

Stephen Robertson

The bench

At one end of the bench in the garage sits
a miniature wooden eight-drawer chest
given to me (budding carpenter) as a child
for nails and screws. At some more ordered
stage of my life (certainly long before
the children arrived) I divided each drawer
into four or more sections, with plywood strips
carefully cut and glued. And labelled the front—
Nails: tacks, panel pins, ovals and round;
Screws: small, size 6, size 8, large.

Beside it stands another of much later age:
a plastic chest with small, clear plastic drawers
—unlabelled, but the nuts and bolts and washers
are visible within.

Gathered round about, a motley crew
of categories in boxes, jars and tins:
the larger bolts and nuts and washers,
flooring nails, staples, cuphooks, clouts
masonry nails, screw-eyes, picture hooks
wallplugs, rivets, self-tapping metal screws,
rubber tap washers and fibre sealing rings.

The jars hang from their lids, nailed to
the shelf above. The boxes and tins are stacked
in increasing disorder along the back
of the bench, as far as the window.

Some of the contents and all of the containers once had other uses. The plastic boxes were made for slides or toothpowder, tins for cocoa or throat lozenges or metal polish, jars for all sorts of jams and pickles. Washers and nuts and bolts and screws and hooks were saved from all sorts of deconstructed objects: defunct household gadgets, broken furniture, shelves no longer serving any useful purpose.

The clutter covering the remainder of the bench is piled uncontained and unconstrained.

Unused parts from finished or abandoned projects, pieces half-constructed or half-deconstructed, for some architectural or mechanical purpose now half-forgotten. Electrical components. A pair of cast-iron supports for an old high-level lavatory cistern, wonderfully ornate. A pump and valves from a washing machine. An electric fan. The dial of a clock. Another dial, from a stand-on weight scale. A device for demonstrating electricity to children: a wooden board on which are mounted battery box, switches, lights, buzzers, plugs and connecting leads. Another pair of brackets, this time for a wooden curtain pole, two and a half inches in diameter (the pole itself and four-inch rings surely to be found elsewhere in the garage).

The bench was once a kitchen dresser, already ancient in the damp basement of the Peckham house that we bought some forty years ago. One of the legs had rotted half away. But a new piece of four by two turned it into a perfect workbench—the cuts and holes and scars from saws and hammers and screwed-on wood- and metal-working vices added to those caused by generations of kitchen knives.

Clearance time. What can I possibly salvage
from all this?