

The Well-Designed Walk-In Closet

Although they are often crammed into whatever space remains on a floor plan, these closets deserve thoughtful location, layout, and outfitting

BY LYNNE HEINZMANN

As an architect, I often see poorly designed walk-in closets added to floor plans as an afterthought. There often seems to be no regard for horizontal and vertical dimensions, the type of door or its location, or adequate lighting.

Besides, a walk-in closet doesn't necessarily work in every home. On the contrary, I think some designers and homeowners need to face the truth: A walk-in closet might not belong in a cramped floor plan. To be useful, a walk-in closet needs to be at least 4 ft. deep, with full ceiling height and no obtrusive bump-outs. Anything less than that, and you might be better with a reach-in closet.

Then again, if adequate attention is paid to key details, a walk-in closet can offer tremendous flexibility in the storage spaces it can provide. It can be outfitted with multitier closet rods, open shelves, built-in drawers, or

specialized storage for specific types of clothing. A room that's used every day deserves to be well designed.

Choosing the right location

The first crucial design decision for a walk-in closet is its location relative to other features of the bedroom. There are seven principles I like to consider, and although it's not always possible to satisfy all of them, the more the better.

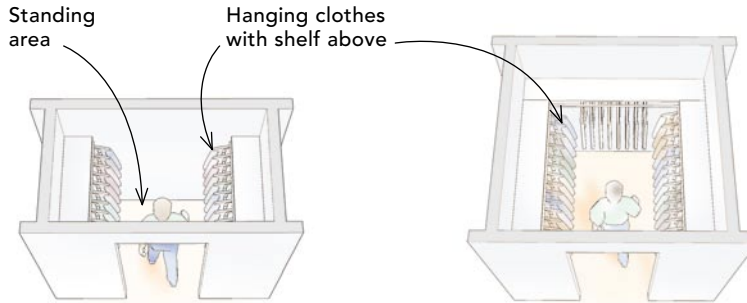
- Create a circulation zone. As shown in the floor plan on the facing page, it's best to group doorways in the bedroom suite to keep the circulation zone separate from the furniture zone.
- Plan for a proper entrance. Don't put the closet behind the bedroom door or the bathroom door, a surprisingly frequent mistake. A walk-in closet is its own room and requires its own unimpeded entrance.
- Plan for the door swing. A proper closet entrance won't be



A room that's used every day deserves to be well designed. The right location, layout, lights, and storage make a walk-in closet a more-useful part of your house.

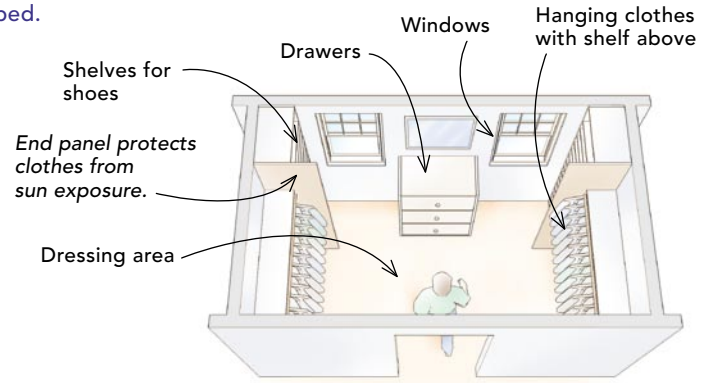
START WITH LAYOUT, LOCATION, AND ENTRY

Layout is driven by the size of the space. Dimensions and details for the three most-common walk-in closet layouts are shown below. Larger walk-in closets feel more luxurious, so to a certain extent, the bigger the better. But when space is at a premium, the layout needs to be scaled appropriately so that floor space is adequate and storage isn't too cramped.



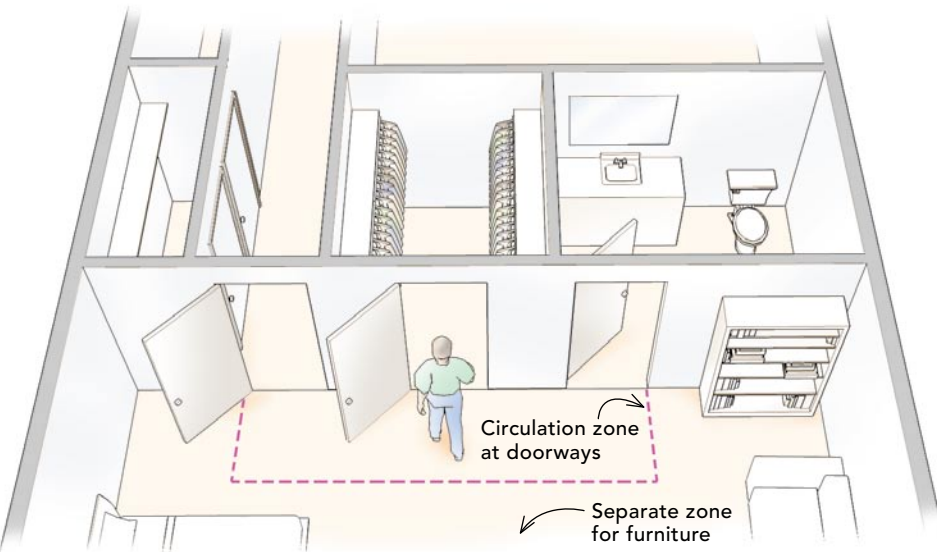
Standard: For a walk-in closet with clothes rods on two opposite walls to be efficient, it should be a minimum of 7 ft. wide and 4 ft. deep.

U-shaped: When the rods run along three walls in a U-shape, the closet should be 7 ft. wide by 7 ft. deep, minimum. These dimensions allow for a 3-ft.-wide area between racks of clothes.



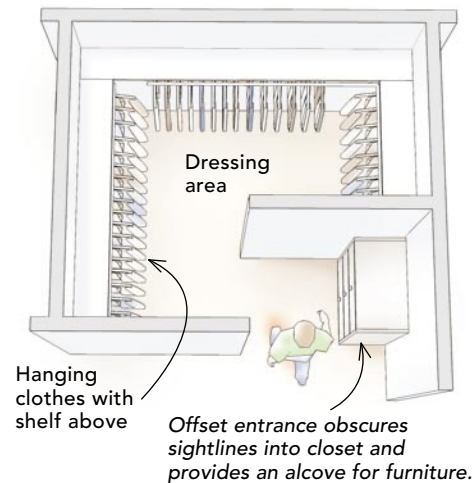
Large with dressing area: If the walk-in closet is also to be used as a dressing area, the standing area's width is increased to 5 ft. Of course, customized elements (shelving, drawers, and so forth) will alter the size and shape of the closet.

Group the doorways together. Smooth the flow of traffic and eliminate the need to walk around furniture by grouping the bedroom, bathroom, and closet doors in the same area.



The best door might be no door at all.

Consider eliminating the door by designing the closet entrance to block sightlines to the interior.



much good if the door can't open all the way. Don't place the bed or other furniture too close to the closet entrance. If the bedroom is too small to allow room for a proper door swing, consider a different door option, or even none at all.

- Consider the exterior impact. When deciding whether to place the closet on an exterior wall, consider the overall appearance of the house. Unless the closet will contain a window, locating

the room on an exterior wall will result in a blank area on the house's facade.

- Avoid a direct line of sight. A closet tends to be messy, so don't draw attention to it. Locate the closet entrance so that it is not in the sightline from the bedroom entrance.

- Use closets for sound control. A closet can provide an effective sound barrier. Take advantage of this quality by placing the closet between bedrooms.

- Locate a closet near the bathroom, but not in it. Some architects might disagree, but I don't place a closet entrance in a bathroom. It seems convenient, but I think the steam and humidity of a shower or tub is harmful to some types of clothing and fabrics.

Don't underestimate the importance of good lighting

The most-overlooked element of a walk-in closet is lighting. Any-

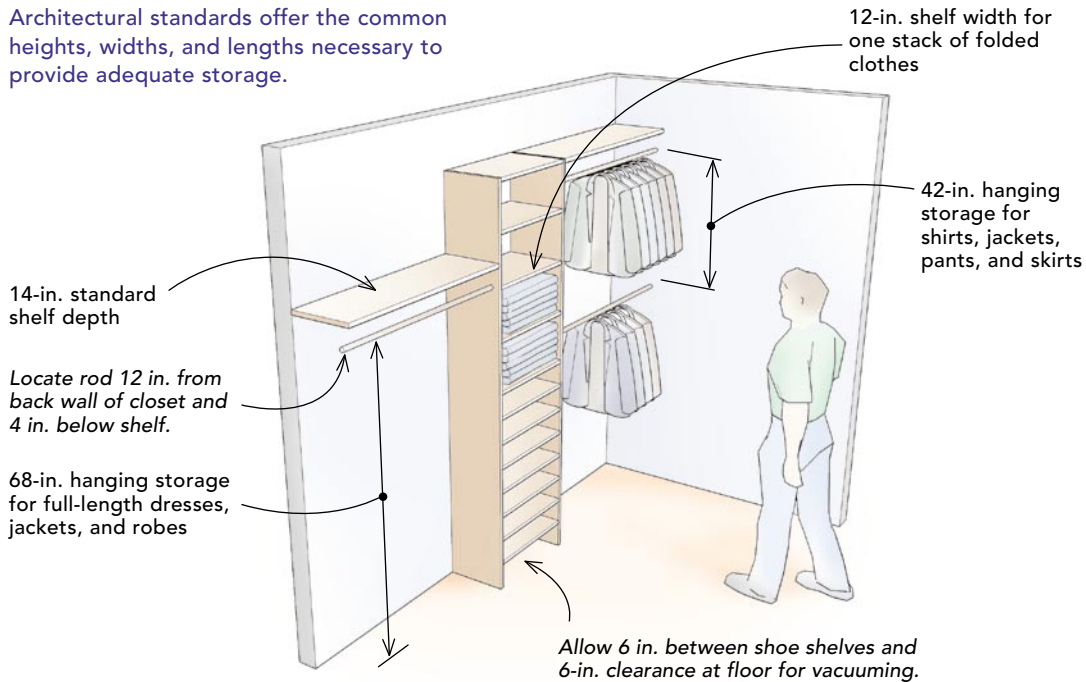
one who has fumbled around in a dark, crowded closet can tell you just how important good lighting truly is.

There are three standard choices for hardwired lighting. Surface-mounted or recessed ceiling fixtures are generally the least-expensive lighting option and the easiest to install. If mounted in the center of a walk-in closet, these fixtures provide an even level of ambient light. Because of shadows that are cast

STANDARDS ARE GREAT FOR PLANNING STORAGE

Dimensions and clearances that work

Architectural standards offer the common heights, widths, and lengths necessary to provide adequate storage.



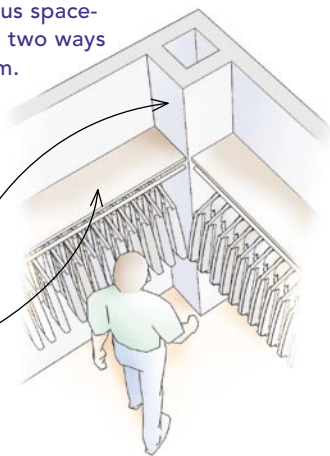
Dealing with corners

Corners are notorious space-eaters, but here are two ways to solve the problem.

Solution 1: Boxed-out corner

Corner framed out and finished with drywall

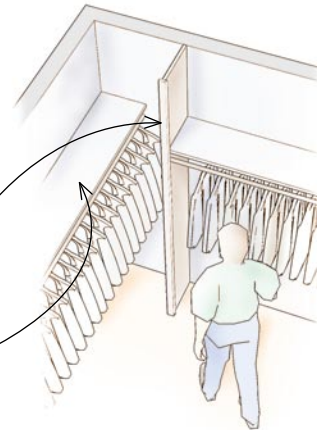
12-in.- to 14-in.- deep shelf with closet rod below



Solution 2: End panels

¾-in. veneer-plywood end panel reinforced with stile on front edge

12-in.- to 14-in.- deep shelf with closet rod below



by hanging clothing, however, items near the floor tend to be in shadow.

Wall sconces are mounted at eye level and are better than ceiling fixtures at illuminating shoes and other clothing stored on the closet's lower shelves. Because sconces require a blank wall area for installation, though, they tend to be reserved for larger walk-in closets.

Relatively new to the market and still relatively expensive, lighted closet rods (www.luciferlighting.com and [www.outwater](http://www.outwater.com)

.com) are rapidly gaining in popularity. Installed in place of standard clothes bars, they are either hardwired or are plugged in to an outlet and cast light directly on the hanging clothing and items stored below. Of course, items stored on shelves would require another means of illumination.

Each of these three lighting styles has its own strengths, but their weaknesses ultimately mean that the optimal solution for lighting a walk-in closet usually involves using a combi-

nation of two or more different types of fixtures.

Although the proper light fixtures can provide a nice, even level of artificial light, I prefer to use natural light whenever possible. If a walk-in closet is on the exterior wall of a house, natural light can come from windows located so that sunlight does not shine directly on the clothes, which could damage them. Because the sun never shines from the north in our hemisphere, north-facing windows are ideal in closets. If north-

facing windows are not possible, window treatments and wall placements can be used to protect clothing from fading.

If you can't spare the wall space to install windows, consider using traditional skylights, or even better, tubular skylights, which use reflective tubes to channel natural light from the roof to the closet ceiling. (See "Tubular Skylights," *FHB* #180 and FineHomebuilding.com.) Then again, if you get dressed before the sun comes up, you will still require a backup light source.

Storage options are dictated by needs

Closets should be designed to accommodate the types and amount of clothing you have, but should make allowances for future storage needs. When building a walk-in closet, you can incorporate many different types of storage units into the design (see sidebar, facing page). If you plan to customize the closet yourself, consider specialized storage areas for shoes, ties, and other specific types of clothing. Other customizing products include benches, stepladders, rotating clothes trees, and cedar closet linings. Whatever plans you have for customization, pay attention to standard clearances to ensure a proper use of space (drawings left).

When you're finished with the tough decisions, your well-designed walk-in closet should have adequate lighting, the appropriate type of door, proper customization, basic minimum dimensions, and correct placement within the bedroom suite. When all these criteria are met, a walk-in becomes a useful tool for the homeowner, organizing clothing into easily visible and reachable areas. □

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Custom closets can use prefab components

Closets don't have to be outfitted with site-built shelving and storage to qualify as custom. In fact, several manufacturers make prefab components that can be incorporated into a walk-in closet without sacrificing function or style.

WIRE SHELVING

The most-economical option for customizing a walk-in closet is to use coated-wire shelving. This type of shelving offers several advantages. It is economical, it is readily available, and a whole-closet kit can easily be installed in just a few hours. On the negative side, wire shelving can leave sweaters with gridlike imprints, the components are not as durable as other types, and the overall appearance is somewhat utilitarian.

Rubbermaid's Configurations line of products includes closet kits (\$135 to \$210 for each 4-ft.- to 8-ft.-wide closet section) with available add-on products such as shoe shelves (\$32), a tie-and-belt organizer (\$21), and a pants rack (\$57). Each kit contains all the hardware and brackets needed to

create the chosen closet configuration, which simplifies purchasing and installing the system. Rubbermaid also recently modified its product so that the wire racks no longer need to be cut to fit the closet but instead telescope in or out as needed.

ClosetMaid sells coated-wire shelving systems on its Web site or at most home-improvement stores. With five different kinds of wire shelving, ClosetMaid offers a great range of products, including whole-closet kits (\$35 to \$122 for each 5-ft.- to 8-ft.-wide closet section) and closet accessories such as a two-drawer kit (\$50), a sliding tie-and-belt rack (\$15), and an expandable shoe rack (\$20). For a \$5 fee, this company offers a custom-design service online. Simply send in your closet dimensions and storage requirements, and a design consultant will help you to customize your closet.

SOURCES

CLOSET SUPPLIES

ClosetMaid
www.closetmaid.com

Configurations
www.rubbermaid.com

EasyClosets
www.easyclosets.com

Easy Track
www.easytrack.com

John Louis Home
www.johnlouishome.com

PLASTIC-LAMINATE SHELVING

For a slightly more-substantial look, consider components made from plastic laminate. Durable laminate shelving is usually available in a wider variety of component options than coated-wire shelving units. On the downside, a plastic-laminate closet system is generally more expensive and is more difficult to install than its coated-wire cousin.

Easy Track offers 5/8-in.-thick melamine-coated pressed-board shelves in white, maple, and cherry. The Easy Track system is installed by hanging components from a thin steel ledger strip mounted 76 in. above the closet floor. Ledger strips can be cut to length with a hacksaw and need to be fastened to studs. The 3-D design tool available on Easy Track's Web site is easy to use, and once you finalize the closet design, you can email the company to order the components. Easy Track's 4-ft.- to 8-ft.-wide closet-section kit runs from \$145 to \$225.

Laminate components from EasyClosets are made of either 3/4-in. MDF (medium-density fiberboard) covered with a thermofoil wrap or 3/4-in. high-density particleboard with a melamine surface. Both come with a lifetime guarantee. Because of the thicker material, EasyClosets says that an 8-ft. section can hold up to 1200 lb. The company's user-friendly online 3-D design tool calculates the total price of the closet as it is being designed so that the relative costs of different components can be compared. A typical 4-ft. by 7-ft. walk-in closet customization costs about \$890, shipping included.

SOLID-WOOD SHELVING

If you want a beautiful closet that doesn't need to be hidden behind closed doors, solid-wood shelving is a good way to go. This stain-grade finish carpentry can be custom-made from solid wood or hardwood plywood.

If you're interested in a factory-made version, check out the John Louis Home brand. This closet system features shelves and panels made from solid-wood slats fastened together with metal hardware. John Louis Home closet components are surprisingly affordable; a standard closet-system kit up to 10 ft. wide retails for \$249 plus shipping. For an upscale look at a reasonable price, solid-wood closet components can be an option.

