

Taking Profits Out of the Closet

The next chapter in a manual of practice.

When I started out in the building business, interest rates were low, money was easy to borrow, and custom homes were the way to go. But six years later, in early 1980s, that all changed. Interest rates went over 15%. No one could afford, yet alone qualify, for a loan. Economics and demand dragged us into multi-family housing—we started installing finish work on apartment complexes, condominiums, and townhouses.

The work was hard, the prices competitive, but the profits were good if you

had your act together, if you were fast and didn't make mistakes. Five or six years later, I was glad when the custom home business came back with a roar. But I wouldn't trade what I learned from those 200-plus unit buildings, not a bit of it.

Our approach to every high-end custom job—from the big ones to the little

ones, and our profit margins, still depends on the lessons learned from production work. And installing closet shelving is a perfect example.

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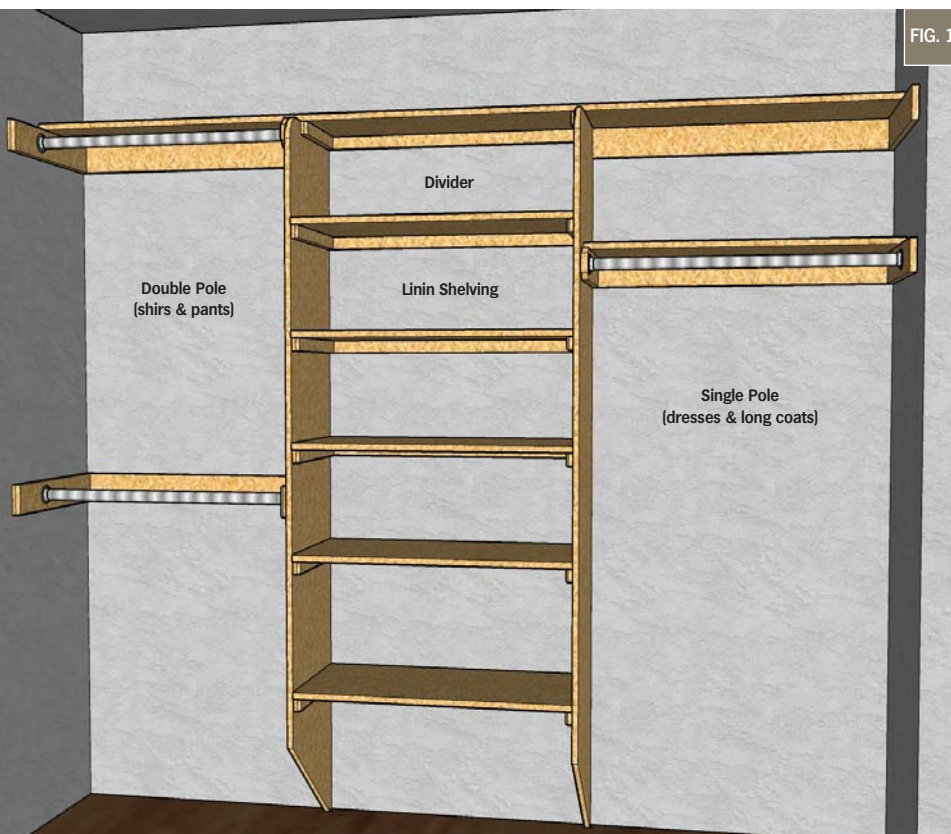
steps, and speeds installation time, then you'll never enjoy the profits that can be made in closets. Once the exterior doors are in, before installing any interior doors or trim, we like to get the closet shelving in place, if it's paintgrade.

It's just easier to work in a closet without the doors in the way, and besides, that way we don't have to worry about banging shelving into new doors. We wait to install the baseboard until all the shelving is in, too, because the baseboard has to be cut around the dividers.

Control Closet Design

FIG. 1

No matter how high-end a home, the closets always share a lot in common—at least the ones outside the master bedroom. After all, there's only so many configurations possible. The three most common types of shelving arrangements are: Double Pole, Single Pole, and Linen Shelves. We try to include a little of each in every closet, and we use 1½ in. dividers to separate and help support the shelving.



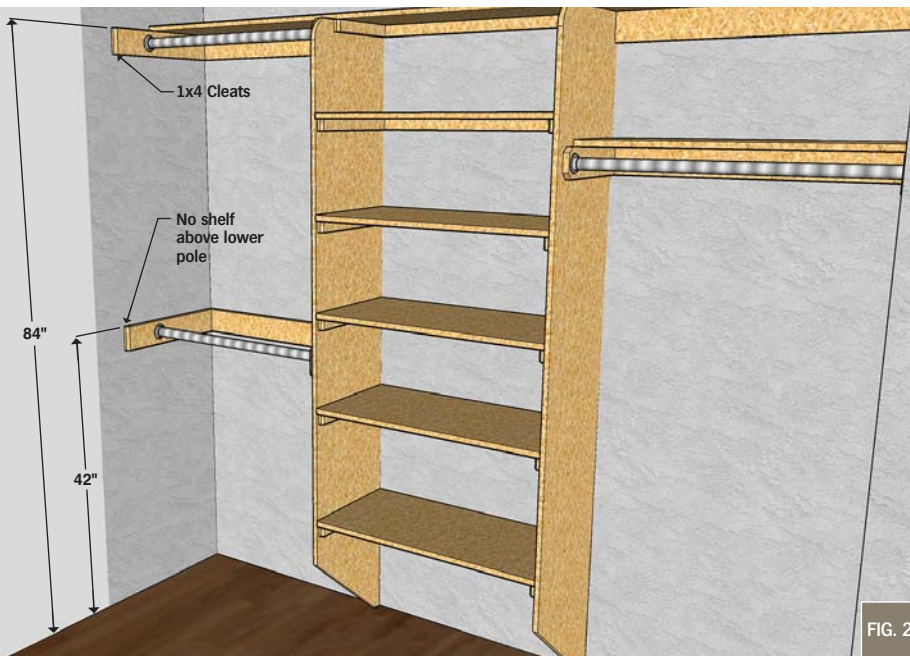
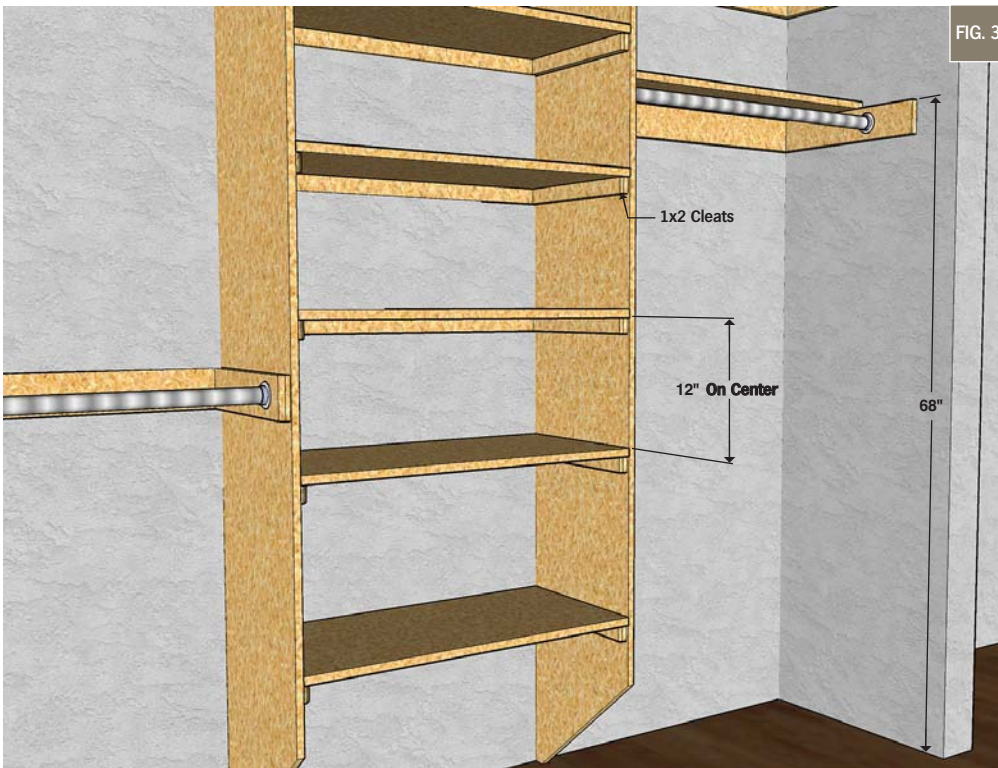


FIG. 2
To allow enough room for medium-length coats and shirttails, double pole should be spaced a minimum of 40 in. from the floor, and 40 in. apart. That puts the top of the 1x4 cleats at 42 in. and 84 in. from the floor. We angle-cut our dividers, leaving a 1-in. toe on the floor, so it's easier to get a vacuum near the wall.

Whether the customer wants wood, melamine, or MDF shelving, we limit the span—anything over 34 in. will sag without a support.

FIG. 3
Single pole is meant for dresses and long coats. It must be installed at least 66 in. from the floor, farther for tall clients. To secure the



pole and the rosettes, we use 1x4 cleats to support all closet pole. For linen shelving, we use 1x2 cleats. This shelving arrangement is a catch-all—it's not meant just for bedding: shirts, sweaters, sports clothing, and even toys will end up on these shelves. To keep closets uniform and easier to install, we keep to the same layout—12 in. on center for all but the bottom two shelves.

FIG. 4
Blankets and boxes need more space, so we put the first linen shelf at 18 in. from the floor, and the second one 15 in. higher, for boots or tall toys.

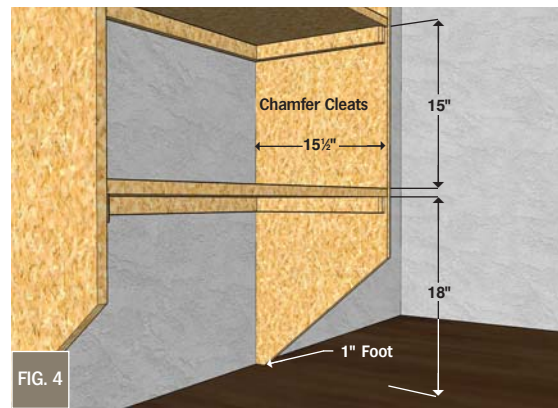
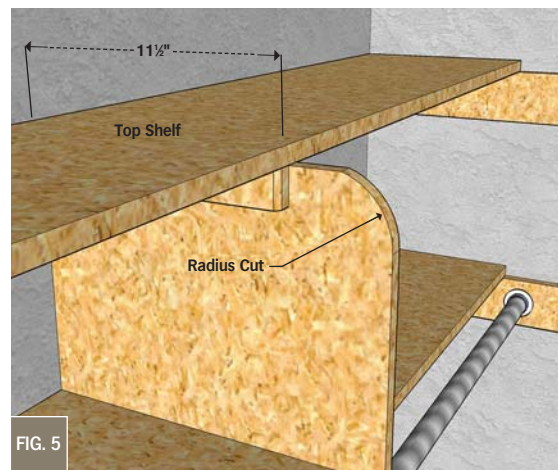


FIG. 5
The top shelf is usually above the door header, which means in a 24-in. deep closet, it's tough to get anything up there. Even though the dividers are 15 1/2 in. deep (so they'll support the poles), we install a 12 in. top shelf and radius or angle-cut the tops of the dividers.



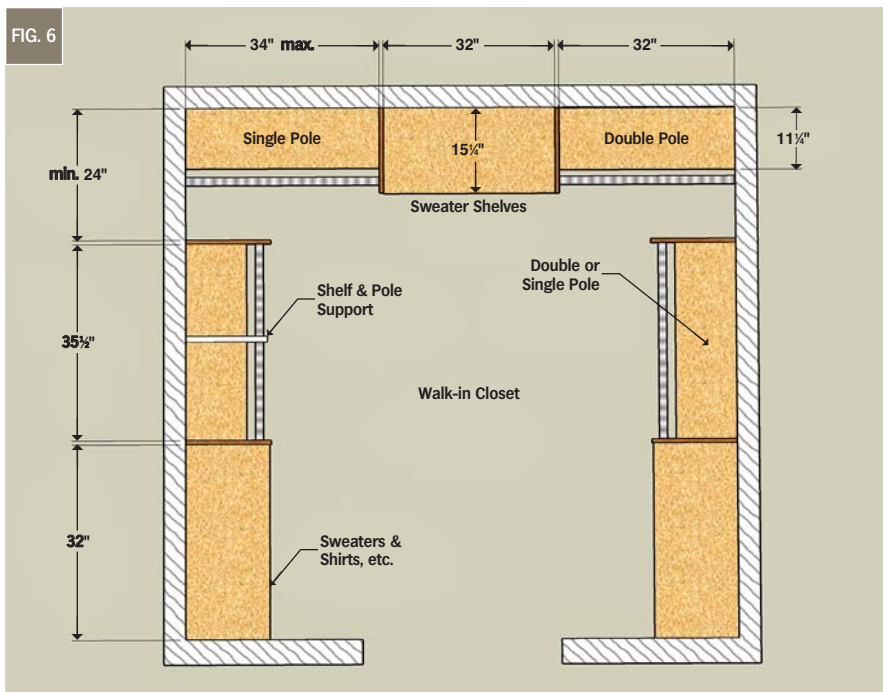


FIG. 6 These simple design rules apply to even the most complicated closets, from reach-ins, like the one in the previous illustrations, to elaborate walk-ins. Just remember one thing whenever you turn a corner with shelving: All closet pole requires a minimum 24 in. clearance before the next divider, otherwise there's isn't enough room to slide the clothes into the corner.

Walk-in closets, and long reach-ins pose a problem when it comes to shelves sagging, too. The best solution is another design strategy: eliminate mid-span supports on linen shelves by limiting their span to 32

in., then let the closet poles run longer. After all, metal supports for single and double pole are easy to install, but installing supports for linen shelving isn't so easy and there's a lot more shelves!

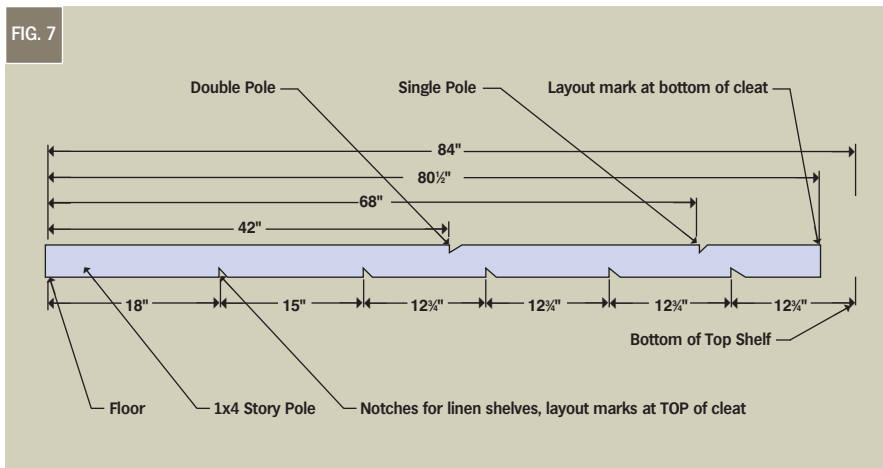
A Not-So-Simple story pole

Obviously, the trick to making money in closet organizers is being organized yourself, and that starts with the design. Once you've controlled and simplified the design, control and simplify the layout and installation, too—teach your crew how to make and use a story pole for every job. (FIG. 7)

It's a fact of life: the more times your carpenters pull out a tape measure, the more mistakes they'll make, the slower they'll work, and the less profit they'll produce. There's hardly a carpentry layout task that doesn't benefit from the use of a story pole.

Make closet story poles form a piece of durable 1x4, and don't just pencil the marks—cut notches so the pole can be used from job to job. Make all the notches at the **top** of the support cleats, **except the top cleat**. Instead, cut the story pole 3½ in. short, so the mark for the top shelf—made by striking a pencil across the top of the story pole—will be at the **bottom** of the cleat, that way your carpenter won't have to climb a ladder to see the top shelf mark.

With good design control and a story pole, in less than one hour a single carpenter can layout all the closets in a typical home, and even make a cut list, too. Whenever possible, we try to keep linen shelves the same width, so they can be cut in packages. The same with double pole arrangements, especially if there are several closets roughly the same size. That way, only one special measurement needs to be made in each closet—for the single pole arrangement. But I'll save that subject for another day. Keep a lookout in the LBM Journal for my next chapter in A Finish Carpenter's Manual of Practice. ■



GARY KATZ, with nearly 40 years experience in the industry, is a contributing editor to Fine Homebuilding magazine, a frequent contributor to the Journal of Light Construction, and produces the Katz Roadshow—Carpentry Clinics at lumberyards all over America. To learn more, visit his web site: www.GaryMKatz.com.