

The Illustrated Cutlist

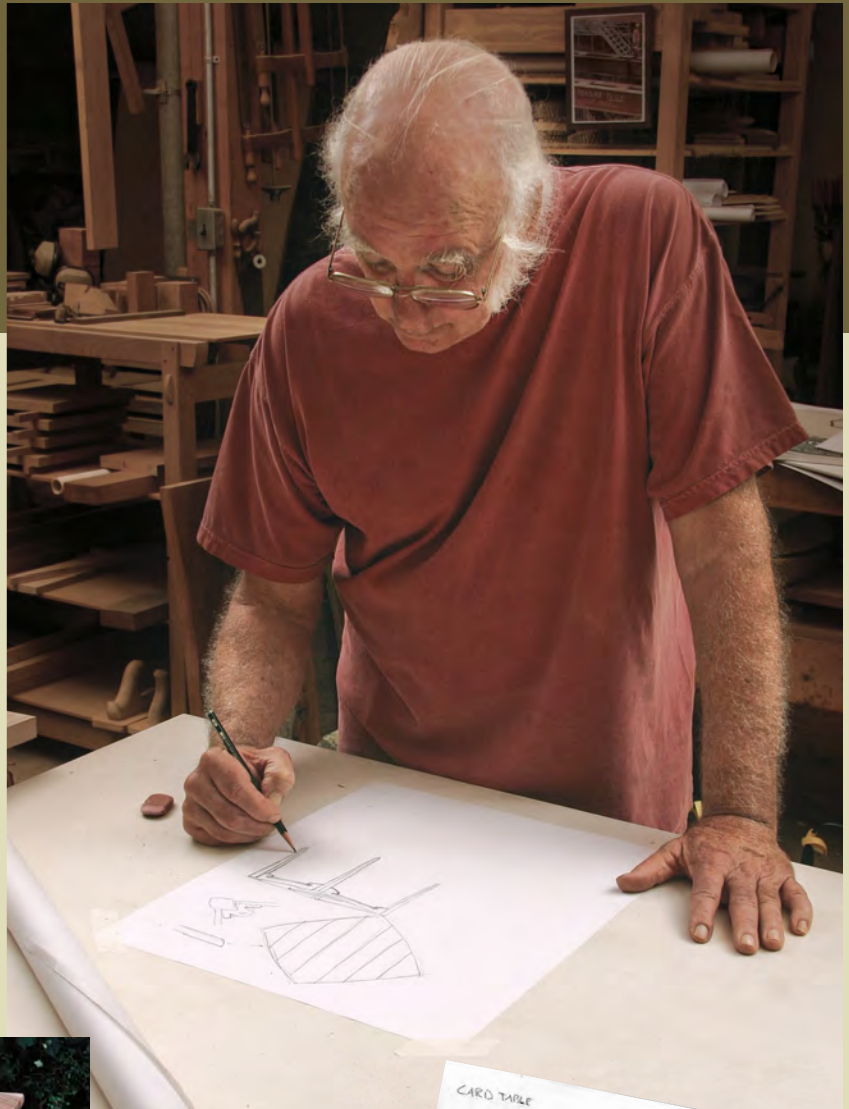
Innovative approach turbocharges this staid staple of the craft

BY HANK GILPIN

A couple of years ago I asked a friend of mine, an excellent craftsman with decades of experience, to build a piece of furniture that I had designed. In addition to measured drawings of the piece, I gave him a cutlist. The next time we talked he said, “Yow, Gilpin, that cutlist of yours is an incredible tool! It made planning and building way simpler. Anyone in the shop could pick up the job at any point and understand it.” I was a little surprised, and it made me think about the method I developed for doing cutlists. So here it is.

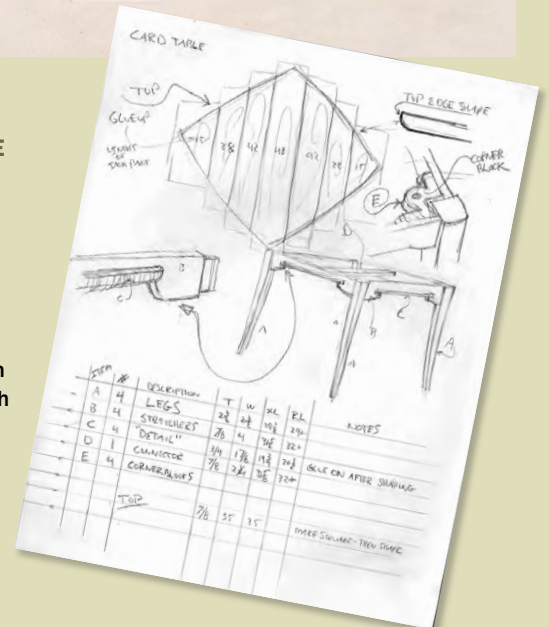
The illustration is essential

The most important element is a three-quarter-view freehand sketch of the piece on the same page with the parts list. Having that sketch right there makes it much easier to envision each part. It’s also very helpful when I’m selecting the wood and as I’m milling, cutting, shaping, and joining it. I include quick detail



A VISUAL GUIDE FOR BUILDING

For this veteran furniture maker, a cutlist is not just a jumble of numbers. Gilpin includes labeled sketches on the same sheet with the list of parts, enabling him to easily envision the piece and all its parts throughout the build.



Making an illustrated cutlist

ANATOMY OF A USEFUL CUTLIST

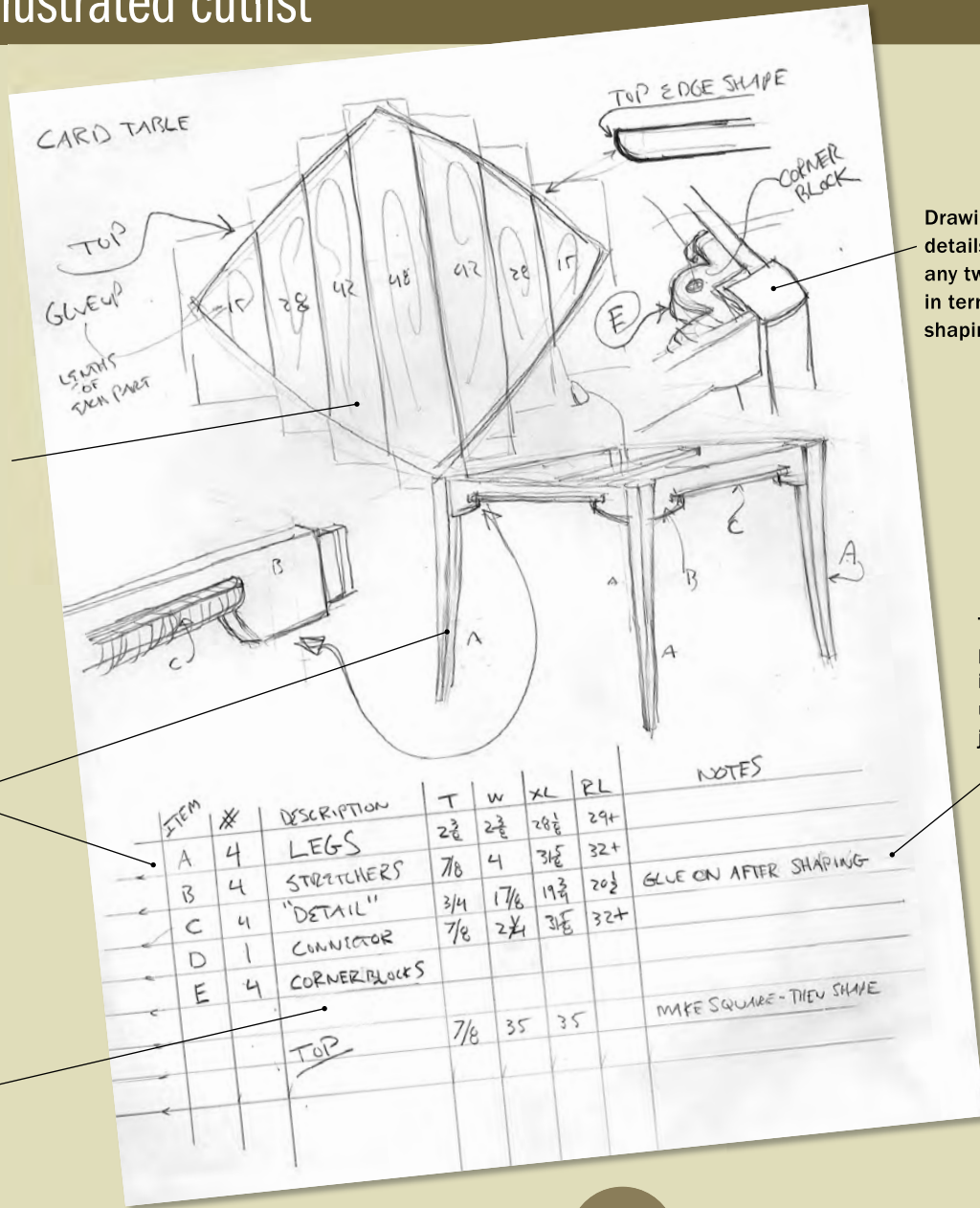
A freehand sketch brings the list of parts to life. All through the milling and building process it gives you a convenient reference image of the piece you're making.

Drawings of selected details illuminate any twists in the road in terms of milling, shaping, and joinery.

Each part gets a letter in the grid, on the sketch, and on the end grain of the workpiece.

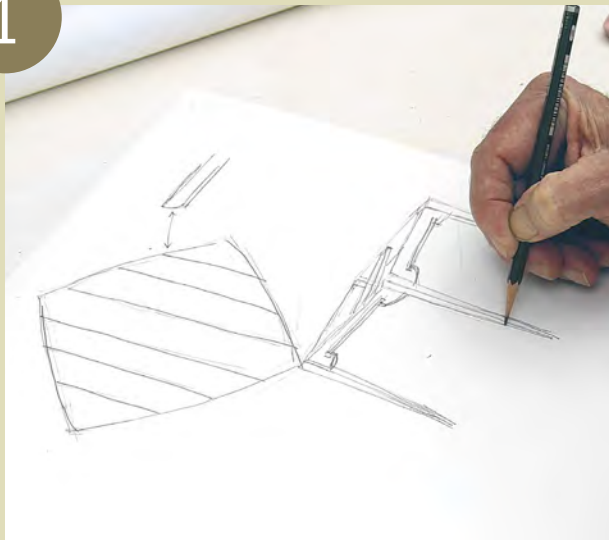
The Notes column provides a place for information about unusual shaping or joinery.

Parts are named on the list but labeled simply by letter on the workpiece, saving lots of writing and erasing.

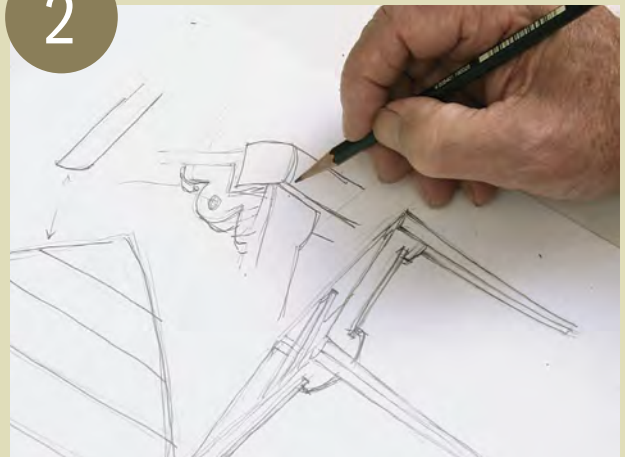


1

Start with a sketch. After designing the piece and doing full-scale shop drawings, Gilpin begins his cutlist with a three-quarter view freehand drawing.



2



Add prominent details. Where he feels they will be helpful for envisioning the way the piece is to be built, Gilpin adds quick sketches of certain details to the cutlist.

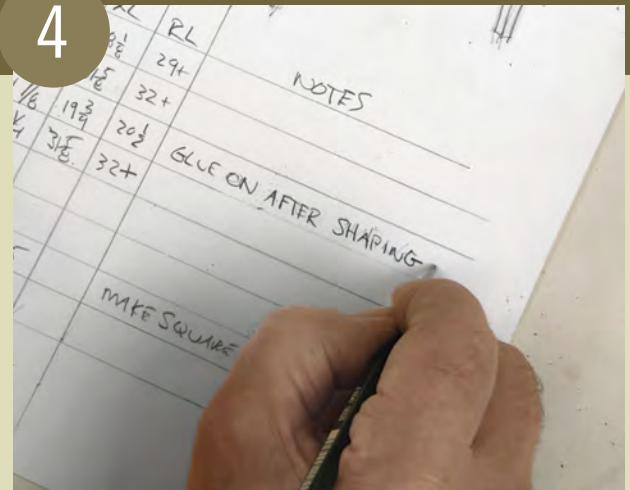
3

Alphabetize.

Parts are lettered to simplify labeling both on the drawing and on the workpieces. All parts shaped alike are lettered alike.

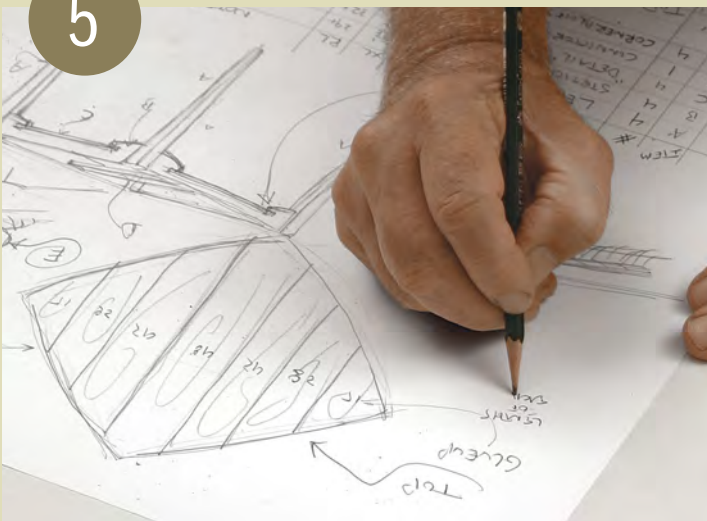


4



Take notes. Notes aren't always necessary, but sometimes they're key. Gilpin adds information in the Notes column for parts that will be milled, shaped, or glued up in an unusual way.

5



Focus on the less familiar. One of the detail sketches for Gilpin's table explains how the top will be glued up from narrow soft maple boards contrasting heartwood and sapwood.

drawings of joinery and shaping. These sketches are an invaluable reference during the job, but they don't take the place of full-scale shop drawings, which I do before making the cutlist.

Big, stiff sheet

What kind of paper should you create the cutlist on? It could be anything: scratch paper, a yellow lined pad, white printer paper, whatever works. I use 14-in. by 17-in. sketchpad sheets clipped to a piece of ¼-in. plywood. I like this size because it allows for a fairly large and detailed sketch along with the grid listing the parts. The plywood backer keeps the cutlist in good shape as it follows you through the job. And after using the cutlist I keep it in a stack with the others from over the years until the next time I make the same piece.

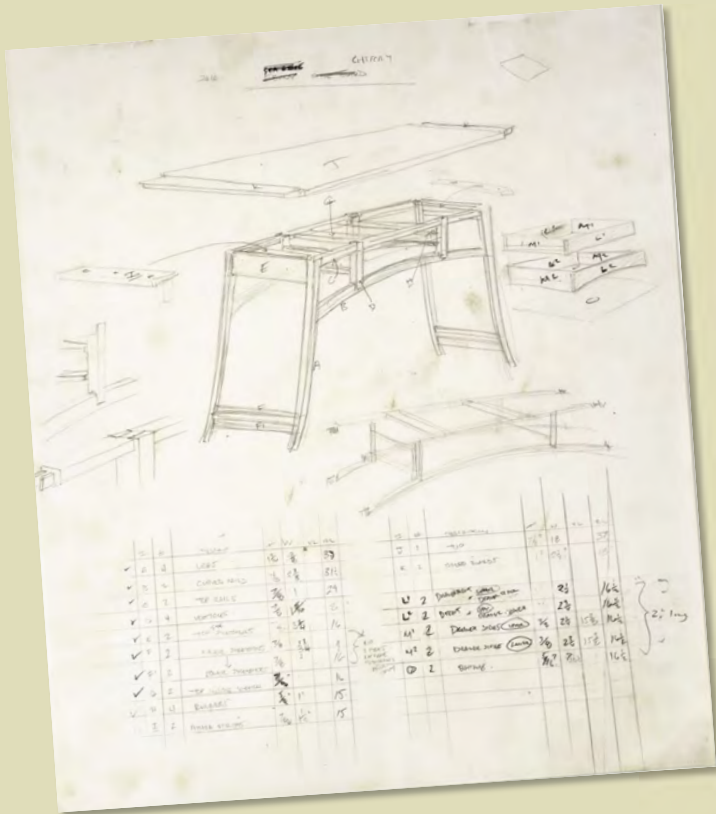
I make the grid with nine columns. The first column is left open, and I use it to make a checkmark when I've rough-cut the part. I cross the checkmark when I cut the part to final size.

6



Put it to use. The cutlist, providing a clear view of the finished piece and all of its parts, helps Gilpin make well-informed wood choices at the lumber rack.

Cutlist case studies

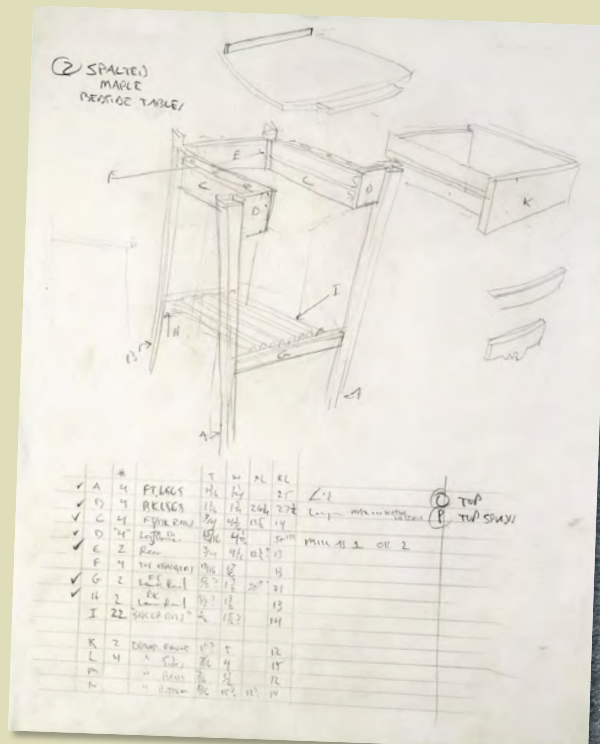


A few well-chosen joints. Two quick detail drawings on the cutlist for Gilpin's cherry sideboard elucidate the unusual joinery of the vertical drawer dividers. Another detail conveys in a few lines how the lower drawer front curves to match the arched stretcher.

Alphabetize the furniture

The most important column is the second one, the Item column. I label each part in the piece with a letter. Parts that are exactly alike—the drawer dividers in a chest, for example—all get the same letter. The letters show up on the drawing, in column two on the cutlist, and on the parts themselves. Instead of having to write out the name of each part on dozens of workpieces, a single letter on each does the job. I sometimes prioritize the parts, putting the more complex or prominent ones at the top of the list.

The column marked with a number symbol (#) tallies the like parts you'll make, and the Description column names the parts, tying the letter to the specific part.



Just enough to go on. Gilpin doesn't worry about making a tidy or totally accurate drawing on his cutlist; he just wants a sketch that clearly shows how the piece will be built. The drawing for this spalted maple side table focuses on the unusual structure of the drawer pocket.

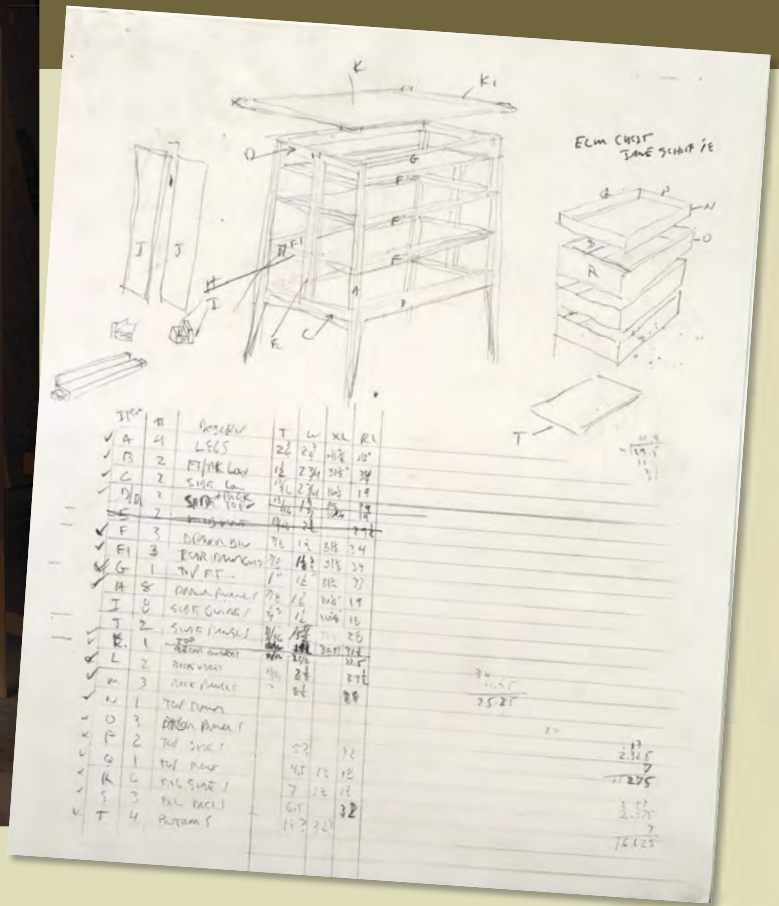


Dimensions

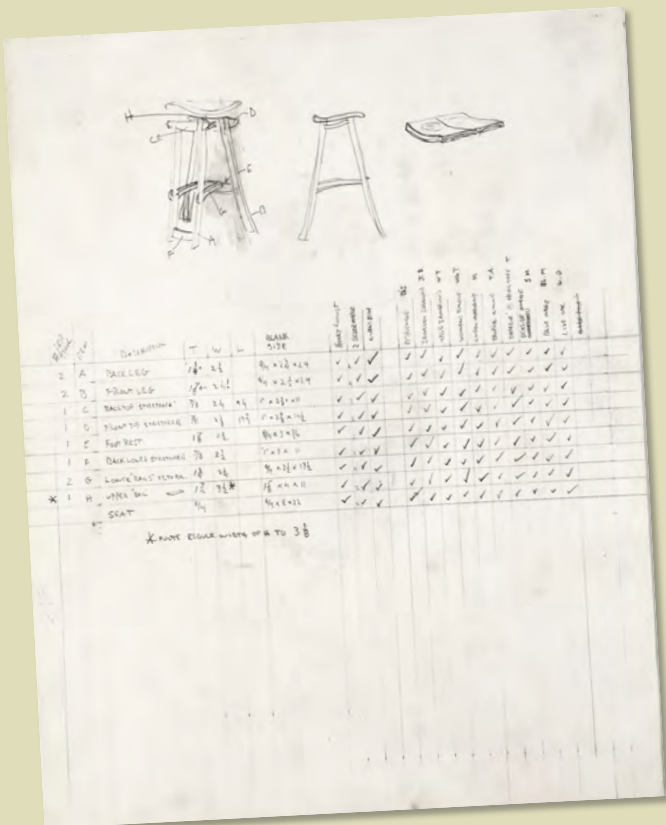
In addition to columns for thickness and width, I usually include one for exact length and another for rough length. Many parts in a piece of furniture have angled

Online Extra

There are many ways to use cutlists. If SketchUp is your method of choice, check out FineWoodworking.com/273.



Complexity clarified. Gilpin's chest of drawers in elm may appear elegantly simple in a photograph, but his cutlist reveals—and provides a sure guide to—its many parts and subtleties.



Multiplication is no problem. On one job for a home in southern Florida, Gilpin built 14 of his signature bar stools in 13 different woods, most native to the region. For the cutlist, one quick drawing and a short list of parts did the trick for all of them. He simply added a vertical column to the right of the grid for each additional species, enabling him to check off and keep track of the scores of parts.

ends—legs, stretchers, drawer fronts, etc.—and determining exact final length can be vexing. So I find that adding some extra length to the workpiece simplifies the thing. I sometimes have a column for rough width, but not often.

Notes to self

The last column is a vital one. My assistants call it Notes, and it's where you make little reminders to yourself. You might write: "mill to 13/16's and cut down after joinery." Or remind yourself to "laminated to achieve final thickness," "leave extra width for joinery," "cut angled shoulders before tenons," "mill AFTER joinery." Or the note could be that the drawer parts are of a different species than the rest of the chest. Often this column is empty, but it is valuable for those times when you really need to take note. □

Hank Gilpin, a student of Tage Frid, has been making furniture since 1974.