

# Taming an Outdated Pantry

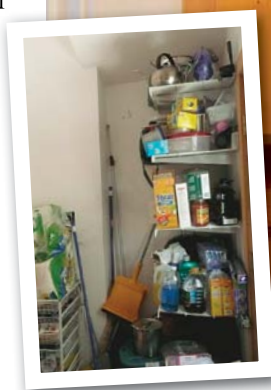
Clever design ideas and construction techniques for outfitting an awkward space with useful storage

BY JOSEPH LANZA

**W**hen we first started remodeling our house, space and time were tight. After I carved out a small office behind the kitchen, I was left with a space about 5½ ft. by 7½ ft. to serve as the laundry, the pantry, and a broom closet. We put a stacked washer/dryer in the corner by the kitchen door. On the wall next to it, I hung some heavy-duty wire shelving above the litter box. On the opposite wall, I built some plywood shelves to hold cans and boxes of food. This system worked while we readied an addition.

When the addition was complete, the laundry moved out, and more recycling boxes and wire shelving moved in. We knew we could do a lot more with the space. After eight or nine years of thinking about it, we had a pretty good idea of what we wanted, so I started modeling the pantry in SketchUp. An additional sink to handle houseplants and cleaning was first on the wish list. Recycling was next. I've built or installed a few kitchen-cabinet recycling centers, but they all have required transferring recyclables to another container on the way to the street. I liked the simplicity of tossing the stuff right into the curbside container. I didn't see why it wouldn't work inside a cabinet, preferably under the sink.

I brought the wall cabinets right up to the sloped ceiling. I knew this wouldn't get us much more usable space and also would make building the cabinets a bit more complicated, but it would get me out of building a soffit.



**Cabinets don't make the space bigger, but they do add efficiency and appeal.** Formerly a cramped storage space (left), the pantry was transformed into a good-looking room with lots more storage by the addition of well-designed, simple, and elegant cabinets.

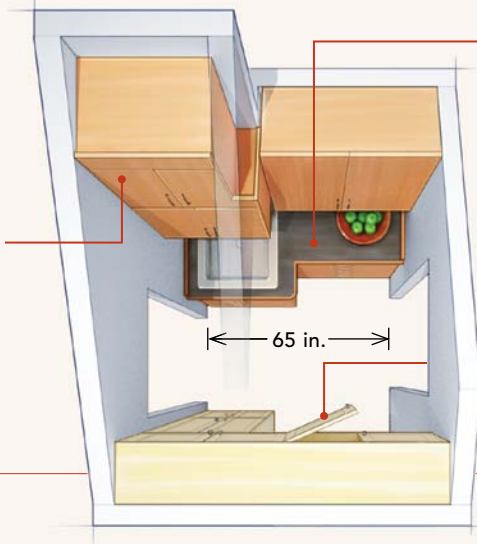
## A scrap of plywood becomes a layout tool

After figuring out the basic design in SketchUp, I worked out the final dimensions at full scale using a story stick that I made from a scrap piece of plywood about 2 in. wide, cut to fit exactly between the walls of the spaces. Starting with the base cabinets, I held the stick in place and marked the edge of the plumbing pipes running on the outside of the left-hand wall, then opened the back door to see how much room I had for the sink base. I added a couple of inches beyond the swing of the door for the end panel and the countertop overhang, then marked out the cabinet between those marks on the stick. For the upper cabinets, I turned the same story stick over and held

## SQUEEZING THE MOST FROM 40 SQ. FT.

### NEW UPPER CABINETS

Instead of the usual 12-in.-deep uppers, the author made the new cabinets 16 in. deep. They can store a lot of stuff (serving bowls, lunch boxes, coolers, big wine bottles laid on their sides) that would never fit in a standard wall cabinet, as well as dishes and glassware.



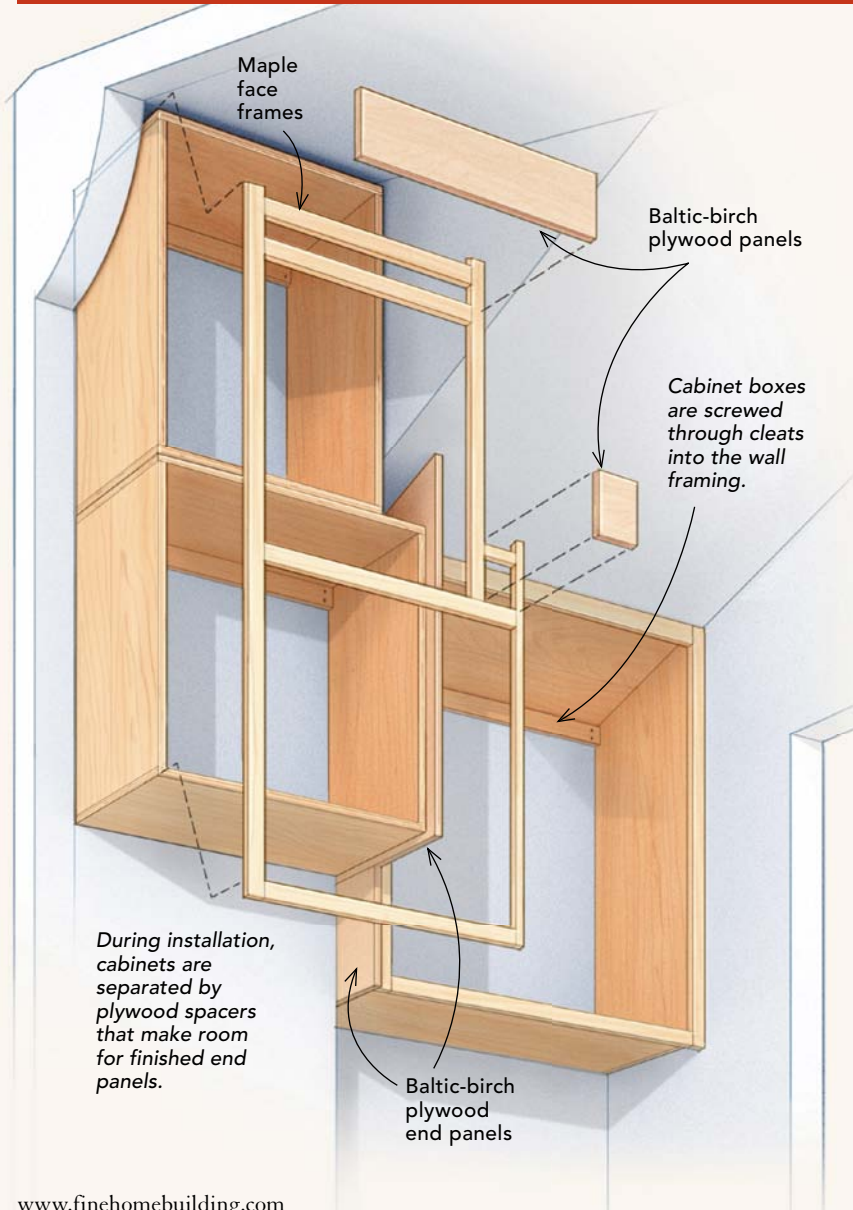
### NEW BASE CABINETS

The finished-maple plywood cabinet boxes were assembled with butt joints, glue, and screws. The width of the sink base, 30½ in., was limited by the swing of the exterior door. To make sure that the recycling bin would fit underneath, the author made the base cabinets 27 in. deep and pushed the sink slightly off center. Now that the bin had a place, he could use the other 32-in.-wide base cabinet for drawers, which offer much more efficient storage than shelves.

### DOORS FOR EXISTING SHELVES

The paint-grade cabinets use the wall space between the kitchen and office doors, including the space over the office door. They contain adjustable shelves used to store canned and dry goods, and at 12 in. deep, they don't interfere with traffic flow.

## USE A STORY STICK TO AVOID MISTAKES



**Check your work.** A handy layout and construction tool to use on jobs like this project, a story stick is a length of plywood scrap on which room measurements are recorded and cabinet spacing is determined. Once the cabinets are installed, use the stick to double-check their locations.



**Assemble the face frames ahead of time.** Built in the shop with pocket screws, the frames are scribed to the wall and nailed to the boxes as units.

## SAVE SOME TROUBLE AND SKIP THE BACK



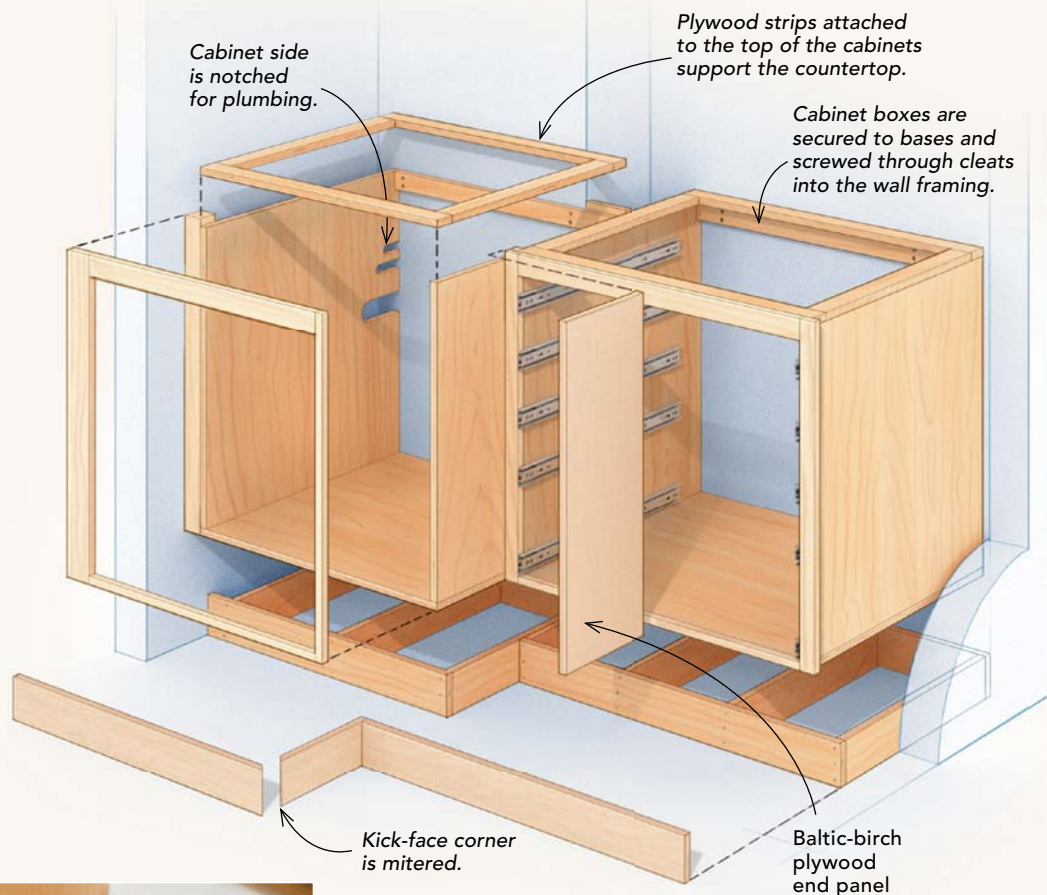
**A separate base is easy to level.** In older houses, it's often easier to build and install separate bases for the lower cabinets. Basically plywood boxes, the bases are shimmed level and attached to the floor.



**A great reason for backless cabinets.** A backless cabinet can be placed and easily scribed to any protruding plumbing or wiring. The base cabinets are sized to create a traditional 3-in.-deep kick space below. Once the cabinets are attached to the base, the face frames are applied.



**Systematic approach to drawer slides.** Allow 1/4-in. clearance between drawer fronts. Mark drawer-bottom locations on the inside cabinet wall, then transfer these marks to a piece of plywood. Use this piece inside the cabinet to support the top drawer slides while they're being attached to the cabinet sides. In turn, cut it down to the next drawer-slide height for each drawer. For the bottom drawer, rest the slide on a scrap of 1/4-in. plywood on the bottom of the cabinet.



### Details don't have to cost a lot



**Unite laminate and counter.** Instead of creating a seam between the laminate and counter's edge, attach the edging first, then apply the laminate, letting it run over the edge. After the adhesive dries, bevel both laminate and edging with one router pass.



**Even plywood can look good.** The exposed laminations of the Baltic-birch plywood used for the doors and drawer fronts become a minimal design element.

it against the back wall. I marked the corner where the wall jogs, then laid out the cabinets to the left and right. I drew all the components—cabinet sides, spacers, blocks, and scribe strips—on the story stick, then used the story stick (instead of my tape measure) to mark the plywood when I cut out the cabinet parts.

### Build and hang the uppers first

I bought finished maple plywood for the cabinet boxes. It's pricey, but it also saves lots of time that would be spent applying finish. I built the uppers first because it was easier to install them without climbing over the base cabinets. The cabinet carcasses are simple four-piece boxes (no backs) with the sides angled to follow the ceiling. I used a plunge router and a shop-made jig to drill holes for adjustable shelving, then assembled the boxes. Instead of plywood backs, I attached a poplar cleat at the back to attach the box to the wall and let the face frame square up the box. The lack of a back doesn't weaken the box, makes construction and installation easier, and in the case of the base cabinets, makes the integration of plumbing and other obstacles simpler.

I find it much easier to apply finished end panels after installation than to make the cabinets with finished sides, so during installation, I used  $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. spacers between the cabinets. I made the face frames from  $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. maple, joined with pocket screws. After hanging the boxes, I attached the face frames with glue and nails.

### Next, install the kick base

I've found that it's less of a headache to build a plinth or kick base for cabinets, especially in an older house. Once the kick faces are shimmed level and attached to the floor, I can cover them with a clean piece of finished plywood that hides the shims and screwheads.

After building the boxes, I nailed them to the bases and screwed them to the walls. When all the cabinets were installed, I applied a shellac-based sanding sealer for color and finished with two coats of water-based polyurethane.

### Drawers and doors complete the project

Rather than make frame-and-panel doors and drawers, I made them from  $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. Baltic-birch plywood. It's less expensive, and I like the minimalist look. After slightly rounding over the edges and finishing them, I hung the doors with clip-on full-overlay hinges. I drilled the 35-mm holes with a drill press equipped with a fence (see "Building Skills," *FHB* #213 and online at [FineHomebuilding.com](http://FineHomebuilding.com)).

For the drawers, I used side-mounted ball-bearing slides. To simplify layout and to speed up installation, I like to align the bottom of the drawer box with the bottom of the drawer slide when it is mounted on the cabinet. Once I had laid out the drawer heights on the inside of the cabinet, I used a piece of plywood cut the proper height to support each slide as it was installed.

### Paint-grade cabinets began as basic shelves

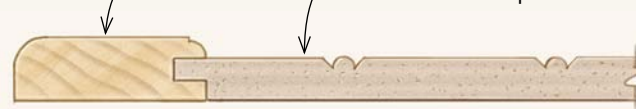
I had originally built a 24-in.-wide by 80-in.-high shelving unit out of  $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. lauan. The top extended over the door to the opposite wall, supported in the back by the head casing and on the wall by a small cleat. It had a nailed-on poplar face frame and a few pine shelves supported with pins. To make the shelves easily adjustable (and to avoid having to paint the inside of the cabinets), I made new faces for the



### NEW DOORS DRESS UP OLD SHELVES

Bare shelving (inset) needed more than face frames. Rather than use clear-finished doors, the author milled cope-and-stick frames, then used  $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. MDF beadboard for the panels.

Poplar frames are  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. by  $2\frac{1}{2}$  in. with a cope-and-stick profile.  $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. MDF beadboard panel, rabbeted  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. by  $\frac{3}{8}$  in. to fit frame profile



sides from  $\frac{1}{4}$ -in. finished maple, drilling holes for adjustable shelves, then gluing and nailing them over the existing cabinet sides. I also covered the shelves with the same  $\frac{1}{4}$ -in. plywood.

I hadn't considered doors before, but now that the other side of the pantry was closed in, open shelves didn't look right.

For the doors, I made poplar frames with  $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. medium-density fiberboard (MDF) beadboard panels. Painted white, the cabinets combine with the new clear-finished cabinets to become an extension of the Baltic-birch and painted-beadboard cabinets in the kitchen. □

When he's not working on his own home, Joseph Lanza designs and builds houses within driving distance of his home in Duxbury, Mass. Photos by Charles Bickford.