Form Follows CONSTRUCTION

by Shana Angela Salaff

Waste not, want not. Salaff's cut-rim plate uses the sections removed when squaring off the form to create a raised rim.

The phrase "form follows construction" is found in the work of designers from The Netherlands. In this philosophy, the elements of construction contribute so much to the form that they don't need to be hidden. This has led to a line of chairs and tables that can be shipped flat, as the components fit together when assembling as well as contributing to the overall visual aesthetic.

This relates to an approach that I like to take in the studio. I prefer to design new forms by playing with cutting apart and attaching components, sometimes going back to shapes that I'm too comfortable with and deliberately messing around with them. I like cutting the rims off thrown plates to create squared plates, but it wasn't until I was demonstrating this technique to a student that I realized the cut edges could then be bent and reattached to create an upright rim with a lot of movement.

Throwing the Base

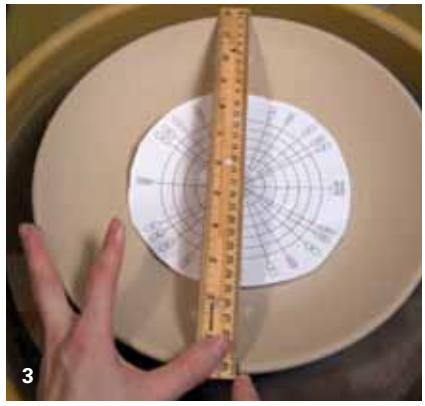
Begin with six pounds of clay to create a plate about 11 inches wide with a generous foot. Center the clay onto a large wooden bat, and then flatten and compress it at the same time by pressing downward and outward in passes from the middle to the edge. I've never had cracks form on the bottom when working this way—a trick that I learned at a workshop with Kristen Kieffer.

Consciously create a low curve from the center to just before the edge. Leave a thick ring of clay at the outside for your rim. Use a rib to shape and smooth the center of the plate (*figure 1*). Create a dramatically rounder upward curve right before the thicker clay at the edge, so that when cut and attached, the rim begins slightly above the rest of the plate.

When you have the plate bottom the way you like it, pull out the rim (*figure 2*). Hold your left hand in front of you with your thumb under the thicker ring of clay, and your fingers on top. Press a sponge around the edge with your right hand. Dig your left thumb under the ring of clay until you have grabbed at least one inch underneath. In order to get the rim to form a low curve at the right thickness, use at least three slow pulls. Begin with a very high curve, and proceed to pull outward as you thin the rim. **Tip:** If you don't like the curve that you've created, but the rim is about to collapse, just let it dry a bit and then put it back on the wheel and reshape it. Rib the top and bottom of the rim smooth.

Use a rib to shape and smooth the center of the plate.

With your thumb under the clay and your fingers on top, pull the rim out and up.



Use a ruler to mark four divisions on the plate rim.

Draw the square outline of the rim using a knife and a flexible ruler as a guide.

Cut along the lines at a 45° angle. Bend the removed sections and bevel the edge.

Use a pony roller to compress the outside seam. Add a soft coil to the interior seam.

Altering the Rim

When the rim has dried to a point where it's still flexible but not sticky, it's time to create the squared rim. Center a dividing web on the bottom of the plate (download Sylvia Shirley's Dividing Web for Decorating at www.potterymaking.org). Standing directly above the center, use a ruler to mark the edge of the rim at the lines labeled "4" (*figure 3*) to divide the surface into four parts. With a flexible ruler connecting two of the points, draw the outline of your cuts using a sharp knife. Press down on the ruler with your left hand, and then use your right hand in an arcing motion to draw out a slightly rounded outline (*figure 4*).

Cut along the lines you've drawn with your knife at a 45° angle. As you remove each section, bend it gently into an L shape and place it on the bat under the cut edge. Cut a 45° angle into the bottom of each section (*figure 5*). Score and add slip to this edge on all the pieces, then do the same with the plate edges. Place the sections without pressing too firmly, so you can make sure they are arranged evenly. Rest a bat on top to check that the rims are level with each other. Once in place, firmly attach the cut rims to the plate. Use a finger to spread the excess joining slip along the inside of the seams so they're slightly rounded and full of slip.

Wire the plate off the bat when you're done, then wrap it in plastic and put aside. Once the joins have set, use a pony roller along the outside of the rim to compress it even more firmly (*figure 6*). Use a sponge to finish the job of compressing while you smooth the exterior. Press a coil of clay into the interior joins. Add a small amount of clay to the narrowest part of the upright rim plate to visually connect each edge as well as prevent cracking (form follows construction!). Use a sponge to clean up any marks and to smooth joins further. Cover lightly and set aside until the rims and the base have set up enough to turn it over onto a square piece of foam.

Trimming

When you trim the base, it's really important to fully support the whole rim so it doesn't crack under the pressure of trimming. Support the center of the piece and inside of each of the four corners with a ball of clay. These clay balls can also be used to secure the plate during trimming. Trim a foot out of the bottom and remove any excess clay. Depending on the thickness of the clay you centered at the beginning of the throwing process, when you're done trimming, you'll have a rounded edge on the outside of the foot going down approximately an inch. Dry the finished plate very slowly to avoid cracking.

By creating the rim for a plate using its own cut parts, the form maintains a visual integrity as well as not wasting any thrown parts. Play around with the cut-off rims and see where else you could use them. For example, I have also used the cut edges to create a raised foot for an elevated square plate. If I'm making the squared plates without a raised rim, I reuse the cut rims by attaching them to other forms that I make at the same time. "Form follows construction" can be applied in a lot of ways!

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