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Max Jules Gottschalk and Godes Design: A Modernist Furniture Manifesto in Newfoundland

The scholarly literature on Newfoundland material culture is, quite rightly, nearly entirely concerned with vernacular traditions and little attention has been paid to industrial design. Similarly, the historical studies of the Commission of Government which administered Newfoundland between 1934 and 1949 have focused on the government's economic development efforts and the confederation debate, and paid little attention to its cultural policies. This essay examines the place of the Markland furniture workshop in the Commission's reform agenda, and the design manifesto of Max Jules Gottschalk, whom the Commission employed as an industrial designer. The first section shows that some of the government's economic policies—such as the co-operative division, the land settlement scheme and, in this case, furniture manufacturing—were attempts to change Newfoundlanders' culture. The second section reveals something of the combination of modernism in design and use of craft and natural materials that exemplify Gottschalk's "godes" designs.

Economic and Cultural Policy and the Markland Furniture Workshop

The Royal Commission on Newfoundland of 1933, popularly known as the Amulree Report, pointed to the need for both an economic revitalization of the country and cultural change among the people to make them more self-reliant. As a result of this report, the Newfoundland government suspended its Constitution and Great Britain appointed a non-elected Commission of Government which administered Newfoundland. The Commission undertook

a number of initiatives, notably the expansion of the recently founded co-operative farming community. The Board of Trustees that oversaw Markland, a communal farming community at Markland near Placentia Bay, had resettled a group of unemployed families, intending the community to become self supporting through its farming and craft production. This core of re-educated people could seed a series of similar communities and transform the whole society. The Commission Government hoped that in these communities, impoverished fishing families and the rural unemployed would learn new skills which would be an alternative to the fishery and the "individualism" of the people would be replaced with a culture of cooperation.

The literature on the land settlement program focuses primarily on its agricultural efforts and says less about its educational innovations. While the Commission was frustrated in its attempt to replace the sectarian school system in established communities, for example, Markland provided an opportunity for a fresh start. The Markland school system was based somewhat on Scandinavian folk schools, teaching craft skills as well as academic subjects. The landscape architect Rudolph Cochius, who had designed Bowring Park in St. John's and several Newfoundland war memorials, served as manager and a member of the board of trustees. Cochius designed houses and community buildings and set the community in the landscape more for its aesthetic quality than functionality for the residents (Handcock 1970). One goal of the original trustees was "a system of education [to] make people living in the settlement enjoy to the full the benefit of the life of the place" (Handcock: 48). While the settlers cultivated the land, the design of their surroundings

would help cultivate in them an appreciation for the environment and aesthetics. The community workshop also served a dual function: making furniture for sale would enable the recovery of some of the government investment in the community and give people craft skills which they could bring to other farming communities and ultimately to the rest of the country.

By 1938, it was clear that Markland had not lived up to the Commission's hopes, the community continued to need a subsidy, and the economic and social situation in Newfoundland was deteriorating. The Commission seconded John H. Gorvin from the British Ministry of Agriculture to advise the Commission on rural reconstruction and to identify new strategies. Gorvin's Interim Report on Rural Reconstruction, presented in September of 1938, suggested an end to the government's practice of handing out public relief for meaningless make-work projects and to replace it with employment for work on cooperative enterprises. This new strategy fit well with the existing Land Settlement Scheme and the government's efforts to encourage cooperatives along the lines of the Nova Scotia-based Antigonish Movement. In addition to cooperative farming, the Commission had hoped that the folk schools would replace Newfoundlander's "individualism" with a communal work ethic and give them craft skills which would be an alternative to fishing. Gorvin's report, which advocated breaking the economic power of local merchants by establishing cooperative enterprises, met with approval in London, and Gorvin was appointed Commissioner of Natural Resources so that he could implement his economic and cultural agenda (Neary 1988: 95-101).

The manual training teacher at Markland, Alex Yetman, had interested a group of young men in woodworking, and the Commissioners believed a professional designer could move the production of the workshop to a new level. The Commission seemed unaware of the Newfoundland vernacular furniture making traditions: the several small workshops in the colony that manufactured furniture, or the considerable amount of skill in woodwork held by many Newfoundlanders who built not only their own houses and a range of out-buildings but also sea-going vessels.¹ For furniture, it turned to an American-born designer, Max Jules Gottschalk (1909-2005), to help design furniture for the Markland workshop. Gottschalk attempted to create a "national" furniture style—one not based on Newfoundland's existing styles of furniture, but on the use of local materials combined with industrial products and modernist principles. How

Gottschalk came to be working in Newfoundland is unknown, but at the time he was the Chief Technical Advisor of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Reconstruction.

Gottschalk was born in St. Louis, Missouri.² His father, Max F. Gottschalk was a professional musician and his uncle, Louis Mutrux, a St. Louis-based artist, architect and builder. As a child, Jules studied drawing, painting and design before taking a Bachelors Degree at Washington University in St. Louis. His Master of Arts degree from the same university included a remarkably eclectic selection of studies: radio-engineering, Greek and Roman Archaeology, Art History and the Psychology of Music. Before relocating to Newfoundland, Gottschalk spent eleven years designing electrical equipment and doing design work for foundry companies and for plastic and radio manufacturers. He had also manufactured furniture in his own studio in St. Louis (Gottschalk to Gorvin, 4 Dec 1940, PANL GN38 S-2-3-3 File 5).

Although Gorvin's Report had said nothing specific about furniture, as the Commissioner for Natural Resources he suggested a "national style" of furniture could be manufactured for local use and for export. Gottschalk set up headquarters at Markland where "Godes" furniture, such as beds, tables, chairs, book cases, desks and similar such items were manufactured, as well as smaller items: book ends and candle holders, for example. Godes appears to be a name invented by Gottschalk, a combination of the words good and design. The Department of Natural Resources' goals in funding the workshop were twofold: to provide revenue for Markland and to train a group of men who would move to other land settlements and form the nucleus of a staff to train craftsmen throughout the country. Like most other aspects of the Land Settlement Scheme, the furniture manufacturing workshop failed to pay its own way. The net loss during the first year of operation was \$909.52 (Memorandum from Commissioner of Natural Resources, 2 May 1941, PANL GN38 S2-1-19 File 2).

According to the September 26, 1940, issue of the St. John's *Daily News*, fifteen days after the start of the Second World War the Commission announced that Gottschalk would be returning to the United States at the end of the year. Gottschalk informed the Commission that he had accepted a contract to design a building in Tennessee and a position as a designer in the aircraft industry, but was willing to work in Newfoundland on contract for an additional five months (Gottschalk to Gorvin, 4 Dec 1940, PANL GN38 S-2-3-3 File

5). Notwithstanding that a number of designs were abandoned after testing, he noted that in eighteen months at the Godes factory, good progress had been made during the experimental phase of testing new designs and materials. He argued that his labour force lacked both experience and a tradition of furniture design yet the factory was now in steady production. Gottschalk also helped a Markland man design skis from local birch, which were available for sale. He then proposed a separate factory, employing new designs and mass production methods. Gottschalk also envisioned a third series of designs which would incorporate local products such as “Jubilee Guild fabrics, peat moss as stuffing, leather and sealskins” (ibid.). The Jubilee Guild was a self-help group devoted to craft production (in this instance, weaving) both for the income it could provide Newfoundland women and the craft skills such work would impart. In short it was the sort of organization that was consistent with government policy.

Gottschalk went on to comment that the “cultural influence of the work does not stop at those actually employed at the factory, or those who appreciate and purchase it.” By “cultural” he seems to have meant a change in people’s attitude toward work, rather than aesthetics. He was pleased that a class of thirty-two boys had cultivated enough vegetables to equip their workshop, and were making toys for sale with scrap material from the furniture-making operation. The children would acquire skills which would enable them to become good craftsmen as adults, Gottschalk commented, and a commercial toy industry could take the place of the toys imported from Europe (ibid.). Gottschalk also reported that he had sent chairs to the United States to be professionally photographed as an aid to marketing, but was disappointed at the low level of support this considerable work had received from the Commission. Neither the new hospital just opened in St. John’s, nor the military bases under construction by the Canadians were encouraged to buy Markland furniture. So, he claimed, he could not be blamed for poor marketing when his “part has been to create a national style, sound and well-designed, and to train Newfoundlanders to produce relatively refined finishes” (ibid.).

An interdepartmental committee of the Commission looked into the workshop and thought there was reason to be optimistic about village industries. Gottschalk had reported to the Commission that he was mindful of the successes in furniture design in Finland, Sweden

and other Scandinavian countries. The committee recommended Gottschalk be retained part time as a designer, but the factory be leased to Alex Yetman with the government no longer bearing any financial responsibility (Memorandum from Commissioner of Natural Resources, 2 May 1941, PANL GN38 S2-1-19 File 2). The Commission had employed Gottschalk and contributed \$480 toward Yetman’s wages during 1940. It had also invested \$1500 in 1939 and \$1000 in 1940 in the building and machinery. Gorvin recommended Gottschalk be hired for the additional five months (Gorvin to Commission of Government, 5 Dec 1940, PANL GN38 S-2-3-3 File 5).

The Department of Agriculture did not renew his contract. Commissioner P. D. H. Dunn praised Gottschalk’s abilities, but recommended letting him pursue work in the United States, since without any end of the war in sight too many young people were working away from home and there was little for Gottschalk to do to justify his salary (Dunn to Commission, 28 Jan 1942, PANL GN38 S2-1-21 File 4). By 1941 the Commission had sacrificed its emphasis on co-operative enterprises and alternative industries, to concentrate on the war effort, satisfying its critics among the business community. The people in Markland also resented the paternalistic interference in their lives and the restrictions on their freedom. With the wartime revival of the economy, many of them abandoned the communal farms to take waged labour jobs. The Commission abandoned its radical efforts to change people’s culture and foster new industries. Gorvin himself was recalled to the U.K. in 1941, leaving the Commission staffed with cautious civil servants, not ambitious thinkers. With Newfoundland’s entry into Canada in 1949, the loss of a protective tariff made the small Newfoundland furniture-making workshops uncompetitive, and efforts to change Newfoundland culture soon passed into the hands of Canadian bureaucrats and the provincial administration of Joseph Smallwood.

Gottschalk’s Design Manifesto

Gottschalk’s association with Newfoundland had not come to a complete end when he returned to the United States. Although he was living in the United States, in 1942 the Newfoundland Department of Agriculture and Rural Reconstruction published a brief pamphlet containing descriptions of several pieces of furniture and his design manifesto.³ He titled the pamphlet “a few of the principal godes

designs created by Jules Gottschalk, chief technical advisor, department of rural reconstruction, commission of government, Saint John's, Newfoundland, and chief designer of 'Design Today', New York – 1942." His choice to not use upper case letters in his title would be the reader's first clue that they were about to encounter an unconventional thinker. Not only were his designs modernist but his descriptive categories emphasized his attempt to not be bound by convention and to create furniture for the modern age. Gottschalk divided his furniture designs into two principal divisions—"Godes sitting developments," which included the "fanny support" and the "sitting machine," and "Godes supported surface developments," which included the "dining machine" and the "executive surface." Gottschalk's preface, or the "story of Godes procedure" defies summary:

This is the procedure and reasoning followed in designing a series of products called Godes. A few of the principal designs are analyzed in detail and their limitations and advantages explained. The Godes method may be applied with good results to the solution of any design problem where materials dictate certain processes and shapes. The solutions worked out, although in some cases apparently startling to the eye, have new advantages, embody new principles, and indicate the use of novel methods of manufacture. Every line and dimension has been developed by reason and by a deep understanding of the traditions and character of the country and people. Any accusation of prejudice does not apply to this country but rather indicates world conditions, where the greatest motivator towards development is fear, greed and jealousy.

His manifesto for modernist furniture design went on to argue against being unreflective about tradition, and advocated rethinking design from first principals. He argued that the established tradition was flawed:

First objects are judged by their similarity of shape to objects in the past. Any deviation from this usually condemns it in the holder's mind. A chair design with four legs is more familiar than a chair with two or even one leg. For that reason, a four legged chair would usually look better to an average beholder than a two legged chair, regardless of how well it was designed, how beautiful structurally it was, or how economical it was to manufacture. Familiarity and visual conditioning are usually the yardstick for judging excellence of design.

The following products were designed as a result, first of all, of a searching analysis of the assumed function of each object, to see whether it was based on illogical habits. Sometimes the assumed function of an object itself is erroneous. A design can fulfill the accepted functions perfectly, but the original premise on which the design was based can be unsound. Whenever analysis indicated that an improvement could be achieved by a change in the accepted concept and function of an object, the true function was substituted. Then using mathematics, reason, and logical analysis, a solution to the particular design problem was worked out.

This procedure is based on the premise that if an object is designed according to reason and no errors are made in the process, its shape, when viewed with unprejudiced vision, must be beautiful even though the mass of the viewing public cannot at first comprehend its beauty. Educational methods which teach the old first, and use the old as a basis to judge the contemporary, are responsible for much lack of understanding. It is better to study the contemporary from the standpoint of how well it fuses its methods and materials and how well it fills the need for which it was designed. That is the only way to see the truth of an object, its integrity. By this method of examination one sees things which to the ordinary perception are completely hidden. Any good doctor sees things about human beings which are hidden from the average mind, yet which are as clear as crystal to his trained method of logical observation. Of course, here the element of study enters in, but this same study is necessary to judge the true excellence or the inferiority of any design (from a mere nail to a Rolls Royce airplane motor) and ... if well designed, each has its own beauty as much as any Michael Angelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Van Gogh, or Brancusi. The understanding and the appreciation of what is happening right now, at the entering wedge of progress, is open to anyone willing to put forth the slight additional perceptive effort.

He may have anticipated that some readers would respond negatively to his designs because they were unconventional, and he warned that people too often accept things without thought because they are consistent with tradition. Not that Gottschalk advocated abandoning all tradition, for "much of the old is far newer than that which is universally accepted as the last word." As he continued, "a too intellectual approach to 'design for living' can often lead to an exaggeration of apparently functional and structural elements for pseudo-rational aesthetic effects." He wrote that "the governing element in good design should always be common sense." Gottschalk maintained that:

Godes as a style owes much to the past. It can be said that much that is to come, and much that was, can truthfully be called (Good DESIGN). Godes as a method derives a rich heritage from functionalism and the international style, but to these it adds common sense, and avoids the over-intellectual and over strict credo. Functionalism broke traditional thought habits and sought reasonable, new forms, new materials and new methods. It raided progressive fields such as engineering, airplane design and scientific laboratories, for ideas and practices. Godes is a tolerant style. It sprang from analysis and, although simple and primitive, it is in the fortunate position of being able to survey the good and the bad of other styles, taking the best of each, at the same time adding its humble contribution. It avoids the extreme, yet has a rare originality and freshness. It is characterized by clean lines and simple surfaces, uninterrupted by moldings or any sort of trimmings, other than those which were dictated by the indigenous materials used, the process indicated by that material, and by a simple, unaffected reasoning process. It expresses a healthy tough-minded point of view, typical of this country, clearing the murky air of a confused design century with a vigorous logic and a charmingly sophisticated naïveté.

It is difficult to imagine what Gottschalk's furniture would have looked like, since he did not include diagrams or photographs. But the description of manufacturing process, material and appearance that he did provide gives us an approximation of what he envisioned. He named his first piece the "Fanny Support," using then current American slang, probably both as an attempt to convey that it was a contemporary piece of furniture and the idea that the design had been rethought from the basic requirements of sitting. This wood and plywood chair would have two legs, one of which would serve as back support as well, and in profile would resemble the lower case letter "k." It was, he said, "sitting reduced to its simplest terms." This "completely demountable" chair had only six pieces of material and would be shipped in a flat bundle. Since it was held together by screws and wing nuts, it could be assembled by the customer saving assembly and shipping costs. "Demountable" seems to mean that the owner could also disassemble the chair. It is worth noting that similar production innovations were later made by the Swedish manufacturer IKEA, which started manufacturing furniture in 1947 and began designing its own furniture that could be shipped in packages and assembled by consumers in 1955. Another design, the "sitting machine" or z-shaped chair reveals through its name both his

desire for modernity (the 20th century was indeed the machine age) and his philosophy of design from utilitarian principles. This was a particularly clever chair, as "its back swings automatically to adjust to the sitter's mood."

Gottschalk emphasized the use of synthetic material as well as locally available products in manufacturing his furniture. Seat cushions, he suggested, could be made of homespun cloth, seal skin, goat skin or artificial leather and filled with peat moss or latex. He also proposed using "plexigles" (plexiglass) and formica, two futuristic materials which were not then in common use in furniture manufacture. Many of his designs used plywood as well as locally available wood.

Gottschalk had considered each element not only for its economy of manufacture and its interlocking place within the design, but its aesthetic qualities. Beauty was not to come from decorative elements, but from the harmony of the piece that was designed well rather than thoughtlessly relying on past practice. Gottschalk advocated using Philips X head bolts, since they did not mark up as badly as slotted bolts, and he felt they looked better. As he put it:

The showing of screw heads at the points of structural importance is an expression of the inner construction. This is structural honesty. It is decoration based on logical analysis of materials and methods. Furthermore, the screw heads serve as accents and contrast pleasantly with the natural wood surfaces. A great many contemporary products, with their chinoiserie [monkeyshines], their applied excrescences, their pseudo streamlined skirts with gaping spaces with (lacunae), are a shock to anyone at all sensitive either mechanically or artistically.

He went on to criticize designers whom he thought bent their aesthetic judgement to the prejudices of the public, and outlined the kind of designer one should be. Beauty rose from the design itself rather than decorative detail.

Streamlining too is often done without reason. ... The rounding of edges and the elimination of unnecessary detail, such as one sees in surgical and modeling tools, are examples of cleanlining or streamlining based on use, on need, and on reason and as such they are beautiful in themselves. Many designers believe that the formula for good design is streamlining and proceed to streamline everything in sight whether it needs it or not. Good design comes from brain juice, not pedagogical formulae and sedulous aping of mannerisms with no logical reason behind them. Many designers who know better lack the courage and strength of character to insist on good design in spite of

executive prejudice, fear of the buying public, or fear of not making a living. And so they prostitute their knowledge. ... The function of a good design is to lead not to follow. His knowledge, if he is a good designer, is more reliable than that of the average public. His specialized training and what natural aptitude he might possess enable him to see and judge new methods and shapes clearly. To let the public lead in matters of design is like allowing the passengers of a vessel to tell the captain how to navigate, or an average patient to tell his surgeon how to operate. A good designer attains his knowledge, only after much thought and study, with the prerequisite of a combined mechanical and artistic talent. The best designers are the creative ones, the pivotal ones (those who alter by improvement the course of things as they were before). Some achieve their results by slow and laborious reasoning while others have an apparently intuitive awareness of what is right (clairvoyance). Original solutions seem to spring fully developed from their minds. Nevertheless, there is in all cases a reasoning process which goes on whether the designer is aware of it or not.

This pamphlet, with all its idiosyncrasies, reveals more of Gottschalk's design philosophy than his designs themselves. If Gottschalk had taken note of Newfoundland furniture—and there is no indication he did—he would have found the decorative finishes and traditional forms were examples of what design should not be.

When the Commission released Gottschalk's pamphlet to the public it provoked ridicule for both its designs and its unconventional presentation. Writing for the *Daily News* on February 12, 1942, the Wayfarer columnist Albert Perlin admitted that he had "small appreciation of the new in art" but said he had seen modernistic furniture which he did like. Perlin argued that the acid test of value was whether people bought the furniture:

It is not a matter of whether the stuff has artistic merit that only the cognoscenti may appreciate. But whether or not the furniture has an economic value or real importance, public money, however little of it, ought not to be used to present the personal views of anyone on the use of words, or on what is beautiful in furniture.

He suggested that Gottschalk had invited ridicule by choosing such vulgar names as "fanny supports" for his chairs. The columnist suggested that such titles, whether motivated by "sheer high spirits, eccentricity or a desire for publicity," were out of place in official reports.

Not everyone thought Gottschalk's designs, or his pamphlet, deserved ridicule. A February 10,

1942, letter to the editor of the *Daily News*—signed H. B.—responded to the sarcasm to which Gottschalk's booklet had been subjected. H. B. believed criticism in principle was valid, but wrote:

To deprecate the printing of a book without the use of conventional capitals and to label it as "streamlined" is a legitimate comment; but it is not a legitimate criticism of the matter contained in that book. To say one has a personal preference for a chair that is not demountable and can "be trusted to stay put" is also a legitimate comment ... but it is **not** a legitimate criticism of the value and the beauty of the chair itself.

Despite having at least one defender, the name Max Jules Gottschalk has largely been forgotten in Newfoundland and his designs had no discernable effect upon later Newfoundland furniture makers.

After returning to the United States, he began using his first name and had a long and successful career as Max Gottschalk. He worked in New York as an industrial designer, later taking up the position of Chair of the Applied Design Department of Pima College in Tucson, Arizona. He painted and continued to design and fabricate furniture, often using steel and leather and other new materials, pieces of which may still occasionally be purchased at fine art and antique furniture auctions. Gottschalk worked for a series of corporations, such as Hughes Aircraft and Bell Aero Systems, designing electronic equipment, refrigerators and other products. He also formed his own company—Godesco—in Tucson, creating a number of products including sound systems.

Conclusion

The standard narrative history of the Commission of Government has it trying a number of bold economic and social programs during the Great Depression, the economy rebounding as a result of wartime spending on base construction and then the government pursuing a policy of encouraging Newfoundlanders to join the Canadian confederation. While true in broad strokes, this outline obscures some of the nuances. The government's finances rebounded during the war and waged labour improved the living standards of many families, but the war prompted the Commission to abandon many of its economic and social development policies. Perhaps no furniture design and manufacturing industry would have thrived at Markland, but that does not change the fact that it was a casualty of

the war. The Commission cut back on economic development expenditures so that it could support the war effort by reducing the amount it had to draw down upon United Kingdom aid grants.

The Godes factory in Markland was not the last effort to manufacture furniture in Newfoundland, nor the most successful, and Max Jules Gottschalk left no design or industrial legacy in Newfoundland. His particular case is interesting nonetheless. His unconventional presentation style invited ridicule rather than a fair evaluation of his proposal for innovation in design. That the Commission of Government hired him in the first instance shows the bureaucracy was looking for radical alternatives to what the Commissioners saw as Newfoundland's

“traditional” economy, society and industry. Abandoning the furniture workshop had more to do with redirecting money to the war effort than either the lack of a sound business plan or subsequent public ridicule. When Gorvin was recalled to the United Kingdom, the Commission lost its last bold social engineer who had enthusiasm for this sort of cultural intervention. Later generations of entrepreneurs would second Gottschalk's complaint that the government did not give his enterprise the support it needed to thrive. If we look past some of the silliness of his furniture names and the somewhat pompous tone of his manifesto—which his critics were unable to do—we see an innovative designer with a bold conception for a new industry.

Notes

1. On 19th- and 20th-century workshops that made furniture, see Peddle (1984). On Newfoundland's vernacular furniture-making tradition, one which included a range of stylistic influences from Europe and America, see Peddle (2002).
2. Biographical information for this paper was located online at www.askart.com/AskART/artists/biography.aspx?searchtype=bio2artist=108460.
3. The copy of the pamphlet I consulted is in the collection of the Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Queen Elizabeth 11 Library, Memorial University of Newfoundland in St. John's.

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