

LOCAL NEWS

The Log Cabin Democrat of Conway, Arkansas

Sunday, May 7, 2006

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Conway architect generates interest with toy-block set

By **ROB O'CONNOR**
Log Cabin Staff Writer

Forty-three-year-old Conway architect Steve Hurd was more than a kid in a toy store this summer when he traveled to New York to pitch a new toy design to FAO Schwarz.

The famed New York toy company holds monthly auditions for would-be inventors like Hurd, who was demonstrating Cathedral Blocks, a 145-piece set of maple blocks that form a gothic-style cathedral.

Hurd was the first inventor to arrive at the auditions, which are held on a first-come, first-served basis.



He was greeted by store employees dressed as toy soldiers, including one with a trumpet to herald the store's opening. Other employees lined up on the carpet and cheered - a standard store opening, not specifically reserved for Hurd, he insisted.

"There were chills up my back," said Hurd, who had never been to New York and was now surrounded by 10-foot-tall stuffed giraffes. "It was almost surreal."

Hurd met with FAO Schwarz President David Niggli and a group of toy buyers eager to find the next "it" toy.

"My first thought was that I was testifying in front of a Senate subcommittee," he said.

Hurd's hands were shaking so much he could barely assemble the cathedral.

"Self promotion is a not a natural thing for me," he admitted.

For 30 minutes, Hurd answered questions, while Niggli and his buyers played with the blocks. He showed them a notebook with specs on the block sets, as

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well as other designs for future architectural building block sets, including one for a castle and another for a Greek temple. His portfolio also included designs for a series of word toys, two of which Hurd has exhibited at the Arkansas Arts Center's Decorative Arts Museum's annual Toys by Artists show.

The group immediately perked up when they saw the Cathedral Blocks floor plan, which they suggested he laminate, Hurd said.

"I left feeling it was a success," he said, adding he also left Schwarz with, of all things, a set of store-bought blocks for himself.

"For me, you can't have too many blocks," he said.

Three weeks later, Hurd received an e-mail from Niggli that simply said, "Thanks," which he took to mean thanks but no thanks, until he saw an attachment to the message.

When he opened the attachment, he found a letter from Niggli that said the company was intrigued by his creativity and wanted to take the design to the next step in the process.

When he told his 8-year-old son, Christian, the child ran through the house yelling "They want his toys! They want his toys!"

Shortly after hearing the good news, Hurd was interviewed by the Wall Street Journal.

According to the story, which appeared on the front page of the paper's first Saturday edition in years, the monthly toy auditions are a necessary step for the store to stay on top of a very competitive market.

Store founder Frederick August Otto Schwarz opened the New York store in 1870, selling top-of-the-line toys from Germany, Paris and Switzerland.

The Fifth Avenue and 58th Street store was a New York icon.

The 1988 movie "Big" featured Tom Hanks as a kid in a man's body, dancing across a giant toy keyboard.

After trying unsuccessfully to compete with mass marketed toys sold by large chains like Wal-Mart, Target and Toys "R" Us, the company filed bankruptcy two years ago.

Last year, the company's retail stores, catalog and Web site were bought and all but two of the company's 15 retail branches were closed. The New York and Las Vegas stores are the only remaining Schwarz stores.

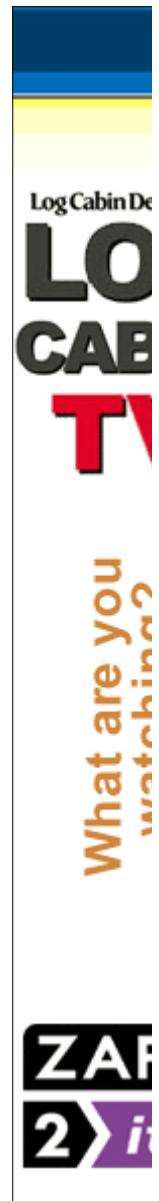
No matter to Hurd, who said that having his blocks on a Schwarz shelf is a dream.

"Where I wanted to be in the first place is where I jumped to," he said, referring to Schwarz as the "holy grail."

This summer's audition was a dream long in the making for Hurd, who first designed Cathedral Blocks 15 years ago.

The set he showed to Schwarz was made in 1989 by Sam Horn, a Little Rock woodworker who recently died.

Last year, Hurd had 100 block sets made in Asia. He sold the sets himself for



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\$95 plus tax.

Mayor Tab Townsell was one of Hurd's customers. Townsell bought a set for his newborn daughter.

Hurd still has some of the Asian-made sets available, but he would like for the blocks sold at Schwarz to be made in America.

Hurd went through the Arkansas Wood Manufacturers Association directory to find a manufacturer.

He is working with a husband-and-wife woodworking duo from Hatfield, near Mena, to see if they would be able to make the block sets.

If that falls through, he has been in contact with a woodworkers' association based in Boston and a craftsman from Vermont, who might be interested.

Right now, "it's a numbers thing," Hurd said.

"I don't know what kind of volume they're talking about," he said. "I guess it depends on how many people buy them."

Even if the 145-piece Cathedral Blocks sell for \$200 at FAO Schwarz, that would still be less, from a cost-per-piece standpoint, than other specialty block sets sold at Schwarz, Hurd said.

At this point, Hurd believes his blocks would be an FAO Schwarz exclusive product, though he would also have the option of selling the blocks to independent specialty toy stores.

Hurd said he could hear from his would-be manufacturer any day now. Then, it's up to Schwarz to see if the toy store wants to go further.

"The waiting is hard," Hurd said. "But it's been a great experience."

Though his dream is close to fruition, Hurd remains realistic, or at least, cautiously optimistic.

"Overnight success is rare and usually five years in the making. Mine is going to be at least 16 years," he said. "If I was depending on this for my living, that would be a problem."

Hurd admits that being a toymaker for Schwarz would be a fun second business.

"There's always the possibility," he said.

Hurd said he won't quit his day job any time soon. He remains a passionate architect, volunteering as a guest speaker at local schools' Enrichment Day, where he talks to students about design and shows them his toys.

"They always like the cool stuff," he said.

Hurd also serves as chair of the Conway Historic District Commission.

"An architect is a designer and this is a building," he said, pointing to an assembled set of Cathedral Blocks on a table in his house. "I did this with my design skills ... and I love to play with blocks."

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For more information on Cathedral Blocks, or to purchase a set, call Steve Hurd at 336-9447 or e-mail arquiteque@conwaycorp.net.

(Staff Writer Rob O'Connor can be reached at rob.oconnor@thecabin.net or by phone at 505-1240.)

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