



At Home in the Shop

Built for living as well as working,
a woodshop in Maine evolves with its maker

BY CHARLES DURFEE



Yes, it looks like a house! That's for several reasons, but primarily because it was one. When I built it 32 years ago, my shop served as an all-in-one building for my life: woodworking on the first floor, storage in the attached shed, and living space upstairs for me and my girlfriend (long since my wife), Jennifer. Another reason was aesthetics. I wanted something that would be pleasing to my Yankee eye, and that fit into the New England landscape. That called for a pitched, gabled roof and wood-shingled walls, dormers, divided-light windows, and classic red-painted trim. It all added up to a sensibility that felt at home here in Maine.

I made some modifications to accommodate specific needs. The first-floor ceiling is 9 ft. high, way higher than pre-19th-century country dwellings but great for a woodshop. And the roof has a steep pitch, which provided extra living space upstairs.

*Looking out,
I would see fields
and trees, changing
with the seasons.*

It always looked too tall to me, but with years passed, the surrounding trees have grown enough to soften that.

Aesthetics counted in the location, as well. We built on a five-acre lot on a dead-end country lane, so my noise and racket wouldn't bother the neighbors. From the inside looking out, I would see fields and trees, changing with the seasons, which is refreshing and recharging as well.

My shop isn't really "done up" as some are (although I do admire and have learned from some that are). Mine is plain, simple, practical, efficient, and straightforward. I've had regrets about some decisions I made, some possibilities not realized, but I am generally at peace with what I have.

When our daughter was 3, and a son was about to be born, we realized we had outgrown the upstairs thing. It was rustic (rudimentary plumbing, cramped space, reliant on an outhouse), and after six years we built a "grown-up" house a few hundred feet up the hill behind the shop.



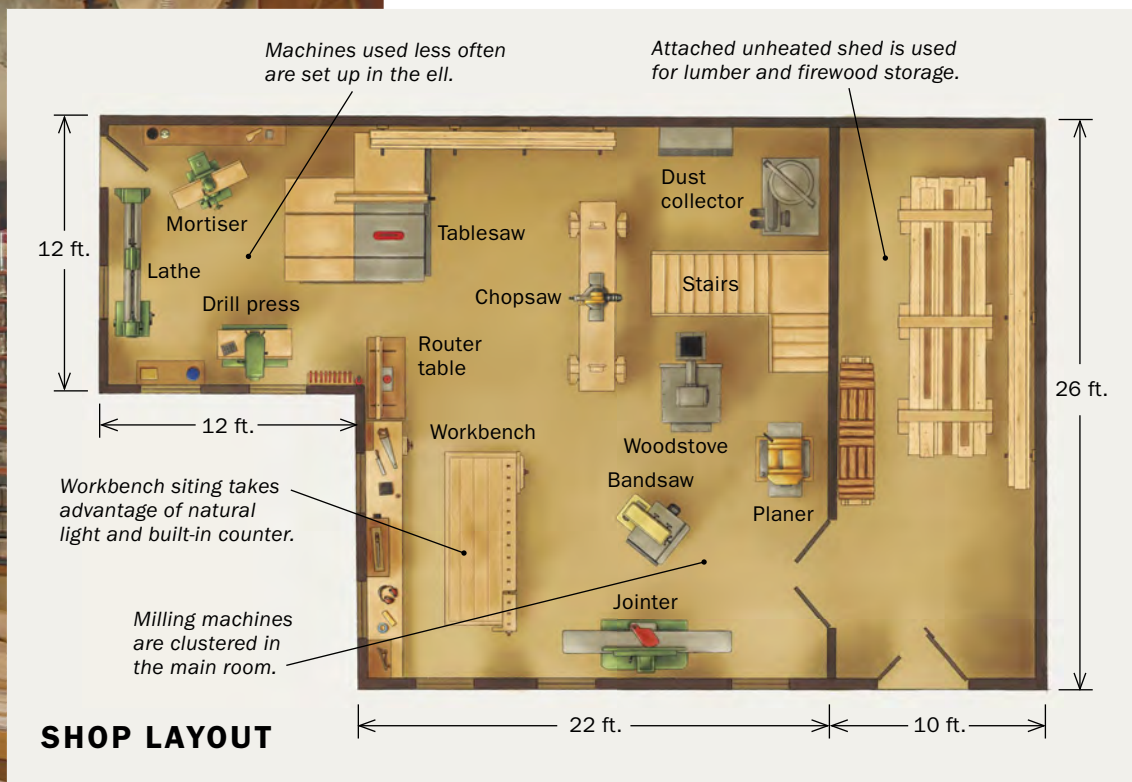
Guided by daylight. Originally intended as a machine room only, this space, with its high ceiling and plentiful natural light, soon became home to Durfee's workbench. The counter behind the bench affords quick access to hand tools and serves to keep the benchtop clear. The space also houses his bandsaw and other often-used machines.



What spurred me to build

Getting to the point of building the shop was a long evolution of its own. I got started in woodworking building wooden boats, large and small, but within the first 10 years my work morphed into dry-land stuff. I've built just about anything to do with houses: kitchens, stairs, built-ins, corner cupboards, fireplace surrounds, frame-and-panel doors. These jobs have been a big help in keeping the bills paid. In addition, there have been more than 150 pieces of furniture in the mix, and I'm doing furniture exclusively now.

During that first decade I worked in six different shops, some well-established but others quite makeshift. How about working in barn shops (in Maine, remember) without insulation? Or in my brother's living room? Or building a 16-ft. boat in a 17-ft. garage? After a few of these experiences, the idea of having my own place to live and work was a constant driver, and getting it at last was a dream come true.



A layout designed over time

Once we had built the building and moved in, the shop's layout evolved in a very organic way. For example, I originally intended to devote the whole main space to machines; the ell would be my bench room. That didn't last long. With big windows on two walls, the main room called out for my bench. I soon moved it, and to this day I happily spend the vast bulk of my time right there.

The bench shares the main room with my bandsaw, tablesaw, jointer, planer, chopsaw station, and router table, and there's a space where I set up sawhorses with a piece of MDF on top when I need an assembly or finishing table. The ell now houses the outfeed for the tablesaw along with some smaller machines I use less frequently: drill press, lathe, mortiser, and sharpening bench. It also provides space for a thicket of hanging patterns, jigs, and templates. All my machines have moved multiple times over the years, but the current configuration seems to do most of what I

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Changes in the ell.

When Durfee moved his bench out of the ell, his drill press, mortiser, and lathe moved in. This part of the shop also provides outfeed space for the tablesaw and quick-access storage for clamps, patterns, and templates.



Online Extra

For a video tour of Charles Durfee's shop, go to FineWoodworking.com/272.

need, and is quite efficient. Not to say it won't change again!

The identities of the machines themselves (my "apprentices") have gone through many changes, though the roster now seems fairly well settled. Having started in boats, I bought a bandsaw as my first machine. It was a 12-in. Rockwell, which was replaced with a 14-in. Delta, which was then replaced with a 20-in. Italian machine, an Agazzani. My tablesaw is a 10-in. General, a good friend that I've had since the shop was just built, when it replaced a contractor's saw. I've had a couple of jointers (currently an 8-in. Jet) and planers (now a 15-in. Bridgewood). I never try to impress with my machinery—it's all pretty basic, small-shop stuff. But it is versatile and for the most part does good work.

I built several of the fixtures myself, including my router table, chopsaw stand, and workbench. I did lust after the Hancock Shaker bench, but I realized it would be quite stationary, with all those drawers filled with tools. The bench I built has an open trestle base so that it can be moved if necessary. I built a second work surface along the wall behind where I stand at the bench; this countertop catches all the debris that would usually be on the main workbench, so that's been very handy. I like not having a tool well on my workbench; that makes the bench equally good to work at from either side.

Storage is important in this trade. Lumber, which I try to buy in bulk as much as I can, is on racks in the attached shed, and on racks on one wall inside the shop. Upstairs, where we used to live, is a showroom (which is sometimes presentable) for finished work, and there is storage space for larger jigs, boxes of parts, and fixtures from past projects.

Also mundane, but important, are lighting and heat. At first I had several rows of incandescent lights, as I disliked fluorescents. But these had to be changed often. Eventually I went with color-corrected fluorescents, and I'm glad I did. They are expensive, but worth it. For heat, I've relied on a trusty woodstove. That was all I used until about 10 years ago, when I added a propane wall furnace to keep the shop at 50° when I'm not in it. □

Charles Durfee's shop is in Woolwich, Maine (cdurfee.com).



From family to furniture. The upstairs of Durfee's shop, where he and his family lived for several years, became a showroom for his furniture when he built a new house up the hill.



A rural commute. Durfee's shop is just a short walk down through the woods from his house.