

Feature



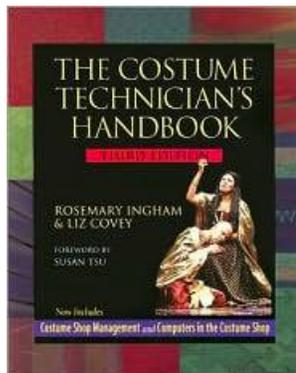
Remodeling a Costuming Workspace

Gail Wolfenden-Steib*

A professional theatrical costumer talks about how she applied principals of organizing a costume shop to remodeling her own personal costuming workspace.

Professional costume shops come in a number of shapes and sizes. An efficient and functional small in-home shop may be created by taking the best concepts from the larger professional spaces and scaling them to fit. Running a business out of a small space is possible as long as it is kept organized and accessible. As a small business owner with very limited space I can tell you that investing in quality storage is vital.

In *The Costume Technician's Handbook*, Rosemary Ingham and Liz Covey cover the basics of setting up a large scale professional costume shop. "Even though each costume shop is unique, all shops



contain universal concerns, such as light, electricity and machinery." [p.3] Some of the points they bring up are extremely relevant to the home set up.

The first topic of conversation is the general space. The home based shop doesn't have the luxury of determining how much space is needed to create the optimum size shop. The question is how much space is available to be dedicated to costume production? A closet, a laundry area, a spare bedroom, a loft space or a garage are all examples of potential shop locations. Once the size and location of the space is determined there are key points that need to be addressed.

The work space needs to be adequately illuminated. In an ideal world the area would be lit with natural light as well as incandescent. In large spaces, fluorescent light is a good choice to use as fill light. Warm light (the kind created by natural and incandescent light) is preferable to cool light (fluorescent). Color, pattern and texture are easily discernible in warm light. Access to electricity is equally important.

Whenever possible, power strips should be mounted to the wall or simply kept off the floor. Tangles of power cords are difficult to clean around and can pose a tripping hazard. Power draw should also be taken into account. Running multiple high draw items (irons and steamers) off the same circuit has the potential of blowing fuses.



The [Childsplay](#) costume shop in Tempe Arizona is one of the best laid out that I have ever worked in. Note the organization of the different areas. Two of the three cutting tables have hydraulic systems to raise and lower the work surface. Power supplies drop down from the ceiling rather than come up from the floor. There is also a wall of windows on the right side of the room in addition to both incandescent and fluorescent lighting. There is a separate wig/makeup room, wardrobe room, dye/paint room and costume storage all connected to the main shop space in the picture.

Permanent cutting tables should be accessible on all four sides whenever possible. The table should stand approximately 10 inches higher than the average dining table and be at least 45" wide and ideally 6' long. The space under the cutting table is great for storage. Multiple metal filing cabinets are also useful to build your table on if portability and space are issues. All that's needed is a piece of plywood and some two by fours to frame it out and raise the top as needed. Cinderblocks may also be used to raise the height of the work surface.

Top your work surface off with a piece of [Homasote](#) (also known as sound board or wall board—available at the local home improvement store) covered with a piece of muslin. This provides a surface that can be pinned into that is much less expensive than the cork table top seen in a lot of pro shops.



If you wander down the insulation aisle at your local home improvement store, you will be met with a big stack of Homasote. Ask the kind folks there to cut it down to size. You can also bring it home, use a box cutter to score it your size, and then snap it off just like dry wall.



Childsplay's well-organized notions area has labeled storage drawers.

A temporary cutting table option is a banquet table propped up on cinderblocks with a piece of Homasote on top.

Machine areas are frequently set up based on the location of outlets. Some professional shops locate all the machines in one area. Others cluster machines around a cutting table. Whatever set up is chosen it is important that the machines have power, adequate task lighting, and are on a stable cabinet or table. Thread should be stored close by. Wall racks, storage towers or well labeled clear storage boxes are all great for thread storage. Pressing areas also need to be near available outlets and the machine area. Supplies should be stored in an area convenient to the sewing area.

Ask the following questions while organizing supplies: Can it be seen? Is it accessible? Is the space being maximized? Does the organization make sense? Make the most out of wall space by taking storage from floor to ceiling. Frequently used items

should be kept up front and visible within easy reach. Less frequently used items can be stored higher up and behind.

Notions are sorted and stored by item in small clear tubs or placed into a drawer unit that has been labeled according to its contents. These can be mounted on the wall or set on top of cabinets. Thread spools may be sorted by color on spool racks and mounted on the wall. Back stock should be clearly labeled to keep duplicate purchases to a minimum. Serger cones are also stored by color on racks, shelves or in tubs.

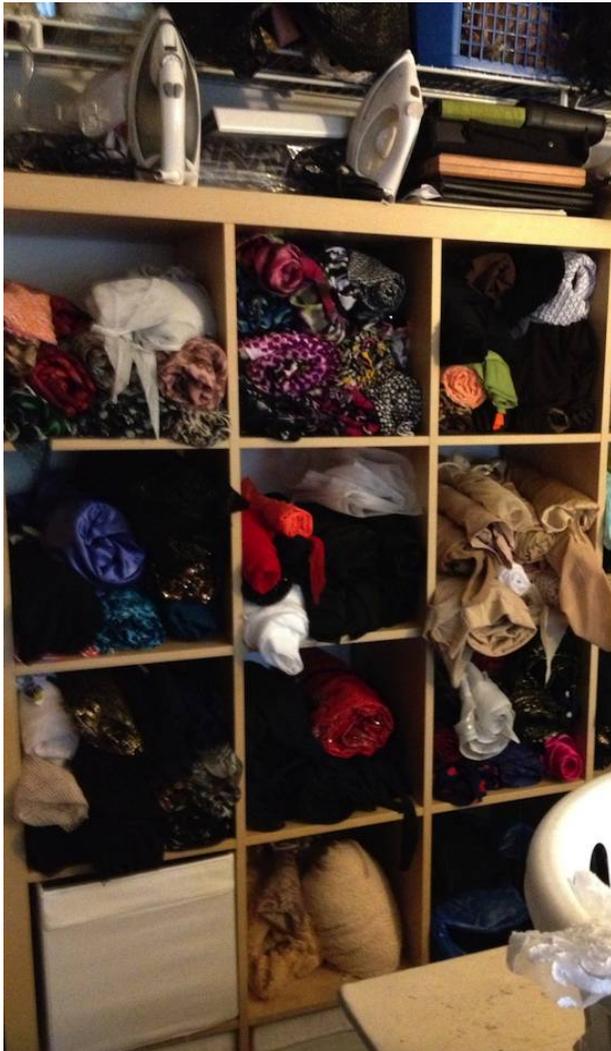
Fabrics should be sorted in a way that makes the most sense to the individual. This can be by color, by fabric type or end use. No matter how the fabric is sorted it should be properly labeled if it is stored in tubs. Open shelving storage of fabric rolls or flat



Childsplay's "wall of fabric" is one way to organize fabric scraps or shorter yardages. As a project is finished the extra fabric is placed in a box and labeled. Bolt storage and rolled fabric is stored elsewhere.

folds allows for a quick scan of what is available at any given time.

My in home shop is located in a spare bedroom and is a dedicated space. It houses all my machines, notions, fabric,



This is an example of adapting storage concepts from professional shops. Ikea is a great source of shelving. All the fabric is rolled and visible.

accessories, costume stock, dress forms (most of them) and patterns. The room is approximately 10ft x11ft with a slightly vaulted ceiling. It is actually quite small, but I have built a full length ballet out of it not to mention some rather large plays. I do my



The metal storage shelves hold tubs of material, and drawers with notions and paints. I plan to replace them with more Expedite shelving.

client fittings in my spare bedroom and have it set up with a floor to ceiling mirror and the tools needed for hems and alteration marking (it's still a bedroom). Clients always seem amazed at what I can accomplish in the shop given the amount that I have stuffed in the room.



To make the most of the space I have adopted a vertical storage concept when possible. Shelving units run along two walls of the space. Business

fabric is rolled and stored on an [Expedite](#) unit purchased from Ikea. It consists of 25 cubbies in a 6ft x 6ft unit. Fabrics have been organized by type and color ie—all black stretch lycra is stored together. This allows fast and easy access of the fabrics on hand. Before the fabric was organized this way I found myself constantly duplicating fabrics. There is a high shelf above the unit for storage of accessories that are not accessed regularly.

The entire wall is filled with storage. An additional area houses 'personal stock' fabrics. These tend to be more expensive than the fabrics I routinely use for customer items. The metal shelves that run across three quarters of the other wall may look like a disorganized group of tubs on the top but in truth it is not. I try to store items in



Table from thrift store covered with Hemasote and muslin does double and sometimes triple duty.

clear tubs whenever possible. I also use every inch of space up to the ceiling in the room. The wooden drawer unit on one of the shelves is part of an old shelving system from Ikea. It houses notions and paints.

The two shelving units to the left that are just out of view hold my flat folds. I plan to replace two of these units with the Ikea Expedite system as soon as finances permit. The Ikea units are not as deep as the metal shelves and will provide more floor space

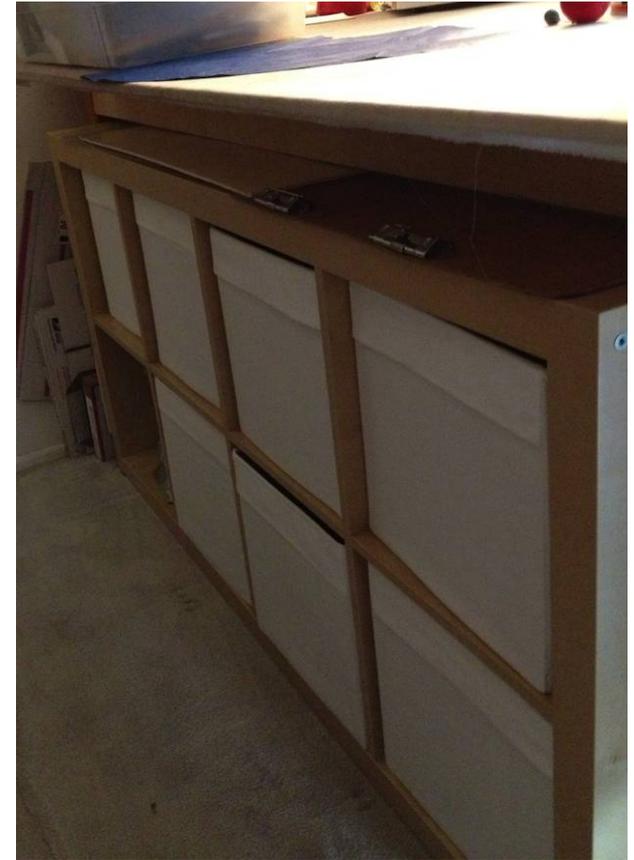
around the cutting table and help keep fabric from getting lost on the shelves.

The ease of access to materials has helped trim the duplicate purchases down to almost nothing and has decreased the time I spend with customers looking for specific fabrics for custom orders. The vertical storage also has maximized the functionality of the room by giving me more floor space around the cutting table.

Due to the room dimensions my cutting table surface (left) is 5ft x 4ft, and is only accessible on three sides. It also serves double and sometimes triple duty as a machine table and an ironing table. The actual table base was a thrift store find. My



Power strip is tied to table leg with zip ties to prevent tripping and make it easier to clean..



Under-table storage uses another Ikea shelving product to store smaller pieces of fabric and current projects.

best guess is it was part of a store display unit in a previous life. The Homasote top is covered in two layers of muslin. Under-table storage uses another Ikea shelving product (above). I currently store smaller pieces of fabric by use (linings, power net and illusion, etc.) in the bins, as well as current client projects and person projects.

I use power strips exclusively in my shop. The power strip nearest my cutting table is attached to a leg with zip ties (left).

By mounting the power supply off the floor I am less likely to trip on cords and it is easier to clean around my primary work space. Additional power strips are located in the shelving units. The strips pull out when in use.

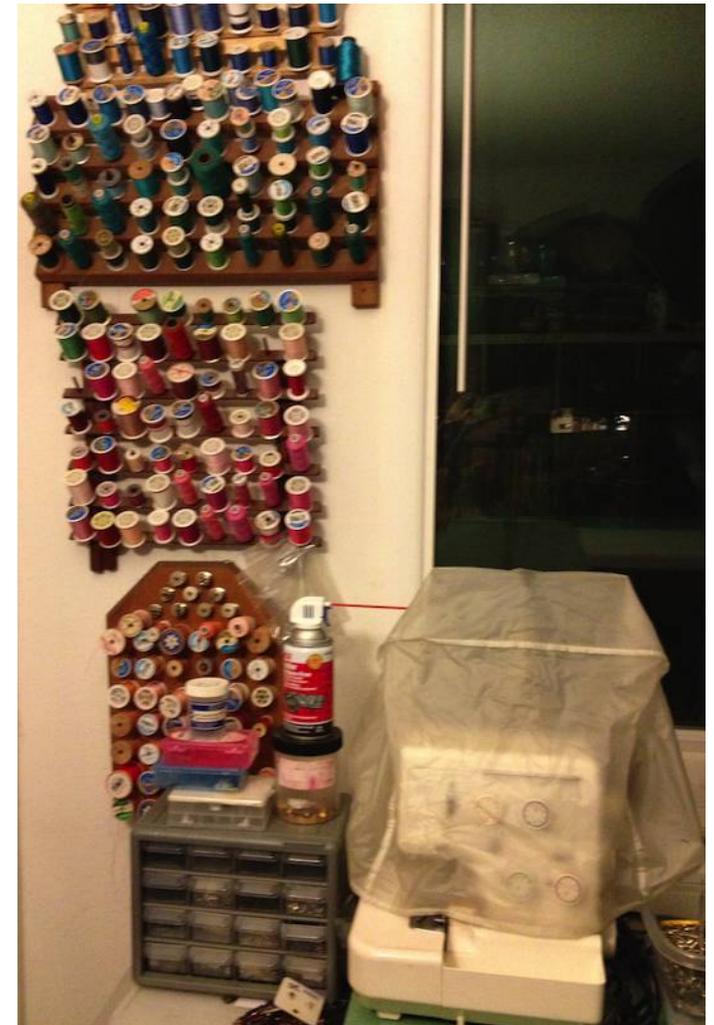


Table for industrial sewing machine sits under window. Cone thread storage and patterns sit to its left.

My Juki industrial (left) sits under the window in the room. This is the most logical placement. On either side of it are three drawer units that house cone thread. The three black milk crates hold frequently used patterns in well labeled 10in x 13in clasp envelopes. I have additional pattern cabinets to the right of the crates (just out of view).

I sort all my thread by colors and type and have it out on racks. Four out of the seven racks are pictured (right). The small gray drawer unit holds findings. One of my sergers lives on the Juki table. I have three home machines (they all like different fabrics), one industrial and two sergers that I may be using at any given time. When not in use these machines are stored either on the gray metal shelving units or on the floor under the cutting table.

Running a business out of a small space is possible as long as you keep it organized and accessible. If you can't find it you can't sell it. I can't tell you how many times I have ended up purchasing a duplicate item because the stock item was buried in a tub. Open shelves are great but things get lost. Tubs are also great until they become over stuffed or topple over. As



Thread racks on wall to left of window hold thread sorted by colors and types. Drawer to the left of the serger holds findings.

a business owner with very limited space, I can tell you that investing in quality storage is vital.

Gail Wolfenden-Steib is an award-winning theatrical costume designer based in Phoenix, Arizona.