



Cabinet Layout With Story Poles

by Patrick N. Brown

Building face-frame cabinets used to be a fairly complex process for me. After marking the appliance and sink locations on the walls, I would measure the intervening spaces and key them to a drawing of the cabinets. Back in the shop, I would use my calculator to add, subtract, and juggle numbers in an attempt to make the cabinets fit the spaces and to develop an accurate cut list. It was haphazard, stressful, and prone to error.

Then I discovered story poles. I now use story poles to make a permanent record of all my cabinet components, along with their relation to doors, windows, and appliances.

Having a fixed reference is not only invaluable for complex cabinet layouts; it's also handy for simple jobs like vanities, peninsulas, and islands. The little extra time spent on layout is a lot cheaper than fixing mistakes.

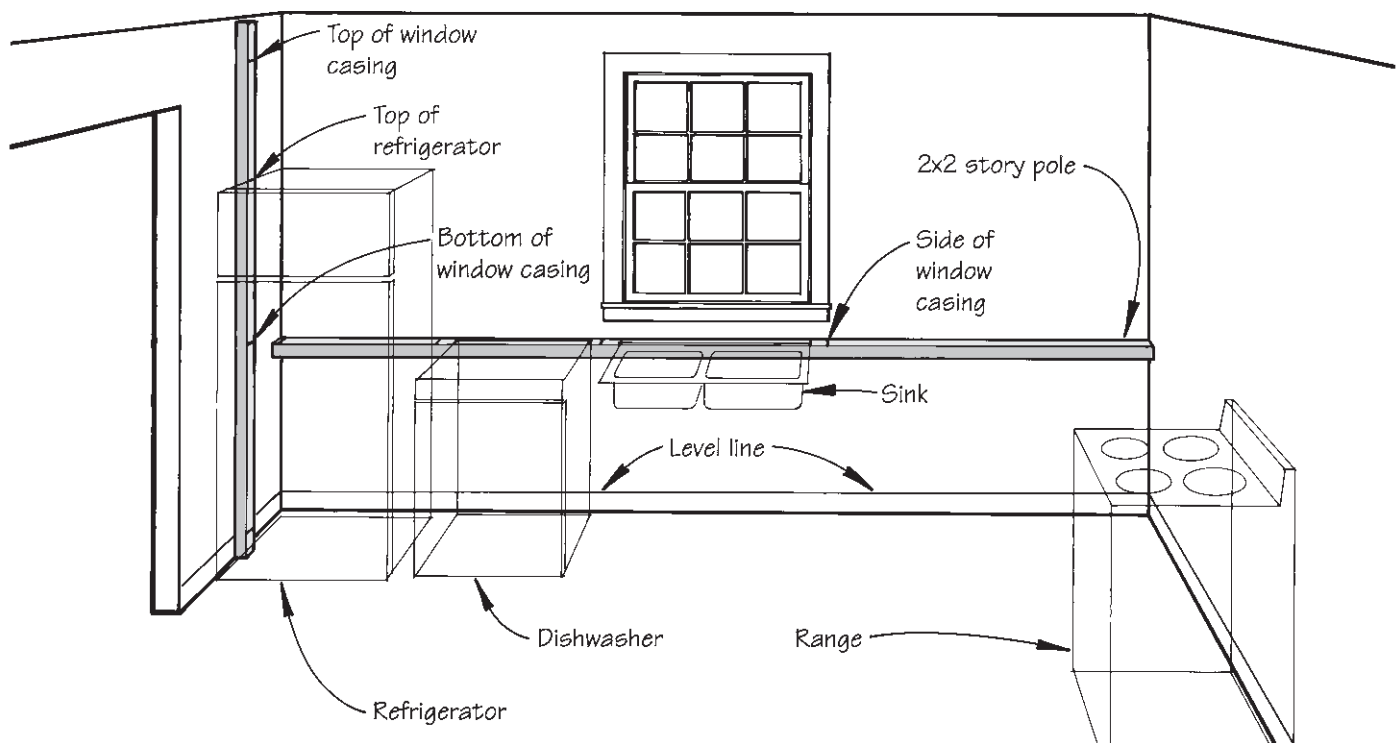
Locating Fixtures

My first step is to mark all the appliance and sink locations on the walls. I then transfer this information to 2x2 wood story poles tacked directly to the wall (see illustration, below). I make a separate horizontal pole for each wall. These run the length of the wall and are marked with the loca-

tions of appliances and the sides of the doors and windows. (I add in the width of the casings if they haven't been installed yet.)

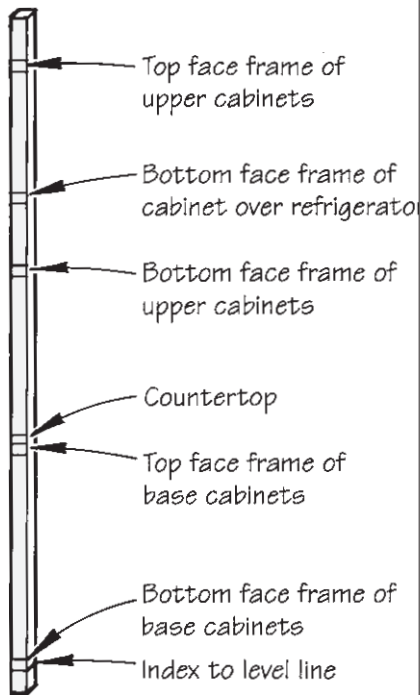
I then make a single vertical pole for the entire room. Before making the vertical pole I use a transit, chalk line, and a helper to snap a level line around the room to index the pole to. I make this line where the top of the kickspace will be, or about 4 inches above the highest point of the finish floor. (I build my lower cabinets without a built-in kickspace. Instead, I build 2x4 bases to rest the cabinets on and shim these level with the index line. The cabinets rest on top of the

Marking Appliances and Openings



First, mark the locations of all appliances on the walls. Next, attach the horizontal story pole to the wall and transfer these marks as well as the locations of window and door casings onto one side of the pole. Do the same with the vertical pole, making sure to index it to a level reference line near the floor.

Vertical Story Pole



The author marks the locations of face frame parts right on the story pole, then uses the story pole to create the cut list.

bases, protruding about 3 inches to create a kickspace. I trim the rough 2x4 bases with a finish baseboard, scribing it to the floor. I then go around the room, keeping the pole's index mark on the chalk line, and record the tops and bottoms of windows, the tops of doors, and the top of the refrigerator.

Marking the Cabinets

Back at the shop, I transfer the cabinet specs from the drawings to the story poles. I leave a 1/4-inch clearance around residential stoves and dishwashers (more around commercial units); refrigerators get a 1-inch side clearance, as well as a 2- to 3-inch clearance on top and behind. The vertical pole (see illustration, left) is marked with the countertop height or heights, the tops and bottoms of all cabinets, and the widths of their horizontal face frames. I use one side of the pole to record the lowers and the full-height uppers, a second side for the uppers over the sink, a third side for the uppers over the stove, and the fourth side for the uppers over the

fridge. The horizontal poles are marked with the widths and locations of all vertical face frames, upper and lower. I use one side of the pole for the uppers and an adjacent side for the lowers.

The horizontal poles now contain the location of all vertical face frames, and the lengths of all horizontal face frames; the vertical pole contains the location of all horizontal face frames and the length of all vertical face frames. I can now take exact measurements right off the poles to produce my cut list.

I use wafer joinery to assemble my face frames, so the actual measurements I take from the poles become my cut lists. (Pocket screws or loose tenon joinery would provide the same benefit.) I also keep my carcasses flush with the inside of the face frames. This not only looks tidy, but it leaves me plenty of spare face frame on end cabinets to scribe to out-of-plumb walls. ■

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