Getting What You Want Out of Your Cabinets

by Jamie Fisher

How do you make sure cabinets (or anything, for that matter) get built the way you want? You work with good people, draw well — and keep an open mind when things don't turn out as planned.

I try to do all these things, yet like most designers, I still sometimes get things back from the cabinet shop looking different than I imagined — and from what I thought my drawings made clear. Every time this happens, it's a chance to learn how to refine the process of turning ideas into reality and to improve the process of designing and speccing custom work.

A recent job in which some cabinets I designed came back with a few "discrepancies" offered several such lessons. The cabinets were for a kitchen renovation in a 1910 house that had the usual number of quirks and problem areas (I never get called in on the easy ones). The room has 9-foot 4-inch ceilings, allowing for extra-tall upper cabinets. The wall where we were mounting the cabinets had been given a couple of jogs to allow the refrigerator and the ovens to be recessed.

The drawing at top right is what I faxed to cabinet shops for the bids; what was created and installed by Bill Thompson of Stile & Rail Custom Cabinets is shown below that. Bill did a fine job, but between us we managed to create several inconsistencies between the conception I thought I sent him and the cabinets he sent me.

When Custom Is Really Custom

The first problem showed up in the cabinets at either end of the run. A strong feature of the design as drawn was the row of little cabinets running along under the crown molding. I wanted this line to follow all the way across the cabinet run even where functionality dictated a different cabinet breakup. So at each end, where we wanted taller actual cabinets, I drew two doors with a single swing symbol, indicating in each case (I thought) that I wanted the look of two doors, but that these would be joined to swing as one tall door. What I got instead were single doors with a dividing rail that did not match the width of the stiles on the adjacent cabinets. This broke the continuous line I wanted across the full run of cabinets.

In retrospect, it's easy to see how it happened, for what I was asking for — two doors invisibly splined together with a typical 1/4-inch gap between and functioning as one door — is, while not unheard of, certainly not an everyday occurrence. On the other hand, an extra horizontal rail is routine, used commonly when doors get too tall. The cabinet shop went with the more "standard" solution.

Unfortunately, that standard solution made it look as if we switched cabinet styles in the middle of the run. Bill and I have been doing kitchens together for 10 years, not just because he makes beautiful cabinets but also because he'll do what is necessary to make things right. In this case, he offered to fabricate four new doors (really eight new doors) and figure out a way to fasten them together with the required gap. I offered to share the cost of this fix because I felt that my drawing, perhaps backed by a phone call or written notes, should have done more to call attention to the nonstandard approach required to create the design.

The second discrepancy showed up at the refrigerator cabinet. My drawing shows this cabinet flush with the shallow top cabinets to the left (look at the crown mold). What we got was a cabinet out 1 1/2 inches from the others. Instead of a clean line at the ceiling, we have a jog, and the refrigerator has to be pulled farther into the traffic lane to get the door to open fully.

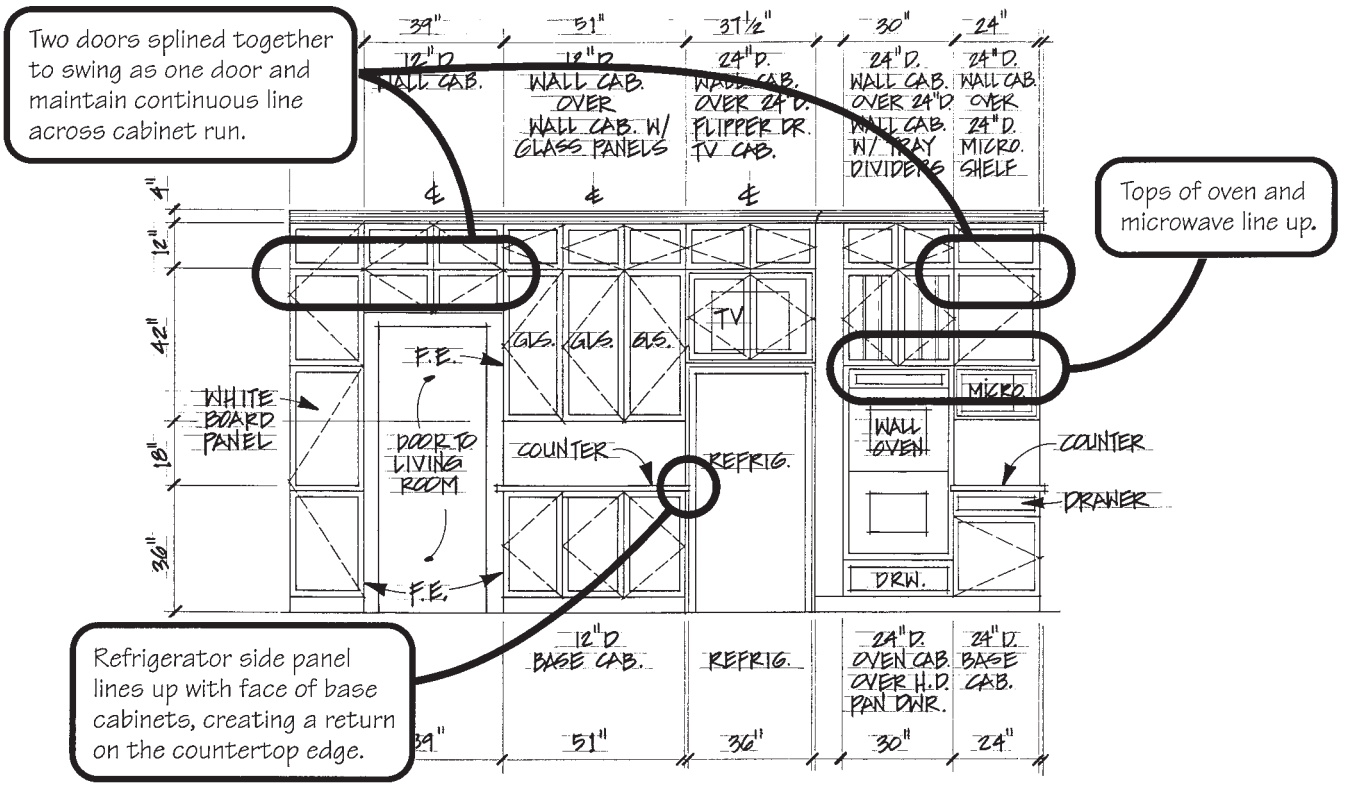
Again, once you look at it from the cabinetmaker's perspective, it is easy to see how this happened. It is standard procedure for refrigerator side panels to extend past the face of base cabinets so that they can catch the edge of the countertop. Otherwise you need a little return on the countertop edge, which I in fact show on my drawing. This return, however, is difficult in laminate and darn near impossible in granite or tile. Cabinetmakers have learned from bitter experience that this awkward detail is a likely callback and they routinely avoid it.

What Bill built instead illustrates something that happens all the time in construction: If you give guys in the field the latitude to bring their knowledge and experience to bear on a problem, they will often solve it better than you could have at your desk. Not only does his solution solve the countertop return problem, but it creates a visual center for the run, establishing a hierarchy of dominant and subordinate planes that was far more handsome than my original solution. I was able to get the homeowner to accept the projecting refrigerator, and Bill was grateful not to have to rip apart the installation to make it per my drawing.

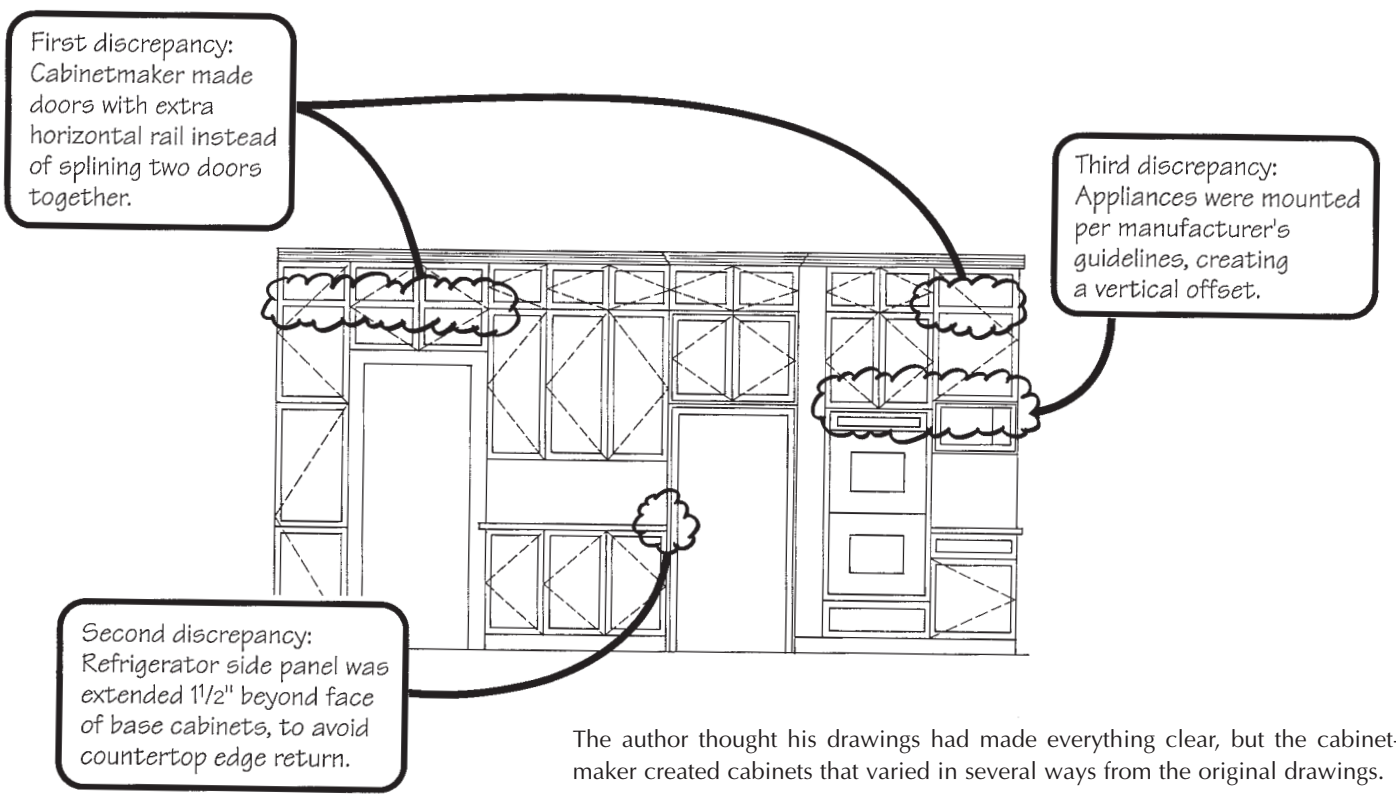
Giving Into Reality

The third discrepancy occurred at the

Cabinet Elevation As Designed



Cabinet Elevation As Built



The author thought his drawings had made everything clear, but the cabinetmaker created cabinets that varied in several ways from the original drawings.

oven and microwave cabinets. I show them lined up across the top, but they came out offset vertically by 2 inches. The explanation: Bill simply followed the manufacturer's published guidelines for appliance mounting height. At the time I make my drawings, the appliances have seldom been selected, so we don't know how big they are. I drew them lined up because it's easier to draw and because it would be nice if it turned out that way. If I had known that following the recommended heights would result in a 2-inch offset, I might have gone back to the homeowner and asked him if he wanted to make an adjustment. Unlike other horizontal alignments on the job (like my precious little cabinets at the ceiling!), this one was relatively insignificant. The homeowner agreed, and the cabinet remained as built.

Drawing Some Conclusions

A good drawing will make clear what is important or vital to the design. It will be very specific about the things that you, the designer, care about the most, and more general about the things that matter less. This lets the fabricator know where he has latitude to bring his considerable skills and experience to bear on solving your problem, and where you want him to toe the lines, so to speak, that you've created in your drawing. All this was easier when drawings were done by hand, when you could use freehand or soft pencil to indicate tentativeness and hardline ink to show you really meant it. The computer (at least until very recently) demands a uniformly high level of precision for everything, which is its weakness. The difference needs to be made up for either by using lines of different weight or by annotating the drawing.

Make sure the sub or fabricator knows when you want something done in a nonstandard way. If in doubt, talk about it or note in the drawing and request preconstruction shop drawings. They will often point up misunderstandings and save expensive fixes later on.

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