

The Snug, Unplugged Workshop

A woodworker's space evolves along with him

BY DAVID FISHER

The little workshop at the back of our house has changed as much as I have since the day some 20 years ago when I first entered it. Today as I dive ever deeper into working green wood, it serves me perfectly. But its history reflects my own journey through the craft.

In 1996, my wife, Kristin, and I bought a century-old house in our hometown—a house showing its age and in desperate need of renewal. Fortunately, we were naïve about the amount of work that lay ahead; as we stood in the odd little attached garage that served as a vestibule, we focused on the potential and ignored the leaking roof.

From garage to home-improvement central

This quirky L-shaped space was 19 ft. deep and 10½ ft. wide, broadening to 15 ft. wide beyond a bump-out of the house. We agreed that our vehicle would stay outside—it was only a car after all. What few tools I owned were moved into this 250-sq.-ft. space that we were already calling the workshop.

For the first year or so, it remained unchanged but for some crude shelves and a cast-off chest of drawers I used as a workbench. It was the domain of chopsaws, caulking guns, paintbrushes, and utility knives as the infrastructure of the house took first priority. Rooms were transformed, floors were installed, and built-ins were built. As the list dwindled, my mind drifted to furniture and carving. It was time to outfit the shop.

A real workshop

I had worked in my high-school woodshop, in my dad's basement, and in the living room of my first apartment, where I clamped boards to the coffee table to carve them, but this would be my own dedicated workshop. I went

with what I knew: a basic workbench, low cabinets as a perch for benchtop power tools, and lots of pegboard and metal hooks. The workbench and the row of low cabinets still serve me well.

I stumbled into building a workbench that is as solid as the workshop itself. Using dimensional lumber, I constructed the supporting framework and secured it to the wall studs. I bought two sheets of ¾-in. exterior plywood, ripped them lengthwise, and face-glued them into a four-layer sandwich of a benchtop. I drilled some dog holes and added a face vise and got to work.

I filled the shop with a tablesaw, drill press, router, and other power tools. I also added a ventless gas heater and a second-hand bathroom sink, both of which remain valuable assets. Within three years, our family had grown to four and I built furniture to meet our expanding needs: a changing table, toy chests, cabinets, patio furniture, and various other pieces.

With each new piece my skills and my tool arsenal expanded. Although I was doing some handwork on each project, the tablesaw, router, and orbital sander were still regularly screaming—and spewing a fine layer of dust all over the shop and me time and time again. For that reason and others, I began to consider unplugging my shop.

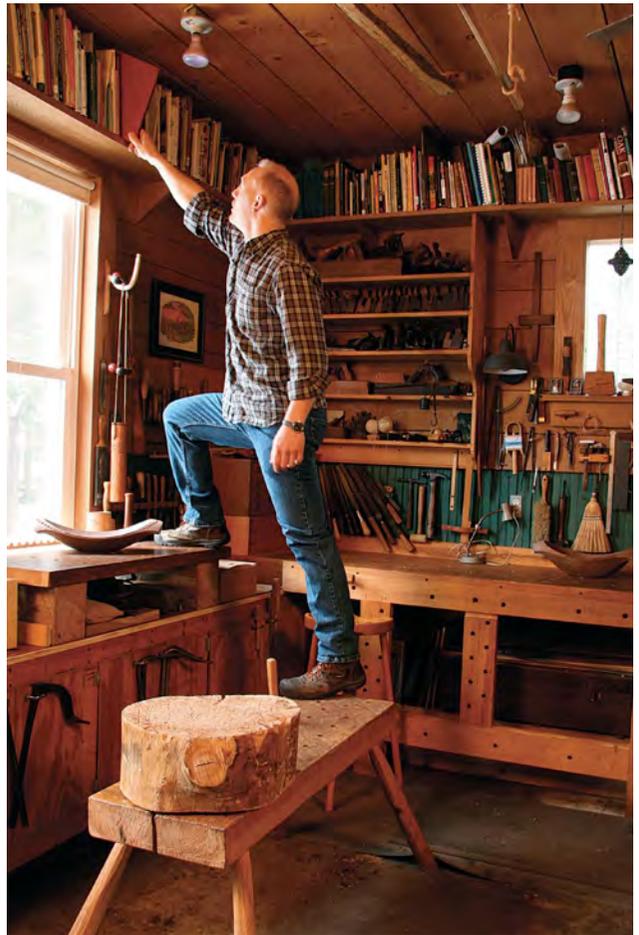
These reasons began to compound. Nap time had become precious, making the idea of a quiet workshop even sweeter. With many of the home requirements met, I was now able to focus on projects I wanted to explore, and I realized that none of them were facilitated much by a space-guzzling tablesaw. The latest gadgets in the tool catalogs had lost their appeal. I had no scorn for power tools; it just became clear that I wanted to move on without them. In a rare moment of decisiveness, I sold or gave them away.







Fine shop furniture. Fisher's canted-leg low bench (below) serves him for chopping, carving, and for reaching his library of woodworking books. His bowl horse (left), made from a stout log, pinions a workpiece from front and back.



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From dust to chips

With the money from the sale of the power tools, I bought a slew of old hand tools in need of renewal. I focused more than ever on tuning my tools, and built a dedicated sharpening station. I had already been doing some handwork, but I felt incredibly energized by the new challenge and possibilities.

Work in my shop became even more interesting and fun. The pages of books by Roy Underhill and others were guides to adventure. I also continued to expand and stretch my carving skills with works in relief and in the round, and made furniture for our use in the house and lots of toys for the kids. Regardless of the project there was no dust to settle, only shavings. And it seemed that there was always another exciting road to explore.

One thing I did that smoothed the transition from power to hand tools was to attach an assembly to the front of my existing built-in bench. Constructed from yellow pine dimensional lumber, it has a frame with a sliding deadman, a board hook, and holes for pegs, providing excellent work-holding options.





Rudimentary and rock-solid. Fisher's built-in bench, made years ago from construction lumber and exterior plywood, was upgraded for handwork with the addition of a frame with a sliding deadman.

Going green

A whole new dimension opened in my work and my shop when I discovered the writings of Drew Langsner, Jennie Alexander, Mike Abbott, and Peter Follansbee. These folks were making things from trees! The shop now became a laboratory for a pole lathe, chairs, shrink pots, shaving horses, riven oak boxes, spoons, timber framing, and especially bowls—I fell in love with carving bowls.

My interest in bowls eventually led me to build two features that have now been at the center of my workshop for well over a decade, a low bench and a bowl horse. The low bench is simply a thick, wide oak timber held at top-of-the-knee height by four splayed legs fit into round tapered mortises. It serves as a support for all sorts of operations, from sawing to boring to shaping with an adze. It even supports my portable chopping stump. Like my workbench, it is pierced by $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. holes for pegs, and for those miracles of work holding, holdfasts.

The bowl horse emerged from my desire to work on bowls with a drawknife. The concept was to adapt a traditional shaving horse so that a bowl would be supported by the bed and squeezed end-to-end between the dumbhead and a vertical stop.



Decorative tool storage. To make the shop feel more personal, Fisher purged it of store-bought containers. He uses every inch of wall space for storage and display.





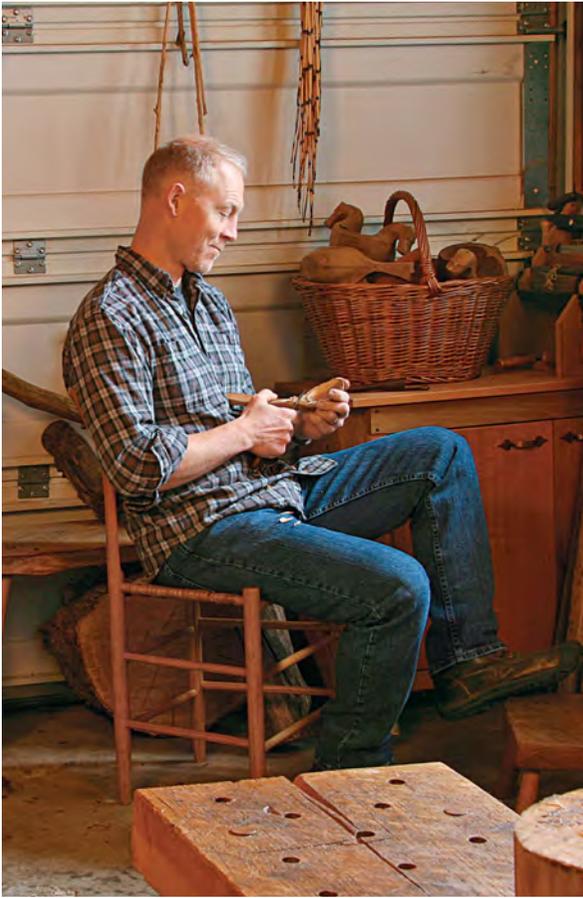
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The aesthetic movement

I had also come to the realization that this workshop was more than a place for me to make things. The space served as a foyer into our home, a mudroom, and my peaceful retreat. My children would often pop out to work on projects, and every so often we'd record their heights on the wall. One of the things I enjoyed most about the location of my shop just off the kitchen was this accessibility; I was in the shop and at home all at once. I began to pay more attention to the aesthetics of this room that we all at least passed through many times a day. I didn't want to create a showroom. I just thought that I, and my craftsmanship, might benefit from a reasonably attractive, pleasant, uncluttered space. I was after authentic, practical changes. Like a well-designed wooden spoon, a workshop can bring joy not only through its performance, but also by its appearance and feel.

I got started by closing in the ceiling joists with roughsawn pine boards from a local sawmill and insulating above them, making a ceiling with character that also kept the heating bills down. I got a deal on a big stack of sassafras boards and lined the upper





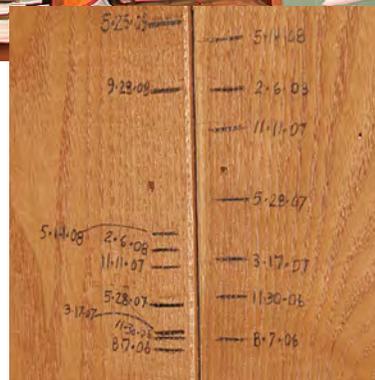
walls with them, adding a high shelf running around the room to hold my ever-growing library of wood-working-related books, making use of what would have otherwise been wasted space. I decorated the walls with things I found meaningful and beautiful.

I got rid of plastic storage bins and containers, replacing them with wooden boxes and small chests that are more pleasing to the eye and just as effective at keeping clutter under control. Some I made and some I picked up at garage sales and auctions. Tools that didn't go in boxes I kept within easy reach on shelves or hung from the walls. Carved branch crooks serve as hangers for everything from tools to hats. And a couple of vintage file cabinets provide storage for paper, art supplies, records, and various odds and ends.

Change and continuity

Like us, the workshop has seen many changes over these two decades. It's still a humble little shop that has its limits, but limits often encourage resourcefulness and creativity. It has all I need to make what I want. I'm sure the metamorphosis will continue over the years as I continue to explore. Yet much of the character and the story will remain, like the growth chart scratched onto the wall. □

David Fisher works green wood in Greenville, Pa.



Home shop. Fisher's shop is also the main entrance to the house, and his family's coats and hats share space on the walls with his tools, his children's artwork, and a penciled record of their growth.

