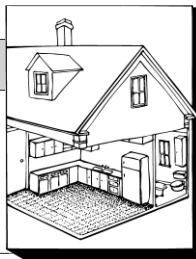


Kitchen Cabinet Facelift

by Paul Turpin



The single biggest expense in kitchen remodeling is replacing the old cabinets. One way to save money is to keep the existing cabinetry casework, but refurbish the doors and the hardware. This lets you transform the kitchen at a fraction of what it would cost to buy and install new cabinetry. Not only do you avoid all the mess and upheaval involved in demolishing the kitchen, but you save the attendant costs of wall patching, new countertops, and the labor to install the cabinetry. That leaves money for other improvements,

like putting in a new floor or adding new drawers, pull outs, revolving shelves, and other storage wonders (see "Working the Corners," *Kitchen & Bath*, 4/91).

New Doors

Almost any kitchen will look brighter and bigger with white, full-overlay, flat-panel doors. Glass-front doors can also brighten things up, particularly if you paint the shelving behind a light color. Darker, richer finishes work best in a fairly good-sized room, and you may have to add lighting if the

room isn't already bright.

If you have a shop (and plenty of time) you can make the new doors yourself, but I prefer to have them made at a local cabinet shop specializing in doors. You can also order new doors through a supply house. Regardless, make sure the door sizes, edge detail, overlay, and hinge selection will all work with each other. If you're using a local shop, this should be part of their service. But you should double-check everything.

Refacing

The cost of refacing — changing the surface of existing doors and face frames — varies not only according to the size and sophistication of the kitchen, but also by the methods you use to redo the cabinetry.

Plastic laminate. When your customer is shopping price, a plastic laminate refacing job often looks like a good deal, but the companies that specialize in this kind of work don't always pay enough attention to detail. Typically, they cover the doors and the face frame with a high-pressure plastic laminate, but often fail to wrap the edges of the frame as well. I have yet to see a job of this kind that really looks good.

Wood veneer. Another way to reface cabinets is to laminate wood veneer over the doors and face frames. This lets you turn oak cabinets, for example, into maple cabinets with minimal expense.

However, as with plastic laminates, I don't recommend doing this yourself unless you have some experience. I once laminated paper-backed oak veneer onto painted face frames with contact cement. What a nightmare. There were strips of veneer everywhere, some brushed up with contact cement, others still waiting to be fitted onto the frames. When we were done, days and days later, the face frames looked like solid oak, but we were way over budget and everyone was in a bad mood. If I were asked to do it again, I think it would be cheaper and faster to remove the old face frame and replace it with a new one built from solid wood.

Paint and lacquer. Painting is a good choice, especially these days when everyone wants everything white. Lacquer is even better. It's more expensive and has to be sprayed on, but it gives you a smooth, professional-looking finish that you can't get with brushed or sprayed on paint. I often compromise by painting the frames with a brush and spraying the doors with lacquer. This works well on full-overlay doors, since they hide most of the painted frame. To keep the room clean, remove the doors and spray them off-site. One drawback to both of these finishes is that

they may crack, especially at the joints on raised-panel doors.

Refinishing

Occasionally I'll run across someone who wants their cabinetry refinished — stripped down to bare wood and stained or painted. My advice is don't do it yourself unless you're an experienced refinisher. Not only is refinishing cabinetry labor intensive, it's one of those things that works better in magazines than in the field. The customer usually expects 50-year-old face-frame stock, after it's been stripped of ten layers of paint, to match new cabinet doors.

Hardware

Selecting the pulls is one of the more important decisions your customers must make. People have strong opinions about pulls and, in fact, the pulls can make or break the look of a kitchen. Some pulls can also be difficult to use, especially when your hands are wet or greasy.

Finding the right hinges is important, too. If you're installing all new doors, avoid hinges that don't fit the doors' style and function. For instance, you don't want imitation wrought iron on contemporary doors. And if you encounter problems trying to match existing hinges, it may be easier to reHINGE everything.

Hinges also get tricky if you're installing full-overlay doors over face-frame-style cabinets. You must select a hinge that will allow the doors to lay with a minimal 1/8-inch gap between them (Figure 1, previous page). Cabinets whose face frames are wide or butt against a wall require a special hinge and baseplate to allow for more overlay (see Figures 1 and 2). Keep in mind that, with this kind of hardware, there are limits on how thick the door can be and how far it will swing.

Other Considerations

Adding a new cabinet — over a refrigerator, for instance — can be a problem since it's unlikely you'll find manufactured cabinetry to match what's already in the kitchen. I rely on the local cabinetmaker to put together the cabinet box. Then I finish it with doors to match the rest of the job.

One final note: I often come across wobbly cabinetry with shelves that are falling on one side or bowed in the middle. These are not worth rebuilding, unless they are base cabinets with an expensive countertop on top of them. If I am forced to rebuild, I charge the customer based on time and materials. Restoring old cabinets without taking them off the wall is tricky and time consuming. ■

Paul Turpin is a Los Angeles-based contractor who specializes in kitchen and bath design and remodeling.

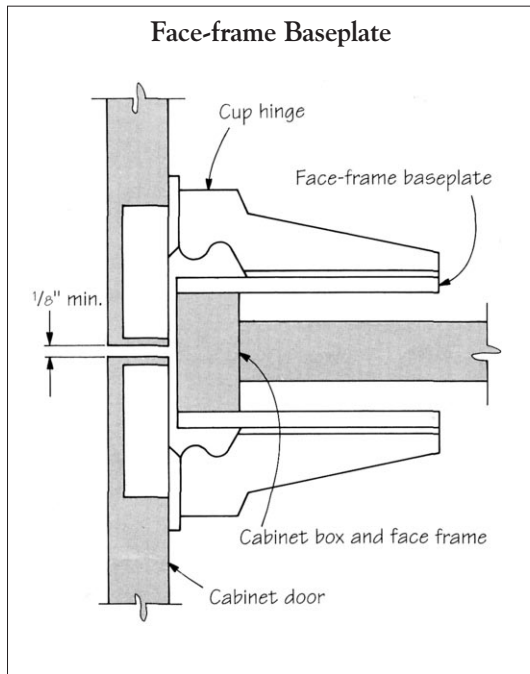


Figure 1. You may need a special hinge, such as this cup hinge, to overlay doors on wide face frames.

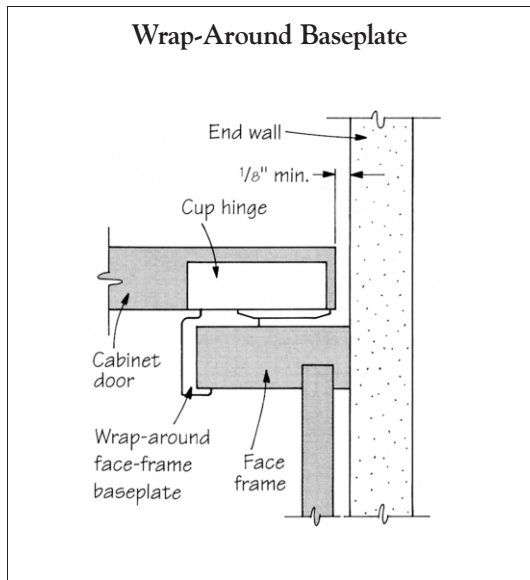


Figure 2. On end cabinets where the face frame abuts the wall, you can use a Grass TEC 831 hinge in conjunction with a wrap-around baseplate.