Bargain-Bin Kitchen

Nine years later and still married, a cheapskate editor finally completes his kitchen with a mix of recycled materials

BY CHARLES MILLER

My friend Andy came by the house a little while ago looking for some barn sash for a storage shed he was building. I have a similar shed in which I have banked a decade's worth of tag-sale windows, boneyard doors, Dumpster sinks, and just-can't-throw-them-out light fixtures. I expect this hoarding disorder is a holdover from my previous life as a remodeling contractor.

We quickly found a window that suited Andy's needs. As we tied it off to the flanks of his truck bed, Andy said, "Don't take this the wrong way, Chuck, but I really want to be here for your estate sale." In my book, that's high praise for a junk collection.

Home improvement, bit by bit

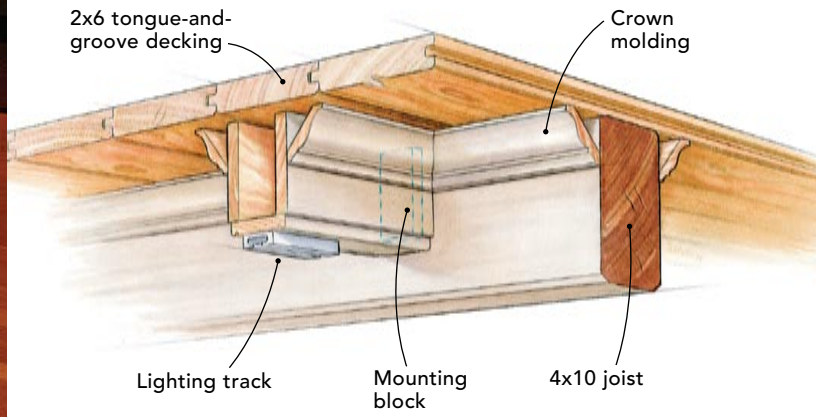
I hung up my contractor's tool belt in 1980 to become an editor for this magazine, but I've never stopped working on our house. Traveling around the country to see the work of the best builders, designers, and architects on the continent has fueled my passion for serious nesting even more. Combine that with a thrifty streak, a fondness for finding new uses for old stuff, and a desire to do it all myself, and you've got a solid-gold recipe for glacial progress.

My extraordinarily patient wife, Jeanetta, and I bought our house in the early 1990s. We enjoy preparing meals together, and the original kitchen didn't have enough room for the two of us. Worse, it included the laundry, which had a pair of bifold doors that would swing open

Divided down the middle. *An alcove dedicated to food prep and cooking (photo left) shares the center-table workspace with the cleanup zone on the opposite wall. A tall Vestfrost refrigerator with a 2-ft. square footprint handles the bulk of cold-storage duties (photo below); leftovers and beverages are stored in a below-counter version from Sears. A pair of whimsical doors inspired by a tuxedo jacket dresses up the sink cabinet. Photos taken at A and B on floor plan.*

LIGHTING IN A BEAMED CEILING

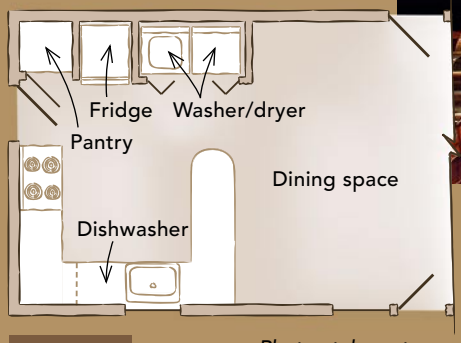
Soffits around the edge of the room house recessed lights. Faux beams made of 1xs and crown molding provide mounting locations for track lighting and chases for wiring.



A COOK'S ALCOVE

Outfitted with stainless-steel counters and shelves, and lined with ceramic tile, the cooking zone is finished with easy-to-clean surfaces that are durable and impervious to heat. Below the cooktop, a pair of stainless proofing drawers from an old bakery now contain pots, pans, and lids.

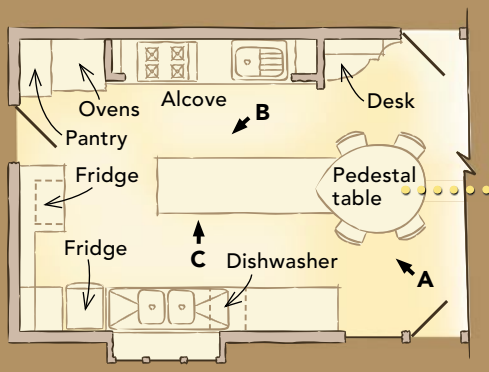
Tile tactics. *With tile, the trim is what eats up the budget. The key to keeping those costs to a minimum was to start with the trim. The black bullnose and celery-colored accent tiles came from a big-box store, where the choices were quite limited and therefore more likely to be affordable. The 3x6 subway tiles came from a real tile shop and cost about $3 per sq. ft. They are arranged in a running-bond pattern, starting from the center of the alcove, to minimize the number of cuts. A pair of ⅝-in.-thick glass shelves in each wall recess carries the lines of accent tiles across the alcove. At $90 each, the shelves definitely qualified as splurge material. Photo to right taken at C on floor plan.*



Before

Photos taken at lettered positions.

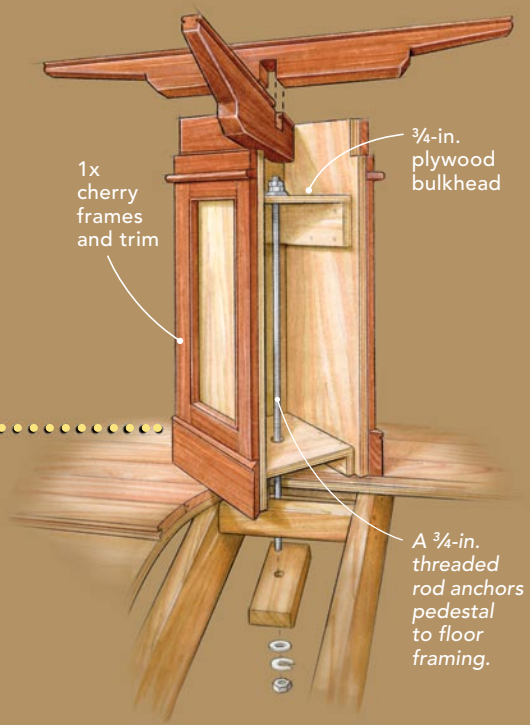
◄ North



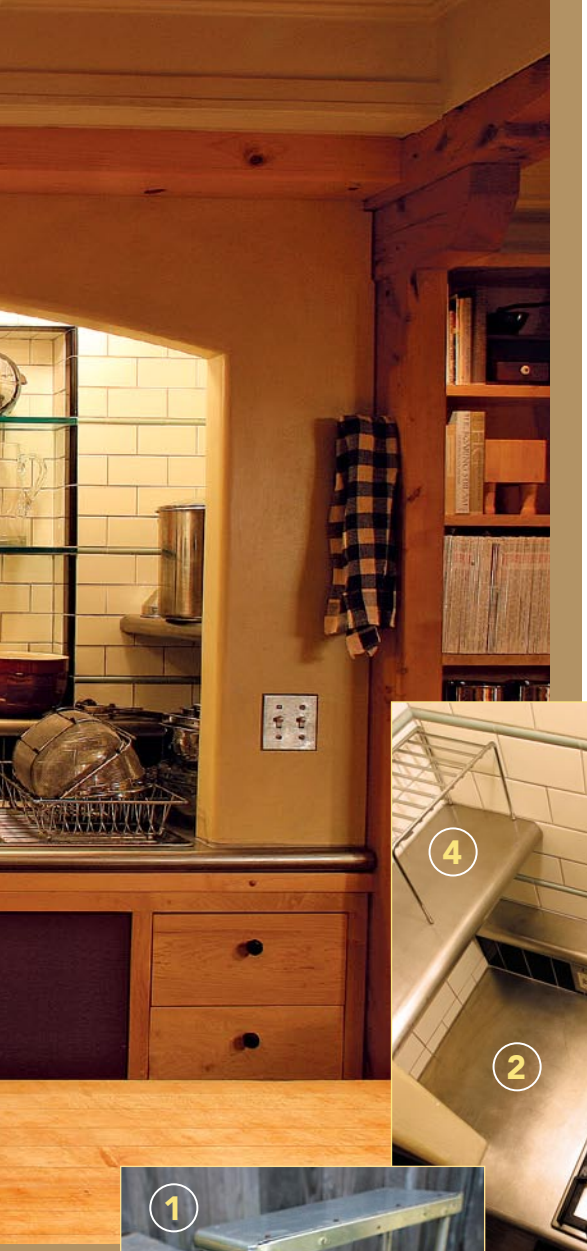
After

0 2 4 8 ft.

Alcove overlook. *A bar-height table provides both seating space and a finished end for the kitchen worktable. To maximize legroom, the cherry table sits atop a pedestal anchored by a threaded rod attached to the floor framing. The pedestal is simply a gussied-up ¾-in. birch-plywood box.*



Floor-plan drawings: Paul Perreault. Other drawings: Bob La Pointe.



Stainless counter and shelves. *The 12-ft.-long deli table had a 23½-in.-wide top and a similar lower shelf (table debris above)* **1**. *The top became the alcove counter, which is 9 ft. 6 in. long* **2**. *The lower shelf provided material for the shelf that sits atop the tile backsplash* **3**. *This shelf is recessed into two cavities in the 2x6 wall. Shelves at each end of the alcove hold big bowls and stockpots* **4**. *These shelves are let into tiles cut with a 2-in.-dia. carbide-grit hole saw to conform to the shelves' bullnose profile. The knife drawer puts the counter cutout for the cooktop to work as a drawer bottom* **5**. *A replacement handle for a Viking oven door serves as the drawer pull.*

during the washing machine's convulsive rinse cycles, blocking the path out of the kitchen.

Our plan was to relocate the laundry, annex its space for a new kitchen, and spread farther into the inexplicably large, unused portion of the room on the south end (floor plans, facing page). Moving the laundry created a classic domino effect, sucking both upstairs bathrooms into a remodeling vortex. A few other missing elements, like a garage, a screened porch, and a deck, muscled themselves onto the schedule. By the time I got back to the kitchen, about eight years had passed. That interlude had given me time to collect some really good kitchen parts, such as a 5-ft. stainless-steel sink with integral drain boards, an 8-ft. prep table, and a 12-ft. deli table (more on that in a minute).

Building a new kitchen in an old kitchen while it's still being used can be tricky. The strategy was this: Leave the old kitchen in place until the new cooktop, ovens, prep counter, and sink were operational in the former laundry; build as many parts as possible in the basement and install them as finished elements; and work from the top down.

Soffits and a coffered ceiling

The kitchen ceiling and the upstairs floor are one and the same: 2x6 tongue-and-groove decking supported by 4x10 joists, all exposed. This arrangement doesn't leave much opportunity for integrated lighting, so I began the kitchen overhaul by building soffits around the perimeter of the ceiling for recessed lights. I broke up the expanse of the remaining exposed 2x6s by adding a row of faux beams down the center of the room. These short, hollow beams serve as mounting platforms for track lighting and raceways for the wires.

I dressed up joists and hollow beams alike with crown molding. Painted white, this grid of beams breaks up the 2x6s into a coffered ceiling and cuts down on the unrelieved, wood-everywhere look.

A two-part table for prepping food and hanging out

At 13 ft. wide, our kitchen isn't large enough for a deep island, but it is big enough for a long table. I learned long ago that you can get lucky at outfits that sell used restaurant equipment. I hit the jackpot: an 8-ft.-long, 30-in.-wide restaurant-prep table for $450 at Globe Restaurant Supply in Bridgeport, Conn. Made of stainless steel with a 2-in.-thick maple top, the table has a lower shelf, a pair of huge drawers, and an 8-ft. pot rack. The rack overwhelmed the kitchen, so we hung it in the porch for barbecue-tool storage. The maple top was in rough shape, requiring four hours with a belt sander and multiple mineral-oil baths.

The worktable is 34 in. tall, just right for chopping onions and carving chicken. The top of the pedestal table is at 39 in., allowing plenty of room for tall barstools. We eat just about all our meals here now.

Hooked on stainless

I like the chameleonlike quality of stainless steel. It can seem ethereal, taking on the colors of whatever material is nearby, or it can suddenly turn businesslike when the lighting changes. Given its impermeable nature, stainless steel makes an excellent prep counter. I even like the name, which contains a built-in disclaimer: It's not stain-free steel, nor is it smudge-free steel; it just stains *less*. Incidentally, Thor makes the best stainless-steel polish I've found (www.thorproducts.com).

My dream prep counter for the cooking alcove would have been 30 in. deep, with an integral, lipless sink welded to it. That dream died when estimates of $3000 came in, not including the cost of the sink. So I went to plan B: hunting on the Web for a used stainless-steel counter that could be modified. My search yielded a 12-ft.-long deli table on rickety legs for $50. It yielded enough material for the alcove counter and several shelves. Stainless steel is notoriously difficult to work, especially patching holes. Calling local metal shops finally led me to a jack-of-all-trades named Gerry (the artist otherwise known as G^3). Plasma torch in hand, G^3 turned my table scraps into a countertop. □

Charles Miller is special-issues editor at *Fine Homebuilding*. Photos by the author.