



"*Together we win.*" This quote on the wall poster appropriately conveys the successful teamwork of public television's program, *The New Yankee Workshop*. Producer Russell Morash (fore-

ground), discovered a host, Norm Abram (a carpenter at the time), in his own backyard. As Abram proved that he could build a project, Morash proved that he could build a show.

Norm Abram: Carpenter Turned Furnituremaker

Profiling the host of 'The New Yankee Workshop'

by Jim Boesel

When Norm Abram took a job building a small barn in the backyard of a television producer's house on the outskirts of Boston, he had no idea that his life was about to take a dramatic turn. At the time, Abram was a young general contractor trying to steer his business toward quality renovations. Impressed by Abram's chintzy scrap pile and efficient work habits, Russell Morash, creator of public television's *This Old House*, approached Abram with the idea of Norm the carpenter appearing and talking about home restoration. Abram, figuring he didn't have much to lose because work was scarce, said okay. Since accepting that offer in 1979, his career has continued to blossom. And the barn? Well, it resides next to the lush garden featured in *The Victory Garden*. The barn's not so small either—it has been

expanded into *The New Yankee Workshop* (see the photo above).

As host of *The New Yankee Workshop*, Norm Abram builds projects in front of 4½ million loyal viewers each week. With those fans and more than a few skeptics wanting to know what really happens behind the scenes of his show, I thought it was high time to look at what goes into, and what comes out of, television's best loved woodshop. Through a visit to the shop and interviews with Abram and producer Morash, I learned how this Yankee's woodworking—from carpentry to furnituremaking—is evolving.

The man behind the saw

While growing up in Milford, Mass., Abram learned much of his craft from his carpenter father. By age 15, he was working con-

struction with his dad. Once through high school, Abram studied engineering and business at the University of Massachusetts and then worked for three years as a site supervisor of a large construction firm before going into business for himself in 1976. For a time, Abram kept up his company, Integrated Structures Inc., while appearing on *This Old House* and finally began attracting the kind of up-scale remodeling jobs he'd hoped for. But as the success of the show grew, so did the demands on his time. After four years as a contractor/builder, Abram felt out of touch with the day-to-day work, so he let his business go dormant.

Learning from This Old House—In 1980, *This Old House* debuted nationally on PBS. Host Bob Vila and Norm the carpenter soon became familiar characters to millions of do-it-yourselfers, woodworking wanna-bes and casual viewers. In the early episodes, Abram played second banana, and his laid-back style proved the perfect foil to Vila's gameshow-host persona. Norm came across as the one with know-how while Vila sold viewers on how easy it was to remodel an old bathroom or install new windows.

Eventually, Vila's propensity for salesmanship caught up with him. In spite of the noncommercial nature of PBS, Vila, from the beginning, was allowed to endorse products on the side. When competing underwriters threatened to withdraw more than \$1 million in support, WGBH insisted that Vila stop the promotions. He refused, so WGBH hired a new host, Steve Thomas, for the tenth season in 1989. Interestingly, Abram came through the whole ordeal with his integrity unscathed—in good position to become top dog on his own show. Although he's had offers, he's never directly endorsed any brands. He does make personal appearances at regional home shows, but those are paid for by either the sponsors of the show or by WGBH underwriters, and he makes a point of plugging the program instead of products.

Building The New Yankee Workshop—Before Morash could launch *The New Yankee Workshop*, he needed a convenient place to videotape. So he had Abram design and build the barn addition in 1988. The shop's layout and equipment (see the top photo on p. 48) are mostly Abram's preferences, and when looking back on how the shop has functioned, Morash said: "We did everything right. There's not much we would change." That's because *The New Yankee Workshop* is a real shop, not a studio set. If you showed up on a day when the show wasn't being taped, you'd easily mistake it for what it is—a well-equipped suburban shop of a successful executive with a serious woodworking hobby.

Ever wish you had the right tool for every job?

Making sawdust is easy in *The New Yankee Workshop*, thanks to the tool manufacturers eager to donate tools with the hope that Abram will use them on the air. The heart of the shop (and the only major tool that wasn't donated) is a Delta 10-in. tablesaw, a vintage 1966 model that was a birthday gift to Morash from his wife. For crosscutting, there's a 12-in. radial-arm saw and a 10-in. chop saw. There's a 6-in. jointer, a 12-in. planer, a 14-in. bandsaw and a floor-model drill press. The shop also sports an extra tablesaw, a portable dust collector, a ¾-in. spindle shaper, an air compressor and two lathes: one for duplicating and one for using on a benchtop. And there's quite an array of hand tools, clamps and finishing supplies as well as bits, blades and accessories.

Of course, no shop is complete without a complement of portable power tools, but these Yankees have more than a fair share. There's no end of sanders, routers, pneumatic nailers, drills and saws. Morash makes no promises and takes no money in exchange for airing tools or hardware. Abram doesn't automatically

Norm talks safety

Despite the safety discussion that begins each episode of *The New Yankee Workshop*, experienced woodworkers have criticized the show for being soft on safety. So I asked Norm about shop safety, and here's what he told me:

"First of all, we never tell people what to do on the program. It's always in the first person, 'I'm going to do this, that and the other thing.' And we try very hard not to show something that could cause someone to get hurt. I'm very conscious that my audience has less experience than I do, so I approach each task from their skill level. For example, while I've been known to cut a tenon freehand, holding the work upright against a fence, on the show I use a tenoning jig and clamp the workpiece.

"There are some things that I've been criticized for that I don't necessarily agree with. For example, bringing the sawblade up through a workpiece for a stopped cut. If done properly (using a stop block), this is a perfectly safe operation—unless you're silly enough to have your hand where the blade comes through.

"Even blade guards can't make all situations safe. When I use a dado head on my radial-arm saw, for example, I often have to remove the guard. Luckily, guards are getting better. But even so, most shop accidents happen because people are doing something they shouldn't be doing (with or without a guard).

"Doing the show has raised my own safety awareness, so even off camera I've gotten in the habit of using jigs (see the photo below) and not taking shortcuts where safety is concerned. I figure that every day that goes by, the odds start to work against me, and if I hurt myself, it won't look good on the show and I may be out of work. I've only been nicked once—on the tablesaw. And it was typical of most workshop injuries; I was tired, in a hurry and I did something stupid."



Finger-saving finger joints: Abram uses jigs, especially when a machine's guard has been removed for photographic clarity (or otherwise). To make tablesaw operations logical and safe, he builds jigs, for example, that ride in the saw's miter grooves, as shown here.

use donated tools on the show either. If he likes the way a new gadget works, it will likely get on the show; if he doesn't like it, it won't. When deciding how they'll show a tool being used, Abram and Morash discuss safety (see the box on p. 47). To avoid being accused of featuring a particular tool to the exclusion of others, they usually remove or obscure labels (manufacturers do get their names listed in the credits at the end of the show). When it comes to materials, though, Abram and Morash draw the line. Rather than accept donated materials, they prefer to choose their wood at the lumberyard and order supplies for each project themselves.

Video woodworking without a net

When I went to see how they videotape *The New Yankee Workshop*, I expected to find more show business than woodworking—



Ready on the set: After Abram explains what he's going to do, Dick Holden, whose camera work has earned him three Emmy awards, and Hugh Kelly, Holden's integral grip, videotape Abram cutting a tenon shoulder with his radial-arm saw. This improvisational rapport between host and crew results in unique, low-budget productions that don't sacrifice quality.



Rolling... The front of a barn, which resembles a garage, functions as the potting shed for *The Victory Garden*, as Abram's finishing room and as *The New Yankee Workshop's* recording suite shown here. Engineer Bill Fairweather's no-nonsense mixing of visuals and sounds means Abram never has to add studio voice-overs, which leads to what, Russ Morash calls "easy-assembly editing."

I figured Abram would show up, go through the motions with a router, maybe a tablesaw, while reading from a script and working with spare parts made by somebody else, and then be on his way. Well, I figured wrong. Here's what really happened.

Setting the scene—Producer/director Russ Morash and crew are taping episode #11 for the 1993 season. Abram is assembling two redwood arches to form a trellis that covers a slatted bench. It's obvious that he's not just working "with mocked-up parts. He's actually building this project, and the camera is a visitor like me.

The show is made with a six-person crew, but besides Morash, there are only three people in the shop: Abram, spreading glue on the tenoned ends of several 1¼-in.-sq. crosspieces; Dick Holden, a few feet away with a big video camera balanced on his shoulder; and Hugh Kelly, known as the grip, keeping Holden's camera cable out of the way (see the top photo).

Lights, camera—A pair of studio lights, mounted on tall stands, illuminates the scene as Morash watches on a 20-in. monitor located in the corner of the shop. Occasionally, Morash picks up a walkie-talkie to speak with the other two members of the crew, engineer Bill Fairweather and his assistant Kate Cohen, about 15 yards away. The engineers' recording suite, which includes audio mixer and camera controls, is set up in the entrance of the original barn (see the bottom photo). Back in the shop, Morash and Abram fine-tune the monologue:

Explaining to Morash how the arches join, Abram offers, "Crosspieces with tenons cut on each end join the arches...." Morash interrupts, "*The arches* are joined.... Make the lead-in stronger, like the beginning of a paragraph since we left off talking about crosspieces." Abram responds, "*The arches* are joined with the crosspieces that have tenons cut on each end." Morash, making sure Bill is ready at the board, says, "Good, let's do it."

Action—With Morash's "okay, action" cue, Abram says his line and drives the tenon home with a mallet. Morash: "Did you get that Bill?" Bill's "got it," crackles back over the walkie-talkie, and Holden relaxes while Abram starts clamping up the assembly.

That's it. It took less than five minutes to plan, rehearse and shoot the scene. There is no written script, no unplanned camera angles, no make-up and no second take (in five years of taping, only one episode needed a reshoot). It all looks too easy until you realize that the key players, Morash, Holden and Abram, have been working together for more than 12 years. Each man knows his craft and respects the skills of the others at theirs. None of them waste time second-guessing another. But while it's clearly a collaborative effort, in Morash's words: "It's not a free-for-all. It only works because someone is definitely in charge."

The man behind the curtain—*The New Yankee Workshop*, which costs under \$100,000 to produce per show (a modest figure for television), is just the latest in a long list of successful ventures that Russell Morash has created for PBS. The list includes *The Advocates*, *The National Theatre of the Deaf*, *The Victory Garden*, Julia Child's cooking shows and *This Old House*, PBS's top-rated half-hour program. Morash has received six Emmys and is widely accepted as the guru of how-to television.

According to Morash, the thing that's unique about his methods is that he sees and hears each shot. For example, when taping takes him away from his benchtop monitor (see the top photo on p. 50), Morash directs remotely via a shirt pocket-sized television, whose picture is sent from the recording suite. The day I visited, the tiny monitor came in handy to shoot the closing scene of

My workshops: old, New Yankee and new

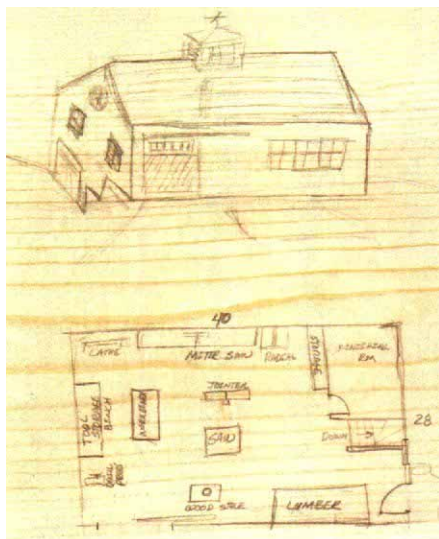
by Norm Abram

After I built *The New Yankee Workshop*, my producer gave me a key and said, "You're welcome to use this anytime." Well, I've certainly taken him up on that offer. While I don't have loads of free time to do personal woodworking projects, I use *The New Yankee Workshop* as my own. The show only ties up the shop for about 65 days a year: two days for each of the 13 episodes, plus about three days to build each prototype. The rest of the time, the shop reverts back to making sawdust.

At home, I've got a dusty little shop, which has your basic woodworking tools and a bench where I can cobble things together—repair work mostly. Fortunately, I'm building a new two-story Colonial/timber-framed house that's going to have a nice shop. Because I've gotten spoiled by the extra room at *The New Yankee Workshop* (and believe me, the 936 sq. ft. comes in handy), my new shop, which will be a little bigger and in its own building (see the staked-out site in the photo at right), is patterned after *New Yankee's* 26 x 36 space.

Originally, I thought about building the shop with an open truss roof, giving me 9 ft. of clearance. But, because it's nice not having overhead obstructions, I chose a gable roof, like in *New Yankee's* shop (see the photo on p. 46). I'll probably put in skylights for more daylight as well. The building's grade is stepped, which means I'll have a storage basement underneath, with 7 ft., 4 in. of headroom. The basement will have a garage door, and the shop level will have a sliding door. The shop's floor, rather than being a concrete slab, will be wood, which should be easier on my feet.

I haven't laid out the exact floor plan



yet, but I've worked up a rough thumbnail on a board (at left) showing where I'll most likely place machines, benches and tool cabinets. Although it'll be quite a while before I'm set up in the new area, every chance I get, I think about how I'm going to organize things. My stepson's already got a boatbuilding project slated for whenever the new shop is finished.

Shop on a shingle (left) lets Abram refine his new shop's layout.

Shop stakeout: Abram (below), scoping out where his new shop will go, says he's looking forward to trying all kinds of high-end woodworking at home once his shop is built. His new house, under construction, is in the background.



Photo: Richard Howard; drawing: Norm Abram

Abram commenting on the location of the installed arbor, which just happened to be in Russ Morash's front yard.

Making projects: from prototypes to profits

Decisions about what projects to include in the show are made by Morash and Abram. Each season, they include a mix of carpentry, like a shop cabinet or a seating arbor, and furniture, like a Shaker tall chest or an English sideboard (see the front cover photo). Abram and crew usually tape a segment to show where a piece's inspiration came from, such as at the Hancock Shaker Village near Pittsfield, Mass., or at a London antique shop (see the bottom photo on p. 50). On one occasion, the show highlighted the retrieval of 200-year-old cypress logs from a river in Georgia. Although these "historicals," as Morash calls them, are meant to add authenticity, the projects are not reproductions but are Abram's

adaptations that often combine elements of several originals.

Measured drawings—When building the prototype for each project, Abram works from a rough sketch, refining proportions and joinery details as he goes along. Next he draws a preliminary plan based on the finished piece. An illustrator then prepares a pencil drawing that Abram checks and adds notes and dimensions to. The final drawing is inked and then sold individually or with a video. Each drawing includes details, construction notes and a materials list, which footnotes that all dimensions are approximate. Abram believes that an exact cutting list is a recipe for failure that ignores the many variables inherent in working with wood.

Three for one—For each episode of *The New Yankee Workshop*, Abram himself must build the featured project, not just once, but



Video choreography: When the crew is taping on location, such as to show Abram installing and using this seating arbor, Morash uses a portable monitor. This lets him see procedures that might, due to foreshortening of the picture, look awkward or dangerous—something that Abram may be unaware of.

Photo: Richard Howard



To find inspiration for 1993 projects, Abram traveled to the U.K. to view country furniture at *The Saunders Home* in Weedon and at several famous antique shops. He learned that many overpriced dealer antiques are, in fact, remakes from old architectural remnants. Abram adapted his own prototypes, which take about three days to build, mostly from authentic English period pieces.

three times. First Abram makes a prototype the week before the show is taped. While building the prototype, which will air as the finished piece (see the top photo), he makes any needed jigs or templates. He also decides which processes to feature. Sometimes he saves time by milling stock and cutting out enough parts for the other two pieces, but he does this only if he is sure those steps won't have to be taped.

Next, with the prototype still fresh in his mind, Abram builds a second piece over a two-day period with Morash and crew on hand to tape key processes (see the top photo on p. 48). Abram tries to organize his work to reduce the time that the others wait for him to finish operations or clamp glue-ups. The third piece is built later, often on a weekend when Abram can find the time, so that a photographer can take stills for the season's eventual book. Except for an occasional helping hand from one of the crew members, Abram builds all three pieces himself.

Abram's home is furnished with many of the pieces he's made

on *The New Yankee Workshop*, especially Shaker style furniture, his preference. But he confesses to having a storage bin full of unfinished projects. Parks Corp., one of the show's underwriters, also gets a piece now and then to promote its line of finishes. Morash keeps the rest of the pieces for posterity, filling up his house, the shop and wherever else he can find storage.

Responding to critics

Despite the successes of *The New Yankee Workshop*, a few woodworking writers have criticized the program for pushing power tools, trivializing furnituremaking and looking too much like Hollywood woodworking. Abram acknowledges that WGBH might have brought some of the criticism on by using the term *master carpenter* to describe his job.

"*Master carpenter* is a title that Russ gave me," Abram said. "It may be a legitimate title in the theater, but there's no such thing in the construction trade, just a journeyman. But I look at the term as meaning someone who is always trying to improve his skills—who continues to learn with each project—as opposed to one who has reached top level, because there's so much to learn in the field."

Speaking of his loyal following, Abram continued: "Originally we were after people that already had a shop set up, maybe in the basement or garage. We wanted to give them some nice projects to do—to help them enjoy their woodworking. Surprisingly, we've not only attracted that audience but we've also attracted viewers who might never do woodworking. Some of them say, 'Look, we know it's not high-end woodworking, but we've learned something from it.' And basically, that's all the show is really meant to do."

While I was having lunch with Abram (sitting at a picnic table he had built for the program), I asked him why he persists in wearing a carpenter's tool belt on the set. Abram just chuckled and said, "It's become a trademark for me...a carryover from *This Old House*. And besides, what difference does it make? Just the other day, I said something about my tool apron getting pretty ratty, and maybe I should get another one, but Russ said 'No, no, it's fine.'"

Working around a grueling schedule

Although 43-year-old Abram agrees it's fun to be paid well to do what he loves, it's also a lot of work. Last year he taped 26 new episodes of *This Old House* and 13 of *The New Yankee Workshop*. Then, in his spare time, he did 30 personal appearances, which at times, he confides, conflicted with his family schedule (he's married with four children). In past seasons, the taping for *The New Yankee Workshop* was spread out over six months. But this year, they've speeded up the schedule so Abram can help on a new house he's having built. He admits to being a bit frustrated because he doesn't have time to build the house himself, but he's satisfied that he'll at least be making the staircase and a new shop (see the story on p. 49). Meanwhile, Abram and his wife, Laura, who helped design the house, are also working with a ghostwriter on a new book about the home's construction.

Abram said he might eventually develop and market his own line of country furniture. But for now, not knowing how long his high-profile television roles will last, Abram wants to ride the wave as far as it will take him. And it's likely that viewers will stay tuned because, just like other "woodworkers, Norm Abram is learning and improving as he goes along, except that he's also bringing quite a few others along with him. □

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A close look at the Yankee's work

With success comes scrutiny, and *The New Yankee Workshop* is no exception. Although Norm Abram fans rally behind their woodworking hero when critics take aim, the show and its host still have a share of rational detractors. For example, furnituremakers have criticized Abram for making heavy-handed adaptations of classic designs and for failing to allow for wood movement in a few of his pieces. I wanted to see for myself—examining both old and current work—if these criticisms are valid.

Past: When reviewing project plans from previous seasons, I found a few examples of wood movement problems and an instance where Abram screwed into the endgrain of a bed rail; a fastener here is totally unnecessary if the mortise and tenon fit well. But I was impressed that on a reproduced Shaker style clock, Abram remained true to the original by using a solid panel in the clock's door with its beveled surface turned inward.

Present: I also looked at a few projects from the newest season, which are based on English country furniture. One of the most ambitious pieces is a 6-ft.-long white oak sideboard (see the cover photo) with three drawers and bandsawn legs braced with a wide shelf just above floor level. Abram said the piece was patterned after several larger sideboards.

Abram's sideboard made a good first impression: It was well-proportioned, and the beveled drawer fronts and arched framing showed a good eye for English period details. He used Baltic-birch plywood for the drawer sides, although solid wood would be plenty strong enough and more in keeping with the rest of the piece. Perhaps the weakest part of the piece was Abram's failure to adequately sand the applied moldings, which clearly show tell-tale ripples from having been hurried past a router bit.

The sideboard suggests that Abram has taken seriously the admonitions about allowing for wood movement. He pointed out that the 10-in.-wide tenons where the sidepieces join the legs are glued only along the top 3 in. or so, with the remainder of the tenon left unglued to float in the mortises in the legs. This solution allows expansion while avoiding the use of a frame-and-panel construction, which would spoil the authentic country look. The wide shelf is also free to expand. It is pinned at its center to the cross braces,

notched to fit around the legs and restrained from cupping by being dadoed into the inside faces of the legs. Abram designed these joinery details because all the original pieces had splits in their wide boards.

I found the other pieces I examined, a butcher-block table, a bow front corner cabinet and a pine kitchen table, all to be without any glaring instances of faulty construction. For example, the endgrain, butcher-block top, as shown in the photo below, was beveled on all four sides and floated within a 2x6 frame. Abram wanted to be sure his design *allowed* for wood movement.

Future?: When evaluating the quality and value of *The New Yankee Workshop*, it's important to remember that it is not meant to be a complete course in woodworking. The show is designed to appeal to a mass market by tapping into an existing audience of people who are fascinated with woodworking and woodworking tools. The show has also been accused of blurring the line between commercial and non-commercial television. But, as long as Abram is not trying to palm off inferior tools on hapless viewers—and I saw no evidence that he was—

then I consider this a non-issue.

I believe the most valid criticism of *The New Yankee Workshop* is that it trivializes the process of building furniture. Surely, more goes into the design and construction of a quality piece of furniture than a half hour show can do justice to. Abram is a carpenter turned furnituremaker. He understands power tools and is certainly qualified to demonstrate their use. But, like all self-taught furnituremakers, Abram is learning about design and construction as he goes along—and he is clearly improving with each season. If the show would take an on-the-air trip to a professional furnituremaking shop to discuss the elements that refine and elevate a piece of furniture, it would go a long way toward giving both Abram and his craft the credibility they deserve. —J.B.

The New Yankee Workshop, a co-production of WGBH, Boston and Morash Assoc., Inc., began its fifth season in January. Check your local stations for broadcast times. Project videos, drawings and books (published by Little, Brown & Co.) are available from The New Yankee Workshop, P.O. Box 9345, South Burlington, Vt. 05407-9345.



Handling wood movement gets top priority. This table's endgrain butcher-block top is beveled on four sides and floated within an oppositely tapered 2x6 frame. Although Abram admits the construction is experimental, he says it's designed to allow an expanding top to slide upward in the frame. As the author looks on, Abram explains how the top works and how the rest of the table was built.