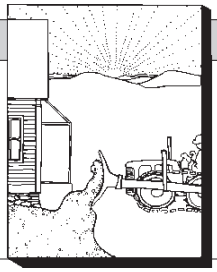

One Way to Skin A Cabinet

by Marylee MacDonald

How to put a pretty new hardwood face on plain old cabinets—and make them taller, too.

The goal in this project was to upgrade a 1950s kitchen without spending a lot of money and without disrupting the lives of the tenants living in the apartment. In addition, we wanted the kitchen remodel to fit in with the original style of the turn-of-the-century home. Oak cabinets with raised-panel doors would be just right.

The existing cabinets—basic plywood boxes—were structurally sound but bland in design. After talking to a local cabinet shop, the solution was clear: Leave the base and wall cabinets in place, purchase new oak doors and drawer fronts, and apply adhesive-backed oak veneer to the cabinet sides and faces.

While we were at it, we decided to take advantage of the open space above the wall cabinets by extending the existing cabinets to the ceiling. We did this by scabbing a piece of plywood to the open sides of each wall cabinet. Then we added 1x2 rails and stiles to the front, fastening the top to a 2x2 nailer secured to the ceiling. It looked like patchwork at first, but with the new veneer on, all the seams and joints would disappear.

The cabinet shop that contracted to make the oak doors and drawer fronts agreed to stain and spray-laquer the oak veneer to match their other woodwork. So other than minor touch-up, the job required no on-site finishing.

About the only prep work needed was a light sanding of the cabinets with #100 sandpaper. (If the wood had oil or grease on it, you'd have to strip the wood clean first.)

Working with the veneer is pretty straightforward. The type we used has a pressure-sensitive adhesive on the back with a peel-off backing (available from Superior Distributing, 922 Ft. Wayne Ave. IN 46202; 317/638-1392.) We bought the material economically in 2x8-foot sheets for about $2 per square foot. We used red oak, which was the only veneer available with peel-and-stick backing. Birch, maple, walnut, and cherry veneers were also available, but only with iron-on adhesive.

The only two special tools you need to work with the veneer are an ordinary office paper cutter and a plastic-laminate strip cutter (about $104 from Superior Distributing or from a supplier of plastic laminates.) If you do a lot of this work, you might also want to purchase a squeeze roller, hand trimmer, and hand iron (for iron-on veneers) from Superior.

To use the veneer efficiently, start with your large pieces first and cut strips from the offcuts. If this is your first time with this material, start on an inconspicuous area—beside the refrigerator, for example.

Make your cuts with an ordinary utility knife and straight edge with a piece of plywood underneath. Cut the material from the back; otherwise the knife will tend to follow the grain on lengthwise cuts. On narrow pieces, use the paper cutter for a sharp, crisp cut. Make your cross-grain cuts accurately as you cannot easily trim across the grain in place.

Cut and try out each piece for fit before peeling the backing. Veneer the side panels first, leaving about a 1/16-inch overhang on the front of the cabinet. After the side veneer is bonded, trim back the overhang so it's flush with the front of the frame. I had great luck trimming the material with a tiny 2-inch-long Craftsman plane.

After the sides are completed, apply your strips to the rails and stiles on the face-frame. Cut these (with the laminate-strip cutter) to slightly overhang the side panels, and sand them back lightly with fine sandpaper. Finally, do the inside edges of the face-frame the same way. A little touch-up stain will hide any imperfections in the corner joints.

To get good performance from the adhesive, you need to press the veneer soundly into place with a roller or block. Work the big pieces of veneer from the center outward to work out any bubbles.

The entire job (not counting the shop work) took one worker about two days labor. And this was for nearly 30 linear feet of base and wall cabinets.

The cost of all materials—new doors and drawer fronts and veneer—was about $1,700. The work was so unobtrusive that we actually left all the food in the cabinets (we covered the cans and cereal boxes with plastic sheet).

The final result, as you can see in the photos, is perfectly respectable. This particular job was done on a rental property. But cabinet skinning can make sense in a lot of remodeling projects that can't bear the cost of all-new cabinets. ■

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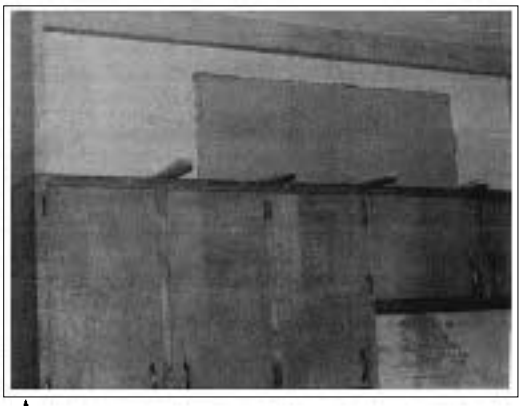
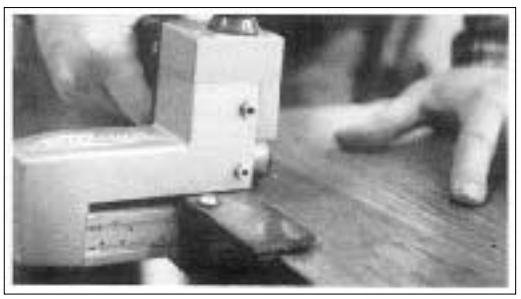


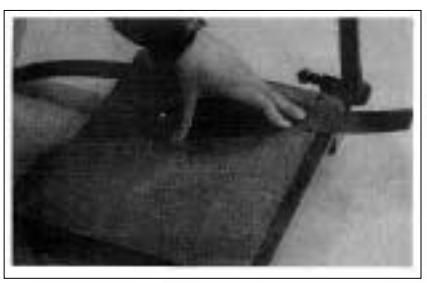
***Step 1.** The existing plywood wall cabinets are extended up the ceiling with plywood sides and a pine face-frame.*

***Step 2.** After measuring the cabinets, we cut the pre-finished oak veneer, big pieces first.*

***Step 3.** After checking for fit, the peel-off backing is removed and the veneer stuck in place.*



***Step 4.** Using a plastic-laminate strip cutter, veneer strips are cut for rails and stiles.*



***Step 5.** A standard paper cutter cuts the strips neatly.*

***Step 6.** After a little touch-up sanding, new oak doors are installed, and "Look Ma, a new kitchen!"*