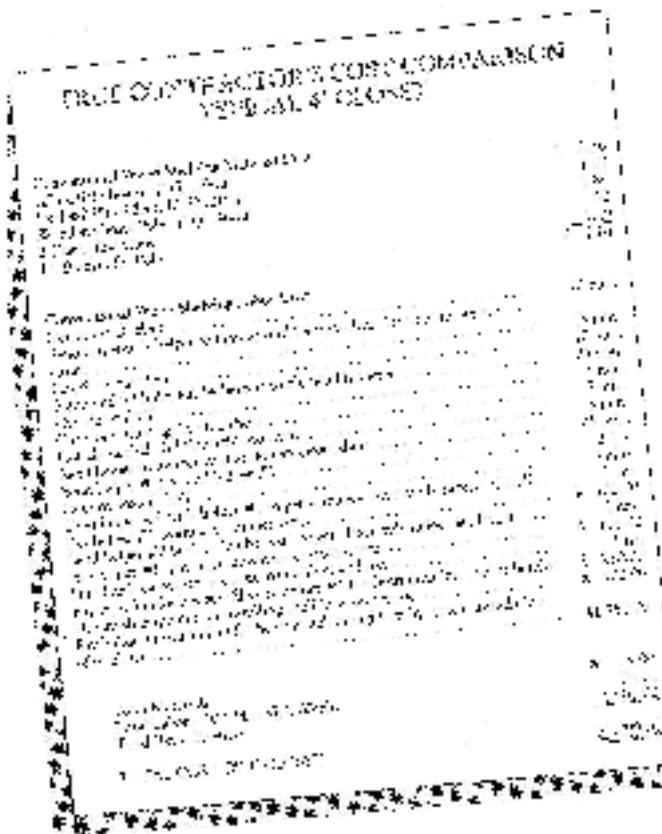


Customizing Closets

Closet doctors offer clever cures for storage headaches



Although the above scenario may be exaggerated, it's not unusual to face problems when finishing a new home's closets. And because closet interiors are hidden behind doors, the main strategy in the past has been to ignore them. But this has changed. For today's sophisticated buyers, storage has become a hot item. For empty-nesters faced with squeezing years of accumulated stuff into a condo, for young couples with upscale tastes, or for ordinary homeowners just tired of skimpy little closets, closets are "in."

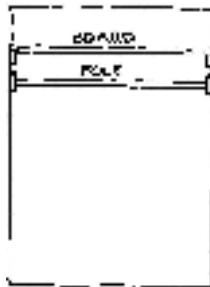
As a carpenter I had seen this interest in closet storage space growing over the years, and in 1984 I got together with a friend, Hugh Knapp, to start Closet Crafters, a full-service company devoted entirely to closet storage. The idea was simple: Take the burden of doing closets off the builder's shoulders

and at the same time give the new homeowner custom closets, something previously reserved for very expensive houses. For less than a microwave or a central vac system a builder could provide customized closets, without any of the headaches that customizing usually means. By using a manufactured storage system and factory-trained designers and installers, we were able to cost-effectively install custom closets for less than a builder could. The idea worked. Developers and homeowners liked it so much we took on a third partner, Larry Godond, to handle new construction, and now have four branch offices in addition to our main office in Williston, Vt.

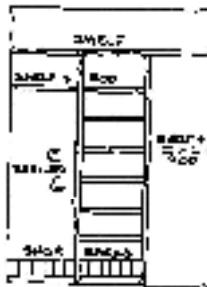
Custom Design is simple

Designing a closet is relatively simple if anyone looks in the user's wardrobe. The

old board-and-pole closet assumes every piece of clothing we own is 56 inches long. In reality, a standard woman's wardrobe has about one-third long-hanging, one-third short-hanging, and one-third foldable articles. Her clothing needs do not call for a closet like this:



but more one like this:



Meanwhile men tend to have very few long-hanging items, usually a bathrobe or pants hung by their cuffs. In a typical closet there is a lot of wasted space. A man's needs really dictate a closet that looks like this:



A standard board-and-pole configuration is almost worthless in a child's closet. The poor little kid can't reach the pole, so a typical custom closet for a child should be more like this:



Several manufactured systems are available. The one we use, the Closet Maid system, includes a special clip (called a "fin-back clip anchor") that acts as both a molly-type fastener and as a shelf hanger. Because of this, we aren't restricted to hanging at the stud, and we can put shelving at any height and in any configuration. We can accommodate almost any homeowner's storage needs. We once designed a closet to accommodate 50 pairs of cowboy boots!

How We Do It

To design a closet, we first take the exact wall-to-wall dimensions of the closet, noting the front-to-back and top-to-bottom dimensions. With these measurements, we meet with the builder or owner and discuss the specific needs of the clients. We find out how much of each storage category they need: long-hanging, double-hanging, and shelving. With their input we designate the appropriate amount of storage necessary for each type of clothing.

Each closet design is different, depending on house design, client needs, and budget. On one recent condominium project, we worked with a small budget to make limited closet spaces work for full-sized families of four. The solution was to give every closet in the two-bedroom units some double-hanging storage (about three-fourths double-hanging, to one-fourth long-hanging) nearly doubling the small closets' capacities.

Perfect Fit

In a brand new four-bedroom colonial house located outside of Burlington, Vt.,

the Closet Crafters were to "fit" 11 closets with racks, shelves, and rods. A job of this

size would normally take two people no more than three hours to install. The entire

process, however, from receipt of the architect's prints through installation, generally takes a week or more. This job took nine working days and cost \$900. Much of the work happens back at the shop, where the shelves and parts are cut according to the plans drawn by in-house designers. The parts are delivered in closet-by-closet stacks and organized by size, to save time at the site (see photo A).

In one of the two walk-in closets in the master bedroom, the designers had to work around a window in the closet, which wasted a lot of storage space (photo B). The closet crew tried to use as much of the wall as they could, but the window wasn't exactly where the prints said it would be, and a shelf had to be cut from the design at the last minute.

Because dimensions in new homes often differ from the plans, the closet installers carefully check out all measurements before they drill a single hole (photo C). The precut shelves are modified where necessary.

For drilling accurately, a template is used wherever possible. Where the template doesn't fit (as in under the window sill), a level is used to mark the wall. Cordless drills speed the work: Two men are able to work simultaneously in the closet without tripping over wires. (photos D & E). The installers insert a fin-back clip anchor into the drilled holes (photo F). Two such anchors can support a shelf holding up to 50 pounds. The clip has a molly-type back for drywall applications and is not restricted to stud placement.

The installers check for level every step of the way (photo G). The final product provides lots of shelving, double-hanging, and long-hanging racks (photo H). A curved rod connects Wall B to Wall C, so that the corner is not wasted (see illustrations for the final design).

- NEB

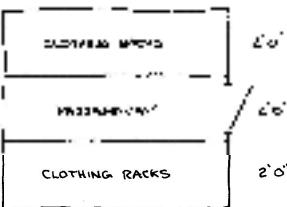
On a different project, we were faced with luxury condominiums with large closets but no basement storage. The buyers were generally older couples either moving from an existing home to a smaller condo or young couples moving up with many articles to store. The approach was to give each room the maximum shelving storage possible for the off-season garments, books, records, sewing machine, and weights that one would normally store in the basement, while still accommodating the occupants' wardrobe.

At an exclusive high-end, single-family development, the generous budget allowed us to meet with every owner and design closets to meet their specific needs. In that case, our designers made suggestions about what storage the homebuyers might need both now and in the future, and their designs took that into consideration.

Please Don't...

A few of the problems we have encountered while custom designing closets have easy solutions in the framing stage. A reach-in closet should be at least 22 inches front-to-back. Twenty-four inches is even better. Less than that makes it difficult to hang clothes due to their width. Coat hangers may be only 18 inches wide, but the clothes themselves add from 2 to 4 inches to this dimension. Also in reach-in closets, if the closet is big (long) but the door is disproportionately small, the space left on either side of the door becomes unusable.

A walk-in closet is a distinct asset to a master bedroom, but a walk-in of the wrong proportion ends up being a true waste of space. The most common error in framing a walk-in closet is making its back wall too small. Since clothing requires 24 inches to hang properly, a back wall of 6 feet or less either eliminates one wall of clothes or provides no passage between racks (assuming 2 feet is designated for a passageway, as in the illustration below).



Another common error is to make the side walls too small. A walk-in with a back wall of 12 feet is grand, but if the side walls are 3½ feet that leaves only 1½ feet for passage—not very much room to move.

Win/Win Closet Design

Closet design is simple, but it does take some thought. There are just a few components: shelving, double-hanging, long-hanging. It's how and where they are used that makes a closet special. With the proper closet dimensions and a certified designer working with the owner, it becomes a win/win proposition. The owner gets custom closets at a fraction of the price he would pay for built-in closet storage, and the builder is spared the trouble of designing and installing them. As unlikely as it may sound, we have discovered that custom closets sell houses—a reasonable goal for all builders.

Joe Cenis is president of Closet Crafters, located in Williston, Vt. with branches in Lebanon, N.H., Albany and Plattsburgh, N.Y., and Rutland, Vt.

