

Designing built-in cabinetry: blend, break away, or mingle?

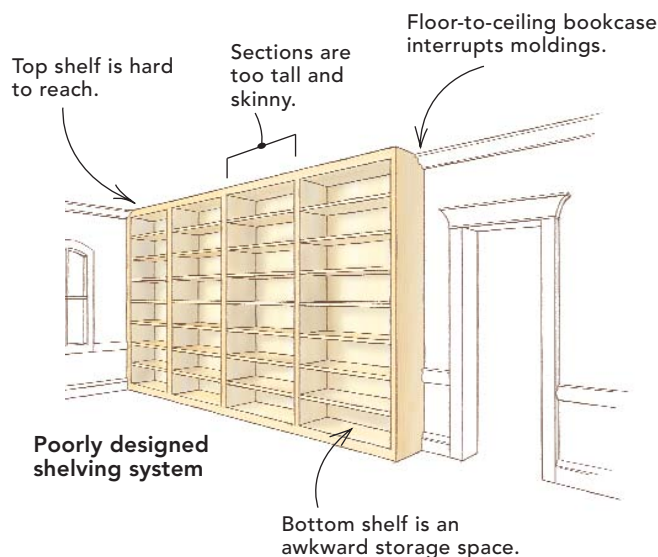
Built-in cabinetry is a great way to maximize square footage and to integrate good-looking storage into a room. But designing built-ins that combine utility with aesthetics is a fresh challenge with each project.

Size matters, regardless of style

Scale and proportion are the most important aspects of designing built-in cabinetry. Regardless of architectural style, the piece must fit comfortably in its room. Often, the functional goal of maximizing storage conflicts with the aesthetic context of the room (top drawing).

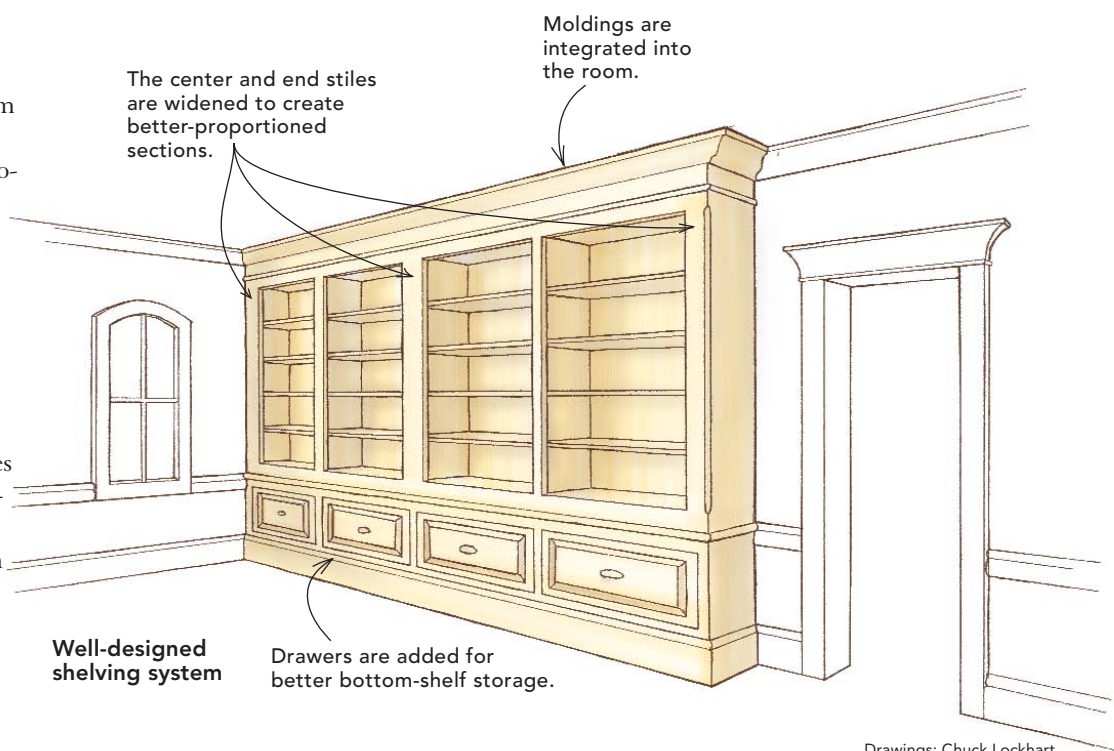
Creative fiddling on paper often solves these problems with little loss of storage space. Changing stile and rail widths is one way of doing this: You can soften ungainly proportions by widening one or the other. Another way to make a massive piece look less clumsy is to break it down into smaller units (bottom drawing). Base cabinets, paneled-in areas, breakfronts, stepped sections, decorative pediments, and other period-informed detailing can help you to attain good proportions without losing storage. I often refer to pattern books such as *The Elements of Style* by Stephen Calloway and Elizabeth Cromley (Simon & Schuster, 1997) for period details.

Sometimes a cabinet's function dictates its divisions, as with entertainment centers and their bulky audio and video components. A breakfront cabinet with large doors may be mandatory here. But such factors should be seen as an opportunity rather than a constraint. You can create pleasing proportions by



Maximum storage can look like an afterthought

People often are tempted to cover a wall with shelves with little regard for proportion. But by reworking the sections of the box, you can make a piece fit its surroundings without losing much storage. Adding drawers below the bookshelves and widening three of the stiles define two distinct sections with good proportion.



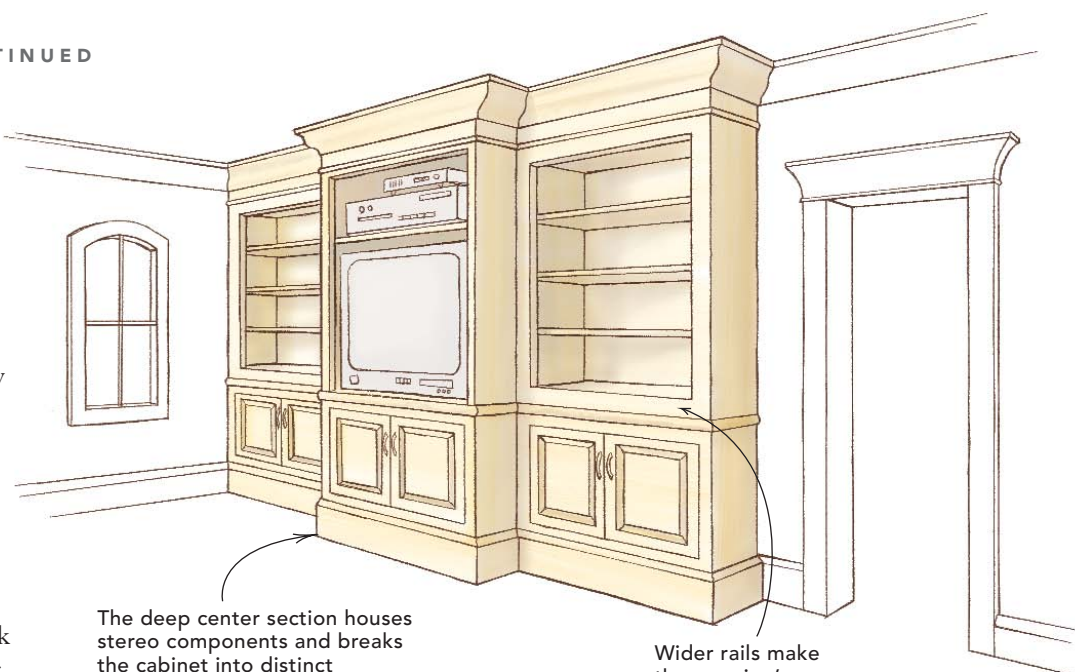
tweaking the major carcass sections (drawing right).

Good scale and proportion are only a beginning. You can take several stylistic directions with trim details: fully integrated work, which seamlessly blends into the house's interior; nonintegrated work, which introduces a new style; and referential work, which borrows design elements from the space but stands on its own stylistically.

Continue a room's theme with integration

Appropriate in homes with a specific architectural style, fully integrated work repeats that style. In this way, a historic home can meet contemporary storage needs without an abrupt, inappropriate change-up in architectural style.

Integrating new moldings with the original ones is crucial to incorporating the cabinetry effectively. If the original isn't available, the new trim should



The deep center section houses stereo components and breaks the cabinet into distinct segments.

Wider rails make the opening's proportions better.

Depth can be a design motif

Accommodating bulky stereo or video components can create opportunities to break down a massive cabinet into subsections with pleasing proportions. Varying stile and rail width is another way to improve a cabinet's look.

speak the same language as the home's existing molding.

Make a statement: step apart from the room

If you want cabinetry that makes a bold design statement and stands on its own, scale and proportion may need to be newly minted, particularly in the context of modern or Asian-inspired work.

These styles are about abstract geometries. With basic carcass joinery, the visual impression of horizontal and vertical lines is the dominant design motif (drawing right). Although classical rules of proportion may not be central to the design, ideally some specific organizing principle is at work.

Rule breaking can be fun, but it needs to be justified so that it doesn't result in impractical cabinetry. Adhering to abstract geometries, for example, can result in fixed-shelf cabinetry that doesn't hold the



Break away from convention

A display cabinet can be a completely different style than that of the home. This Asian-style cabinet takes proportional cues from Japanese tatami-mat dimensions, but it is still pleasing within the space.

books and heirlooms it was intended to hold.

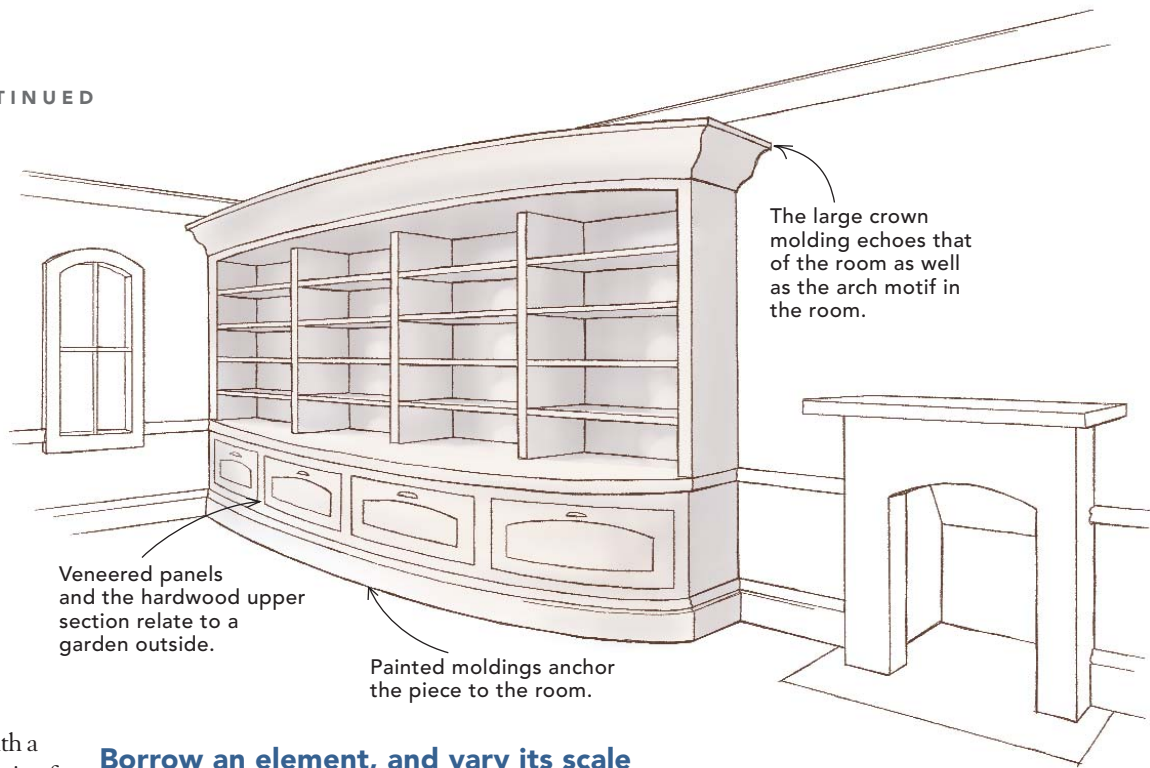
Something old, something new

Fully integrated work blends into its environment and can be boring; nonintegrated work can be so unmoored from its context that it's irritating. An interesting middle ground is cabinetry that borrows design motifs from its surroundings without slavishly repeating details.

One referential strategy that works well is focusing on a particular architectural detail, such as arched windows, and transforming it (drawing right).

In another case, an antique secretary with a swan-neck pediment might suggest a pair of bookcases with broken pediment tops.

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Borrow an element, and vary its scale

This built-in borrows from the window's arch and plays with the scale by expanding it (across the cabinet front) and reducing it (in the drawer fronts). Integrating the base and chair-rail moldings anchors the cabinet to the room, but keeping the height below the room's cornice maintains the cabinet's identity.