

Thrifty Solutions for an Outdated Kitchen

Challenged by a tight budget, a contracting couple finds five affordable ways to gain luxury, convenience, and space

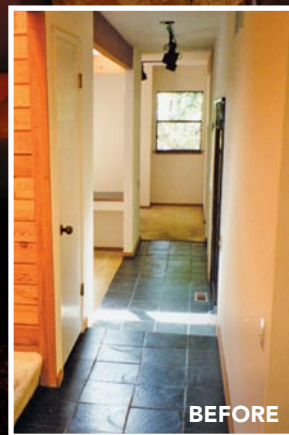
BY SARAH SHIDELER

In the eight years that we've been together, my husband, Bill, and I have collaborated on a number of kitchen remodels for other people. His architecture training and 30 years of work as a general contractor coupled with my penny-pinching ways often provided creative solutions to those projects, but until recently, we hadn't done a project for ourselves. A few years ago, we moved into an outdated ranch and decided to put that collective experience to work in our own kitchen.

The challenge we faced involved a key element in limited supply: money. We knew that we'd be doing a substantial amount of the work ourselves or supervising subcontractors called in for selected jobs. But our budget, dispensed in pay-as-you-go fashion, couldn't exceed \$40,000—a bargain here in California. As it turned out, our kitchen rescue was successful in all the ways we hoped it would be. We gained space without building an addition, increased natural light, and incorporated three features that vastly improved our enjoyment of the kitchen: an island, a coffee bar, and a small home office.

Existing footprint establishes a template for the new

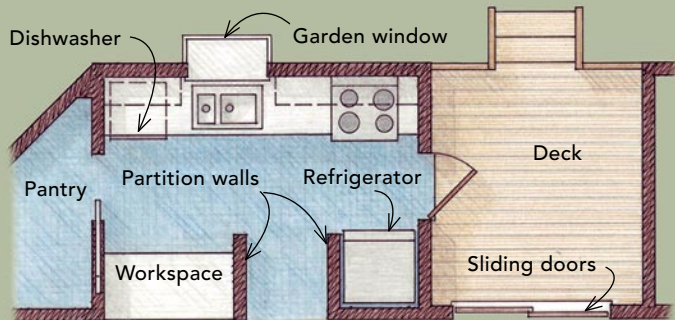
By living in the house for a while before making a huge remodeling commitment, we were able to make note of how well the space worked. We paid particular attention to things like the type of natural light that was making its way into the kitchen; and the way the size and placement of the pantry,



A new hallway without walls. Thanks to a support beam that replaced partition walls, the kitchen now blends with the rest of the main rooms on the first floor. A cantilevered section of the butcher-block top becomes space for casual dining. Photo taken at A on floor plan.

1 ADD SPACE AND LIGHT WITHOUT AN ADDITION

Instead of shelling out thousands of dollars for an addition, we took a simpler, less-invasive approach. We replaced the partition walls with a single beam, extended the exterior wall with a short stemwall to envelop an underused deck, added a large skylight, and enlarged the garden window. These few changes created the necessary space to make minor revisions to the original kitchen's layout.



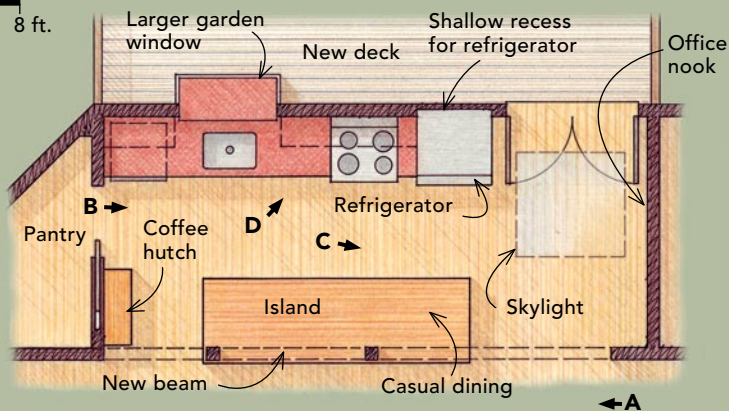
Before

Partition walls and the adjacent deck hemmed in the kitchen's footprint, which left nowhere to move the fridge or to add an island. A limited amount of natural light entered through a small garden window and the door to the deck.

0 2 4 8 ft.

After

Eliminating one wall and shifting another created enough space to move the back wall and add an island, a coffee hutch, and an office nook. Adding a large skylight above the office brought in more natural light.



the appliances, and the sink functioned in relation to our own cooking needs. We also assessed cabinet storage space. It didn't take long for us to notice where changes needed to happen, but making them happen on our budget became the challenge.

We each had some creative ideas to address the limitations in our stodgy kitchen, but we were stymied by the kitchen's meager square footage. Then a small deck came to the rescue. Accessible via a kitchen door and sliding-glass doors off the hallway, the 8-ft. by 9-ft. deck had become a collecting point for firewood and junk since we moved in. We briefly considered converting the space to a screened-in dining area, but a better idea was annexing the space to help the kitchen grow a bit.

Although enveloping the deck space required eliminating one wall and moving another, this acquisition expanded the kitchen enough to make the changes we wanted and didn't require major foundation work or an addition.

Opening a wall makes room for an island

One thing we know for certain is that relocating plumbing and heavy-duty electrical outlets gets expensive immediately. Some of that expense is in the materials themselves, but much of it is simply in labor costs. Moving

2 DON'T MOVE THE PLUMBING

The L-shaped workflow of the original kitchen created tight, awkward movement while cooking. We considered a traditional triangle in the remodel, but the projected cost of moving plumbing to accommodate such a design forced us to reconsider. Moving the sink to the island was a logical choice, but we would have spent an additional \$1200 to move the plumbing. Relocating the stove was possible, but moving the gas and electricity would have run at least \$500 plus the cost of a new stove to work with the island we wanted. In the end, we moved the sink and dishwasher plumbing only 3 in. to 4 in. to allow for wider base cabinets. By keeping the plumbing-related appliances in the same place, we estimated our total savings at close to \$2000.



Home office on deck. Not moving the dishwasher, the sink, and the stove allowed other elements to grow in the new kitchen. Relocating the fridge created room for an island for food prep and casual dining. Photo taken at B on floor plan.



3 UNCLUTTER THE COUNTERTOP WITH SPECIAL HARDWARE

Limited counter space doesn't have to mean limited workspace. Mounting two appliances (a mixer and a food processor) on heavy-duty appliance lifts from Rev-A-Shelf (www.rev-a-shelf.com) keeps them out of the way but instantly accessible. The brackets are strong enough to support an appliance in use, so lifting it up and out of a base cabinet creates an instant workstation. Photo taken at C on floor plan.



A spring-loaded helping hand. Springs help to lift the mixer into place with ease. The appliance plugs into an outlet inside the cabinet, and a drawer keeps accessories handy. Rev-A-Shelf no longer makes the model shown here. It has been replaced by a heavier chrome version that sells for about \$90 online (shelf not included).

FineHomebuilding.com

Visit our Web site for more cabinet-box, door, and drawer suppliers.

fixtures just a few inches, however, is often a simpler solution because most of the time it doesn't require a major utility reroute through walls, ceilings, or floors. As far as we were concerned, the sink, the dishwasher, and the stove were staying where they were. The only appliance we relocated was the refrigerator, but that meant simply moving an existing outlet.

Replacing several short partition walls with a single load-bearing beam created the perfect area for an island. This island quickly became the logical place for storing large countertop appliances, cookbooks, and large jars, keeping them all within easy reach.

Thanks to special heavy-duty hardware, both a 20-lb. mixer and a 15-lb. food processor are stored in a cabinet, not on the countertop, and they swing up to working height with little effort.

Materials are chosen after design

Once we agreed on the basic layout and design, Bill and I had a tough time finding common ground in choosing the cabinet colors. A craftsman at heart, Bill really wanted to stick with a natural-wood kitchen and declared cherry the species of choice. I believed strongly that white was the best choice and that all-wood cabinets, especially cherry ones, would be too dark. Money probably would have been a deciding factor for us, but Bill came around to the fact that a white kitchen can be stately and beautiful. As a compromise, we did our coffee and tea hutch in cherry so that it ties in to the dining-room built-ins.

We estimate that buying mail-order knockdown cabinets from CabParts (www.cabparts.com) and installing them ourselves saved us about \$15,000, but it took a great deal of knowledge and time on Bill's part to measure everything exactly. In the end, that decision was definitely worth it.

We wanted the look of a professional kitchen but couldn't bring ourselves to spend thousands of dollars on Viking and Wolf products, so we went with stainless-steel appliances on sale at Sears.

It became clear to us that we needed a bigger refrigerator, but neither of us wanted it to stick out into the kitchen as so many do. Many manufacturers make low-profile models that match the depth of the countertop. Although a nice idea, those versions sacrifice storage space and tend to be much more expensive than normal-profile fridges.

Product photos, facing page: Dan Thornton and Krysta S. Doerfler

4 BUY READY-TO-ASSEMBLE CABINETS

We chose white-melamine boxes for most of the kitchen and cherry for the hutch, all from CabParts (www.cabparts.com). The drawer boxes were ordered from Drawer Box Specialties (www.dbsdrawers.com), and the doors and drawer fronts from Decorative Specialties (www.decore.com) based on sizes provided by CabParts. Ordering parts by mail and installing them yourself requires careful planning and precise measurements, but the payoff is major savings (for us, about \$15,000). Photo taken at D on floor plan.



Knockdown boxes save money but take time to assemble. Ready-to-assemble cabinets arrive flat-packed in boxes. Dowel joinery (glue and clamping required) and quick-connect hardware like Conformat screws (no clamping required) simplify the work of assembling the cabinets.



Spending hundreds of dollars to save about 6 in. was out of the question. We settled on a fridge we could afford, and Bill figured out a way to recess it slightly into the wall. His approach created a built-in look at near-cabinet depth (floor plans, p. 55).

By exploring local discount granite warehouses, we found one that could supply the 9-ft. piece we needed for the countertop and would offer us a contractor's discount to boot. The slab was $\frac{3}{4}$ in. thick instead of the more expensive and common $1\frac{1}{4}$ in., but it included a built-up front edge that creates a thicker appearance. Instead of making the island top granite, we opted for butcher block, a more-versatile, less-expensive alternative.

Completing most of the demolition and general-carpentry work ourselves saved thousands of dollars. To save time, we hired laborers here and there, as well as electrical and plumbing contractors when necessary. Instead of renting an on-site Dumpster, we made multiple truck trips to the dump, which saved a little money but probably cost a good amount in time. I also cleaned up at the end of each day when a crew was on site to save at least a half-hour of labor, if not more. When all is said and done, our own kitchen makeover reinforced what we had learned from similar jobs: that savings can be maximized when you consider as many economical sources as possible. □

Sarah Shideler helps her husband, Bill Shideler, run his design/build firm, WMS Construction, in Marin County, Calif. Photos by Chris Ermides, except where noted.

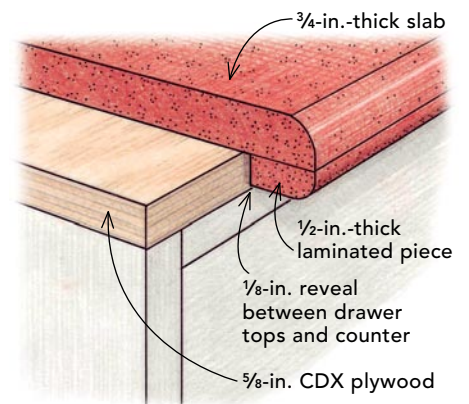
5 CONSIDER A VARIETY OF COUNTERTOP MATERIALS

We wanted granite for its look and durability, but our budget kept us from using it on the island as well as the countertop. By shopping around, we found a $\frac{3}{4}$ -in.-thick granite slab that cost 30% less than a $1\frac{1}{4}$ -in. version. John Boos & Co. (www.butcherblocks.com) offered butcher-block tops in many style and size options, and allowed for the on-site modifications we wanted. A maple top like this costs about \$450.



A beefed-up edge does double duty

The granite's true thickness is visible around the undermount sink, but a laminated edge makes it look like a thicker slab and hides the plywood backing behind it. CDX plywood screwed across the cabinet tops provides structural support and raises the final countertop height to 36 in.



A top that can be drilled on site

Besides being more affordable than granite, the island's butcher-block top was easy to modify on site. The posts appear to run through the top but actually rest on it. Each post houses an outlet to keep appliance cords on top of the island, not draped over the edge where they can become snagged.

