# Built-ins
## That Blend In

Design kitchens that complement older homes without being a slave to tradition

BY NANCY HILLER

As a designer of cabinetry for period-style kitchens, I specialize in work for clients with homes built in the late 19th and early to mid-20th centuries. People come to me not for strict reproductions, but because they want their kitchen or other cabinetry to fit harmoniously into an older home. Whether I'm adding to existing cabinetry or designing a kitchen from scratch, it pays to follow some basic guidelines. Although the cabinets shown on these pages were built for 19th- and 20th-century homes, the same principles can be applied to other periods.

When designing cabinetry for an older home, familiarize yourself with the house and its architectural details. Ask yourself: When was the house built? What is the architectural style? How are period elements expressed in the original doors, trim, and built-in cabinets? You may be adding to the original cabinetry rather than replacing cabinets added at a later time, so the trick is to tie in the new with the old. Clients often ask me to design cabinets that will look like the rest of their kitchen but will function more practically.

### Consider raising the height of the counters

Old kitchens have counters that would be considered backbreakingly low by contemporary standards—usually 32 in. above the finished floor. While this may be fine for kneading bread dough or rolling pastry, it's terribly uncomfortable for most of us, when washing dishes and preparing food. Even if you leave existing base cabinets at their original height (and sometimes

# Arts and Crafts style

The author designed new cabinets with straightforward-looking details and proportions to match the existing details of this early 20th-century Arts and Crafts style kitchen.

## DESIGN DETAILS

### CASES
Hiller's design uses traditional face-frame construction, with stiles extending to the floor at the end of each cabinet run, and recessed kicks (painted black) in between these ends.

### DOORS
Simple frame-and-panel construction, inset in face frames.

### DRAWERS
Faces are plain and inset.

### COUNTERTOP
The author used unglazed mosaic tile for this kitchen. Other period-appropriate choices would include genuine linoleum with aluminum edges, wood, or stone.

### WOOD/FINISH TYPE
Faces are solid poplar, painted with oil-based enamel.

### HARDWARE
Surface-mounted, pressed-metal hinges for doors; simple, chrome-plated knobs.

### DETAILS
Upper cabinets extend to ceiling with glass panels in upper doors.

***Some face-frame stiles extend to the floor.*** *The kick space on the cabinets looks open, but there is another kick slightly recessed, painted black, which prevents debris from collecting underneath.*

***Salvaged hardware is a close match.*** *Hiller searched local antiques shops to find hinges and pulls that matched existing hardware in the house (top). The hinges she found (bottom) are not an exact match, but they're close.*

Photos: William Duckworth; drawings: Muir Stewart

they are well worth preserving, restoring their tiled or linoleum countertops as needed), consider making new base cabinets with today's standard height of 36 in. or even 38 in. Although it may sound tall, a 38-in.-high countertop feels great for many kitchen tasks.

The upper cabinets in most old kitchens were built right up to the ceiling, not stopped a foot short as often is the case today. This applies as well to rooms with 10-ft. ceilings as to those with ceilings at 8 ft., and it's a great way to maximize storage space. So what if you can't reach up there without a ladder? Tall upper cabinets are wonderful for storing rarely used items such as punch bowls and holiday-ware that might otherwise be consigned to the basement. Particularly in a small kitchen, the extra cubic feet of usable space gained by going to the ceiling can make the difference between a room that works and one that has inadequate cabinet storage.

### Study details in face frames, doors, and drawers

One of the most effective ways to get an authentic period look is by attending to the proportions of the original cabinets. Vintage cabinets display enormous variety in such details, and if you rely on a standardized dimension for your rail and stile widths, your cabinets simply will not look authentic. When adding to existing cabinetry, I pay close attention to the widths of frame stock in the original work. Note whether the bottom rail is wider than the top, and subtle details such as bevels on the inside edges of door frames.

Sometimes, when space is tight, it is impractical to use face frame or door stock as wide as the original. In such cases, you may wish to scale down these members proportionately so that you can at least come close to the authentic feel of the original work.

Note also whether the doors are inset or half-overlay. If the latter, note whether the door's outer edge is square, rounded, or shaped in some other way. On many Shaker cabinets, for example, this edge is rounded. Does the face frame have a bead, or is there cock-beading around the outside frame of the door? Is the inside edge of the door frame clean and square, or shaped into a quarter-round (as in some 1930s kitchens)? Are the door panels flat or raised? Pay attention to the same kinds of detail when designing drawer faces.

For several decades it has been conventional to recess fully and conspicuously the area at the base of kitchen cabinets to provide toe space. However, no matter how strictly you apply every other guideline, using fully recessed kicks will betray the period look. If you want your cabinets to look authentic to a period predating the middle of the 20th century, stay away from fully recessed kicks.

There are three main styles of kick

***Graduated drawer fronts.*** *To mimic the Shaker style, the author designed the drawer fronts so they get narrower near the top. Note that the top two faces are really one drawer, built to a more useful size for a modern kitchen.*

# Shaker style

The Shaker style has been aptly described as timeless, and it fits harmoniously into just about any home, such as this classic Cape. In this kitchen, the author used Shaker details such as flat panel doors, simple hardware, and maple countertops to blend in with the architecture.

## DESIGN DETAILS

### CASES AND MOLDINGS
Hiller's cabinets have traditional face-frame construction that extends to the floor, creating a flush, not recessed, toe kick. Molding profiles are drawn from examples of Shaker furniture.

### DOORS
Frame-and-panel construction, inset in face-frame openings. Inside edges of door frames have thumbnail profile.

### DRAWERS
Faces are half overlay with a handplaned roundover. Note the graduated drawer fronts.

### COUNTERTOP
Solid maple planks, not butcher-block, glued up in tabletop fashion. Bullnose edge, with cherry quarter-round detail below.

### WOOD/FINISH TYPE
Cherry or maple with oil-based polyurethane finish.

### HARDWARE
Simple butt hinges. Shaker-style knobs are painted with oil-based black enamel.

### DETAILS
Peg rack below upper cabinets. Open plate racks above stove.

***Upper storage spaces, open and closed.*** *The cabinet above the stove was made deeper than the cabinets on either side to accommodate a range hood. The author added a plate rack for storing large dinner plates.*

***Molding details—keep it simple.*** *The maple countertop is shaped with a bullnose. Underneath that is a simple cherry cove molding.*

spaces in older cabinetry. Flush kicks are simply an extension of the cabinet's face frame down to the floor. Although flush kicks take getting used to, they are one of the most convincing details you can incorporate into a kitchen, when appropriate, to make it look period-authentic. A variation on the flush kick sometimes used for sink cabinets or Hoosier-type built-ins features a cutout curve. Many kitchens from the 1930s have toe space along the main run of cabinetry, usually painted black, but with the face-frame stiles at the ends of each run extending down to the floor. In cabinetry designed for a more formal, furniture-like appearance, it may be more appropriate to use a full plinth.

### Kitchen woodwork needs a durable finish

Many early 20th-century kitchens had painted woodwork and cabinets. If you plan to paint your cabinets, consider using an oil-based enamel, rather than water-based, applied either by brush or spray. Milk paint is an alternative, particularly appropriate if you're going for an authentic Shaker look. One disadvantage with painted woodwork, especially lighter colors, is that it tends to show dirt and grease stains.

On the other hand, you may wish to disguise dirt and signs of wear by using the figure of your chosen wood to distract the eye. Some early 20th-century kitchen cabinets were made of fir and finished with shellac. You can come very close to this look by using amber-colored shellac in the finishing process. I often use a coat of shellac over dye and pigment stain to impart a wonderfully aged look to new wood. After scuff-sanding the shellac, I apply two or three coats of oil-based polyurethane, which is more durable.

For those who want to get deeper into kitchen design, two resources are *Bungalow Kitchens* by Jane Powell (Gibbs Smith, 2000) and *The Elements of Style* by Stephen Calloway et al (Mitchell Beazley, 1996). □

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*Nancy Hiller designs and builds cabinets and furniture in her shop in Bloomington, Ind.*

## HARDWARE SOURCES

**Acorn Manufacturing**
www.acornmfg.com
800-835-0121

**Ball and Ball Hardware**
www.ballandball-us.com
610-363-7330

**Craftsmen Hardware**
www.craftsmenhardware.com
660-376-2481

**Crown City Hardware**
www.crowncityhardware.com
626-794-0234

**Horton Brasses**
www.horton-brasses.com
800-754-9127

**McCoy Millwork**
www.mccoymillwork.com
888-236-0995

**Rejuvenation**
www.rejuvenation.com
888-401-1900

**Van Dyke's Restorers**
www.vandykes.com
800-787-3355

**Whitechapel Hardware**
www.whitechapel-ltd.com
800-468-5534

# Victorian style

Victorian houses, built in the 19th century, are notable for their embellishments, inside and out. In this home, the author designed a butler's pantry in a small hallway that connects the kitchen to the dining room. Her cabinetry takes some of its inspiration from the client's collection of antiques, and mirrors the profuse detail found in the existing home's cornice moldings, baseboards, stairway, and door and window casings.

## DESIGN DETAILS

### CASES AND MOLDINGS

Hiller's cases are of kitchen-cabinet construction, with face frames in quartersawn white oak. Flat bracket feet and wide crown molding at the ceiling complete the design.

### DOORS

Frame-and-panel construction with raised panels, inset in face frames.

### DRAWERS

Inset, without any edge treatments.

### COUNTERTOP

Marble with oak edge.

### WOOD/FINISH TYPE

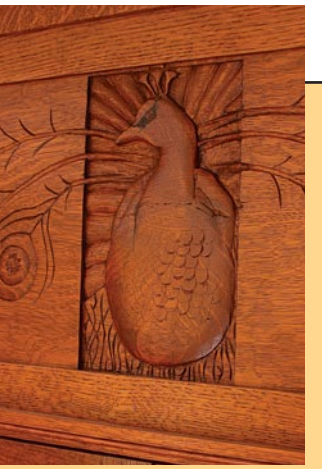
Quartersawn white oak, dyed, stained, brushed with one coat of amber shellac, and finished with oil-based polyurethane.

### HARDWARE

Ball-tip butt hinges. Teardrop pulls match those on an original Victorian sideboard in the house.

### DETAILS

Moorish arches, chip-carved "almonds," turned pomegranate finials, carved sunbursts and peacock all express the architectural style of this particular house.



***Why the peacock?*** *This carved peacock, flanked by tail feathers, appears on the top center panel in the frieze of the new butler's pantry. It was inspired by the clients' antique stuffed peacock.*

***Take some details from the house.*** *Hiller used several details from this stairway (left) in the design of the butler's pantry. The turned teardrop shape on the bottom of the landing newel post, the Moorish arches in the balusters, and some of the molding shapes appear as design features in the new cabinetry (above).*