The Slaughterhouse Gallery and Studios
Lawrenceville, Pittsburgh, Pa.

When Garth Jones and his wife Tara Meyer moved to Pittsburgh in 1994, they hunted up an Aikido class—a Japanese martial art that they both practiced. In the class, they met Don Reed, a banker and woodworker by hobby. It was a friendship that would bring them to Lawrenceville and the founding of The Slaughterhouse Gallery and Studios.

Jones, a chemist at the time, was mildly interested in woodworking until he saw the bokken (a Japanese wooden sword) that Reed brought to the class. “They were beautiful, and I wanted to have one of my own. Don took me to his basement workshop and showed me how to make them,” Jones said, running his hand over the smooth laminated bokkuns he has made for himself and his wife from purpleheart and maple wood.

For several years, the men worked in Reed’s small basement workshop on 43rd Street, with Reed teaching Jones everything he knew. “If it weren’t for Don Reed, I wouldn’t be doing this work,” said Jones. In addition to what he learned from Reed, Jones apprenticed at LeFort Furniture Makers in Boston. “The actual work isn’t hard,” Jones said, “and after doing graduate work in chemistry, I’m pretty well suited to reading directions, trying and trying again. The artistry, though, comes as a gift.”

In 2000, Jones quit his job and founded Jones Furniture Designs, still operating out of Reed’s basement. “We were growing out of the space,” said Jones. So they began to look for a bigger and better woodshop.

The two had some commitment to Lawrenceville, where Reed lived, and where there were many properties for sale. “The problem was finding something that wasn’t too large,” Jones said. “We needed a place to unload lumber off the street, like an enclosed garage.” They decided to have a look at the former slaughterhouse, which had been for sale for a while.

“It was a real ruin,” said Jones. “It would have been easier, and less costly, to tear it down and start over.” As we spoke on a crisp fall day, sun crept into his woodworking shop, where he designs “one-off” furniture. One-off, he explained, means off the production line—one
This photograph, taken in the early 1940s, shows a young Robert Poropatic (left) with his father Cenko (middle) and Anton Starcevic (right) in the retail meat market. Note the tin ceiling, marble panels on the wall to the left, and all the wood trim. Courtesy Randy Poropatic, collection of Garth Jones.
of a kind—a singular sensation. The bench that he was creating, from African zebrawood, with soft curves accentuating the contrasts within the wood, was, for sure, unique.

Leveling the building was not on the mind of these two, who were committed to renovation and restoration. “Jill Joyce, a local architect, made some drawings that showed us how it could fit our needs,” said Jones. They bought the property in 2001. “Besides that,” he added, “it was cheap.”

The structures, which included a smokehouse, slaughterhouse, meat locker, and retail shop, were built by German immigrants Gottfried and Amalie Bokermann, between 1885 and 1890. The Bokermanns paid a total of $6,000, half for the land and half for the building, for their business and residence. Between 1885 and 1908, the property operated as a butcher shop, but the family, who must have been doing well, moved to a house in Stanton Heights in 1896.

In 1908, the Bokermanns got out of the meat business and rented the building. In 1919, Anton Starcevic, Joseph Gerich, and Cenko Poropatich, three Croatian immigrants and the founders of Union Provision and Packing Company, rented the place. Four years later, they bought the property for $28,000.

Union Provision and Packing Company slaughtered 50 to 60 hogs and cattle per week and produced hot dogs, baloney, bacon, pudding, and other goods. “Several older Lawrenceville residents have stopped by and told us that they remember that the cattle occasionally got loose and went rambling down Butler Street,” said Jones.

In 1969, federal legislation ended slaughtering on site. By then the business was owned by Cenko Poropatich’s son Robert and Stephen Check, who ran it as a butcher shop for the next 25 years. In 1993, Robert Poropatich (by then the sole owner) sold the business to Rick and Diane Johnson and retired to Florida.

Under the Johnsons, Union Provision offered organic meat and specialty items, processed deer, and other game. Sadly, Rick Johnson died unexpectedly in 1999, and the company ceased operation.

With some help from demolition crews, and willing friends and relatives, Reed and Jones went to work. They cleared out eight truckloads of debris. On one occasion, Jones fell through rotting floorboards, even though he had tested the boards with a crowbar before walking on them. “I wouldn’t even let the cat walk across the floors,” he said.

In the outside area, where the sturdy smokehouse still stands, they created an area for storage of large pieces of lumber and installed millwork equipment to work on the rough wood. Inside, where the meat lockers and butchering had taken place, they created a woodworking studio where Jones creates his individually designed pieces of furniture. Reed, now retired, comes in every day, often to work on his current hobby—model railroading.

The butcher shop has become an art gallery with a hint of its past life. During restoration an intact tin ceiling with delicate designs appeared when a drop ceiling was removed and a marble wall, hidden behind the meat showcases, revealed itself when a bland Formica surface was ripped down. The gallery is available to the five artist tenants, who rent space above it and in a small freestanding building on the property.

Jones has an office above the loft, a refuge to which he retreats in his free time, for a little more woodworking. There, he is building an Adirondack Guide Boat from western red cedar and cypress. It rests in a snug alcove that just holds it. In the office area, where he creates furniture designs, he points out the wood paneling, aged by a century of gentle neglect. He admits, “All we had to do was clean it up and put a coat of shellac on it.” He notes a handprint and an animal footprint pressed into the wood, probably a century ago. “When I turn on the soft lights at night, the wood gives off a warm glow,” says Jones. It would seem that he has found his groove.

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