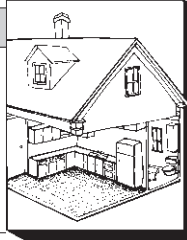


Medicine Cabinets Get Their Due

by Lynn Comeskey



Several months ago I wrote about ventilation hoods, calling them the "afterthought" of kitchen appliances. This column deals with the bathroom equivalent - medicine cabinets.

How many times have you settled for the antiseptic white, recessed box with chrome trim around the mirror? Or a surface-mounted mirror and the shallow cabinet with the sliding Lucite doors? It's as though manufacturers, designers, and contractors have collectively and perversely tried to provide and install the most insipid collection of medicine cabinets imaginable.

But the explosion of beautiful bath materials, fixtures, and fittings has made the old standard in medicine cabinets look shabbily out of place. Upscale customers no longer will settle for a \$50 medicine cabinet astride their \$1,000 Sherle Wagner sink or their \$800 Kalista faucet. As a result, American manufacturers are beginning to offer "upper end" medicine cabinets, imported medicine cabinets are finding their way into designer showrooms, and custom-made medicine cabinets remain a viable option.

Made in the U.S.A.

Nutone and Jensen are two of the three American manufacturers I use occasionally. Although these manufacturers offer good, serviceable units, they don't yet have the pizzazz or finish of the imported medicine cabinets. Nutone, Inc. (Madison and Red Bank Rds., Cincinnati, OH 45227; 513/527-5421) has a broad line with some interesting units, but the "quality" torches are sometimes only appliques. I also haven't been able to find a local retailer with a good sampling of the product line; we end up ordering from the catalog and hoping the mirror doesn't get damaged in shipment.

Jensen (Jensen/Nortek, 1946 East 46th St., Los Angeles, CA 90058; 213/235-6800) historically has emphasized a builder line of medicine cabinets. With an infusion of capital - Jensen is now part of a larger corporation - the company is branching into "designer" medicine cabinets and currently offers them with list prices ranging from \$300 to \$400. They expect to expand the line further by introducing

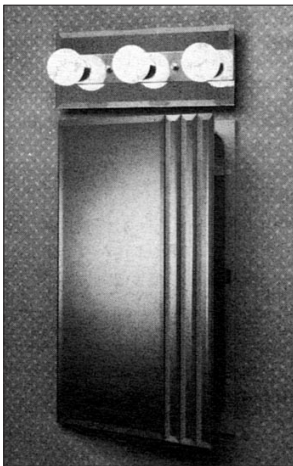


Figure 1. To give the standard medicine cabinet a bit more pizzazz, manufacturers are including such things as beveled mirrors and matching light panels, as in this American-made Jensen model.

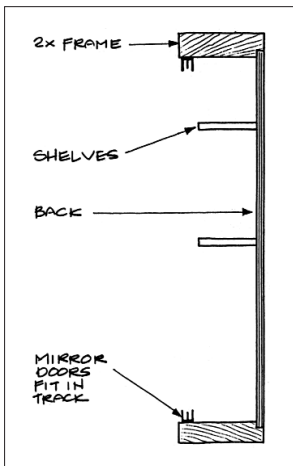
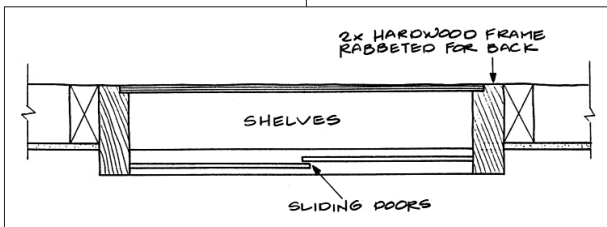


Figure 2. This plan view of a simple, custom-made, medicine cabinet shows how the 2x hardwood frame protrudes beyond the stud cavity. The doors typically are mirrors mounted on standard track; shelves are tempered glass or wood.

medicine cabinets in the \$600 to \$1,000 range this year.

Jensen's current line includes relatively simple trim in Kohler-matching colors, and more use of beveled glass and metallic trims other than chrome (see Figure 1). The promise is for sleeker cabinets with attractive integral lighting.

A third American manufacturer, Roborn, Inc. (1648 Winchester Road, Bensalem, PA 19020; 215/245-6550), works hard to look European, from the design of their catalog to their products. They have a slick line of cabinets that list from \$600 to \$2,500. Their modular cabinets can be installed together with stock sizes that run up to 84 inches wide, and custom sizes can be ordered. Doors are mirrored on the front and back - a great idea.

Basically, it is a box made of 2x6 oak, maple, or birch assembled on edge. The wood can be stained or covered with plastic laminate. The 2x should be ripped to approximately 5 inches so that approximately 1 inch protrudes past the face of the drywall when the frame is recessed in the wall (see Figure 2). We install the unit before the drywall, and flat tape right up to the edge of the frame.

We drill holes on the inside for adjustable shelf supports; the shelves can be made of wood or tempered glass. The height and width of the unit is flexible. If the unit gets too wide for the shelves to be self supporting, then a vertical divider can be installed. For doors, we typically use mirrors mounted on KV wheels and track. If the mirrors get too large,

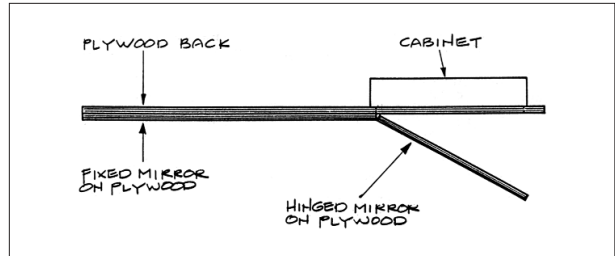


Figure 3. This custom design accommodates both fixed and hinged mirrors by using plywood as a backing for both. The double layer of plywood keeps the mirrors in the same plane; the inner sheet is cut out for the medicine cabinet opening.

The Imports

I am familiar with three brands of imported medicine cabinets: T&L Royal, Allibert, and Keuco (mirrors only). In general, the features I am most impressed with are the clean lines and the quality of the finish.

T&L Royal cabinets (2108 Crown View Drive, Charlotte, NC 28277; 704/845-2848) list from \$800 to \$2,500. T&L offers a 63-inch-high "mirrored tall cabinet" which provides maximum storage and a full-height mirror. The company's models also feature some very handsome matching lights and a built-in radio.

Allibert cabinets (P.O. Box 1200, Stanley, NC 28164; 800/346-2428) list from \$115 to \$330. Most of the units are formed plastic. They don't seem as substantial as some of the other cabinets I've discussed, but the manufacturing process allows them to offer some very unusual designs including built-in back lighting.

Keuco mirrors (Alno, Inc., P.O. Box 3249, Chatsworth, CA 91311; 818/882-6028) list from \$400 to \$700. Using beveled glass and metal trim, they offer a wide variety of geometric forms which are a good alternative to a plain, rectangular mirror. As with the other manufacturers' offerings, the best way to judge these units is in a showroom, but calling for the catalog and the name of their local distributor is a good first step.

Home-Grown Custom Design

Although it's not always necessary to make up your own medicine cabinet if you want something a little out of the ordinary, it's still a useful option. Through the years, we've come up with two different custom designs that we like to use. They are both based on the notion that medicine cabinets should err on the side of being understated - there are too many other bath fittings that should get the center of attention.

The first design is based used where there is a need for a lot of storage.

though, you'll have to use extra wheels to take the weight.

The second design - which involves fixed and hinged mirrors mounted on plywood - is useful where there's a wide expanse of medical cabinets and mirrors, and/or where mirrors have to be hinged. There may be medicine boxes behind the hinged mirrors, but the trick is to keep all the mirrors on the same plane so there is no break in the angle of reflection from one mirror to the next (see Figure 3).

Upscale customers won't settle for a \$50 medicine cabinet above their \$1,000 sink. thus, more choices are out there in cabinets.

We use two pieces of plywood back-to-back for continuity. The first piece is mounted to the wall; exposed edges are edge banded. This piece can be shimmed if necessary to make it plumb. With fixed mirrors, attach a second piece of plywood to the first piece. With a hinged mirror, you will have to hinge a second piece of plywood to the first piece, or to an adjacent fixed piece depending upon the hinges you use. If there is to be a medicine cabinet behind the hinged mirror, you'll have to cutout the first piece of plywood and finish the edges.

In using either of these designs, it will probably be necessary to install a header, since Murphy's law says there won't be adequate space between the studs where you want it. Further, you'll want to inform the homeowner that plumbing vents have a way of appearing in these spaces, and moving them will cost extra. ■

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