

MICROSCOPIST MOVING ON...

On the first of October I signed on the dotted line and thus became owner of a small country house just a few minutes' drive from one of my favorite nature parks, Parc du Bic, in the Lower St-Lawrence region of Québec. At the same time, I was officially retiring from active duty in a Montréal photo store. By the end of the month, I had finally turned my back to the big City and moved to the country. At long last...



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The house of my dreams...

When first visited back in July, the house had struck me as just the right size for a single old curmudgeon like myself. The first floor had an open space living and dining room, as well as kitchen, water closet and a master bedroom that could be used as my office. The second floor had the bathroom and four smaller rooms. And I do mean *small*; the smallest is barely 8x8 ½ feet... But what they lacked in size was compensated by their number.

While around a century old, the house was in excellent condition, with a new roof and windows and a concrete basement equipped with a workshop space. The inside needed a coat of paint and minor repairs, plus some modifications to make it suitable to my needs and taste, but these were only cosmetic considerations.

While my former studio, set in a child bedroom, had to house camera equipment, microscopes, library and fossil collection, in my new residence the work space could be split in two rooms, one for the studio/lab for the cameras and microscopes, with the library and fossil collection set in the smallest available room. Any extra could be stored in the basement. That left me with two bedrooms, including one for the occasional guests.



The bedroom that would become my studio-laboratory

But what exactly is needed in a studio/laboratory? First and foremost, you need some kind of work space, a sturdy table or bench on which to set the microscopes or, in my case, the subjects to be photographed. Next, you need some power, and in my new studio that is something I had to work on as there was no electrical plug in the room. If all you're planning to do is microscopy the wall color is unimportant. However, a photographer needs to think about wall color as it can affect the pictures being taken in that room. In that respect my old studio, while adequate, had a major drawback: when I moved in the walls were green; not knowing how long I would be living there, I never bothered to repaint them. As a consequence, every time something metallic was photographed the green color would be reflected in the metal, forcing some post-production to remove the color cast.

Next, you need some space for any paraphernalia linked to your activity. For the lab, it means space for the microscopes, with power bars to plug them in, and plenty of drawers for reagents, slides, micro tools and the like. As for the photographer, enough space is needed for reproduction tables, light tables, studio lights, maybe a backdrop or two, and of course, plenty of closet space for the equipment.

So, the first order of business in the new studio was to come up with a neutral color scheme. Ceiling and walls are now either white or light grey. The workspace itself was recuperated from the old studio and has a black countertop. The drawers were originally varnished wood, but since two new drawers were added I have decided to eventually paint them all black.



My old studio in Montréal

Besides being small, another particularity of the second floor rooms is their slanted ceilings, what local real-estate agents call a "one story and a half" house. People unaccustomed to these houses tend to bang their heads a few times before learning to keep their heads down... Having grown up in a similar old house I was quite familiar with this idiosyncrasy. On top of it, the studio was designed with this slanted ceiling in mind.



The studio during renovations, and once completed.

The work table has been set alongside the short wall, which mitigate the disadvantage. The slanted ceiling can still be cause for some headaches, literally, but after a few bumps I now have the reflex to bend down and sit when my intention is to work with the microscopes.





When I first started to put the old workbench back together it turned out to be a bit too tall. Microscopes placed on it could not be pushed back far enough to allow some empty space to work in front of them. After some measurements, I figured that lowering it by four inches would allow most of my microscopes to be pushed along the back wall, plus it would place the oculars at a comfortable height when sitting down. So the whole thing was flipped to its side and four inches cut off the legs.

The workspace still needs a new coat of paint, but it's functional.

Even with this adjustment my tallest microscope, the inverted Wild M40, cannot be pushed back and currently stays in front of a wooden box containing a collectible piece, the Zeiss Stativ XV, which was featured in a former article on Micscape. I may figure out some other way of setting it up in the future, (like a small table in a corner) but as it is not the microscope that is used most often, the current arrangement will suffice for the moment. The finished studio has all it needs to be functional. The eight foot long work table left four feet at its right end for a light table and extra drawers; you never have too many drawers...



The closet space.



Slide collection next to the Stativ XV box.

When space is limited you must learn to maximize what you have. The closet was extensively modified. A row of shelves was built on the left side, with just enough space between them to slide hard cases containing photographic equipment. To the right, the closet extends to the slanted part of the room; more shelves were added with an eye on the size of items to be stored: the large case with studio flash at the bottom, then a shelf with boxes of miscellaneous items used only on occasion, and a final shelf for more commonly used photo

equipment. While my former studio had a library with plenty of shelf space I had to find a new place to keep my collection of microscope slides. It is now wedged in a corner, between the wall and my Stativ XV microscope. The books pertaining to microscopy are now in the next room.



The library.

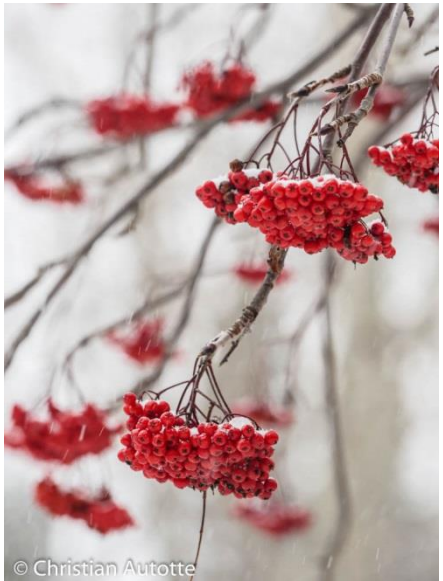
The library was also built around the slanted ceiling, with a row of shelves along the short wall. An old laptop computer is good enough to hold the software used in managing the fossil collection, hidden in a closet to the right of this image. It's another tight space, but adequate.

If life gives you lemon, make lemonade... In other words, learn to go with the flow and make the best of a situation. My new house may be small, and its rooms less than ideal, but they are quite enough to keep me going for the next 20 years...



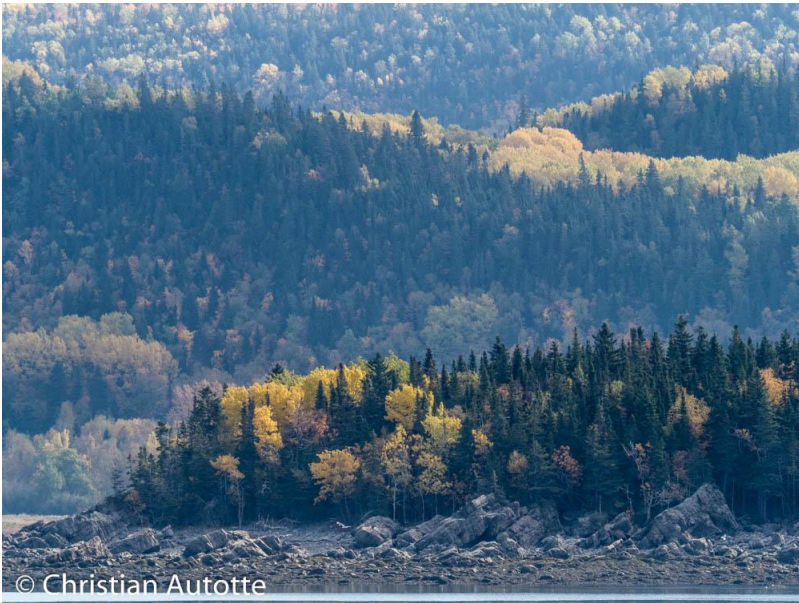
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Eider Ducks, hens with broods.



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Mountain Ash, fruits in snow.



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Mountains rising from the sea, at fall.



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Common seal.



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My house is just behind the second cape...



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A curious red fox.

As you can see from these pictures, Parc du Bic is a paradise for a nature photographer like me...



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Gammarus, full of eggs.



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Worm found in mud, 100x, phase contrast.



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Strange worm found in mud, two pictures assembled, 40x.

I have found some microscope subjects already, but these are from previous visits. I look forward to explore the neighboring sea shores in the years ahead. Can't wait for spring...



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Grass-like algae.



© Christian Autotte

Grass-like algae, at 400x.



Snow Crane Fly, January 5, at -6C.

Meanwhile, I ski and walk and take pictures, including this amazing insect, the snow crane fly. It's a fly that has lost its wings during its evolution. It lives in the air space that forms under the snow and comes out every now and then to look for a mate. Pumped full of antifreeze, it can be found walking on the snow when the temperature is around -5 to -10C. And believe me, this little thing walks fast enough to make it difficult to keep up for a good photograph...

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