

LOW DOWN DESIGN

BY MARISSA CONRAD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KENDALL KARMANIAN

SINGULAR SENSATION

Custom designer Martins Buka cuts a path to the top

Spanning the entire 59th and 60th floors of the luxe Millennium Center overlooking Millennium Park, a just-renovated penthouse at 33 West Ontario Street towers over most of Chicago. So will its new owners, once they close the deal and move in. But the real man on top here is Martins Buka, the designer slash carpenter slash construction company owner who conceived and created most of the 4,000-square-foot space. The penthouse is nearly all Buka, all the time, but judging by the quality of the work, it's not hard to see why its owners had such faith in him.

Besides crafting the doors, molding and garden beneath the staircase, Buka designed and built most of the furniture—coffee tables, dining tables, credenzas and more. The collection (loosely put; since he custom designs items for each client, he doesn't group his pieces by name) is sleek and modern, built from exotic woods like redwood, mahogany and zebrawood. He loves ebony. He works with steel, but not stainless. "Everybody is using stainless," he scoffs. And if you ask where he gets his ideas, he will confidently tell you that he has recently tapped into his feminine side, which is not only more creative, but nicer, too.

Buka, 31, grew up in Latvia, where he went to vocational school and became a carpenter. He moved to Chicago in 1997, and soon "carpenter became more like a developer." From there, it was a smooth transition into design. "I say to people, 'If you hire me to build a house, you don't know what woodwork you want, I'll come in, I'll offer you something,'" he says. "Everybody liked my ideas. Then someone says, 'Can you make me a table?'" Now, he runs Martins Buka Design Concepts out of a studio in Skokie.

The feminine side—a surprising statement from a man with a thick Latvian accent and sexy stubble—comes mostly from yoga, he says, which he got into a few years ago. Buka, now a certified yoga teacher (he also, after 28 years of eating meat, won't touch the stuff these days), says ideas come to him when he meditates. He's also inspired by other pieces he sees, pinpointing what works and what needs improvement, as well as by his



ONE MAN SHOW: Designer Martins Buka. *Below:* An American walnut and zebrawood cabinet, one of several pieces Buka designed and built for the penthouse at Millennium Center.



girlfriend of almost nine years, whom he first met at O'Hare after a friend urged him to welcome her off her flight from Latvia.

Right now, he's working on "building from every direction." The idea: Instead of building a table based around a room, he will build the room based around the table. He's also taking drawing classes to help him better sketch his designs. He hopes to expand his repertoire to lounge chairs and possibly sofas, following the same model: "Do something that nobody has."

Depending on the scale of the project, Buka spends anywhere from an hour to a week to more with a client before figuring out the perfect design. The layout of the apartment matters, but so does the personality of its owners. "I want to know what you eat, when you sleep, what movies you like," he says. And you better believe he's going to try to get you to do yoga. ■

For more information, visit www.martinsbuka.com.