

MASPETH JOURNAL

Furniture Chain's Boast: Made in America. In Queens, in Fact.

By ANNE BARNARD



Generations of cash-poor New Yorkers have filled their tiny apartments with simple, moderately priced furniture

from Gothic Cabinet Craft's no-frills storefronts. Few realize that most of the furniture — sturdier, if less stylish, than globalized alternatives like Ikea — is made not far away, in Queens.

The company's factory on Grand Avenue in Maspeth, surrounded by unglamorous neighbors like the Manufacturers Corrugated Box Company, is filled with the whir of panel saws and the clatter of falling lumber.

It is more than a workplace. It is also home to Marcos Koutsoftas's canaries, scores of tiny songbirds that he breeds in shades from snow to butter to dandelion, which flutter and chirp in their own sunlit room just off the factory floor. Mr. Koutsoftas, 58, was the first carpenter hired by Theodore Zaharopoulos, the Greek immigrant who founded the company in 1969; his canary privileges are untouchable.

Carpenters from Albania and Ecuador and India and Greece decorate their work areas with newspaper clippings in an array of languages and play their countries' music on radios that compete with the industrial din. Postcards of the white houses and blue water of Greek islands cover the tool cabinets. Downstairs, a front office is staffed by Aristidis and Aristeia, Mr. Zaharopoulos's

A ubiquitous company wants to keep its factory near its stores.

son and daughter, both named for the mother he lost at age 14.

"It's a magical place," said Aristidis Zaharopoulos, 33, who recently began running the company's day-to-day operations. "You can keep it alive by not messing with it too much."

"Like I really know what goes on up there!" he said of the factory floor, where he worked as a teenager but whose way he now stays out of. "It's sort of organic. It sort of lives on its own."

Accordingly, Mr. Zaharopoulos has refrained from introducing too many of the newfangled management concepts he learned at the Stern School of Business at New York University.

While some furniture components and items are imported, he estimated that 60 percent of the pieces were made entirely in Queens. He conceded that the company might increase its profit margin if it outsourced more manufacturing to places with lower labor and real estate costs. But he is not interested.

"We like the manufacturing part of it. It's in our blood," he said. "If Gothic didn't have it, it wouldn't be Gothic anymore."

He is not alone. "A strong emo-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY G. PAUL BURNETT/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Marcos Koutsoftas makes furniture — and breeds canaries — at the Gothic Cabinet Craft factory in Maspeth, Queens.



A carpenter, Peter Pieter, at Gothic Cabinet Craft's factory.

tional tie to the city" and to manufacturing has helped keep many such businesses in New York despite financial pressures, said Robert Walsh, commissioner of the city's Department of Small Business Services, who recently bought a Gothic furniture set for his 6-year-old son.

New York has about 500,000 industrial jobs, he said, ranging from trucking and driving forklifts to building stage sets. They make up a third of all jobs in Queens, Mr. Walsh said. In 2007, the city had 469 furniture manufacturers, with 4,386 employees, according to the New York State

Department of Labor. Woodworking, lighting, glass and jewelry have replaced apparel as the largest manufacturing sectors.

The city wants to keep industrial jobs because they pay better than retail and service positions and offer more opportunity for immigrants, since, as both Zaharopouloses know, a lack of English "doesn't prevent someone from making furniture," Mr. Walsh said.

In areas designated Industrial Business Zones, including Maspeth's, the city provides free business counseling and a guarantee that the area will never be rezoned residential — no doubt a disappointment to loft dwellers who might covet the high rectangular-paned windows that pour sunlight into Gothic's workshop.

Still, Gothic is feeling the pressure of the financial crisis, Mr. Zaharopoulos said; people are more likely to buy just a bed and not a bedroom set. He has laid off a few retail employees, he said, but has no plans to reduce the number of factory workers.

Theodore Zaharopoulos started the company in a basement workshop at 13th Street and Third Avenue — now one of more than 40 Gothic stores — where he slept after work. He and his workers would shellac furniture on the sidewalk.

Company legend has it that a business associate told him to "give it a nice Greek name," and then, confusing Gothic architecture with Classical, suggested "Gothic."

Mr. Koutsoftas, who learned carpentry as a boy in Cyprus, said Theodore Zaharopoulos hired him in 1970 for \$80 a week, but a few weeks later, seeing his skills, raised his pay to \$120.

He became Mr. Koutsoftas's koumbaros, a combined best man

and godfather to Mr. Koutsoftas's children, a role in the Greek Orthodox church that is the equivalent of family. In 1974, Mr. Koutsoftas's 19-year-old brother was killed in the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. Mr. Zaharopoulos took a busload of employees to Washington to protest the United States government's pro-Turkish stance.

Gothic's employees improve their skills on the job. Beginners earn about \$500 a week staple-gunning prefabricated drawers together on a kind of miniature assembly line. Experienced carpenters make up to \$1,500 a week building ornate custom furniture from scratch. One, Nick Arvanidis, 56, spent three days recently building a 16-foot-long wall cabinet, with Greek-column details and space for mirrors and sinks, for a shaving salon in Boca Raton, Fla.

Working at Gothic is about more than business. Surinder Saini, a carpenter from India, left for six years to open a bodega, but got his job back when it failed. "It's like you come back to home," he said.

It is hard for the factory's 150 employees to imagine a world without Gothic. Many other people also depend on the company, said the foreman, Kostas Georgiou: "the hardware stores, the lumber stores, the tool manufacturers, their families."

Mr. Koutsoftas said he had never lost the thrill of inspecting a piece of his finished work and saying, "O.K., this is nice."

"I love work," he said. "I love wood. This is my life."

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