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### **James Rogers: Spin On**

For particle physicists and Zen masters, all things merge into one. For James G. Rogers, an architect from Darien, the same happens when he is at the seat of his lathe, turning rough hunks of wood into smooth, symmetric art... or maybe into bowls.

Rogers was born in Washington, D.C., moved to Pound Ridge, N.Y., as a boy and then to New Canaan where he grew up.

"Throughout that period of my development, from the earliest days that I can remember going back to when I was 5 or 6 years old, my dad was a wood worker; not too serious, but he had a shop and liked doing woodworking projects," said Rogers. "His wood working shop was in the garage and he had a bench that was sized for him and then he had a sawed off a woodworking bench that was sized for me."



Rogers made go-carts to roll down hills, birdhouses and little pieces of furniture.

"I always maintained an interest in working with my hands and with wood," said Rogers.

Another current running through the Rogers family was that of architecture.

"I come from a line of architects, my uncle was an architect, my grandfather was an architect," said Rogers. "It's been in the family DNA for a long time."

Of the seven individuals who have been named James G. Rogers in his extended family, five have been architects. "Though I didn't decide to become an architect until I was almost finished with college," said Rogers.

Rogers achieved a Bachelor of Arts from Yale University and a Master of Architecture degree from Columbia University.

"That set me off on a path of starting a firm with two partners in New York City."



Rogers helped to found Butler Rogers Baskett Architects in 1979 in New York City and as of January 1 of this year purchased the Connecticut office of that firm and started James G. Rogers Architects.

Rogers said the transforming moment for him regarding his woodwork was after moving to Danbury from New York City in 1984.

"It was my first house as opposed to apartment," said Rogers. "There was a garage attached to it with a woodburning stove. I finally had a chance to have a woodworking shop."

Also while living in New York City, Rogers had taken pottery classes.

"I absolutely loved the process of making pottery on a wheel," said Rogers.

Roger subconsciously made the connection between the spinning of clay and that of wood; soon he would pursue the purchase of his first lathe from Sears.

"Becoming a homeowner connected these things," said Rogers. "Superficially, pottery and wood turning are the same process. The experience of shaping something out of a spinning object means it's going to have certain symmetry to its shape."

Rogers taught himself by becoming immersed articles, magazines, catalogues and videos all about wood turning.

"The Sears lathe had real limitations having to do with its weight, sturdiness and very practical problem of changing speeds," said Rogers. Rogers moved to New Canaan in 1991.

"That house was a downgrade shop-wise; I had a room there that was probably 8x10 feet," said Rogers. "The key upgrade there was my wife buying me a good lathe for my birthday."

Though Rogers has made some baseball bats for friends, the majority of his time working with wood is spent making bowls.

"The maximum diameter of something you can make is about twelve and a half inches and the maximum length is about four feet," said Rogers.

"That's the world my wood working lives in."

Rogers uses a band-saw as a companion tool to his lathe.

"A lot of the wood that I use is the equivalent of road kill," said Rogers.

"I would never buy a piece of rainforest wood to make something out of; there are so many beautiful woods to use that are not rainforest woods. I love the idea of using used wood. One of my favorite pieces was a piece of firewood off a friend's log pile."

Rogers said sugar maples, though an iconic New England tree, are in decline because of their susceptibility to acid rain, age and proximity to roads, and are therefore readily available for those looking to make use of their wood.

"The local highway departments will chop up the trees and leave the wood on the side of the road," said Rogers. "I'll pick up one or two and take it back and warehouse it."

Rogers said green wood, or newly fallen wood, can be the most satisfying to turn.

"It's like butter," said Rogers. "When you're turning, the ribbons of shaving come floating off, almost like butterflies. It's not as if you could be thinking about anything else. Dry wood does not do that, though wood that is moist will change shape in the process of drying. You can't get upset about that."

Rogers said though it can cause cracks, working with moist wood can also create unplanned anomalies that can be welcome.

"I'm not bothered by flaws and imperfections," said Rogers. "It becomes interesting; it gives it character. In many cases the wood itself has a story. Someone else's garbage can be my jewel. You can take the most useless piece of wood and try to understand what characteristics it has that can be exploited to make it into something attractive or interesting."

Rogers said he continues to experiment with his process by creating pieces that he finds interesting, if not in the final product, in the path he found to achieving its final shape.

In addition to his house in Darien, Rogers now has a second home in Newburyport, Mass., where he has been able to build his dream woodworking shop.

"One of the great things about being a hobbyist is there are no time limits, there are no deadlines and you never have to get into the position of saying, 'This isn't as good as I'd like it to be,'" said Rogers. "It brings you to a different place."

Rogers has repeatedly been asked to sell his pieces, but for fear of tainting what his woodworking provides him, has respectfully declined. He gives his bowls away as gifts to friends, family and acquaintances. He has entered some into woodworking shows and brought some to auction for charity.