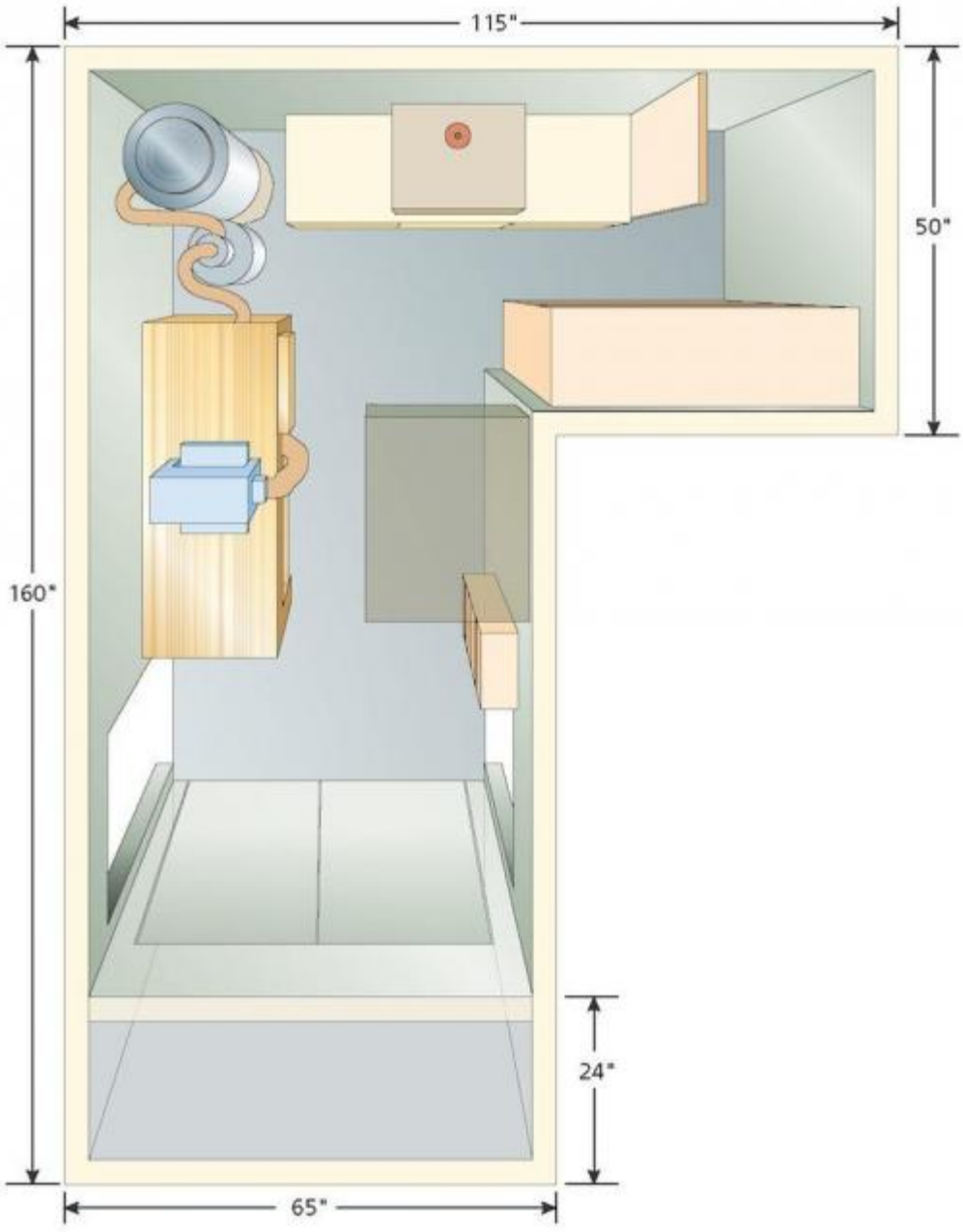
How To Setup A Tiny Workshop In An Apartment

(With Less Than 9x9 Feet Of Space!)

For many years in the past, I've worked full-time in industrial design, almost exclusively at the computer, and found I was really missing working with real tools. As a lad, I had really enjoyed woodworking in high school but never did anything with wood since, other than home improvements.

On a whim, in 1996, I decided to take a furniture making fundamentals class at NAIT, a trade and technology college in Edmonton, reasoning that winters are long here, and what better way to pass one than by learning something useful. The course and instructor were excellent, and it really inspired me to continue learning and honing my craft. Eventually, I ran out of courses to take, so decided to further pursue the hobby at home, and therein lay the problem.


115"
50"
160"
24"
65"

Woodshop in a condo?

Years ago, I lived in a high-rise condominium in downtown Edmonton, and didn't have a spare room to convert into a workshop. And besides, who ever heard of doing serious woodworking in a high rise? I had a fairly roomy walk-in closet that I decide to repurpose for a workshop.

So now I had a whopping 75 sq. ft., split into an L shape, to play with. Nothing was more than 5' wide, and I had to cram wood storage, tools, supplies, and most importantly dust control, into the space. Oh, I nearly forgot, a workbench would be nice too. Surprisingly, it was much easier to do than I thought it would be. I was able to repurpose the various existing shelf and closet furniture for tool and supplies storage, and reworked an old chest of drawers for additional space for a power tool storage center.

I realized right away that dust control would be critical because, well, the closet doesn't actually have a

door, just a curtain, and it joins the master bedroom directly. Woodworking inevitably leads to dust, and while she-who-must-be-obeyed usually indulges me in my passions, it's pushing my luck to expect her to put up with a visible layer of mahogany dust on the 400-count Egyptian cotton bed sheets – especially when she's in them.

Lots of Considerations – Because the master bedroom was directly beside Adams' small shop, he had to take dust and noise very seriously. He also had to learn how far was too far when it came to temporarily moving unused tools and machinery out of his shop and into the bedroom.

First, control the dust

First off was a small wet/dry vac and cyclone, which nicely fit out of the way under the workbench. Then a dust collector, which fits neatly at the end of the bench, also completely out of the way. Finally, a dust filter, which I bolted to the ceiling so it's also out of the way. Total floor space requirement for all of this? Only 30" by 20", which is hardly any sacrifice at all.

Dust Control *– Adams put dust control at the top of the priority list. His main line of defence is a small dust collector, which gets used often. Next is a cyclone connected to his wet/dry vacuum, then a hanging air filter. A broom and dust pan are used to clean up the larger chips. If Adams cleans the dust up as soon as it's made, there's much less likelihood of it entering the bedroom.*

For noise reduction reasons, if I need to use serious dust control, I will usually limit this to the dust collector only, which I find is by far the most effective

method. I finagle fittings so I can use this with just about anything I use that produces dust, including jigsaws and sanders. For dust and shavings cleanup, my most important tool is – you guessed it – a broom, which is way more effective, and much quieter, than my little vac, although it too has a place of course, especially for removing fine dust from wood after sanding it.

An unexpected bonus was that I discovered that if I drew the curtain across the door into the workshop from the bedroom, it would suck into the workshop a bit, indicating negative pressure. This meant that not only would dust not easily travel out, neither would odours, so now I could also do my finishing in there and found that even oil-based finishes don't smell up the place. I do use an organic vapours mask of course, as I'm really sensitive to those types of odours. Provided the curtain is left across the door, you can't smell a thing outside of the workshop itself. I think the toilet fan is venting the space even when not running

so there is air circulation, so no lingering oil-based finishing odours.

Reducing noise

The second biggest issue is noise, given that I have neighbours either side, and also above and below me. The solution to this is multi-fold and actually quite doable. First, I ensure I only make noise during reasonable hours. This means I don't use the routers or planer much after 7 p.m., or before noon on weekends. That sounds restrictive, but it's just a matter of planning, so I try to do the power planing or routing in a single session, after having rough-cut all the wood for a project first. The only complaint I ever had about the noise was one evening when someone banged on their ceiling (my floor), presumably with a broom handle, when I was doing some heavy chiseling with a mallet late one evening. I got the message pretty quick so now time-restrict that activity too.

The noisiest combination of equipment will be the

planer and dust collector, but I did leave them running one day then went into the hallway outside my suite and couldn't actually hear anything. Luckily, noise doesn't seem to travel well in a condo. Concrete floors and walls obviously help, and I'm pretty sure the all-wood style condos would pose serious problems in this regard.

Moveable machinery

Looking in from the bedroom, you will see the workshop and, beyond that, the ensuite bathroom, which doubles as my sharpening station. Looking out from the workshop, you see the king size bed – bigger is better as I can temporarily place stuff I don't immediately need for the project at hand on the bed – hopefully when my wife isn't actually in it.

This raises a really crucial point with this whole mini-work- shop issue: everything you have in the way of tools, including power tools, must be easily moved to

free up space in the shop. Equipment must be as light as possible as it's a much easier task to carry it through a doorway single-handed. Why do you need to move all this stuff into the bedroom anyway? Well the workshop doubles as a storage area. Want to use it as a work- shop? Well, you have to empty it of the larger items that are stored there. Sounds onerous, doesn't it? The reality is that I can make this magical conversion in about a minute flat; I only have to heft the stuff about 15' and it's out of the way. And nothing I use weighs more than about 60 pounds so it's really easy for me to lift it alone.

One final trick to free up room in the shop is that I leave all my offcuts in a big wheelie-bin, so it too can be moved into the bedroom.

Power tools vs. hand tools

At first I didn't think I could get away with using power tools so I decided to use only hand tools. I bought hand planes galore, saws, saw sharpening

systems, every type of chisel, and anything I could convince myself I needed to do this hobby properly. When I realized I could get away with using some power equipment, I bought a router, router table, a small drill press, a thickness planer and a scroll saw, as well as the usual collection of hand-held power tools.

And there's the first big lesson, which is to decide up front whether you're going to be a power-tool-only, hand-tool-only, or combination type of guy, because you'll save a lot of money if you have a clear idea of which of these you are going to be. I'm a combination type, and will always default to using the powered equipment without shame if I can do so. But I do like the hand tools too, and there's really a place for both in any project.

Having said that, I must confess I bought way too many hand tools, especially planes, and could do with selling a bunch of them I'll never use off. But they're

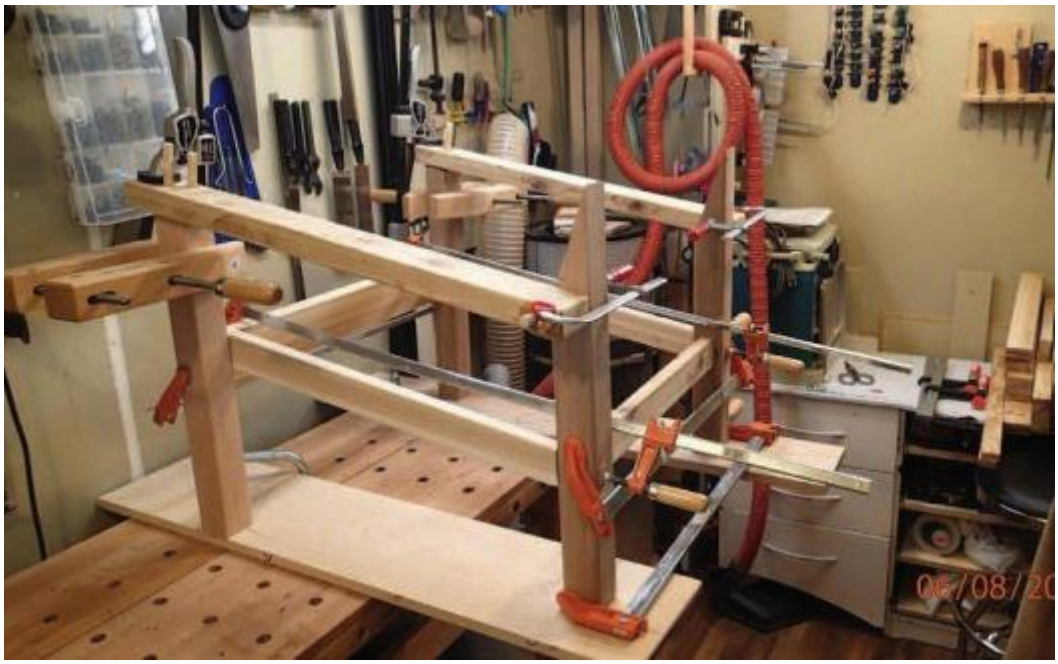
beautiful little beasts and I love fondling them and admiring the design and quality, so I probably won't of course.

I will never own a jointer, and while I do own a portable table saw, it's in the building superintendent's workshop. He lets me use it there under sufferance, providing it's not too often and only during the day, so I try to use it as little as possible. Again it boils down to good planning, so I try to cut all the wood required for a project in a single session.

I use my planer, a sled and hot glue to flatten the faces of the wood I'm using, and edge joint on the router table if possible. Failing this, I'll use the table saw, or my Veritas 22" jointer plane. I don't really get why people are so hung up on jointers, as they're cumbersome, expensive, and high-maintenance beasts at best, and usually only accommodate narrow wood. My planer takes wood up to 13" wide, and the sled and hot glue do a great job of flattening any face perfectly. I

believe the jointer is the least essential piece of equipment in any hobbyist's workshop, but maybe that's just because I can't have one.

Skip the Jointer *– Because a jointer takes up a lot of space, and has only one purpose, Adams opted to make a planer sled for dressing the first face of rough lumber. He uses hand tools, or other methods, to true one edge. Hot glue helps keep the board stationary during the dressing operation.*



Work in Progress *– While Adams is limited to smaller items he still has enough room to build a lot of household furniture. Here, a chair is underway, with just enough room to approach the chair from all sides.*

Project list

Finally, what do I actually make in the shop? Well pretty much anything, providing it's not too huge. I tend to shamelessly plagiarize other people's designs. While I have some of the manual skills needed, I am not inherently artistic (what's wrong with wearing a purple tie with a pink shirt anyway?) so have difficulty

visualizing correct proportions, matching woods, colours, etc. Over the years I've made many tables, chairs, a series of tournament grade chessboards, fancy cutting boards, stools, jewellery boxes, cabinets and doors, even a curved laminated table. I also enjoy working with veneers and inlays when I want to do something really intricate and fiddly.

Finished Product – Adams admits that, while he has a strong grasp of the technical skills required to make quality furniture, he doesn't always have the design sense to come up with his own high-end designs. This table was inspired by Enrico Konig's Arc Coffee Table (www.kurve.ca).

If you’re determined enough, and don’t mind moving things around when required, you really don’t need a big workshop. In fact, you’ll find that in a mini workshop like mine, you’ll really get to love just how close at hand everything is.