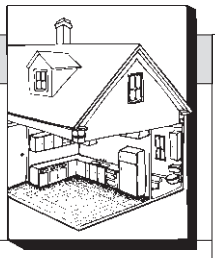
My Beautiful Laundry Closet

by Paul Turpin



In the course of remodeling many kitchens, I often find myself looking around for a new place for the washer and dryer. In California, these are typically housed on a service porch or in a separate laundry room that we want to open up to enlarge the kitchen. While it is possible to conceal the washer and dryer behind cabinetry, you need custom-made cabinets and a kitchen layout that leaves room for these oversized appliances.

Relocating the washer and dryer usually involves making some trade-offs. Putting them in the basement, if your clients are lucky enough to have one, means they must trudge up and down the stairs every time they do a load of wash. I've found the easiest alternative is to house these appliances in a closet all their own in the kitchen, bathroom, family room, or hallway. Since I usually try to cram the washer and dryer into the least amount of space possible, the sorting and folding counter and the utility sink are inevitably sacrificed. But finding alternatives for these lost facilities is one of the challenges of relocating the laundry area.

Where To Put the Closet

Finding room for a laundry closet can be tricky, especially in a compact house. A stacked washer and dryer combination is very close to full-size capacity, but they take up about half the space of two separate units. A Maytag combination, for instance, is 27 1/2 inches wide by 27 inches deep and 73 inches high.

But even with a stacked combination, you'll have a depth problem. A typical closet is only 24 inches deep — not big enough to accommodate the appliances, plus the additional 3 to 5 inches for hoses, piping, and ductwork. That brings the necessary closet depth to about 31 inches.

In some cases, you can borrow some space from the room behind the closet. But an easier solution (providing the room or the hallway is big enough) is to build the closet end walls out an additional 5 to 7 inches . To make the walls look like they belong, I sometimes run bookshelves over to the nearest corner or create an alcove.

I usually use full louvered bifolds to maximize hall space, improve air circulation in the closet, and prevent moisture buildup. Opening a bifold takes up less room in a hallway where a conventional swing door would be cumbersome. I use free-floating hardware on the doors, instead of the usual track hardware, so the doors will open all the way and not interfere with opening the dryer door. Using 8-foot doors allows me to build the closet opening without a dropped header, so I gain access to overhead storage inside the closet.

Storage is a must for any laundry area. I use an 18-inch-deep wall cabinet or wall-to-wall open shelves above the appliances. Be sure to leave about 20 inches of clearance above the appliances for work space and washer lids that open upward (see illustration, previous page). I typically install bright lights, which are concealed behind a valance, below these upper cabinets. Laundry sorting needs good lighting for finding stains and matching socks.

As for a work surface, your customers will probably have to make do with the tops of the appliances. It helps if you can put the closet in or near the kitchen so that customers can borrow some countertop space when they need it. This also gives them access to the sink in case they need to presoak some items

Laundry appliances are noisy. Putting the laundry area in a new kitchen/family room, for example, will not make the customers happy if they have to listen to the roar of the washing machine's spin cycle while they're trying to eat a quiet meal or watch TV. Be sure to inquire about your customer's habits so that the noise from the washer will disrupt their living pattern as little as possible. In some cases, locating the laundry closet near the bedrooms may be the best option, since this is where most of the laundry is generated.

Venting the Dryer

When deciding where to put your laundry closet, you must consider how to vent the dryer. Because of potential moisture problems, the dryer should always be vented to the outside, never into the attic or under the house. You don't have to build the closet on an outside wall, but you'll need to run a duct there. If you're installing a gas dryer, read the instructions carefully. Because you're exhausting combustion gases as well as moisture, you have to use metal ductwork and limit the length of the duct run. Most manufacturers limit this run to 50 feet and deduct 8 feet of run for every 90 degree angle. I always use 5-inch duct to improve the air handling capability and help avoid lint buildup.

Keeping Things Dry

Washers may flood, from either a clogged drain or a hose or valve failure within the washer itself. Make sure drains are at least 2 inches in diameter and are kept clean. Most modern drains are ABS, but if the drain is old 1 1/2-inch cast or galvanized pipe, cloth fibers can catch and collect on the rough edges and restrict water flow.

A disaster from a clogged hose or faulty valve can be avoided in most cases by installing a shut-off valve in a spot that's easily accessible to the homeowners. Use a recessed washing machine box that provides both water supply and drain connections in one neat plastic or metal package. Specialty Products Co. (P.O. Box 186, Stanton, CA 90680; 800/854-3215) is one source for these.

If you're really worried about flooding, you can build a "wet closet" with a waterproof floor and floor drain. The drain can be tied to the DWV (drain/waste/vent) system or piped straight outdoors with inexpensive PVC. Tying into the DWV can create problems, however. Depending on local code, you may need a trap and trap primer to maintain the trap seal. Also, this drain will likely be the low point of the plumbing fixtures on that floor level. That makes it the first spot to overflow if there is a blocked line. To avoid problems, install a flapper valve or check valve below the drain and an access panel for servicing.

Piping straight outside is easier if it is allowed by code. If you live in an area where surface runoff is strictly regulated, you may have to tie the drain outlet into the roof runoff system.

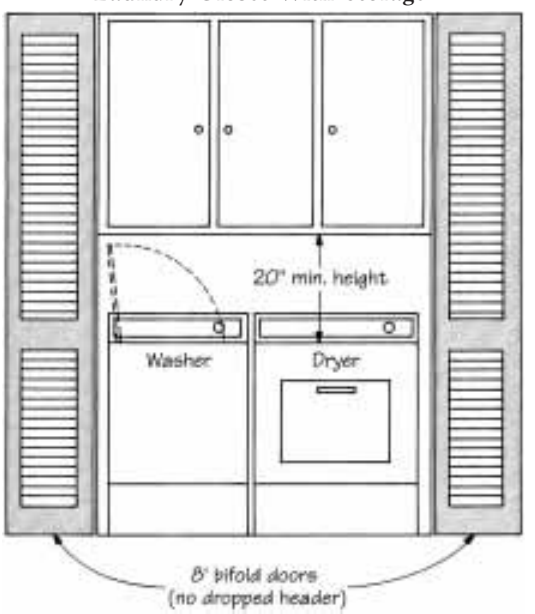
At the very least, put some sort of dam around the perimeter of the machine to help contain the initial surge of water if there is flooding. Make sure this dam is removable. Many washer maintenance warranties will be voided if there is a curb that the machine must be lifted over for repairs.

Alternatively, you can sit the washer in a sheet-metal overflow pan that drains to the outside. I recommend this for water heaters as well. To make the washer accessible for repairs, cut the front corners of the sheet metal curb then caulk them back together again. If there is a problem with the washer (and it's likely that there will be eventually), the front edge of the sheet-metal pan can be bent down to form a ramp.

My last bit of advice on installing washers (and water heaters and toilets) is to break the subfloor by running a saw around the appliance. This prevents slow leaks from spreading too far from the washing machine. You'll save your clients money and you'll be doing a favor for whoever winds up replacing that section of flooring. ■

Paul Turpin is a Los Angeles-based remodeling contractor who specializes in kitchens and baths. If you have questions about the design or renovation of kitchens and baths, write to K&B, JLC, RR2, Box 146, Richmond, VT 05477.

Laundry Closet With Storage



Using 8-foot louvered bifolds allows access to the storage cabinets over the washer and dryer. These should be high enough above the washer to leave room to open the lid.