. One of the region's premier mansions, it is now on the market for \$19.5 million.*

grandmother would hire you to do."

Indeed, Miller's grandmother was the person who'd commissioned him to create a 5,000-square-foot gem of haute chateau styling on 85 acres just off NW Skyline Boulevard. "I knew what I wanted to see, but I had no idea how to get there," says Miller. But Frank saw the way, expertly replicating centuries-old building techniques, evident in the hand-troweled pattern on the home's interior stucco and the divots painstakingly gouged into exposed beams with an antique adze.

Frank retired in 2000 after completing a few more ambitious country estates, remodeling homes designed by Pietro Belluschi and Van Evera Bailey, and building a handful of modern coastal homes with architects like Michael McCulloch, Saul Zaik, and Richard Potestio. He's since handed control of James Frank Construction over to his sons Paul and James Jr. and his grandson Thomas.

A 53-year legacy ensures that their calendar is filled with custom homebuilding and cabinetry projects, which are no longer milled in Frank's basement but in the company's capacious workshop in Northeast Portland. Today the shop is cluttered with modern machinery, time-saving necessities for competing in an industry obsessed with speed and specialization. A slick, laser-guided panel saw hums cool efficiency, turning out sharp angles and carpets of fresh sawdust in seconds rather than hours. But beneath the shop's stacks of fine veneer, Frank's sons also make space for their father's hand tools—a miter box that's sawn countless corners, piles of router bits hand-ground to match antique woodwork, and a row of wood planes that have carved some of Portland's finest buildings.

"The new equipment is great," his son Paul explains, "but when we interview a new carpenter, we always ask them if they own a simple block plane." The best always do. —*Sloan Schang*



● Jennifer Dzienis (from left), Anna Goodman, Ryan Yaden, Andrew Wolfson, Carrie Schilling, Lauren Hollinger, Jon Jorgensen, and William Neburka



## The Rising Star

### WORKS PARTNERSHIP ARCHITECTURE

A new seven-story speculative office building rarely spurs architectural excitement, particularly in Portland. But towering on a tiny 3,800-square-foot site on E Burnside Street, the soon-to-be-completed Bside6 development is set to be the perfect new gateway to the East Side: simple concrete slabs and columns clad with an abstract composition of metal and glass panels. Call it Everclear architecture: clear, cheap, and potent. Designed by the three-year-old firm Works Partnership Architecture, Bside6 is the latest in a series of buildings poised to change the East Side.

Principals Carrie Schilling and William Neburka first hooked up on what they call a "blind date" arranged by developer Brad Malsin. Fresh from Cincinnati seven years ago, Schilling got her start in town working on Malsin's East-bank Commerce Center with Di Loreto Architects. Malsin guessed Schilling might be the perfect professional match for Neburka, a former New Yorker who had yet to find his niche in Portland. "They clearly

both had a burning desire to make their own path in the world," Malsin says. The first job: Olympic Mills Commerce Center, a mind-bogglingly complicated East Side warehouse the duo transformed into the city's most dynamic warehouse remodel since the Wieden & Kennedy building.

Works' philosophy, Neburka says, is to know the bottom line even better than its developer clients do, an approach that brought Bside6 in at the unheard of budget of \$138 per square foot. But beyond delivering rigorous architecture at a competitive price, Works is pushing fellow architects to engage with the community. Last spring, the firm launched Project Cityscope, which hosts Pecha Kucha Night, a recurring show-and-tell of art, architecture, and ideas.

The global credit crunch may force a pause in the city's development. But when that's passed, Neburka says Portland's "wheels are going to come off" with new development. "It's the perfect time," he says, "for new ideas."

—*Randy Gragg*