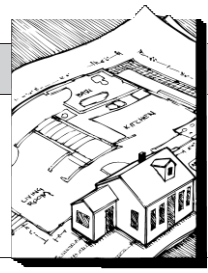

Door Casing Details

by Gordon Tully

Last month, I classified window casings into three types: traditional flat stock, plaster returns, and window-box (edge-on) casings. Door casings can also be classified this way, but the second two options are not often used. The interesting cases are variations on traditional casings. Visually and practically, I can see four approaches to "normal" door casings:

(1) The traditional method, which has milled or flat casings that miter at the head corners, with the baseboard butting into the casing.

(2) Milled casings that miter at the head and also at the baseboard, forming continuous running trim.

(3) Casings with blocks at the corners.

(4) Casings with extended head pieces forming a lintel or cornice, with or without blocks at the base.

The Traditional Casing

You might think that the traditional approach is a no-brainer. Indeed, I often use the system on low-budget jobs, because most owners accept its limitations. The most notable problem is, of course, the head miter, which almost always opens up.

An old-timer I worked with cut the miters so they were slightly open at the outside. He tacked the trim in place and left it until it settled down, then came back, recut the miters as necessary, nailed them home and completed the finish work. So much for budgets and schedules. Another builder uses biscuit splines and glue, taking some risk that the trim will split. But most builders working against time and budget simply nail them up and hope the miters won't open too badly.

If you build up the casing from two or three pieces, the miters will be shorter and aren't as likely to open; but the cost is higher.

At the base, the system works fine as long as the casing is thicker than the base. When it isn't, the base has to taper down at the door casing. (I have seen this in very old houses built by naive carpenters: the problem has been around for awhile.)

Finally, there are situations where any casing needs to be cut down — for instance, around a door at the end of a narrow corridor (see Figure 1). Here, success rewards the well-prepared. Shaped one-piece moldings like clamshells and colonial designs must be cut away at the outside, which creates an ugly mess at the head miters. With mitered flat casings, you can cut down the jamb pieces without creating a mess.

Except on low-budget jobs (such as my own office), I don't use simple flat casings and baseboards, since they look too plain. One way to dress up a flat casing is to mill a bead on one edge. If the bead is on the inside, it continues all around the opening no matter how narrow the casing gets; and it doesn't interfere with a similar bead on the baseboard.

Another approach is to add a small decorative molding to the outside of the flat stock, making a simple two-piece casing. Cut the flat stock to fit the tight situation and apply the decorative molding continuously to the outside of all three casings.

The Continuous Trim Approach

I like trim that runs continuously along the baseboard, then up and over the doors. To achieve this continuity, you need to add a separate decorative molding to the outside of the casing and to the top of the baseboard.

It is sometimes possible to achieve the effect with a one-piece

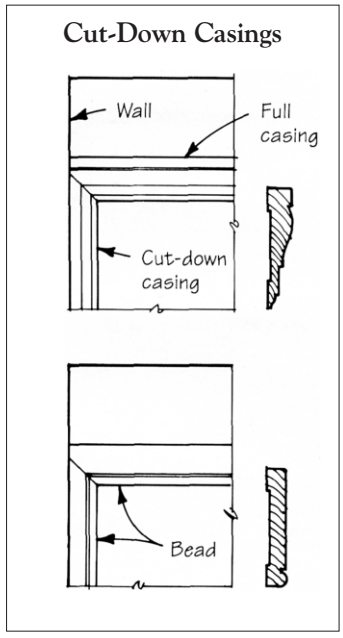

Figure 1. *Traditional milled casings (top) look awkward when cut down to fit tight quarters, like the end of a narrow corridor. With a bead cut on the inside (above), or an applied molding on the outside, cut-down moldings look better.*

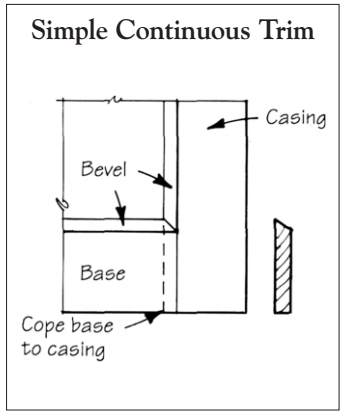

Figure 2. *The author likes to run molding continuously along the baseboard, then up and over the doors. A simple one-piece molding — for example, with a bevel along the outer edge — works well for this.*

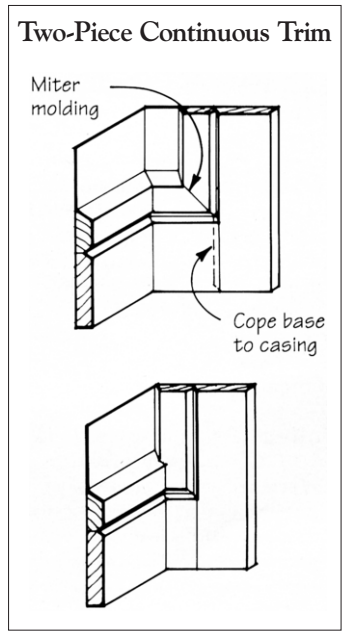

Figure 3. *With two-piece moldings, you can achieve more complex profiles and still keep the trim continuous between baseboard and doors (top). However, tight spaces may require tricky joints (above).*

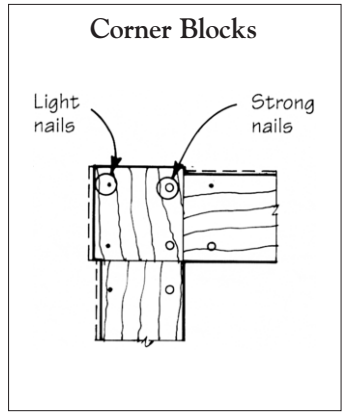

Figure 4. *Fasten corner blocks securely to the frame and moldings, but nail lightly at the outer edges to allow for shrinkage. In Victorian times, this detail was common in servants' quarters.*

molding, providing the detail is very simple. The joint that has to be resolved is the one between the casing and baseboard. It is very labor-intensive to cut a clean and tight inside miter into the casing to receive the baseboard. However, if the detail is simple, like a bevel on the edge, you can cope the baseboard to the detail and achieve a tight joint (Figure 2). For more complicated details, you have to use two-piece moldings (Figure 3).

The illustration shows one difficulty with the continuous detail. Be prepared for some fancy coping when the baseboard collides with the door frame from the front instead of the side, as would occur in a narrow corridor. You can waste a lot of time trying to design a molding detail which miters perfectly in all directions. It may be better simply to omit the vertical run of decorative trim in tight quarters.

Corner Blocks

Moldings with blocks at the upper corners solve many problems — notably the opening of miters. If the casings and corner blocks are firmly secured to the door frame and to each other, and attached to the wall with light nails, they should stay together even if all the pieces shrink and expand (Figure 4). Biscuit splines should help, although I've never tried this.

Stylistically, plinth blocks at the bottom of the casing are associated with corner blocks at the head. An advantage to plinths is that the baseboard can be thicker than the door casing, provided the plinth is thicker than both.

Corner blocks have a few problems. Unless they are edge banded, you will see end grain. They need to be made of strong, clear stock so they don't split or warp. Stylistically, corner blocks have very particular associations that are not very attractive: In some 19th-century houses, the servants' quarters were treated with corner blocks, while the front rooms got fancy mitered casings. So don't assume everyone likes this detail, despite the recent fad for things Victorian.

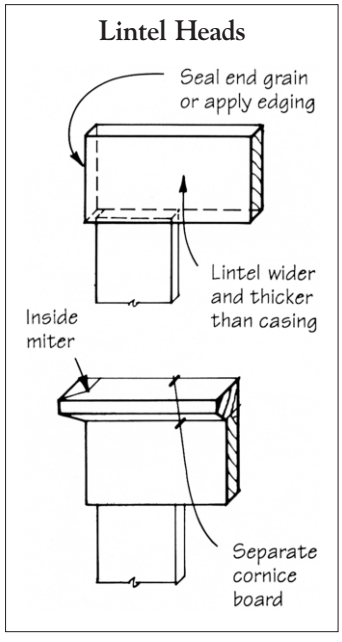

Figure 5. *Like corner blocks, lintel heads (top) were originally used in utilitarian spaces. However, adding a simple cornice molding (above) makes them quite elegant.*

Lintels And Cornices

Lintel head casings are those in which the top casing is thicker (and sometimes wider) than the jamb casings, and extends a little beyond them like the top bar on the letter "T." Like corner blocks, they were used in servants' quarters and they show end grain if not edge-banded; but they are less likely to offend. To make them very elegant, all you have to do is add some kind of cornice molding (Figure 5).

In my 1916 house, the "nice" spaces have cornices, while the utility spaces have simple lintels. The cornice molding can simply be applied to the flat stock. Typically some type of crown molding is used, but this leaves dirt-catching gaps on top unless you fill in the gaps, sand the top smooth, and finish it properly.

For more monumental cornices I detail a piece of horizontal flat stock to sit on top of the lintel, either with a Scotia under it, or with a shaped edge (perhaps a simple bevel). If you shape the long edge, don't shape the ends — return the stock at the ends with a miter to avoid showing the end grain.

Thickness And Proportion

On low-budget jobs I simply spec 1x4 frames with mitered corners, and hope the builder uses dry stock. Even if carefully made, however, 3/4-inch-thick trim can look crude compared with stock millwork.

Stock baseboard moldings are usually 9/16 inch thick, and the outside edge of stock door casings is usually 11/16 inch. In addition, traditional trim tapers, so the overall effect is thin and delicate. Most people are accustomed to this kind of scale and therefore expect it.

But there are no hard and fast rules for sizing trim, except those which govern good, consistent proportions. Watch your budget: Massive trim systems can quickly get out of hand, especially if you scale up all the other details: cornices, hardware, doors, balustrades, light fixtures, even furniture. ■

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