

THE FINE ART OF NESTING

Nesting is the art of creating a working or living environment that feels good – and the emphasis is heavily on the ‘feels’. It is directed wholly at our emotional response to our immediate surroundings. I suppose it is possible for someone to be immune to his or her surroundings, but if it is possible I am sure it will be relatively rare. I strongly suspect that many who claim to be, are actually only at a loss to know how to go about creating the sort of space that they would feel truly comfortable living or working in.

It is probably more likely that many woodworkers simply don’t think about it. Their workshop is simply the place where they do their woodwork. It just is what it is, as much by accident or necessity as by design.

What I want to do here is to change that. What I am suggesting is that there are important reasons why we should take some notice of the place where we do our woodwork.

My interest in this is twofold. First, I am, naturally, an incorrigible nester, and always have been. Linda Goodman summed me up when she wrote of Pisces that if you put a gay, colourful Pisces in a dull, grey room, within two weeks you will have a dull, grey Pisces. I am a Pisces as it happens, and that really is me. I am very sensitive to my surroundings. I do not enjoy working in indifferent surroundings.

Second, I have over the years, have had many students who have hoped to do some work in their own time between classes, at home. It rarely happens. Now there are many different reasons for this, and most of these are unavoidable, especially for those with busy families or demanding jobs. But there is one reason that I suspect looms large, which is avoidable, and that is the lack of a pleasant, inviting workspace. This becomes especially important when woodwork is a hobby, and you have to volunteer to go and do it. Then, how that thought makes you feel will have a great impact on whether or not you do actually do it. If the mental image it conjures up is not inviting, how much harder does it become to leave the comfortable chair, the TV, or eBay?

We can couple this thought with the fact that woodworkers the world over seem to be endlessly fascinated with other people’s workshops. We love visiting them. We love the smell of them. We love to nose about and check out their tools, machines, gadgets and how they have set themselves up. And when we happen across a particularly warm and interesting workshop, this pleasure is all the more acute.

This is the Nesting Instinct in action.

For those interested, then, I want to give my ideas on this fine and gentle Art.

There is no one way, or ‘right’ way, to practice it. Above all else, I think it should be fun. It is a way of playing, of indulging in some pure pleasure. It doesn’t even matter if you never get beyond it, and just spend all your ‘woodworking’ time nesting – getting

ready, in the time honoured way, to do some serious work, one day, soon..... What does it really matter if that never happens, provided you are happy just doing what you are doing? When all is said and done, isn't enjoying yourself the whole point anyway? If you really feel that you have to justify all the money you spend on your tools and machinery by producing something then you might be a little too serious and driven a personality to indulge in such a light hearted Art. It requires a slightly more anarchic and hedonistic spirit – like that animating the Blokes who put together the Code of Practice for the Shed on the UBeaut Website.

Seriously though, the place to start is by making a start. Good workplaces don't need to be planned out beforehand. Rather, they best evolve, so any starting place will do. Hang up a chisel. Make a little home for your favourite plane. Bite the bullet and get yourself a real bench. Spend the money, or better yet, build yourself a proper one. It doesn't matter where you start – one thing will lead to another. At some point you will want to make an adjustment by changing something you have already done. Doesn't matter. It is a necessary part of the process. It is like the establishment of an ecosystem where, because nature abhors a vacuum, every possible niche eventually comes to be filled, and there is a constant process of shuffling and adjustment as all the parts slowly work their way into the most comfortable and efficient overall arrangement.

You merely need to be sensitive to your own feelings. If you don't like something, change it to something you like more. If the space lacks something, try to provide it. For example, I am a firm believer in creature comforts. I like bright light in a workshop. I don't think it is appropriate in a home, where spots work better to create atmosphere, but in a workshop, to me, bright means warm. It feels good. I like to be warm when it is cold and cool when it is hot, so I have reverse cycle air conditioning up here in sunny Brisbane. When a cold wind is whistling about outside, and it is pouring rain, I am snug and cosy in my space, and I love it. It adds to my woodworking pleasure, rather than subtracting from it.

Another Law of Nesting that I abide by is that it is a deliberate activity. That is to say, it is not done hurriedly or absent mindedly. There are no holes drilled in handles so tools can hang on nails banged into my workshop walls. Rather, each tool has a special home. I take each tool and try to think of a way to hold it in position on the wall or in my tool cabinet, and I don't care at all how bizarre, complicated or hopelessly inefficient my solution is. It just has to work, and be more interesting than a mindless, heartless nail. I just let my imagination run free, and I play with whatever possibilities occur to me.

If you doubt this, ask yourself what you would find more interesting when you visited someone's workshop: a lot of nails in the wall with all the tools just hanging haphazardly from them, or a series of little Heath Robinson contraptions cleverly devised to hold each tool? Which is more fun, more interesting, more lively? I always find it disappointing when someone builds themselves a lovely workshop of the kind that fill the various coffee table Taunton Press books on the subject, but lack the energy or imagination to finish the job by storing their tools well. The result is a window or wall festooned with tools, machine accessories and jigs dangling from nails.

A very important by product of making all these homes is that it becomes a pleasure to clean up, and return all my tools to their places. It also makes it obvious when something is missing.

Another result was that I became a bit more choosy about the actual tools I was making these homes for, because if a good tool deserves a good home, it can also be said that a good home deserves a good tool. So as my workshop has evolved, so, too, has my collection of tools, as I constantly upgrade them. Woodworkers who are indifferent to the quality of their tools are as foreign to my understanding as those who are indifferent to their surroundings. Perhaps that is because I am process oriented, and not result oriented. I like to enjoy the process of doing my work, and am not only driven to see the finished result.

Such a narrow focus does not satisfy me, even though I know it will have its financial rewards.

Another aspect of Nesting that is important is colour. I think most, if not all, people respond to the warmth of wood, and a part of that impression comes from its colour. Most wood colours are warm, yellow based colours, especially tones of brown and yellow and red and cream. I prefer to stick to these colours when I choose any paint for my walls or floor. I don't respond as well to colder colours, which usually have a blue base, though I know other people will.

A similar point can be made about surface texture. There is a world of difference between surface of a sheet of ply and a sheet of melamine, and this difference extends to cupboards made out of them. In this case warm and cold have their counterparts in soft and hard. Wood is soft, but plastic is hard.

To sum up, I believe your woodworking will become a more deliberate, serious and directed activity if it takes place in a purpose built environment – even if that is only a corner in the garage. It will not happen in a vacuum, despite your best intentions. Making yourself a woodworking 'nest' will not only help you do it, but will increase your enjoyment of it. You will know that you have succeeded when you have to fight to stay away from it, rather than fighting to do it. Or when you and your mates just seem to naturally gravitate to your space rather than to the back deck or the TV.

The skill of nesting is probably like any skill in that it needs to be learned, and takes a bit of time and practice. You will get better as you go. You will probably also find that once you make a start, you will get caught up in it, and it will become easier to keep the process going.

Above all else, remember that it is not a serious activity, with any 'proper' ways of doing it. Even nails are okay if used deliberately and thoughtfully (see my sash cramp rack, for example). It is something to play with. It should be fun.