

A Brilliant, Affordable Kitchen

How a young architect designed and built the kitchen of his dreams for under \$10,000

BY REID HIGHLEY

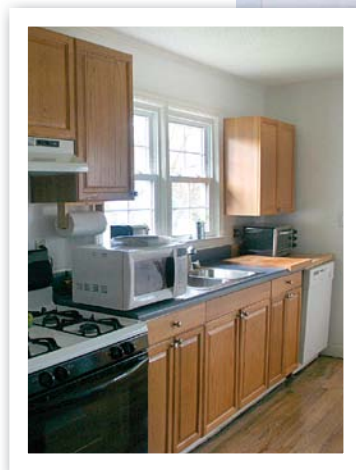
When I bought my house several years ago, I did so despite the condition of the kitchen. Age and a bad renovation attempt had left their marks. As a young (read: poor) professional, I knew it would be a while before I could renovate.

For several years, I tolerated the room and its deficiencies. I was a bachelor, and I was rarely home long enough to make anything more than a bowl of cereal for dinner. But when I got engaged, I knew that the time for procrastination was over. My soon-to-be wife and I would need a grown-up kitchen.

I figured I could spend about \$10,000 on the renovation. With that number in mind, I set out to design a kitchen that an architect could be proud of.

Transforming the dead zone

Although the kitchen was in bad shape, it had one thing going for it: its size. At around 180 sq. ft., it's larger than you might expect in an 800-sq.-ft. house. Nevertheless, a sizable chunk of this space was empty and had no good use. My first design decision was to fill a portion of this dead zone with a large, multifunction island. Because the house had no laundry facilities, I sized the island so that a front-loading washer and dryer could fit inside. Concealed behind pairs of doors,



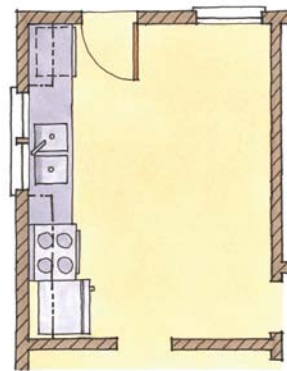
New look, similar layout. Keeping the appliances in the same general area reduced construction time and costs. A new island and updated finishes and fixtures helped to make this dated space an architect's showpiece.



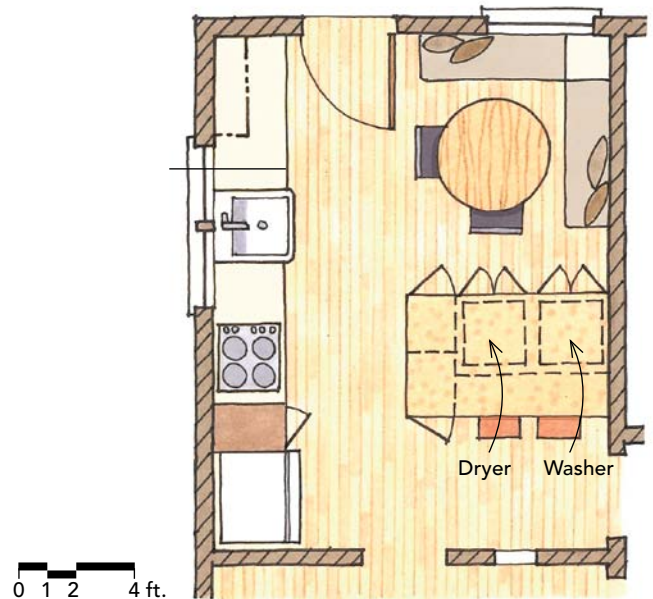


A cozy corner. Stock benches with custom trim and cushions have a built-in feel. The large pendant light helps to define this dining space, which can seat up to six people for a meal.

Before



After





Stretching the budget

Finding materials for a kitchen renovation on a budget of this size demands resourcefulness. For example, not many people would think to save marble toilet partitions from a Dumpster to use as countertops. I chose materials and fixtures carefully, allocating larger portions of my budget to those items that would get the most use. While my budget was small, I wasn't completely willing to turn a blind eye to quality. Here are the highlights.

- \$400 IKEA COOKTOP** It's an Ikea appliance, which typically means that it's a rebadged European Whirlpool model. It works well and has plenty of power for the cooking that we do. Its only downside is that the black surface can be difficult to keep clean.
- \$200 IKEA 24-IN. CONVECTION OVEN** I timed my trip to the store just after the new year when they put serious markdowns on the prices of soon-to-be-discontinued models. This oven cost \$900 a few weeks earlier. With the convection feature, it cooks quickly and evenly. Drawbacks: Difficult to understand dials and inability to accommodate large pans.
- \$900 SAMSUNG REFRIGERATOR** The fridge was a splurge since I was set on a 24-in.-deep model. I also prefer the bottom-freezer configuration; it puts more frequently accessed refrigerated items at eye level. The smooth door finish is extremely easy to clean.
- \$300 IKEA VENTILATION HOOD** For all its good looks, the vent hood was dead on arrival. Parts were difficult to order because of some bad cross-referencing with Whirlpool part numbers, which gave the warranty-service company fits. Now that it's fixed, it does its job well, and the upward-slanted configuration is nice for a small kitchen with low ceilings. The hood was another year-end steal from Ikea. Normally \$900, I got it for \$300.
- FREE MARBLE COUNTERTOPS SAVED FROM THE DUMPSTER** The white marble countertops were toilet partitions removed from a local building during a gut renovation. I snagged them for free, cut them to size, and cleaned them up by polishing them with progressively finer grits of silicon-carbide sandpaper.
- \$95 UTENSIL RAIL BY LEE VALLEY** This chrome rail provides a convenient spot to hang all sorts of accessories. It's thin, so it can't take heavy loads on long spans without flexing.
- \$180 BACKSPASH TILE FROM THE HOME DEPOT** I originally lusted after a marble subway tile that was priced just short of \$14 per sq. ft. This 12-in. by 12-in. marble floor tile was less than \$4 per sq. ft. I simply cut each tile to the size I wanted with a tile saw.
- \$1300 WHIRLPOOL WASHER AND DRYER, ORDERED FROM AJ MADISON** At 24 in. wide, the front-loading washer and dryer are the smallest models that Whirlpool sells in the United States. The washer works great and takes bigger loads than you might expect. The dryer tumbler has broken twice in a year due to electrical-wiring issues.
- \$1495 IKEA CABINETS** The cabinets are Ikea Akurum boxes with off-white Ädel doors and drawer fronts. They were simple to assemble, the soft-close hinges and drawer slides are a nice touch, and the finish is easy to wipe clean.
- \$95 SHELVING STANDARDS BY RAKKS** This beautifully simple shelving system consists of aluminum brackets that cantilever from channelized standards without any hardware. Inexpensive, adjustable, and strong, they are a favorite in design circles.
- \$195 GROHE CONCETTO FAUCET, BOUGHT ON EBAY** I believe in spending more money on surfaces that you touch daily. I picked up this faucet at a moderate discount. The pullout spray is imperceptible when retracted, and the control-arm action is smooth.
- \$185 IKEA FARM-STYLE SINK** This farm-style, apron-front sink is perfect for a small kitchen. The extra depth provided by the overhang makes it feel luxuriously large, and it's plenty deep for most dishes.
- \$110 LED LIGHT STRIP** See "Feedback," p. 104.
- \$50 DINING PENDANT FROM CB2** The Eden pendant lamp has a 20-in.-dia. drum shade. It's made as a plug-in, but I modified it to be hard-wired. It looks nice, but I wish it kicked out more light.
- \$5505 TOTAL**

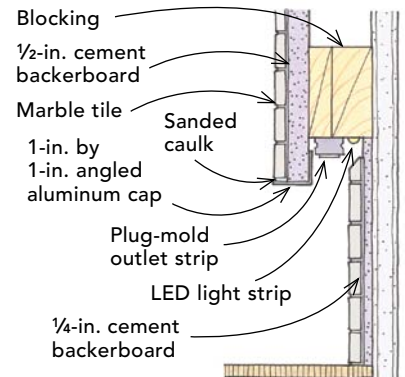
The workhorse.
A site-built storage cabinet that sits below a large bamboo top also houses a washer and dryer. The island serves as a laundry center, a dining spot, and a food-prep area, depending on the demands of the space at various times of the day.





Cool detail

The lack of upper cabinets forced a creative solution for countertop lighting. A furred-out portion of the backsplash creates a recess that houses an LED light strip and a plug-mold strip, enabling the backsplash to be free of outlet receptacles. The LED lighting dramatically illuminates the marble-tile backsplash and casts light onto a marble countertop to make food prep easier and safer.



these appliances are hidden in plain sight. Few of our dinner guests realize that they are dining in the laundry room. In addition to providing a home for the laundry, the island has bar-style seating for breakfast, trash storage, dog-food storage, and plenty of counter space for food prep or folding clothes. I also punched a “window” through the wall behind the island to open views straight through the house, creating a more open feel in the room.

The other end of the dead zone became the dining area. To keep the seating footprint compact and to gain storage space, I bought two benches, gave them a custom look by adding some trim, and set them against wainscoting.

Keeping down costs

To keep my budget and timeline intact, I kept the work zone of the kitchen in nearly the same configuration as the original. This eliminated what could easily have turned into costly plumbing and electrical work. I also was creative and resourceful when it came to selecting fixtures, materials, and appliances.

Happily, with a lot of hard work, I pulled off the renovation comfortably under my \$10,000 target. Even better, the room doesn't give the impression that it's the result of penny-pinching. In these uncertain economic times, I consider it a responsibility to demonstrate that exceptional projects can be realized on less-than-exceptional budgets. In fact, financial limitations seem to spur creativity in a way that unlimited budgets often don't. □

Reid Highley is an architect in Chapel Hill, N.C. Photos by Rob Yagid, except where noted.