



*Through Solli Concepts, **Sohel Contractor** and **Zahabia Abid** offer hand-crafted furniture that makes the best, and often unusual, use of different varieties of wood*

Wed to Woodworking



What, in your opinion, does it take to create a timeless piece of furniture?

SC: A timeless piece takes time; it needs to follow certain timelines, processes and guidelines. Creating an original design, selecting the right wood out of the numerous varieties available, selecting materials that fuse with that particular form of wood, and then a lot of trial and error to carve the perfect piece of furniture with the right balance of form, function and esthetics - that's a timeless piece!

Sohel, tell us about your journey from engineering to furniture design.

SC: I have always had a personal affection for wood, and it fascinates me to learn about the variety and its properties. Wood is so unique that not a single square inch of it is the same. Each piece is different - you could create thousands of pieces of the same design from wood and no two would be the same.

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It started with a friend of mine who wanted to create a desk and was finding it difficult to get the resources to do it the right way. That's when I offered to help him out, and I haven't stopped! Later, I started creating furniture from my living room, after which I moved on to a garage where I designed furniture at my leisure. Eventually, I started designing for a lot of expats who were extremely particular about the output of quality and designs.

My engineering qualification helped me immensely to follow my passion for woodworking. It was a no-brainer for me to get into this industry after a short stint in automotive engineering in New Zealand.

Zahabia, what made you give up an international career in finance for the furniture business?

ZA: I realized I had the potential to be part of a legacy in the making! Sohel was/is absolutely brilliant at what he does (and I am yet to find someone who has his level of depth and passion about the trade) but he has/had little experience with marketing, promotions and basically creating a brand out of it. When I met him he didn't have any business cards! At this point I was quite convinced I wanted to get onboard with strategizing for the brand.

Creating and promoting furniture was far from what I did but when the opportunity came along, I was extremely excited. I had been doing my job for 15 years and the change and challenge was awesome! It is as far removed from the corporate banking life as it gets but you look at a good idea and you roll with it!

How did Solli Concepts come about?

SC: I don't remember when it started precisely, but a lot of my friends used to call me Solli. It was like a nickname that just caught on. Eventually, after doing my first



White lacquer and teak bar





GTL1 Console



project for a friend we decided to give the venture a name and my friends suggested Solli Concepts.

What is Solli's design philosophy?

SC: At its core, Solli strongly believes in not putting waste into the environment. This drives the entire design and production process. By trying to avoid trends, Solli looks to create statement pieces that are built to last with the promise that it will still look good in a hundred years.

Explain your roles in the business.

ZA: We come from completely different backgrounds, we have grown up in different countries, we have very different styles of working, and to top it all, we are married to each other! Strangely enough, I think it works well because we are so different, we bring diverse perspectives into the practice.

As Managing Partner, I do not get involved in the design process. That is exclusively Sohél's domain – he is Creative Director. As a matter of fact we don't even hire designers. All the pieces from conception to manufacturing are his. On the flipside, his creative brain does not want to get cluttered by the rest of the work so he keeps away from my side of the business.

How do you design a collection?

SC: I usually never start with a blank canvas. It is either a requirement from the industry or an inspiration from somewhere that makes me want to design a new collection. I thrive on taking a complicated project and coming up with innovative yet simple solutions.

For our Drop of Wood collection, each washbasin is made from pieces of wood that have been cut from a single block of solid teak and then carefully arranged to form a beautiful grain pattern. The pieces are then shaped and put together using traditional joinery methods without the use

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of any screws or nails. It was challenging to design the washbasins in such a way that they would not retain any dirt or water. We ensure that all products require minimal maintenance and for this to hold true we made sure that all curves and slopes were created to ensure optimum drainage of water and dirt. The glue and the finish used in the construction are hard-wearing and capable of withstanding even boiling water.

How do you approach quality control?

SC: When talking about quality control, the most important thing for me is the importance of the correct way of building. Employ the right method of construct and quality will be maintained. For the Drop of Wood collection, no nails or screws are used but generally in the rest of my furniture I try and use nails sparingly, using clamps and other traditional joinery methods instead. This makes the product a lot stronger and in my opinion esthetically pleasing. The wood I use will be cut and left to acclimatize before I start using it. I use jigs that have engineering tolerances. I create models of new products first. Once construction is complete, my polishing team spends as much time on a product as my construction team does. I take pride in the fact that you will want to keep touching the product once the polishing is complete.



Teak glass display unit

What type of wood do you favor?

SC: For our wash basin collections, we primarily use teak for its natural waterproofing properties. It's a very hardwearing wood and it has natural resistance to pests due to its fragrance and its high oil content. Teak also has natural antiseptic properties, which is a bonus for its use in baths and sinks. Most important for Solli, the teak used is repurposed and ethically sourced locally. While creating the first washbasin prototype, the challenge was to ensure the joinery techniques used would hold true



*Above: Shou Sugi Ban wardrobe
Left: TLT1 Credenza*



over time especially as they need to be watertight joints. I was adamant about giving clients the same quality of build for the washbasin as we do for all other products.

Other than teak, we use a lot of regional woods such as acacia, neem, mango, and more. We procure walnut and oak through FSC certified suppliers which are ethically sourced.

What inspires you?

SC: I like to add my daily doses of inspiration into my design and build process. I get these daily

doses from everything around me. I'll be watching TV, see something and I'll have to stop and either sketch it out or make notes, much to my wife's disdain! I'll be riding on my bike and will see something on the street and stop to take a photo. Wherever I am, at home or abroad, my brain is constantly wired.

How do you market and distribute your products?

ZA: Our offering is quite unique and as such not many people in the city are doing what we do, so word of mouth has played an important role in promoting our business. Recently we have also taken part in key exhibitions to gain a larger audience in the city and for the rest of the world. We are also getting quite active on digital platforms with our latest collections, which also helps.

What entrepreneurial challenges have you faced so far?

ZA: Everything! Coming from a corporate background where all I had to do was pick up a phone to get something fixed to working as part of an entrepreneurial team where I must fix it all myself has been quite the eye opener! The buck stops with me! It has been the steepest of learning curves. I have faced everything from staff and vendors to clients and technology!

SC: The two most aggravating challenges are lack of skilled labor and unrealistic expectations from a few clients. A lot of my problems would be solved if only end consumers realized the effort and time it takes to create a unique and extraordinary product. A few understand the process but most of them want a perfect masterpiece without having to sacrifice the time it requires to make one.

What are your future plans? How do you plan to expand your brand?

SC: I want to get into teaching. I am so passionate about the art of wood working and it's a dying trade in India. We need to realize the importance of the human touch in this crazy fast paced digital world.

ZA: Our products are quite bespoke at this point and every piece is carefully curated for specific buyers. I want to see the works of art that Sohel creates reaching the masses, and we plan to introduce a line of affordable furniture soon. The quality and finish will be true to that of our original collection but in a price sensitive range to attract the common buyer.

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Left: Countertop washbasin. Above: Inset wooden sink