A Simple, Stylish Cornice Return

by Dave Holbrook

A few years ago, I did a comprehensive addition and remodeling project that included new rooflines and varied slopes, two doghouse dormers, and a total exterior trim and siding replacement. A nice reworking of the cornice return on the architect's blueprints caught my eye. The detail cleverly updated the traditional, decorative method in a contemporary and simple, straightforward manner. I told the architect, Francis Sullivan, how much I liked the design, and he generously offered its use on any of my future jobs. I ran with it.

The concept is to miter the plumb fascia to what replaces the earboard, creating in effect a cornice return. For this detail, the rafter tails typically overhang about 8 inches and are cut plumb and level to outline the soffit. However, the detail works equally well without an overhang. Instead of running over the earboard and out into space, the rakeboard ends on top of the return. A narrower, decorative strip overlays the main rake, aligned with its upper edge. The narrow rake piece miters to a companion "drip strip" on the fascia. This feature, although simple, is probably the most complex piece in the whole assembly, in that it tilts out from the fascia. A bevel along the bottom edge of the drip strip establishes its angle perpendicular to the slope of the roof, or square to the rake angle. The rake miter is thus a simple 45° square cut, which is as complicated as this detail gets (see Figure 1).

Obviously, there are a few more pieces and more labor to this return than the standard method. I didn't want to assemble it piece by piece at the top of a ladder or scaffold. Instead, I decided to prefab all the returns and pre-attach them to the fascia boards before nailing them up as assembled units.

Because the rake board installs over a build-out to give it visual relief and allow the siding to tuck in under, the return must also be built out to the same plane as the rake. (The standard earboard detail usually nails directly to the sheathing, in the same plane as the corner board.)

A 3-inch-wide strip along the top edge of the return completes the detail. It's angled on one end to match the roof slope and is miter-returned to the wall at its opposite end. Because miter joints tend to open up when used outdoors, I used a polyurethane sealant to glue all the miters together and keep water out of the joints. I've worked with lots of red cedar trim and

This basic trim detail turns an unspectacular cut into an eye-catcher

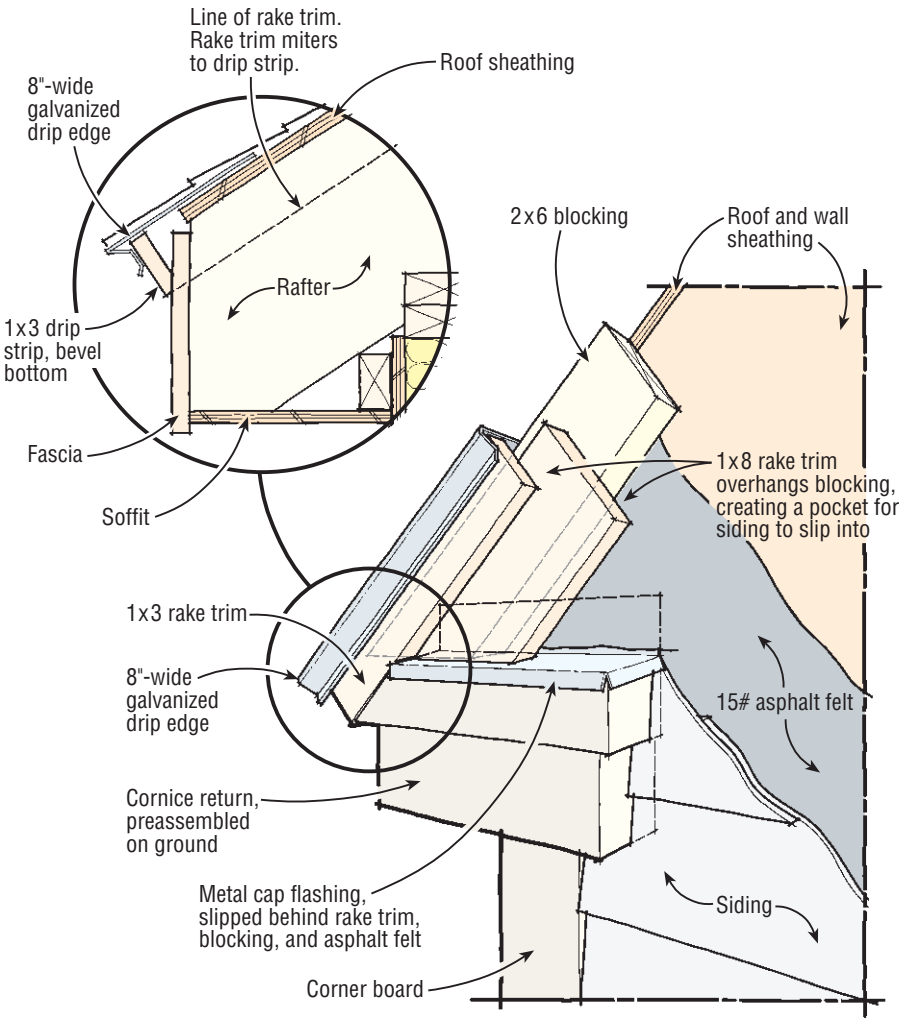

Figure 1. The author preassembled the cornice returns and fascia before nailing them up — edge trim was installed in place. Polyurethane adhesive caulk keeps the miters from opening up.

Figure 2. To look proportionate, trim details should be downsized on doghouse dormers. A 25% reduction looked right in this case.

found that, unlike other sealant types, polyurethane bonds well to that resinous species.

For the doghouse dormers, I scaled the detail down by about 25% to look proportionate with the smaller roof outline (Figure 2).

With the fascia and returns assembled and installed, we cut the rake boards between the ridge and returns, and added the 3-inch-wide strips. The beveled-edge eaves strip was nailed to a chalk line. Although the top edge of the strip leans away from the fascia, a continuous run of 8-inch-wide galvanized drip edge provides enough support and bridges the gap.

Flashing

It's common to use 1x6 fence board to pack out the rake trim. I like a stronger shadow line and used 2x6 instead. To keep things watertight at the cornice return, it's necessary to flash the upper edge of the return. All you need is a regular Z-bar profile, but the depth of the return — about 3 inches — exceeds anything you'll pull off your supplier's shelf. If you own a brake, you can easily make what you need on site. I drew the profile I needed and had a local roofing outfit brake 8-foot lengths of red copper for my unfinished cedar trim, or white anodized aluminum to match painted trim. The flashing has to fit behind both the rake and the backing member — something to keep in mind when you're nailing up the backer. The bottom end of the backer also has to be cut to a level line, struck from the bottom edge of the roof sheathing, to accommodate the flashing. I cut the backer a little high to eliminate interference and kept its lower end nail-free to allow me to flex it up just enough to slide the flashing behind it and the 15# asphalt felt underlayment that wraps the roof-to-wall transition.

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