

Floating Shelves on Display

A designer's approach to open storage with strength and style

BY CINDY BLACK

For the past 14 years, I've been working as a residential architect with my husband in Austin, Texas. In 2009, I opened an offshoot of our firm called Hello Kitchen to offer architectural services focused around that room—the center of a typical house. During several hundred kitchen consultations, I've had a fascinating peek into the way people occupy and use their kitchens. In my design process, I often walk clients through big changes that will alter those familiar patterns. One of the more polarizing subjects is that of open (or floating) versus closed shelving. Because the issue revolves around storage of personal items, it often seems like clients have settled this decision before our discussion begins.

Why open shelves?

I've found that the tidy and meticulous homeowner has no trouble understanding the concept of open shelving in the kitchen. Items are arranged artfully on the shelves within arm's reach, and they require an occasional dusting or cleaning.

But for those who have a looser approach to domestic life, the desire for less maintenance can drive the decision to put everything behind closed doors. Another factor is the hesitation to showcase kitchen items that may not jive with a new aesthetic, such as a dated family heirloom or an indispensable collection of plastic poolside tumblers. It's true that managing so many exposed items in a kitchen requires more time and



CANTILEVERED SHELVING

As the site of 20 years of family-style meals, James and Leah's kitchen had accumulated practical cooking tools, sentimental items, and recipe binders, some of which wouldn't make sense to display on open shelves. With the move to a new house and a restructured kitchen area, James and Leah were in favor of increasing the kitchen's sense of space with open shelving.

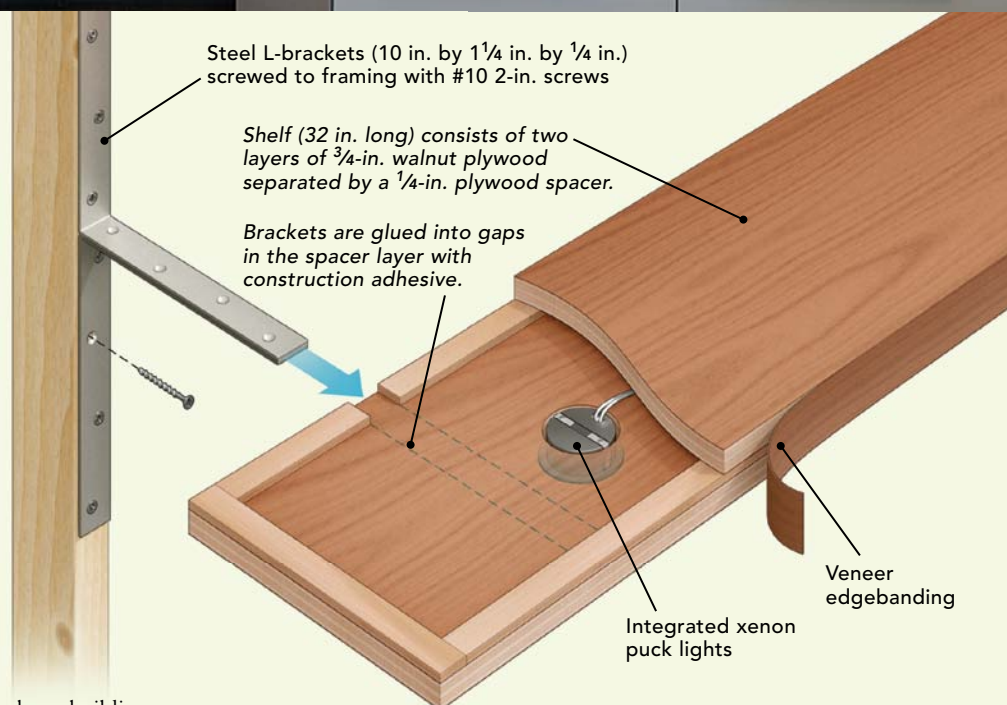
In their new kitchen, we composed the upper cabinets with solid and glass doors, then added a smaller amount of open shelving to frame the Bertazzoni range. The shelves were veneered with walnut to set off the soft green of the Ann Sacks glass tile.

Because Leah would have only a limited amount of frequently washed white dinnerware and mugs on the shelves, we felt comfortable leaving the shelf ends open facing the range. This helped open the space around the cooking area. Integrated lighting was an important aspect here, not only to provide task lighting to the prep space adjacent to the range, but also to attract visual attention from the living room.



6 GOOD REASONS FOR OPEN SHELVING

1. Give character to the kitchen by displaying items.
2. Make cooking and serving easier by having items close at hand
3. Visually increase the size of the kitchen
4. Emphasize horizontal lines for a modern aesthetic
5. Differentiate storage options
6. Accentuate a material or unify it with another, such as flooring or countertops



Cabinetmaker Tim Cuddy, timcuddy.com

Builder Texas Construction, txconstruct.com



SUSPENDED SHELVES

In this transformation of a classic 1930 bungalow, we wanted the cabinetry to have strong horizontal lines yet retain an airiness that would allow light from two new windows to fall onto the worksurfaces. Since our clients, Blake and Allison, were drawn to the idea of combining open shelves and glass-door cabinets, we saw an opportunity to continue the shelving in front of the windows above the sink and around the smaller side windows (photo).

We developed a system with the cabinetmaker to support the front of the shelves with custom-made threaded rods and hardware from crlaurence.com. The back edges of the shelves are cleated to the wall and to the side panels of the adjacent cabinets for more support.

Construction Chris Honea, Honea Woodworks, honeawoodworks.com



thought up front. However, there are arguments to be made against closed cupboards, too. A well-worn kitchen can accumulate many things that get shoved into the recesses of cabinets, and eventually those items become inaccessible.

Closed upper cabinets also decrease the sense of space, and depending on the finish, they can bring a feeling of heaviness to the kitchen. There is also the challenge of cabinet placement. For instance, many kitchens built in the 1980s and '90s featured cabinets that stop about a foot short of the ceiling, creating a surface that catches dust.

The design of open shelving can help to balance the design of the kitchen with practicality and sometimes guide a skeptic into appreci-

ating the advantages of open shelving. The first thing to understand is that not all cabinet storage needs to be the same; in fact, a mix of open shelving and doors seems to work best. In our practice, we typically review these concerns up front and try to strike a balance with our cabinet designs.

Design with purpose

As we begin to diagram the cabinetry and the possible locations for open shelves, we take into account what items will be stored on each of the shelves. Our first round of schematics includes a map of these items so that the client can understand both the quantity of storage



STAINLESS BELT BRACKETS

In Paige and Steve's kitchen, Steve likes to cook, so he needs cooking tools close by and dinnerware to be easily accessible when it comes time to plate the food.

Using open shelves here also addressed a practical need to maintain the location of two horizontal sliding windows, which take up most of the exterior kitchen wall and greatly diminish the opportunity for conventional storage. We envisioned spanning the windows with a sturdy shelf, and we wanted to keep the details simple and elegant. The budget for the project dictated an economical shelf

Construction Matt Davenport, Home Source Construction, hscremodeling.com **Welding** Charles Gatlin, Austin, Texas

A 12-in. by 78-in. stainless-steel band (1/4-in. by 1-in. flat bar) is wrapped around the shelf.

Perpendicular support pieces TIG-welded to the band are screwed into the sides of the framing with 1 1/2-in. by 1/4-in. lag bolts.

Shelving is made from 1 1/2-in.-thick butcher-block material.

Corners are TIG-welded.

Double layer of banding strengthens the back edge.

The band is fastened to the shelf with 1 1/2-in. screws on 6-in. centers.

material, which we had already selected for the island countertop: 1 1/2-in.-thick Ikea oak butcher block. Since we were relying on these shelves to support all the heavy white dinnerware, cookbooks, and appliances, we needed a substantial bracket with many points of support.

The shelf material is attached to metal frames (that are anchored to the studs) with stainless screws at 6-in. intervals, which create a decorative accent. The entire assembly plays off the stainless-steel and oak worksurfaces and lends character to this cook's kitchen.

and the function of certain areas of the kitchen. Interestingly, I've been able to convince people to build smaller kitchens with less cabinetry by placing each of their items in the floor-plan and elevation drawings.

Sometimes the kitchenware drives the cabinetry design. A client's hefty collection of Heath ceramics, for instance, will dictate the depth and length of the shelves, as well as the support demands. Once in a while, when we know that a shelf will hold only a few select mugs, bowls, or spices, we can design a more delicate shelving system. Because open shelves are often in a central part of the kitchen, I like to incorporate recessed lighting within them as accents. I usually specify

WAC Lighting's HR-86 fixture, whose xenon bulb has a quality of light I prefer over that of LEDs. The finish of the fixture depends on the rest of the kitchen hardware.

Shown here are three of my open-shelving projects: a relatively simple design using readily available materials, a design with a mix of store-bought and custom parts, and a design featuring a custom-welded installation. □

Cindy Black is half of the firm Rick and Cindy Black Architects and also runs Hello Kitchen Design, both in Austin, Texas. Photos by Whit Preston.