



designer's notebook

Better built-ins

SQUARE BOXES WITH SCULPTURAL PRESENCE

BY DEAN PULVER

Some woodworkers lament doing kitchens, which can seem like so much utilitarian drudgery. But to me a kitchen represents an irresistible opportunity—I think of it as a chance to design and build a large sculptural object while being paid a fair salary. Just because I'm creating a room with lots of built-ins doesn't mean I have to succumb to an overly symmetrical and standardized arrangement. It's true that I build a lot of utilitarian plywood boxes along the way, but I relish the challenge of making those boxes add up to a space that, while functioning like a skillfully engineered machine, has a flowing, organic feeling to it and has plenty of shapes, tones, and textures to please your eye and attract your touch.

I built this kitchen, the adjoining office space, and a pool-house bathroom for a house in Oregon. As I do in all my work, I aimed to balance straight lines with curves, harder shapes with softer ones, and smooth planes with textured surfaces. I built the rooms for a client who grew up in an old house with excellent woodwork, and with that in mind I chose traditional frame-and-panel as the foundation of the kitchen design. To lighten the effect of all that frame-and-panel, I used flat panels with minimal reveals and built them of maple.

The kitchen is a long, narrow space, so I punctuated the main wall of cabinets with two sets of open shelving. By introducing open space and a splash of bright color from the ceramics stored there, I brought variation and visual punch to a wall of cabinets that might otherwise have seemed overlong and monotonous. I used shelving at both ends of the sink counter in a similar way, adding open space, color, and a couple of curves to balance out the row of closed cabinets below.

I often use areas of carved texture in my built-ins to give them personality and approachability, and to create a lively interaction as light changes during the day. This client didn't want carving, however, so I left the cabinets untextured. To capture some of that responsiveness to changing light that carving offers, I chose maple that had a very vibrant curl.



Add curves where you can. To give even the most functional kitchen a lively personality, Pulver balances the straight lines and flat planes with curved and shaped elements. In this kitchen, where shaping the cabinets was not an option, he injected an organic touch and a bit of asymmetry by carving handles for the drawers and doors.



I'm also partial to including curved counters and cabinet faces in my built-ins to avoid too many straight lines. But there was no room for curving the cabinets in this kitchen. Instead, I relied on hand-shaped pulls to provide the curves, the asymmetry, and the seductive tactile appeal that I find vital to a successful set of built-ins. I varied the pulls in size and offset them in height.

The office next to the kitchen was roomier, and I took advantage of that to create curving cabinets and counters. These too were free of carving, but they

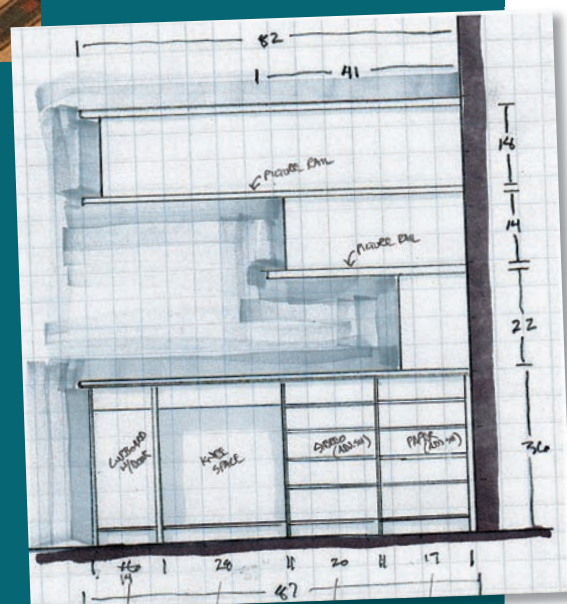
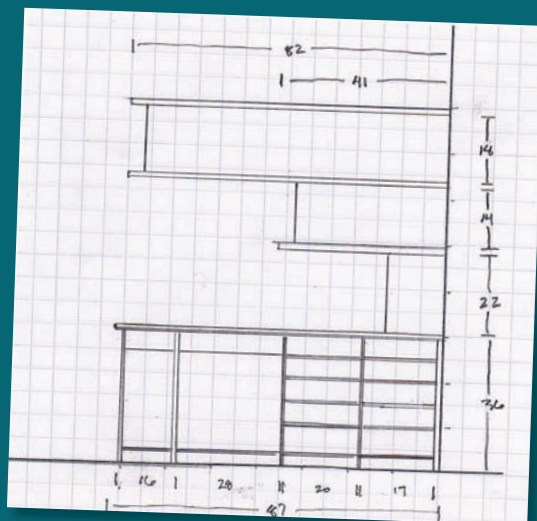
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had a softer, more organic feeling and flow. I built them all of cherry to add warmth to the space.

I decided to partially define the desk area with a large set of upper shelves. To keep the look of the room airy and to provide a wide, unbroken desk surface, which the client needed for reading blueprints, I cantilevered the shelving from the wall. I built the unit like an

Drawings can be decisive.

Pulver wants his clients to see in his drawings the handmade touch they'll find in his finished work. With a few strokes of an artist's marker, he can give even a no-frills shop drawing like this one of the office cabinets and shelves a feeling of depth and character. Although he does many concept sketches by hand, Pulver often finalizes designs in SketchUp. The resulting drawings are stiff, however, so if he wants to show them to a client he'll trace them freehand.



designer's notebook continued



Function is foremost. Pulver always aims to elicit feelings of warmth, flow, and visual excitement with his work, but he is also tightly focused on function. He designed the legs of his trestle table to have a hand-shaped, organic feeling, but also equipped them with low-profile casters, so the table can easily be moved for access to the deep drawers built into the banquette. In the pebble bathroom, the open shelving on the left offers effortless access to towels, but also provides a visual counterpoint to the closed, curved cabinets on the right.



I-beam—it has a plywood back that acts as a stiffening spine and open, solid cherry shelves on both sides. To make this improbable arrangement work, I drilled right through the exterior wall and bolted into the shelving unit from outside.

For the bathroom, I paired a set of curly maple cabinets with the pebbled floor and shower. Evoking the origin of the river-washed stones, I used some maple that has an almost liquid ripple to it, and I gave the cabinets a swelling front line. Here, as with the cabinets in the office, I was able to create a curving front face on the bathroom unit simply by angling the fronts of the cases and cutting curves into the solid-wood drawer fronts. And to avoid interrupting the flowing lines of the cabinet's face, I carved finger pulls into the ends of the drawer fronts. □

Dean Pulver builds custom furniture, built-ins, and sculpture in El Prado, N.M.

