

A dining room food cupboard

It is rare to find a client with a simple request.

Usually a commission comes bound with complicated requirements, special drawers for particular things, shelves of a certain distance, minimum and maximum heights and preferred forms of decoration.

Colour, shape, style are, in most cases predetermined. It

was a joy then, when a fairly wealthy couple asked me to make them a food cupboard.

They had some parameters worked out, but the ones in regard to choice of wood, style of furniture and decoration they left to my judgement.

Not a totally free hand then, but some interesting conditions to work with. I

jumped at the chance and having agreed a rough budget and having only the roughest notion of what they had in mind, I waited eagerly for their promised sketch, with its more particular details.

It arrived quickly, and came as a pleasant surprise. It wasn't a picture of what my clients wanted (at least I hoped it

wasn't), I took it to be a drawing of the space their proposed cupboard should occupy, and the positions and sizes of the shelves they hoped I could hang inside it.

With it came some more particular points for me to bear in mind:

It was to store tinned and boxed food, and as much of it as possible.

There was to be a hanging spice rack, and one drawer should have partitions for cutlery.

Lastly, it was destined to stand in the dining room (not the kitchen), and so it had to look poised — elegant perhaps.

They also sent a plan and several photographs of the dining room. It was a small chamber, brightly lit, with quite a high ceiling and a large window. When the cupboard was in place, natural light would shine across its face, and its far end closest to the window would be about a foot away from the end wall.

In addition, I was reminded that the chief cook was only five foot tall, and could I bear that in mind when siting the spice rack? Liz didn't want to climb a ladder to reach the spices.

Design

When designing such a large piece of furniture, one can take several approaches. One can make it look large, commanding and heavy, solid, weighty and cumbersome, or one could even try something a little more difficult to achieve: and that is to make the monster dance. In such a small room, the latter approach is the best.

When it is finished and in position, you do not want visitors to react with surprise and ask themselves "what is that great thing doing in here?" or mutter "rather dominates the room." By making it dance I mean that it should show a lightness and balance, and to achieve this you have to pay attention to the verticals.

It has to have graceful legs. I drew these in, choosing a couple of very common French designs. A dancing foot does not stand flat on the floor. A bracket foot, a pedestal or a

straight foot look immensely solid and immobile; but they are very strong. A cabriole shape has lift, but it is relatively weak. To see what I mean, compare the three designs and the effect of the different feet on each.

It might be valid to point out that in a small room, no one is going to see the feet, but in this case this was not so. The floor is tiled, and clear, and a three quarter view of the cupboard is the first thing one sees entering the room. At least one front and one back leg would be visible.

If you are dealing with shaped legs, the next thing is to pay attention to the bottom rail which connects them. A little piece of decoration here can emphasise the sense of movement. The decoration can be carved into the rail, or merely cut out from its bottom.

The French are masters of this, have a look at some of their 19th century buffets and armoires.

With this food cupboard there was so much width, that the outline and decoration had to be considered with some care. Too fussy, and the sense of lightness would be lost, too little, and the legs would have to be longer to achieve the desired lightness and grace, and this would have cost storage space.

A simple frieze sawn at the front and the suggestion of a frieze at the sides was all, I decided, that was necessary.

Once the frieze and legs were roughed out on the paper, it was only a matter of a few minutes to draw in the rest of the detail, leaving as much as possible at this stage to my imagination, and the imagination of the client. It is amazing what a few lines can do — or rather what the brain does when presented with a few lines.

Using squared paper, I quickly dashed off a pencil sketch of my proposal. It showed three long doors above, and three short doors beneath a row of three drawers.

With each door I sketched in a different form of moulding decoration. I used a thick 4b pencil, and only by careful

scrutiny of the squared paper, and by much subsequent hardening up of the line is it possible to define what has been suggested.

From this point, it was clear that in the lower half there would be some wasted space. A high rail at the floor of a cupboard makes taking things in and out difficult.

I decided to make the floor level with the top of the bottom rail. This resulted in a significant loss of not very useful space. At the top I decided to bring the cornice down over

the top rail by several inches, thus reducing the wastage there. From the drawing it was obvious that this had to be made in two pieces. The original drawing I had been sent showed a narrow shelf at the top of the lower unit.

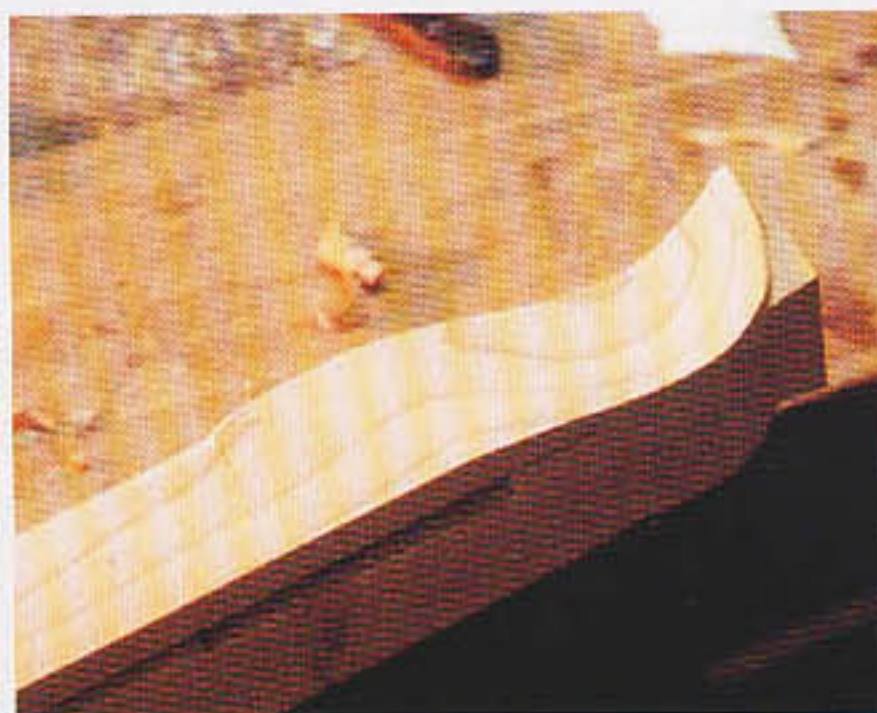
I decided that this would be only of symbolic significance, as whatever was left on the shelf would have to be removed before the doors could be opened.

The clients were pleased with what they think they saw in the rough, and it came back





Before gluing up, I marked and cut the legs



Above the foot, the entire upper part of the corner of the leg was rounded off



Once glued, I immediately fitted the 18mm plywood floor to give it rigidity

with precious few alterations. One significant request was inserted here which added to my problems, but clarified a segment of their original drawing.

The male of the species wanted his family crest emblazoned on the cupboard, his wife didn't. I decided to hide it on the top end panel facing the wall, where someone one day might chance upon it, and where he could gaze upon it when he chose.

I decided to make the cupboard from cedar — it is a beautiful wood, quick to work, easy to cut, easy to join, and stable. It also smells wonderful, possibly an advantage in a food cupboard.

The hard work

So much for the theoretical and aesthetic. There comes a time when one rolls up the sleeves.

First, a trip to the wood yard. Here, I badly underesti-

mated the amount of wood I could carry on the roof of my car. It is quite a low slung beast, with mud flaps which scrape sleeping policemen off the road, but by the time I had loaded half of my purchase of sweet smelling beautiful cedar onto the roof, the car was beginning to sag into the mud.

I made two trips each with a centre of gravity about a metre and a half above the engine block.

We swayed round corners, accelerated with great care and with eyes fixed in the rear mirror for falling logs. I dared not touch the brakes. Lesson: wood yards (to the carpenter) are bewitching places. You always end up buying more wood than you strictly need. Bring a van or trailer.

After cutting, painting white, and marking up a suitably long measuring stick (I had none in the workshop long enough), I commenced

the long slow tasks of cutting, squaring and jointing the wood for the two frameworks. Cedar is wonderful wood to work, but even with such a fine wood, and very sharp tools, this took quite a time, but after a while the framework sections were complete, and the panels made up. Before gluing up, I marked and cut the legs.

These were marked on adjacent faces, and cut with a band saw. The first cut is stopped before the waste falls away and with it your marks. Instead, the loosened part is strapped back with tape, which permits the second side to be cut. The curves were cleaned with a chisel and sandpaper, finishing with a scraper. The small amount of carving at the very foot was then done, removing only the absolute minimum of wood necessary to achieve the shadow. This undercut section was later painted black to accentuate the shadow, and make the

leg appear to be perched on its point.

Above the foot, the entire upper part of the corner of the leg was rounded off. This was done with a chisel and finished with a block plane and sandpaper supported by a curved block.

Once the legs were finished, the panels were inserted into the frames, and the lower section was glued and clamped in separate, carefully controlled stages. Once glued, I immediately fitted the 18mm plywood floor to give it rigidity.

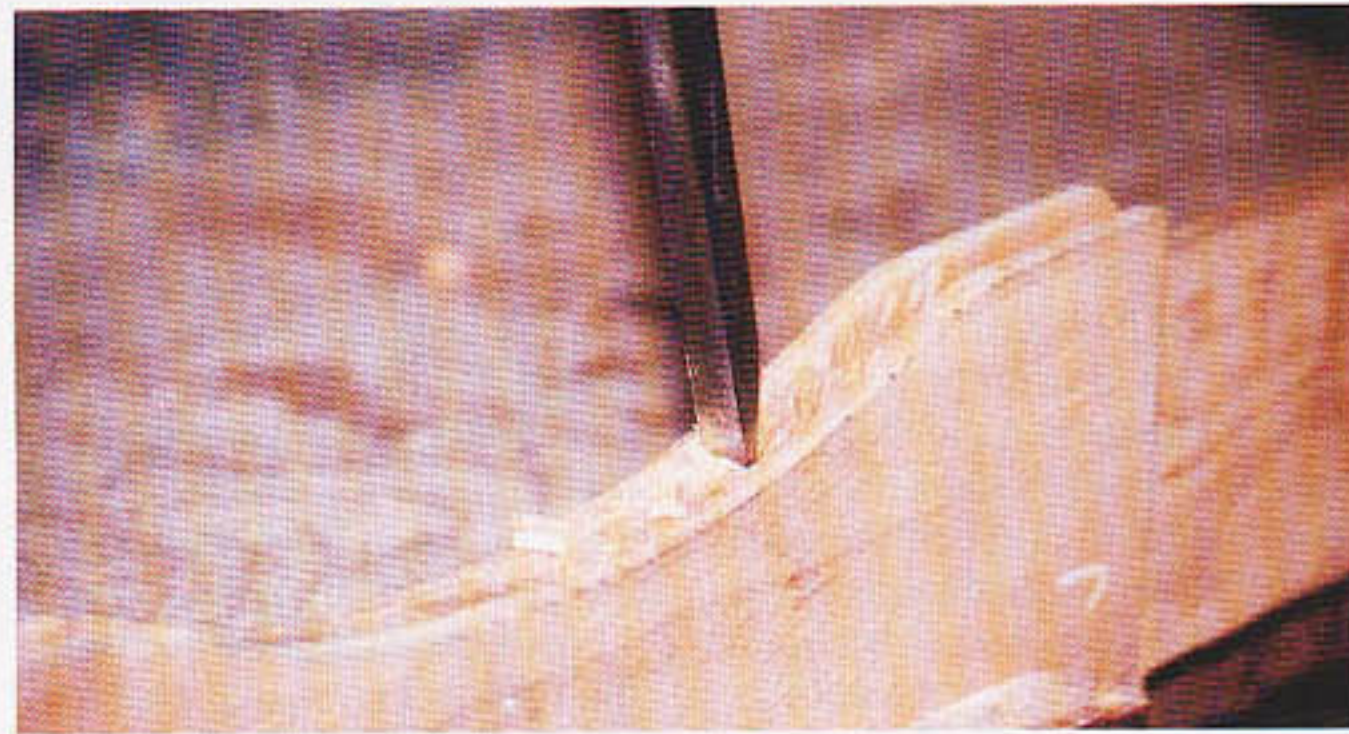
Top section

The top section was a simpler re-run of the lower. There being no lower rail, this was initially a more fragile affair, but as soon as the shelves and top were slid into position, it became sturdier.

After fitting out the lower section to support the drawers and the top I made the doors.



I ran off the mouldings and cut the panel groove with the spindle moulder, and then cut the joints



When the door frames were properly jointed with through tenons, I chopped out the panel groove in its lower edge



A sharp axe is probably no slower than using a hand held planer, and much quieter



I have some very narrow chisels for cutting the slots for the hinges



The cornice is very deep, and is well supported by a wide quarter inch birch bracket at each corner

With the exception of the top rails for each drawer, I ran off the mouldings and cut the panel groove with the spindle moulder, and then cut the joints. When the door frames were properly jointed with through tenons, I removed each top rail, sawed the arched curve, carved the moulding with appropriate chisels and gouges and chopped out the panel groove in its lower edge.

The door panels are flat in front and bevelled at the edges on the back

As with the side and back, the door panels are flat in front, and bevelled at the edges on the back. Before trimming with a hand plane, I used a sharp little axe to remove most of the waste. Probably no slower than using a hand held planer, and much quieter.

Each door is hung with a pair of mild steel back flap hinges.

Because the door is rebated and sits proud of the framework, the hinge flaps which are inserted into the timber of the door have to extend beyond the rebate and have a sufficient anchorage in the stile where a single screw secures them.

Slots

Cutting the slots for the hinges was a bother. I have some very narrow chisels for this work, which have to be supported by plates which protect the wood from bruising, but I had for some reason stupidly thrown away my metal slot template, which in the past I've clamped to the stile, and drilled through, using the narrow drill bit to remove the bulk of the waste (which it does very quickly). I will make a new template before I cut any more such slots.

The cornice is very deep,

and is well supported by a wide quarter inch birch bracket at each corner.

Some blocking was required prior to carving the corners to allow the cornice to follow the curves at the outside front corners of the top section.

This part was carved by hand, the rest was worked on the spindle moulder.

Rather than fit cutlery sections to one of the drawers, I decided to make a small cutlery tray, which would fit in the drawer, but could be lifted out. It took a little longer, but the result is more versatile and easier to clean. The spice rack was another little bit of fun.

It hangs on one door, which opens out and faces the kitchen.

From the aesthetic point of view, I would have preferred it to hang at the top of the door, but for reasons I have mentioned earlier, it had to go at the bottom. In retrospect, it is

quite unnecessary to fit a little lid to the spice rack.

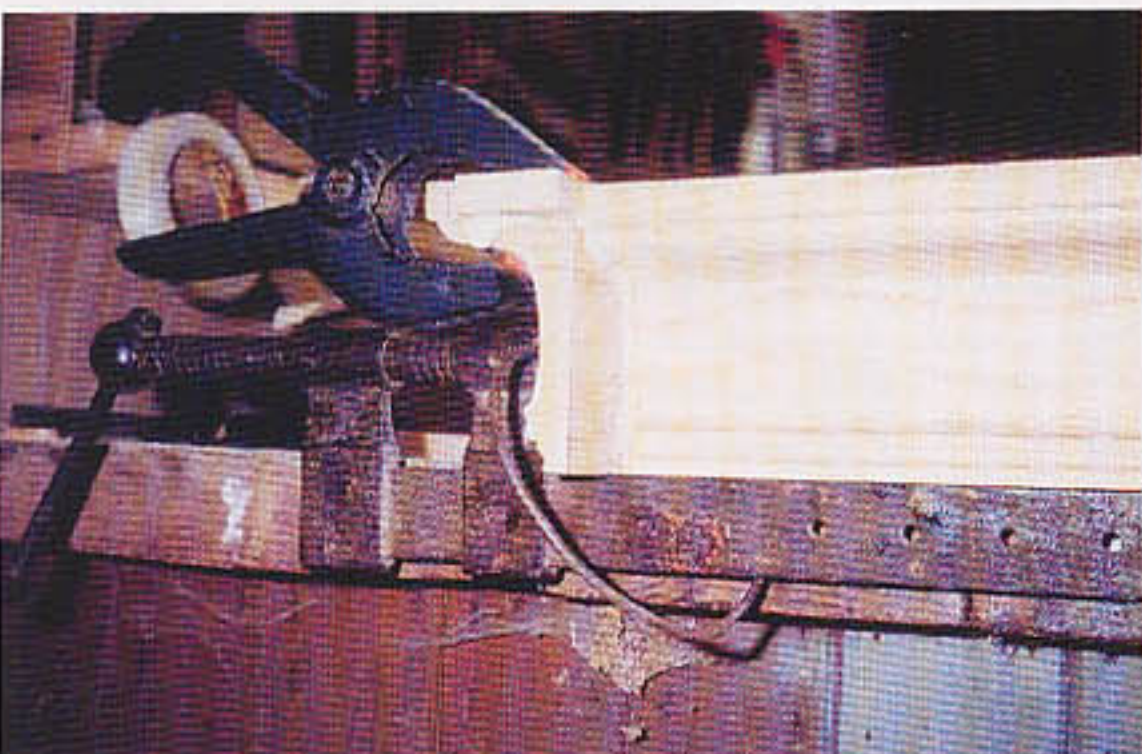
At the time, I liked the design, but now it looks to me a bit like a bird box.

Finishing

The cupboard is finished with three coats of traditional oil based yacht varnish, the first applied dilute. After rubbing down and wiping off, I followed with several applications of shellac, by rubber. On top of this, I painted the important crest, and sealed it with one further rubber of shellac.

The whole thing was waxed the next day, the same day as the carrier came to take it all away.

The finished shots are the photographs I can manage. My workshop is 25' long and 12' broad. I have been sent some rather fuzzy images of the cupboard in place — the clients are delighted — but only a fish eye lens will truly capture it in that room!



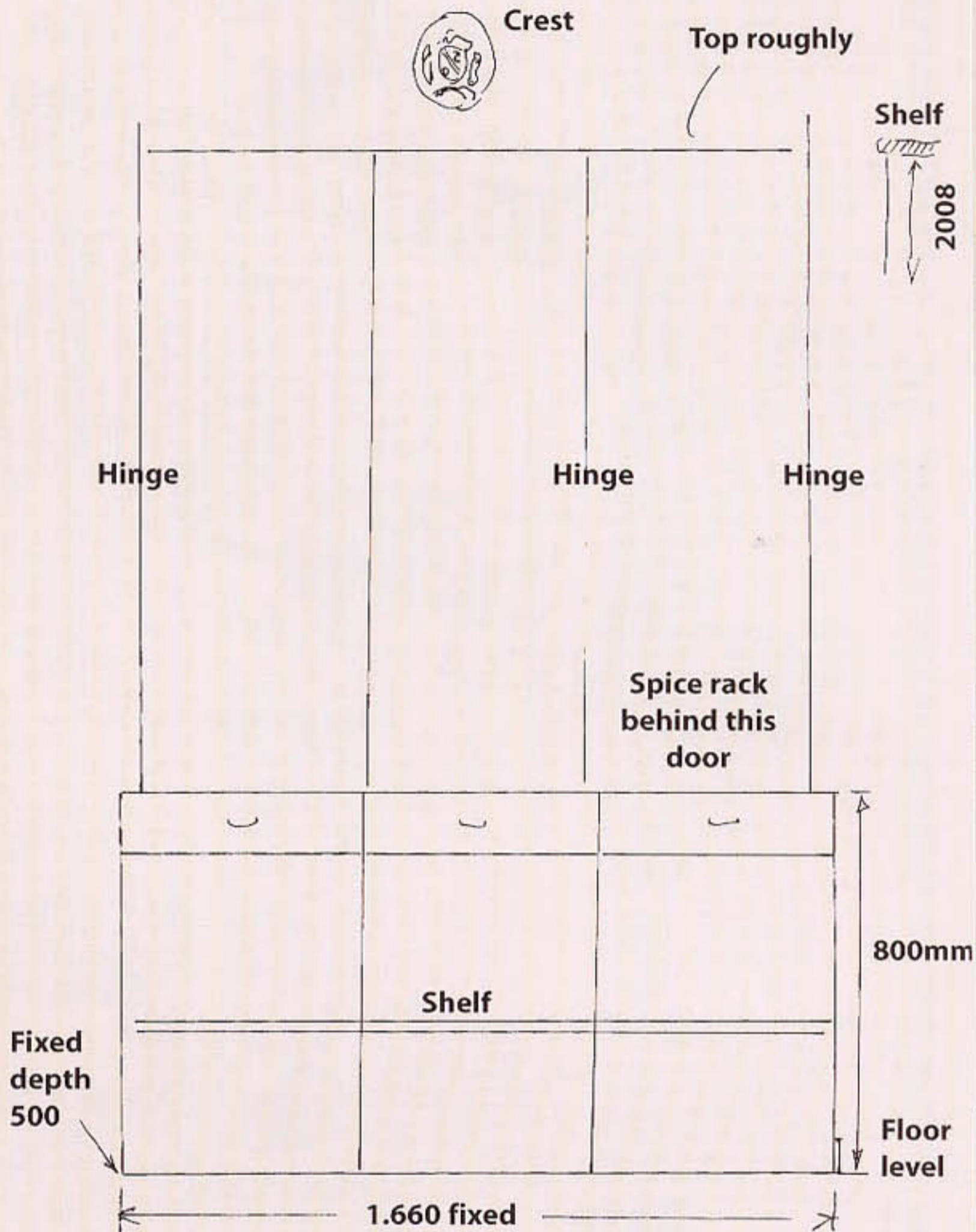
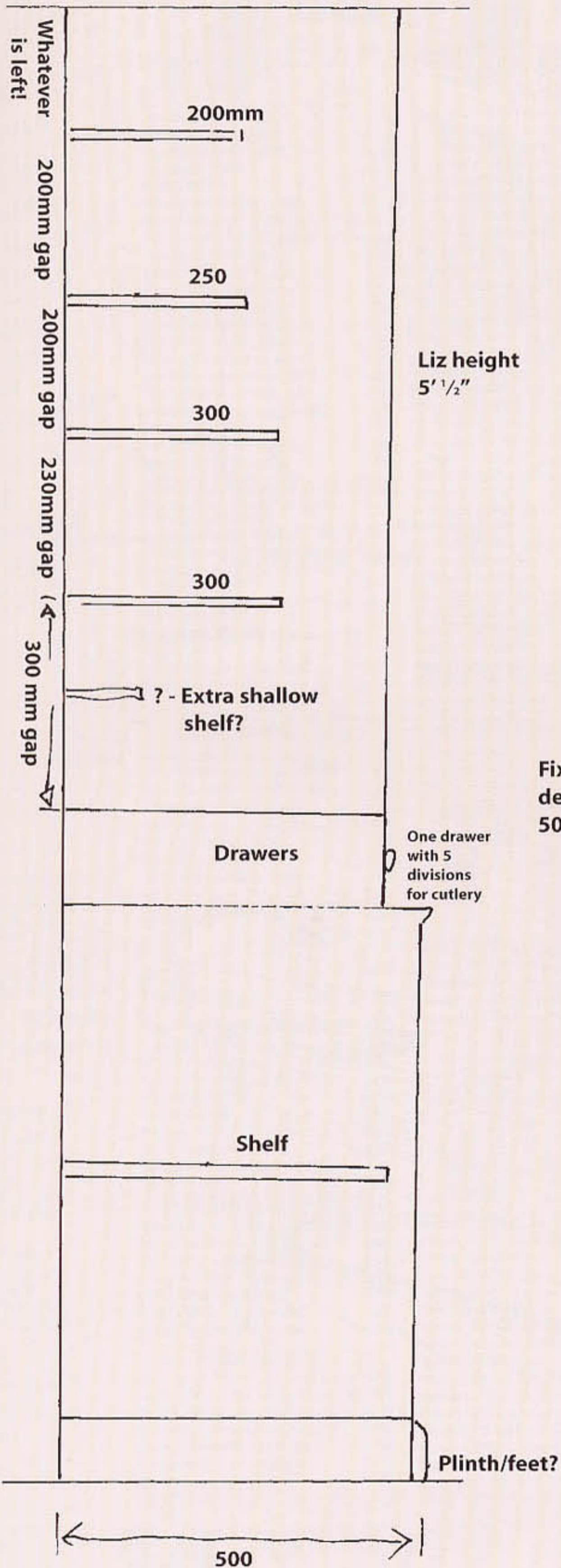
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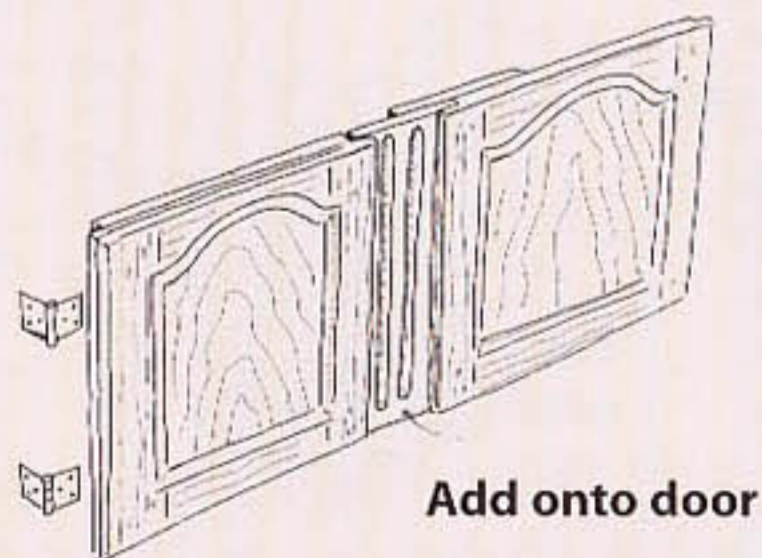
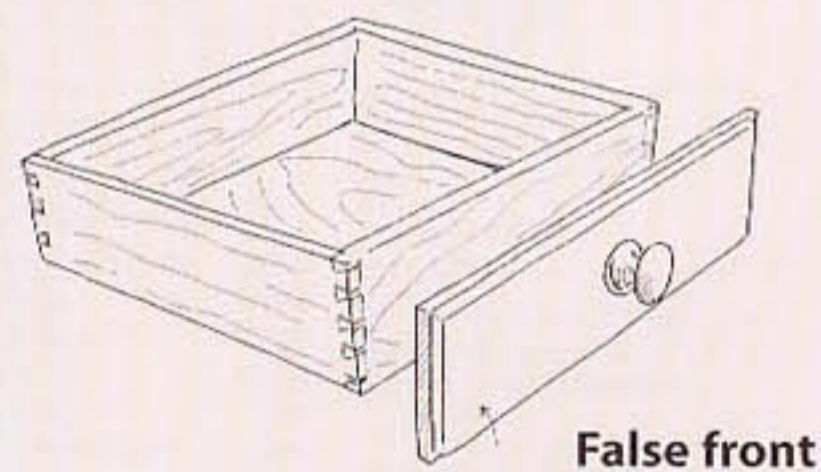
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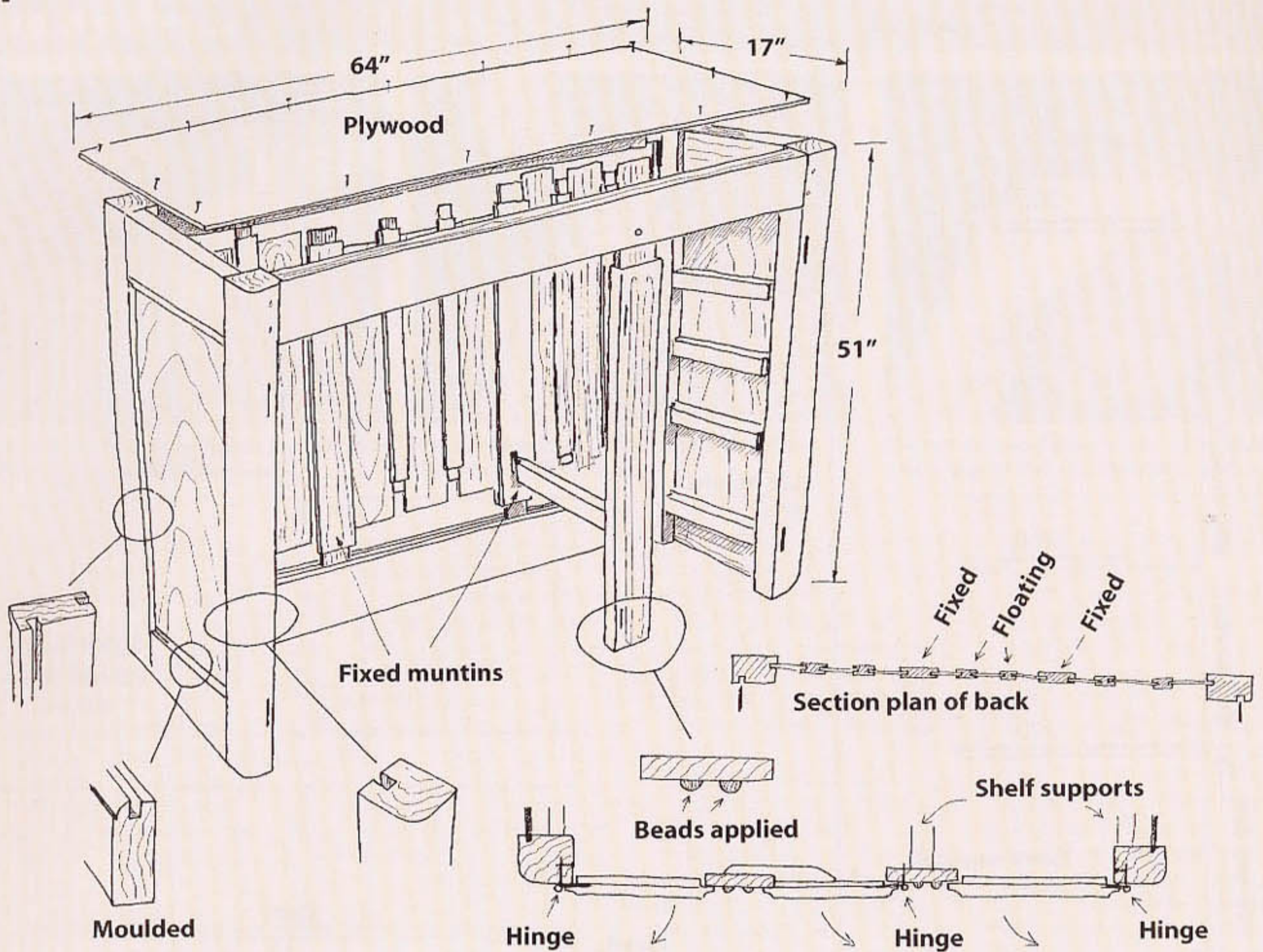
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Base doors and drawer



Top



Base

