Trimming Out Wood Windows

by Gordon Tully

Trimming out window interiors raises several design issues — as well as some practical concerns. Since I use only wood windows on my projects, I'll confine my comments to those. Many of the same problems arise with aluminum or vinyl windows, but their wider frames solve some problems and create others.

There are three general ways to trim out the inside of a wood window:

(1) Flat casings — the traditional approach

(2) Plaster returns — a "trimless" system where the wall returns to the window frame

(3) Window-box casings — an edge-on liner applied to the jambs, head, and sill of a window, projecting out from the drywall 1/2 inch or so

The major design issues differ somewhat for each of these three trim types. In all cases, I assume a modern window, set at or close to the outside of the wall.

The Stool Is Special

Because gravity is so important in our lives, useful horizontal surfaces such as floors, table tops, beds — and window sills — have a special importance to us. I feel it is hard to justify framing a window the same way on all sides (unless it is high up, where the sill cannot be seen and the window acts like a picture cut into the wall). In normal cases, therefore, the window sill, or *stool*, should be different from the rest of the trim.

Whenever I specify traditional trim or plaster returns, I use a traditional stool with an apron below to cover up the joint between the stool and plaster. With a window-box casing, a traditional stool is fine, but you could also simply make the bottom casing member thicker, perhaps letting it project a bit further out from the wall.

Mullion Depth

When several windows are banked together, the frame runs around the group as if it were one window. However, when framing intervenes, a whole series of important decisions arise about how to detail the mullions.

If you use 2x6 studs, you have a choice whether to use 2x4 or 2x6 framing for the supporting mullions. Mullions framed with 4-inch-deep members are not so massive-looking, and they let in more light (see Figure 1). Where windows meet at a corner, a post made from 4-inch-deep framing is much less obtrusive than one made from 6-inch framing.

Sometimes, in a large window bank, it is nice to use mullions the full thickness of the wall for major divisions, shallow "set-back" mullions for secondary divisions, and no mullion at all for minor divisions. The same logic naturally applies to transom bars.

Remember, however, that window headers need to be supported directly by the mullion framing unless the header is sized for the full span. Your header needs to be two 2x's set to the outside of the wall to bear on a 4-inch-deep mullion. So a box-type header — two 2x headers separated by insulation — won't work.

Mullion Width

Wide mullions have a different effect on each of the basic trim systems. In a traditional flat casing system, mullions that trap only one 2x support don't cause any problems. But if there are two or three 2x's, the mullion casing is likely to be wider than the jamb casings. To my eye, when a mullion casing looks wider than the main window casings, the system looks unbalanced. This applies to banks of doors as well as banks of windows. The solution I use is to "sculpt" or build out the casing to make it look as though it were made of smaller members (see Figure 2).

A simple method is to use two layers of casing, with one or two narrow pieces mounted on top of a wider one. This system works only when the mullion casing is inset from the wall. With full-depth casings, the added strips would stick out from the head casing, rather than terminate nicely into the head jamb and stool.

A simple way out of this problem is to rout a groove down the middle of the mullion casing to make it look as if it were made of two pieces of wood.

With window-box (edge-on) casings, a shallow mullion boxed out with simple casings looks okay if it is narrow (see Figure 3). Wide, shallow mullions look clumsy and don't fit in with the rest of the trim system. One solution is to project the edges of the casing a little beyond the face of the mullion, either by recessing a flat board between the two pieces of casing, or by milling a C-shaped section to create the same effect.

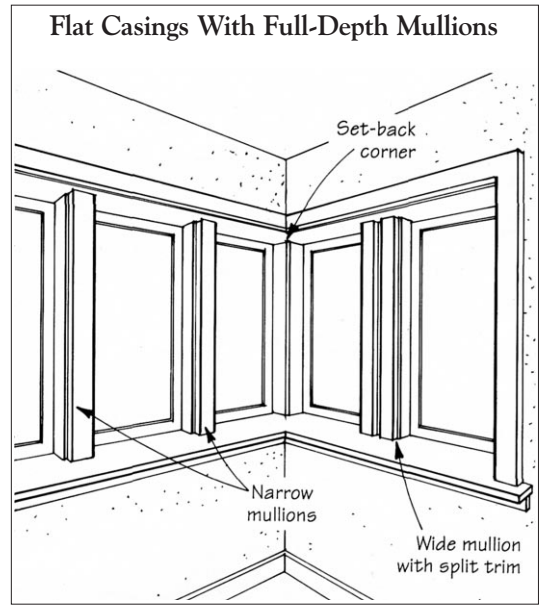

Figure 1. *Mullions framed with 2x4s look less massive and let in more light than full-depth mullions framed with 2x6s. The smaller 2x4-framed corner post also looks less obtrusive.*

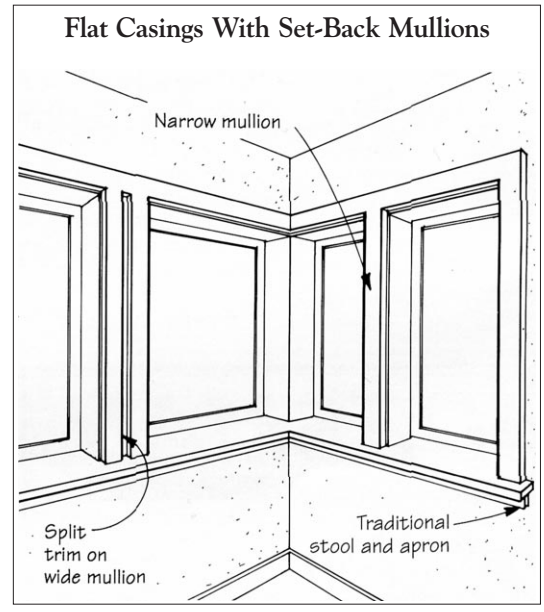

Figure 2. *With 2x6 framing at mullions, traditional flat casings look fine unless they get too wide. Then it's best to split the mullion into two strips.*

A full-depth mullion in a window-box system creates a unique problem. You need to decide whether the mullion is inside or outside the window box. If the head casing runs over the top of the mullion, it becomes trapped within the surrounding frame. It will look like the shallow mullion described above, except that the projecting trim will be flush (or nearly flush) with the surrounding window-box trim.

If you don't run the head trim over the mullion, it is now outside the window box. Since the mullion is now flush with the wall framing, you must cover it with gyp board and treat it as if it were a piece of the wall — creating a very modernist look.

With plaster jamb and head returns, a full-depth mullion is simply part of the wall. A shallow mullion boxed out with casings doesn't clash with anything, but I personally don't like the effect. The wood post doesn't have a top or bottom: it is just sandwiched between the stool and the plastered head. Wood holding up plaster doesn't look right to me. I suppose you could add a phony capital to the post, but that is not the solution I use.

Jamb Extensions to the Rescue

My remedy is a little complicated, but I use it on most of my jobs, even those with tight budgets. I add short jamb extensions to the side jambs and head, creating a kind of internal casing (see Figure 4). The mullion facing is simply applied between or over these extensions.

When I first drew this detail, I assumed the builder would install the gypsum board first, shimmed out accurately from the framing. Then the jamb extension would go in over the gypsum board. One builder did it this way, but found it hard to keep the extensions plumb and true. Also, since the gypsum board is rarely absolutely flat or plumb,

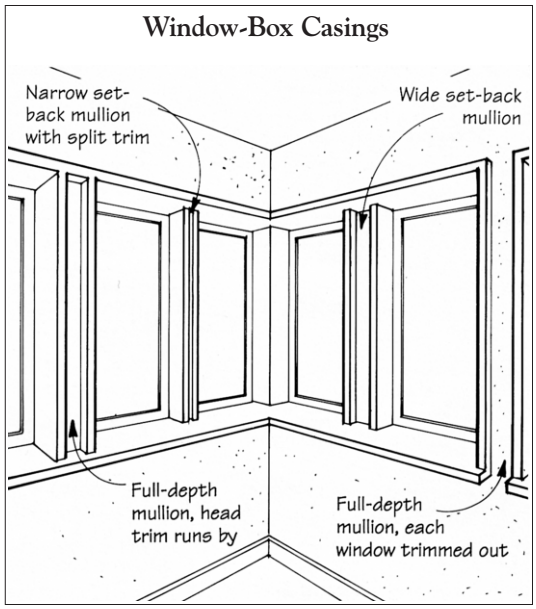

Figure 3. *Lining the windows with 1x stock on edge can work well with narrow mullions. Wide mullions are best treated by recessing a flat mullion facing between the casings so they project out. Another option (shown at right in the drawing) is to leave a section of finished wall between windows.*

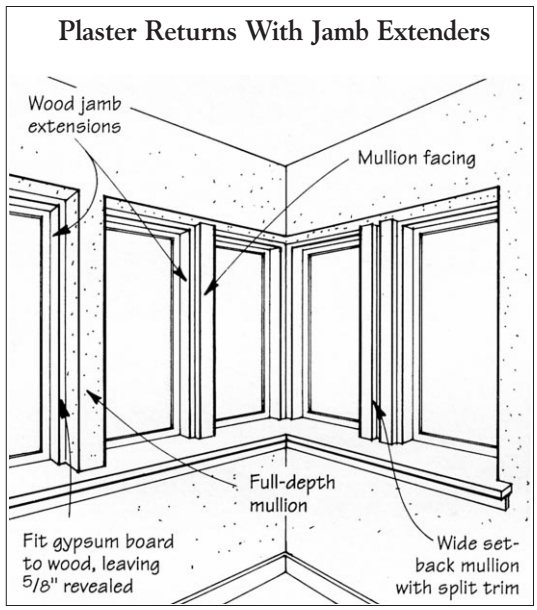

Figure 4. *The author's favorite detail is to add a short jamb extension to the side and head jambs. Mullions can then be either faced with wood, if inset, or finished in gypsum board if flush with the interior wall.*

wood filler or caulk is needed to close up the gaps between the gypsum board and the extension.

Another builder put the extensions in first, shimmed carefully to the framing. Then he brought the gypsum board up to them, leaving about a 5/8-inch reveal at the edge of the jamb extension. With a J-bead or L-bead on the edge of the gypsum board and a coat of joint compound, this creates a clean joint.

Both approaches require reasonably accurate framing. If the window is set hard against one side of the rough opening, it might be difficult to get the gypsum board in (depending on the thickness of the window frame).

Some Design Principles

These thoughts do not begin to exhaust this subject, as anyone can observe by examining old houses. But they do suggest a few design principles:

- Organize the trim systems into planes.
- Examine how these planes work when you turn corners or create transoms.
- Mill out or subdivide big surfaces of trim to create better proportions.
- Don't use deeper mullions than necessary; take advantage of 6-inch framing by using set-in 4-inch mullions.
- Arrange the mullions in a hierarchy of width and depth. At the lowest level, abut windows without framed mullions. Then separate groups of windows with shallow, narrow mullions. Finally, separate the larger groups with wider, full-depth mullions.
- Stools are special and need special treatment. Don't surround a normal window with four identical casings. ■

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