

PATRICK WARNER

A Stylish Credenza



SYMMETRY AND SUBTLE SHADOW LINES give Patrick Warner's maple and yellow satinwood office credenza a dynamic visual rhythm. The same piece could serve as a buffet or as a case for audio and video equipment.

Credenza, the Italian word for sideboard, has come to mean a low, lateral piece of office furniture for storage. I designed the credenza shown in the photo on the facing page for my office at home, and its dimensions and organization reflect that. It's fairly shallow because I couldn't afford to lose much floor space in my small office and because I don't like deep shelves—you can never get to the stuff at the back. Its top is counter height: I wanted to be able to work at it standing up sometimes. I chose sliding doors for the piece

because of the tight quarters and because I like to roam around on my castered chair and don't need more obstacles. But part of the piece's beauty is that all these elements are adaptable to your own situation and so is the overall function of the piece.

OPTIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

Though I built my piece as a credenza, you could just as easily call it a buffet and use it in the dining room to store china and silverware. In that case, you might add a bank or two of drawers. And the doors, two or

A CASE AGAINST THE FINISH

It always bothers me when I begin applying the finish on a piece of furniture and suddenly realize I'm only halfway to completing the job. I work like crazy to apply good design, milling, and joinery to the furniture I make. That should be enough. Now just flood with Danish oil and deliver. Right? Well, perhaps. Danish oil is an easy, cheap, and often acceptable finish, but for furniture that will take a beating or for high-end work, a hard finish and some filling and coloring is often required. To obtain such a finish takes special skills, techniques and equipment, and often large amounts of time and money. This is not woodworking. It's chemistry, abrasives, coloring, compressors, spray guns, resins, solvents, clean rooms, and rubber gloves. And I'd rather not get tangled up in all of that if I can avoid it.

Finishes have their advantages, I admit. But when neither the environment nor the users are particularly threatening, a bare wood cabinet can be a refreshing change. Unfinished furniture is warmer both to the touch and the eye. It develops a nice patina and won't wear out a minute sooner

than work that's French polished or sprayed with automotive acrylic urethane. If it does suffer an occasional insulting hand smear or wet glass mark, a simple sanding or steel wool buff-up will quickly restore the original look. Try that with a catalyzed lacquer or an acrylic.

When you finish wood, you emphasize the grain, color, and figure, and this will limit its use in some applications. The soft, nonreflecting surfaces of unfinished wood, no matter the tree, play down the characteristics of the wood and put the material more in the service of the design.

A "no finish" finish is a natural with light woods like birch, beech, or maple that will yellow badly under finish. These are beautiful woods that shouldn't be discarded for this idiosyncrasy. Left unfinished, these woods yellow a little, but with the advance of the patina, the color mellows, bringing up light tans and other tonal subtleties, as you can see in the photo of the sliding door of my credenza at right.

If you're hesitant about making an unfinished piece for the house or a client, make something for the shop: perhaps a jig, fixture, or bench. Get first-hand experience with bare stock, and see

how it wears and ages. If you like it, think of how much more quality time you can invest in the next piece—time that would have been spent sanding, priming, sealing, and rubbing out that finish.



COMPLETE BUT UNFINISHED. Fed up with finishing, the author never flowed finish onto his credenza. Two years later, the maple and yellow satinwood have taken on the subtler tones time gives to bare wood.

three as you wish, could be mounted on hinges or pocket-door hardware.

You could also easily move the piece into a living room, and use it to house audio and video equipment. The center section could have a swiveling television slide installed, and a drawer or two could be added at the bottom of the side sections for tapes. In this arrangement, tambour doors would be an apt solution. They could be made as a pair that wrap laterally and meet in the middle or as three separate doors that track vertically.

If you wanted to use the cabinet as a display case, you could fit it with glazed doors, glass shelves, and, possibly, a glass top. In this arrangement, you might want to make shallow, traylike drawers, or simply install bottom-mount drawer slides on the shelving. And interior lighting also might be in order.

JOINERY DECISIONS

Once I'd resolved the configuration and dimensions of my credenza, I set to work on the anatomy—what the parts would be and how they would be joined. Whenever I build a piece for myself, I view it as an opportunity to experiment, so I tested a number of ideas in this credenza that had been brewing as I made furniture for less indulgent clients.

AROUND BACK. A half-lapped open frame is all the back the cabinet needs. It is tongued around its perimeter and glued into a groove in the carcass. The back affords excellent clamp access during glue-up.



I decided early on that the whole thing would be solid maple with a top and accents of yellow satinwood. I planned a fairly simple box carcass lifted off the ground by a separate and removable base. I hoped the base would lend the piece an airy feeling and avoid the impression of immovable weight that such office furniture often gives. I knew that the case inevitably would be dragged across a few floors, so I designed the base to be strong, though light, joining its legs and rails with dovetail tenons reinforced with machine-threaded knockdown fittings and hardwood corner braces, as shown in the drawing on the facing page.

For aesthetic reasons, I wanted the sliding doors in the same plane. So I left the center section of the case open to give the doors a space to slide into. I also decided to run the doors on a removable track. They would be installed with the track, avoiding the usual loose fit of sliding doors and the wide clearance required at the top to lift them out. The doors could be removed by unscrewing the track and sliding it out.

I chose a two-stage joinery method for the corners of the carcass. In the first stage, I joined the sides and subtop and bottom with tongue-and-groove joints across their full width. After the carcass was together, I routed out wedge-shaped recesses with a dovetail bit and filled them with yellow satinwood, as shown in the drawing. I make the recesses and the loose wedges with mating router templates. These floating wedges have the appearance of dovetails, and the joint is nearly as strong. I used the technique in a spirit of adventure to explore the decorative advantages it offered, and I certainly didn't exhaust them. You could also use any carcass joinery you like on this piece, from true dovetails or finger joints in solid wood to the range of possible joints in plywood or medium-density fiberboard.

I wanted to leave the back of the case largely open but give the piece resistance to racking stress. So I made a frame at the back of 2½-in.-wide members joined to each other with half-lap joints and to the case with a tongue and groove (see the photo at left).

Credenza

Ends of yellow satinwood top, arced at 8 ft. radius

Top measures $2\frac{1}{2}$ x $16\frac{1}{2}$ x $60\frac{1}{2}$.

Back frame pieces are half-lapped together, then tongued into carcass.

Twin thread screws driven through subtop fix vertical dividers.

Carcass measures 24 x 16 x $59\frac{1}{4}$.

Shot runners eliminate binding; they run in groove in underside of subtop.

False muntin of yellow satinwood

Door runners slide in removable track.

Dovetails and recesses are routed after tongue-and-groove carcass assembly.

Top is secured with screws through subtop.

DOOR DETAIL

For visual interest, thickness of door members increases by small increments from panel to muntin to rails to stiles.

Pull recess, $\frac{1}{2}$ in. deep

Pins keep unglued panel centered as it floats in frame. Holes are drilled after assembly.

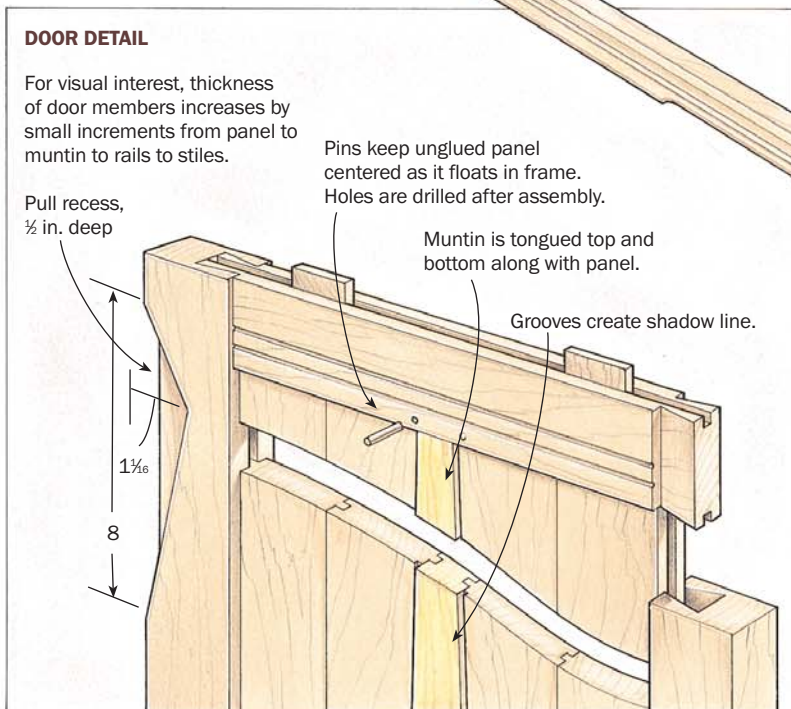
Muntin is tongued top and bottom along with panel.

Grooves create shadow line.

Overall base dimensions: 12 x 15 x $58\frac{1}{8}$

Carcass is screwed to base through ledger strip.

Cap screws engage threaded cross dowels.



For the vertical dividers, I chose tongue-and-groove joints for the subtop and bottom with the tongues stopped so they wouldn't show at the front. There's no real glue surface on this joint, so I screwed the dividers in place with #10 twin-thread screws driven through the subtop and bottom. These wonderful screws contradict the old saw about not screwing into end grain: They get great purchase in a hardwood like maple.

When it came to the subtop and the bottom of the carcass, I looked for a way to make them that would simplify the glue-up. Instead of edge-joining them into panels and proceeding in the usual way with an increasingly frantic case assembly, I chose to install them as slats. I machined tongues and grooves along their edges and tongues on their ends and dadoed them to accept the tongues of the vertical dividers. When it came time to assemble, I first joined the sides, the back frame, and the rearmost slats of the subtop and bottom. Having only an open frame for a back greatly simplified the clamping. And once that initial assembly was clamped and squared up, I could then insert the rest of the slats at my leisure. A rare, tension-free glue-up.

The top went on when the case was finished. I made it of yellow satinwood and attached it with screws through the subtop.

DETAILS, DETAILS

With all the decisions made regarding configuration, dimensions, materials, and joinery, it might seem that the design process was at an end. But to me, one of the critical aspects of any piece of furniture is the detailing. Those subtle details are telling, particularly in a piece like this one that I had decided to leave unfinished (see the sidebar on p. 11). In a piece that's been filled or stained and lacquered, the grain and color of the wood can leap out at you and carry a plain design. But when the wood is left unfinished, it mellows and

recedes. I wasn't out to do anything startling, just to use what small devices I could to tie the piece together visually as well as structurally.

How thick is that?

You could make this credenza using $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. material for nearly all the parts. In a dim room, it would be hard to tell yours from mine. But when light hit the two credenzas, they'd look quite different. I constantly play with thicknesses of material. Variations of as little as $\frac{1}{32}$ in. between adjacent boards can be perceived. I made the top and subtop each a shade under $\frac{3}{4}$ in. and did the same for the bottom and the door track. I made the sides $\frac{1}{16}$ in., so they didn't seem too skinny by comparison with the doubled elements at the top and bottom. I used $\frac{5}{8}$ stock for the dividers to show that their structural role is subordinate to the sides. There are no strict rules governing the thicknesses of different elements, but if you play around with the size of parts, you'll find the overall appearance of the work can be subtly controlled.

Proud of it

Varying thickness is also useful in parts that are viewed face-on rather than from the edge. On the sliding doors, I made the stiles $\frac{1}{16}$ in. thicker than the rails, leaving them proud in the front. This slight variation in the plane of the door frames acknowledges the joint line and distinguishes the separate parts of the frame. I inset the panels $\frac{1}{16}$ in. from the rails to create a third plane. And at the center of the panels, I used a false muntin of yellow satinwood as an accent, which stands proud of the panel by a bit less than $\frac{1}{16}$ in. If these offsets were greater, the door might begin to seem fractured, but because they are only slight, they add visual nuance without attracting too much attention.

Shadow lines and shallow grooves

Shadows can be used like a pencil to vary the weight of the lines in a piece of furniture, to interrupt a featureless surface, or to outline and highlight a part or detail. As with the varying of thicknesses, the use of shadows can be overdone and requires careful control.

I created a reveal around the floating panels in the sliding doors to underscore the distinctness of the panel and the frame. The reveal is $\frac{1}{4}$ in. deep, and the shadows are dark. Shallower grooves cut to either side of the false muntins create a softer shadow and, therefore, mark the tapered shape with lighter emphasis. In the center section of the case, I created a shadow line with a chamfer at the back of the vertical divider where it meets the back frame. This balances the gap shadow between door and divider and picks out the divider as a discrete part (see the photo on p. 10).

The boldest shadow line in the credenza is the one between the bottom of the case and the front rail of the base. I dropped the rail to create this line, intending it to signify the functional separation between the carcass and the base. I've always liked the idea of making the base of a case piece look like a pedestal and tried to carry it out in this design. But I didn't want the two parts to be unrelated, and that led me to introduce several other details.

I had routed $\frac{1}{8}$ -in. grooves across the rails of the doors, and I echoed these on the base with the pair of grooves in the front rail. I hoped these grooves, with their lateral sweep across the length of the piece, would tie the three sections of the carcass together.

The leg design also was intended to relate the base to the carcass. I borrowed the tapered form from the false muntins and emphasized it (while breaking up the



legs' blockiness) with grooves parallel to the tapered edges.

A curve or two for contrast

As I was finishing up, I saw that virtually all the lines in the credenza were rectilinear. Because the top was of contrasting material anyway, yellow satinwood to the maple of the base and carcass, I decided to express the distinction between them a little further by arcing the ends of the top and rounding over the edges. I cut the arc on an 8-ft. radius with a router and template and the roundover with a router and a $\frac{3}{8}$ -in. roundover bit. I used the same bit to round over the front edges of the shelves to give them a visual link to the top.

ANGLED FORMS PLAY OFF STRAIGHT LINES. Floating dovetail wedges, tapered muntins, and recessed triangular handholds form a subtheme in Warner's rectilinear composition in lines and planes.