

What follows is a description of some of the methods and techniques I use when installing kitchens. Whatever size or type kitchen I'm installing, following these guidelines has helped me work efficiently and avoid mistakes, and kept my kitchen installing experiences mostly happy ones.

Delivery and Inspection

Two things I keep in mind before the cabinets arrive at the job site: they are not that easy to move and are very easy to damage. I make sure they arrive when I'm good and ready for them. The less I have to move them, the better.

Cheap or fancy, factory-made or custom, I thoroughly inspect the cabinets for flaws in workmanship or damage. Problems found before installation begins are much easier to deal with than those discovered later. For example, during a recent installation of factory-made (Quaker Maide) cabinets I found a badly warped door and staples coming through an exposed side. I called the kitchen designer/distributor and she warned me that "installation constitutes acceptance." Time constraints being what they were (it would take three weeks to get a new cabinet from the factory), I repaired the blown-out side, while the manufacturer replaced the door.

Reality check. I measure each cabinet to make sure it conforms to the plan. As I do this I arrange the upper and lower cabinets according to the plan to help visualize how they will best go together, and in what order.

Whether the plan I'm working



A Kitchen Installer's Tips

Guidelines to help your kitchen cabinets go up quickly and without blunders

by Lou Dupont

from is a rough shop drawing or a seemingly infallible blueprint, I give it an extensive reality check. Nine times out of ten the kitchen designer or cabinetmaker has measured the space accurately, but it pays to be certain.

At this point I tally up the cabinet runs and appliance dimensions plus any filler strips that are provided. These tallies should be slightly greater than the space where the cabinets will go: The difference will be trimmed from the filler strips for a snug fit. This is especially critical when the cabinets are enclosed on both ends.

If the appliances are not on the job, I call the supplier for the exact dimensions. Appliances are typically

installed with very small tolerances; a little mistake here could bring tears and heartache later.

Layout

At this point I get the lay of the land. If there's an inside or outside corner, I check to see how square the walls are to each other. I determine how plumb the walls are and whether the floor is level. If the floor is out of level, I find the highest point in the area where the base cabinets will go. This is a very important step, because it establishes the minimum counter height. I set the counter height 36 inches above the high point, and shim the cabinets in other areas as necessary. This way I avoid having to do a hatchet job on the bottom of a

cabinet to account for the high spot.

Soffits. If the kitchen has a soffit I pay close attention to the vertical layout, especially when there's an appliance garage (a cabinet that rests on the counter). These cabinets fill up the space between the counter and the soffit, leaving no room for error. In that case I measure down from the soffit the height of the appliance garage plus the crown mold and the counter top thickness, and strike a level line on the wall through this point.

This line shows me how much I'll need to shim the base cabinets. Just above this line is a good place to find and mark the studs you will be fastening to. Any nail holes you make will be covered by the counter. If the height of the wall cabinets is not determined by a soffit, I strike a second level line 18 inches above counter height for the bottom of the wall cabinets.

Marking the layout on the wall. I mark on the wall where each cabinet or appliance will be placed. I start with the cabinets or appliances whose locations are absolutely fixed — such as a sink base centered under a window, or a range that's centered on a wall. With the layout marked on the wall, the nerve-racking part of the job is over and installation can begin.

Uppers First

I always hang the upper cabinets first. If you have ever had to hang them after the base cabinets are in place, your back can tell you why this is a mistake.

Often, if I am putting up several wall cabinets in a row, I screw them

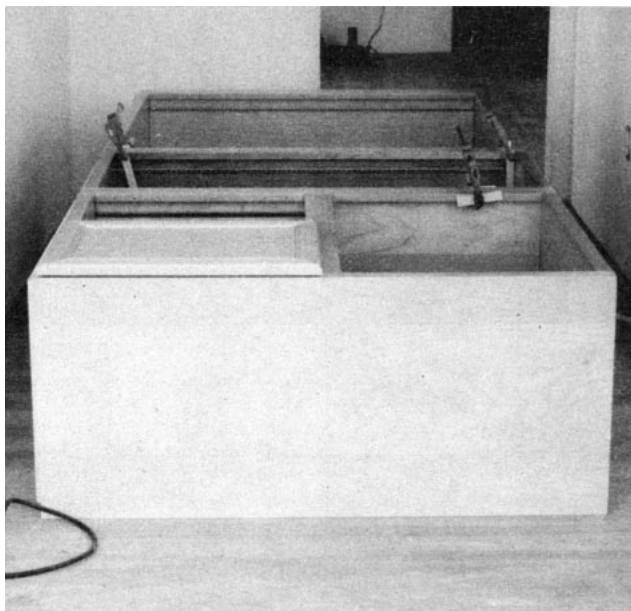
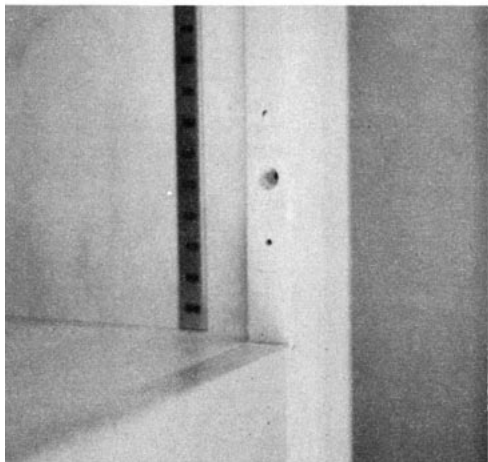


Figure 1. When possible, the author fastens wall cabinets together while they're still on the floor (above). The face frames are held tightly together by screws concealed behind the door hinge base plates (left).



together before hanging them (see Figure 1). With the doors off and the cabinets on their backs, it's easy to clamp them with the frames flush and then screw them together. If possible I hide the screws in the frames behind the hinge baseplates. I use a minimum of four fasteners — either screws or cabinet bolts — between cabinets.

Support ledger. For hanging wall cabinets, I use a temporary ledger board (see Figure 2). I fasten it with drywall screws $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch below where the cabinet will eventually go. By taking the weight of the cabinet, the ledger makes it easier to get the cabinet exactly where I want it. I use shims on the ledger to push the cabinet up that last $\frac{1}{4}$ " into place. Once the cabinet is hung I remove the ledger and patch the screw holes with spackling.

Spacer blocks. When working to a level soffit, I attach a strip of wood to the top of each cabinet before hanging it. This strip serves two functions: It gives me a nailer for the crown moldings to be installed later, and acts as a spacer to keep the cabi-

nets an even distance down from the soffit.

Starting point. If the kitchen has an inside corner, this is a good place to start. Sometimes the corner configuration has two cabinets, with one running by — a "blind" cabinet; sometimes it's a single cabinet, such as a lazy susan cabinet. Either way, starting in the corner allows you to make sure the two walls of cabinets come together plumb and level and tight to the back wall.

If the corner has two cabinets, the blind one goes up first. I make sure that the front face is absolutely plumb so that the abutting cabinet will be level. I may have to shim behind the cabinet at the top or bottom to achieve this. If the blind cabinet has an exposed side, I scribe it to the wall.

Filler strips. After hanging the blind cabinet, I determine what width to rip the filler strip that goes between it and the abutting cabinet. For example, in a recent installation the wall cabinets had to be spaced evenly on each side of a window (see Figure 3). This space was dictated by

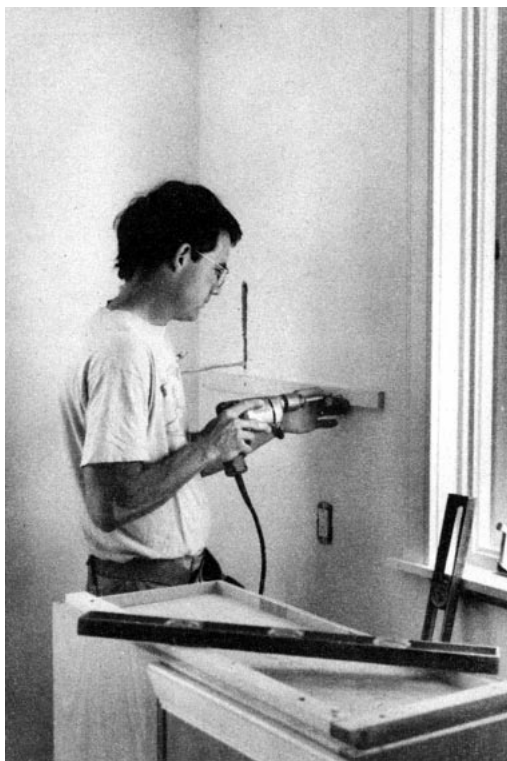


Figure 2. Starting in the corner, the author fastens a temporary ledger to the wall to support the first cabinet, a blind corner cabinet.

the location of the refrigerator. Once I had established that, I marked out where the cabinets stopped on each side of the window and measured back the width of the cabinet. This gave me the filler width.

Typical filler strips for factory-made cabinets are from $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 4 inches wide, depending on where they go. They are designed to be trimmed to take up the slack between a cabinet and a wall, or between runs of cabinets at corners. At corners, wider filler strips allow doors and drawers to operate unobstructed.

I rip the corner filler strip and glue and screw it to the cabinet (see Figure 4). To get a proper fit I hoist the cabinet onto the ledger, scribe it to the other cabinet, then plane it to fit. This is where a sharp block plane is essential.

When installing the second corner cabinet I clamp it to the blind cabinet. I screw from the inside of the blind cabinet into the filler strip. A right angle drill is very helpful for this.

Base cabinets. In a typical installation, I hang all of the upper cabi-

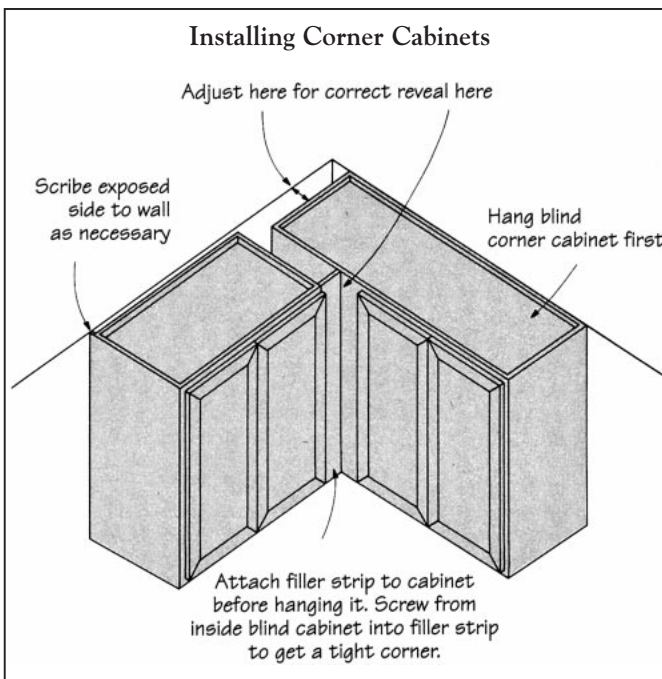


Figure 3. When installing cabinets, start from the corner and work out in each direction. The procedure illustrated here is the same for wall and base cabinets.

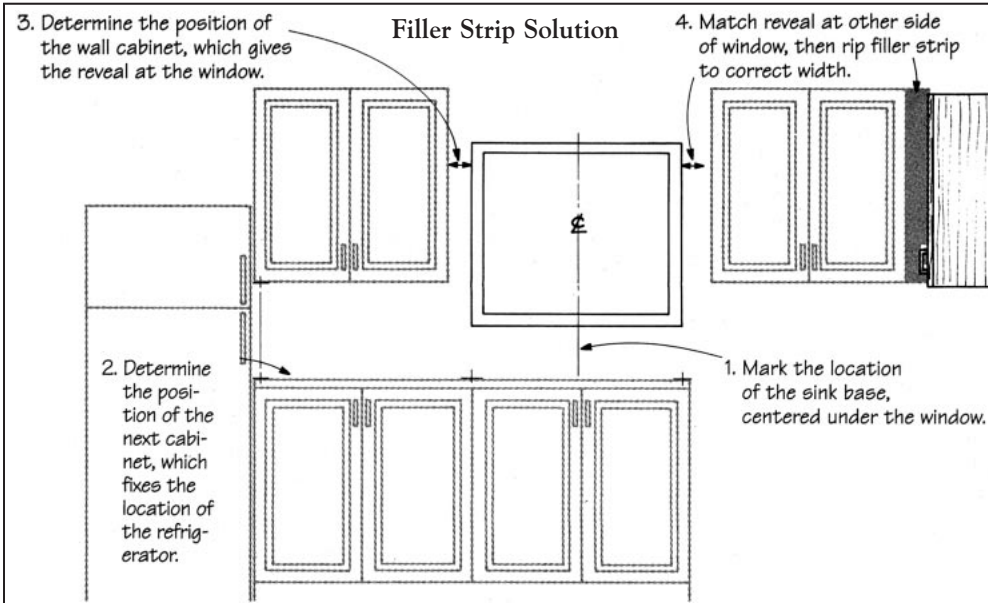


Figure 4. Filler strips allow you to fine-tune the spacing on factory-made cabinets. In the example above, the strip is ripped to give an equal reveal on both sides of the window.



Figure 5. After checking measurements, the author rips a filler strip for the corner cabinet (above left), then glues and screws it to the cabinet (above). With the cabinet held temporarily in place the author checks the fit against the blind cabinet (left).



nets that I can, leaving aside any cabinets that sit on the counter. Then I move on to the base cabinets.

My level layout line tells me how far I need to shim the base cabinets up from the floor. If most of the bases need to come up $\frac{3}{8}$ or $\frac{1}{2}$ inch, I cut a bunch of plywood shims and fine tune with shim shingles. In some cases the cabinets come with adjustable legs, which simplify the leveling process.

Installation of base cabinets proceeds much like that of the wall cabinets. I start in the corners, locate the cabinets that have fixed locations, and adjust the spacing with filler strips.

Islands. When installing an island cabinet I mount 2x blocks securely to the floor. Ideally, I place the blocks so the cabinet will just barely slip over them. If the screws won't show I screw through the sides and the kick space into the blocks. Since nail holes are easier to fill than screw holes, I toenail any exposed sides with 8- or 10-penny finish nails.

Counters. The kitchens I install often have specialty countertops, such as Corian, tile, granite, or marble. Except with simple, straight-run situations, we usually sub out the Corian to a local cabinetmaker who knows what he's doing. For tile tops, we lay down one layer of $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch BC plywood. Our tilesetter tops this with a layer of cement backer board for a solid substrate. Slab counters we set in tinset on particleboard or MDF.

We usually install formica tops. Sometimes we make them as well. When cutting laminate counters to length at the site, I use a circular saw with a forty-tooth carbide finish blade and cut along a straightedge. I always make a test cut to see how the blade performs. I use masking tape on top of the cut to minimize chipout, and to give me a visible pencil line for scribes.

When scribing countertops or splashes to a wall, I use a Bosch jigsaw on the metal-cutting setting with a metal/plastic-cutting blade. I fine tune the cut with a belt sander. To attach a separate backsplash to the wall, I use silicon caulk. I clamp blocks to the front edge of the counter and cut prop sticks to wedge the backsplash against the wall while the silicon dries.

After the counter top is in place I set the remaining cabinets. On cabinets that go from counter to soffit I'll leave off the nailer for the crown mold that I might have used elsewhere. This gives a little more room to slide the cabinets into place. To avoid scratching the counter, I use kraft paper or cardboard. ■

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