

# CABINETMAKER *g e t s* a fresh start

*An unusual, large-scale project revitalized California shop owner Jim Doolittle's passion for cabinetmaking.*

## *Doopoco Enterprises*

*Thousand Oaks, CA*

**Year Founded:** 2000

**Employees:** 2 full-time, 1 part-time

**Shop Size:** 3,200 square feet

**FYI #1:** In naming his company, owner Jim Doolittle adopted his nickname, Doopoco, which plays on "poco," the Spanish word for "little."

**FYI #2:** Jim Doolittle has a woodworking heritage; his great-grandfather founded Albuquerque Lumber Co. in the late 1800s.

**By Helen Kuhl**

**J**im Doolittle almost quit being a cabinetmaker 10 years ago.

It wasn't that business wasn't good. On the contrary, Doolittle had built up a nice market for his company, doing high-end kitchens for six or seven custom home builders in Santa Fe, NM. He had purchased his own shop and grown to five or six employees. The area was booming, and even though pricing was competitive, he still managed to maintain a steady 25 percent profit margin.

The problem was, "Creatively, after 13 years, I just hit the wall," Doolittle says. "I was getting tired of cranking out the same sets of cabinets. The builders we worked for would kind of get set on a style. We got into a pattern of generating, for example, cherry cabinets, because that's what people would see and they would want the same thing. Each builder got locked into a certain kind of look and, after 13 years, it was an old thing to me. I was looking to get out of cabinetmaking completely."

It was an interesting proposal from a client that "kept him in the game" and also brought him to southern California, where he eventually opened his current shop, Doopoco Enterprises. The project, which lasted eight years, was for a residential complex in Malibu that included a 12,000-square-foot main house, staff quarters, out-buildings and separate office building. Doolittle was involved in designing, engineer-



Home builders often leave a wall nook for TV and stereo equipment that can be hard to use, says Doopoco Enterprises owner Jim Doolittle. To meet that challenge, he sometimes designs cabinetry to overlay the hole instead of building cabinets into the wall. An example is this cherry unit, which features radiused edges that turn into the wall. The piece is about 7 feet across and 7 feet high and includes open display shelves with dimmable puck lights in the top corners. Doolittle designed the grill panel for the center channel speakers in an arched shape to add an interesting element to the unit.



*This display cabinet was built for an entryway with a 12-foot-tall radius wall. The homeowner wanted an Italian contemporary style, but did not want to spend the money for a full radiused piece. So just some parts were radiused. It's natural maple with black detailing.*



*Jim Doolittle worked with the designer and builder to achieve a furniture look for this kitchen. The end panels have legs that go to the floor, and toe kicks are recessed and laminated black so that they "disappear." There also are furniture details like arches between the legs and plinthes. The sink and range are set off with posts, which feature chamfered details and have arched radiused pieces running below them.*

ing and building a variety of unique furniture pieces, such as a 14-foot-long dining table, a 21-foot-long credenza, a 16-foot-long desk/table, and lots of custom cabinetry.

As an example, "One of the most challenging pieces we did was a headboard in oak with compound curves that housed a bunch of systems, like computers, pop-up lights, water dispensers and other stuff," he says. "It swept around kind of in a tapered radius that curled like a comma around little end tables.

"The homeowners were very creative and well educated, and we were basically working directly with them. They were involved in almost all the designs," Doolittle adds. "There was a team of architects that would sometimes get involved, but I did a lot of the designs working directly with the clients. They were so creative and intelligent, it was really fun. It revived my creativity and interest."

The project restored his creative juices not only because of the unique nature of the work, but also because of the business arrangements under which he worked. Because of licensing requirements, he was a salaried employee of the construction company handling the project, which freed him from the headaches associated with being a business owner and allowed him to concentrate on the work itself.

"It was kind of nice," he says. "I could just focus on the work. I didn't have to think of the business end of it. I could do all the fun stuff."

## BACK ON HIS OWN

Eventually, however, Doolittle became a shop owner again. After working on-site in Malibu for three or four years, he was asked to move out of the home's garage and began doing the work in a leased shop in Thousand Oaks. After another four years or so, as the project began to wind down, Doolittle assumed the lease himself and started his own company.

This time around, he decided to keep the business at a smaller scale. He has one full-time employee, Tom Sheehy, and Doolittle's 18-year-old son Jamie, who works part-time. Sheehy, another craftsman who worked on the Malibu home, was heavily involved in all of the challenging pieces, and Doolittle says he is a great asset in the new shop. At most, Doolittle says he might add one more employee in the future.

"In the Santa Fe shop as I expanded and had a larger crew, I actually made less money, even though we were very efficient," he says. "I found myself on a pace where there was so much going on that it was hard to keep in touch with the pulse of the



*Employee Tom Sheehy, who worked on the Malibu home project with Doolittle, works on a retail store counter in the shop's assembly area. Most of the company's jobs, however, are residential.*





***This natural maple entertainment center/home theater unit was done for the same owners as the maple entryway display unit shown on page 40-41. The owner requested storage for about 500 video tapes, so Doolittle included big pullout shelves that have storage on both sides. There is media storage behind the doors; the walls also include a bar and fireplace. Doolittle made the speaker cloth above the TV in a unique shape to add a custom touch to the piece.***



***This angular-design maple home theater cabinet features heavily toned black stain accents and white speaker cloth. The TV cabinet steps out slightly from the rest of the piece.***



***Owner Jim Doolittle stands in the crowded production area of his shop, which contains equipment brought from his previous business in Santa Fe, N.M. Included are a Powermatic widebelt sander, Delta Unisaw and vertical panel saw from Safety Speed Cut.***

## Doopoco Enterprises

business. I wanted to stay in touch with the shop."

As he has built up his new company, Doolittle also has tried to focus on unique work that will ensure that his creativity stays challenged. Although his eight years on the Malibu home did not allow him to develop an extensive portfolio of projects (because of a privacy agreement, Doolittle cannot disclose the owner's name to anyone and has no photographs of the work), he did gain the attention of other tradesmen and contractors who worked on the job. Shortly after going out on his own, he began to get work from them and also has built up word-of-mouth referrals to keep a steady flow of interesting projects.

"I was real concerned when we entered the marketplace that I would slip back into the same thing that I was stuck in in Santa Fe," he says. "But we have been able to do the same caliber of projects as our work on the Malibu house."

One market of particular interest to him is high-end home theaters and entertainment centers. "As people upgrade their equipment and see what's available in the aftermarket in terms of cabinetry to put around their stuff, they find that it's boring and ugly," he says. "I am knowledgeable about the electronics and equipment, which is a changing industry. So I see a niche where I can use some of my experience with sound and add some of my design elements to the cabinets and give people unique pieces."

He says that he enjoys the challenge of adding personal touches to home theaters to make them custom. "It is a real challenge, because the function defines the piece," he says. "You have all this equipment; it's a certain size, it needs certain things and there usually is a limited amount of space. By the time you get done, there is not a whole lot you can do with it. But we have been fairly successful at throwing in some curves and radiuses and doing different things with the speaker grills, adding simple details that make it elegant."

In all his projects, he also tries to educate his customers about what is available to them with custom cabinetry. "I try to let them know that they don't have to have something that looks like everybody else's," he says. "We can add just a few simple details or incorporate something that they want or an additional element that will make the piece unique to itself. It's a real challenge to educate people."

While Doolittle does a lot of home theaters, he also does a steady number of kitchens as well as home office cabinetry, furniture and built-ins. Prices for his work range from \$3,000 for a very basic entertainment unit to between \$8,000 and \$12,000 for home theaters. He says that he keeps fighting to get back to the 25 percent profit margins he enjoyed in Santa Fe, but that it is very difficult.

"I keep trying to push the envelope. I just think that good cabinet shops are worth more money than we are getting," he says. "I think it's a matter of educating people. I think when people meet with me and see the value of what they are going to get, money doesn't become an issue any more. They feel comfortable paying. But at the same time, I want to be fair to them, too. So it's a delicate balance."

"I'm closer to 50 than I am to 40 now, and cabinetmaking has never been, at least among all the cabinetmakers I know, a business where people get wealthy. It's more like struggling," he adds. "I want to change that, at least for myself, if I can. Sometimes I ask people flat-out, 'How much do you pay your car mechanic? You are paying him \$85 an hour.' So why are cabinet shops still only charging \$45 or \$50? It's a struggle."

Doolittle says that in order to keep profits up, he does try to work as productively as possible while still maintaining a high level of quality. "I want to be efficient, and I always am interested in what's available to cabinetmakers in terms of fabricating that gives me the ability to be more efficient. But at the same time, there has to be structural quality and integrity," he says. "I have to feel comfortable that the piece is not going to fall apart."

He uses the 32mm system for casework. Boxes are biscuit-joined and screwed together. He handles all his own installation and says that when he designs projects, especially furniture, he tries to design them to minimize the amount of time required on-site. "The profit on a job can all go down the drain with the time spent on the job site," he says. "It's something we try to think about in the shop and control as much as possible."

He outsources his edgework and buys all his drawers from Drawer Box Specialties. He occasionally buys doors from Decore-ative Specialties. But everything is finished in-house by David Nelson, who operates his own finishing business, Old

World Faux Finishes, renting the spray booth in the Doopoco shop. Doolittle also met Nelson on the Malibu house project and says, "He does really great finishes."

## OUTGROWING THE CURRENT SHOP

Doopoco Enterprises' current shop is about 3,200 square feet and, from the beginning, it has been less than ideal.

"We were asked to move out of the Malibu garage quickly, so I scrambled around to find space," Doolittle says. "Initially we were going to put some of the design team and engineers here, and this space included offices upstairs. But they ended up doing something different. So we didn't really need that area."

In addition, the shop came with a big automotive spray booth that stands right in the middle of the production area. It was somewhat handy for the finishing requirements of the Malibu project, but awkward now. "It has become clear to us for some time that this space doesn't work for us anymore," Doolittle says. "It's just too cut up in the back. Dave is crowded, too. We are both in need of better space. Right now we bring our material through the shop and everything has to go out the front office. It's completely backwards."

Doolittle says that he is looking for new space, hoping to find about 2,500 square feet with one office and a nice, open shop.

Most of his equipment was brought from his Santa Fe shop and includes a Powermatic widebelt sander, table saw and jointer; Delta Unisaw and shaper, and a Safety Speed Cut vertical panel saw. Doolittle also has a Julius Blum Mini Press hinge insertion machine and uses Blum's Clip Top hinges and Tandem slides. A lot of the specialty hardware comes from Hafele.

With the exception of a "scary" time following the Sept. 11, 2001 attack, business has been solid, Doolittle says. In addition to his original contractor contacts, he is getting work from local interior designers and direct from homeowners in referrals or repeat business. He also is starting to get jobs through his Web site, [www.doopoco.com](http://www.doopoco.com).

"At first, the Web site was just a tool so that I didn't have to play the 'Who's got the portfolio?' game and so I wouldn't have to tell my story every time I met a client," Doolittle says. "I had a digital camera and several pictures of my work from Santa Fe, so I scanned them and put something up."

"I included information about how I proceed from the point of the first meeting, retention and design, through the project," he adds. "I was attempting to save myself some time and still provide the client with good information and pictures. Now we get people who are just searching the Web, find us and contact us. I had someone who we are now doing a quote for tell me, 'I came to you because it's clear on your Web site that you guys do quality stuff.'"

He also is trying an internet service called "Service Magic," which is a referral service to match customers with tradesmen nationwide. "It was \$100 to sign up," he says. "They e-mail leads to me. All the information is there, the criteria for the job, except the personal client information. If you want to pursue a lead, you pay a fee based on an estimate of what the scope of the job might be, I think it's a percentage. But of the cabinet fees I've seen there so far, the biggest one was \$20, which is nothing."

"We are getting three or four leads from them a day, but most of the time we let them go because we are kind of busy," he adds. "I have responded to a few, but not gotten any work yet. But it seems like a valuable tool and it's something that I'm just playing around with."

However, the best source for work is still word-of-mouth, Doolittle says, and he is happy that it is bringing him the kind of challenging, high-caliber jobs that he enjoys doing. "We are striving to do some unusual things," he says. "And it's fun, because that seems to be what is coming to us." ■



*All the finishes for Doopoco Enterprises projects are done by David Nelson, who operates his own finishing company, Old World Faux Finishes, from the spray booth in Doopoco's shop. Here he is ready to apply an aniline dye stain to a Doopoco store fixture project.*

*Jim Doolittle says he typically has one kitchen job in the shop all the time. This Shaker-style cherry kitchen was a remodeling project.*

