

A Change of Space

By switching rooms and recycling vintage elements, one couple transforms their kitchen on a tight budget

BY LIZ STRIANESE

Sometimes you just know you'd be happy in a house, even when your entire extended family cringes looking at photographs of the mess you're considering buying. That's how it was with our fixer-upper.

It had sat empty for at least four years. I finally stopped to peer through a window, past the tattered remains of a curtain, and saw that all the original details were intact. There were solid-wood pocket doors, Victorian ceiling medallions, and hardwood floors throughout. There were also signs of water damage, walls with peeling, discolored wallpaper, and several neighborhood animals, both domestic and wild, living inside.

But it was just what my husband, Tom, and I were looking for: a house to resuscitate and bring back to its former glory. We bought the house, and after all the major structural and messy work was completed and the floors were refinished, we moved in. All the rooms still needed work, but we thought it made sense to turn to the kitchen first.

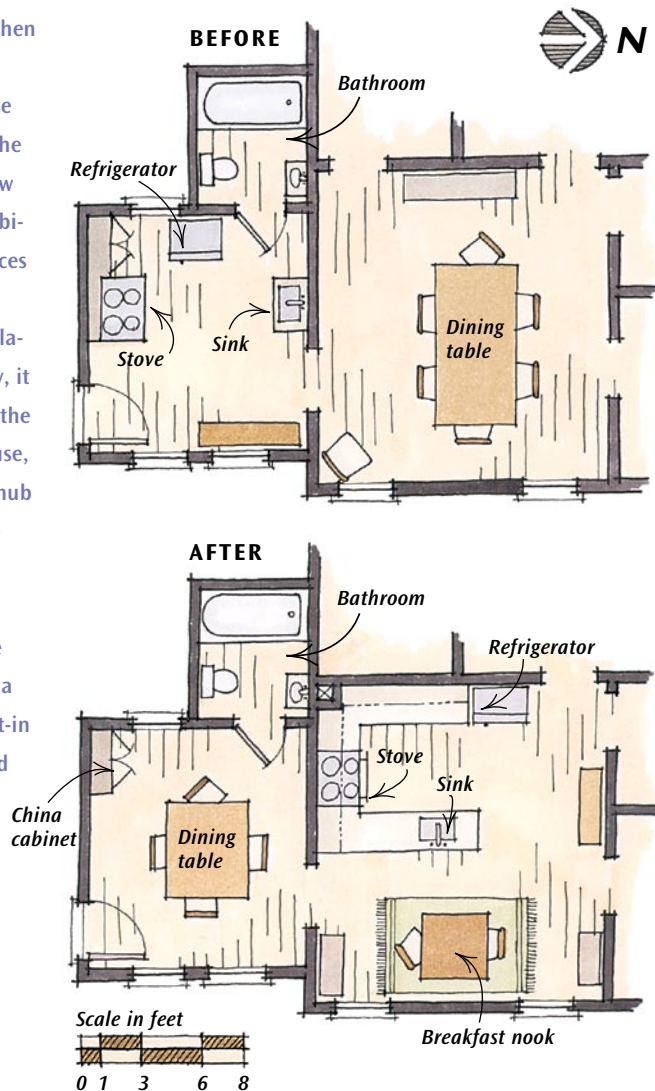


**KITCHEN AND DINING
ROOM TRADED PLACES**
*The result was an efficient
U-shaped kitchen tucked
into a corner, making room
for traffic to flow into the
new dining room.*



THE BIG SWITCH

Flipping the kitchen and dining room made the best use of both spaces. The kitchen could now accommodate cabinets and appliances without blocking windows or circulation. Additionally, it was relocated to the center of the house, making it a real hub of activity. At the same time, the dining room was moved out of the path of traffic to a room with a built-in china cabinet and more windows.



Simple plans for a difficult room

We both love to cook and wanted a beautiful, efficient kitchen that met our agreed-upon priorities: a sink facing a window that ideally looked out onto the garden; all the modern conveniences, including a state-of-the-art refrigerator, stove, and dishwasher; and glass-faced upper cabinets to display our collection of vintage dishes—we're antiques dealers obsessed with dinnerware.

But the tiny kitchen at the back of the house was not going to work. There were broken pipes, years of grease, and squirrels in residence.

Adding insult to injury, the layout was completely dysfunctional: Old appliances were crammed into the small room, blocking windows and light. Three doorways into the room and one built-in floor-to-ceiling cabinet left us with wall space in approximately 14-inch increments.

We drew up a series of unsuccessful floor plans. Upper cabinets wouldn't work because of the intermittent wall space. And we couldn't plan for a long, continuous work surface because the windows started 2 feet above the floor, which would put counters at knee height. We grappled with closing up windows or blowing

out walls. But we had enough major reconstruction to do without adding more. We were stumped.

Switching rooms

One day our friend Jim, also a home renovator, came over to offer moral support. As he stood in the adjacent (and larger) dining room, he suggested that we simply switch the dining room and the kitchen. Since we hadn't replaced the old plumbing to the kitchen yet, we could just run the plumbing to the dining room. We'd get a large central kitchen with more wall space and a sunny dining room with a beautiful built-in china cabinet. It was a brilliant idea.

So we set to work. Closing up a superfluous doorway between the rear parlor and the new kitchen added more wall space. We situated our new galley-style kitchen in one corner of the old dining room, with a peninsula for the sink area so I could face windows onto the garden (see floor plan, at left). All the home renovation books we'd read recommended a layout where the stove, sink, and fridge relate as points of a triangle for optimum efficiency. We incorporated that principle into a U-shape that proved most efficient for us, since we usually take turns cooking rather than sharing the space at the same time. Streamlining the kitchen left room for a breakfast area—a small table and two chairs—as well as a couple of our antique cupboards.

The new compact kitchen layout also let traffic flow easily to the dining room at the back of the house. Charming old details in the former dining room inspired our materials choices in the kitchen. We repaired the existing beadboard wainscot in the dining room, then repeated that look in the new kitchen. We also used the original molding on the built-in dining room china cabinet as a template for the crown

REAL TONGUE AND GROOVE BEADBOARD was used as the backsplash, as the backing in the glass-faced cabinets, and to hide a pipe in the corner of the kitchen. The beadboard backsplash adds charm at a fraction of the cost of marble, which was the homeowners' first choice.





ORIGINAL DETAILS like the crown molding and beadboard on the china cabinet at right were duplicated in the new kitchen (left). The lavender interior of the china cabinet provides a nice contrast to the green walls and highlights the collection of white china.



A GOOSENECK FAUCET with porcelain cross handles makes pot filling easy. This updated version of an old-fashioned faucet—originally called a mixer because it mixed hot and cold—is a focal point in the kitchen. Liz and Tom use the cozy seating area on the far wall for breakfast.

Vintage is usually cheaper than new, and salvage yards carry all kinds of appliances and fixtures.

molding on the kitchen cabinets. These common elements tie the two rooms together, and bright green walls draw you into the room.

Finding the right materials

A meticulous restoration wasn't our plan; we wanted to blend a vintage aesthetic with new function and convenience. In the interest of saving money, we looked at stock cabinets from the big box stores but decided we wouldn't be happy with the quality. Even at pricier kitchen showrooms we saw poorly constructed cabinets made of particleboard and veneer.

In the end, we hired a cabinetmaker; for us, nothing beats handcrafted solid-wood cabinets. Instead of going with a cherry or maple finish, though, we decided to paint them. That seemed to suit our humble farmhouse with its low ceilings and wide-plank floors. We did the sanding, painting, and glass installation ourselves to help offset costs.

By painting the cabinets with brushes, we avoided the glossy commercial look that results from spray application. We painted all the cabinets a pale, pearly gray and the walls a rich, buttery yellow. This is the room where we drink our morning coffee and read the paper—bright or dramatic colors didn't seem appropriate for such a transitional time of day.

For our countertops, we chose honed, matte Carrara marble. The folks at the local stone yards warned

us against it because it stains easily, but we really wanted the soft glow of marble—to us, it's the hallmark of a simple but sophisticated country kitchen. We don't mind having to seal the counters periodically and wipe up spills as they occur, to minimize staining. A little diligence is worth it for a material that grows more beautiful with age and is a central feature in our home.

New uses for old things

We're not "shiny-new" people—we like well-used stuff that has a history, patina, and glow. So the vintage look we were going for in our kitchen resonates with every aspect of our lives, both in our home and in our antiques shop.

We found lots of ways to insert antique elements into our new kitchen. For months we harvested old wavy glass from discarded windows. Installing these vintage panes into the newly milled upper cabinets gave them heft and a bit of age. At a salvage yard we bought an old porcelain sink and then had our plumber retrofit it with a bar-sink drain. (The old drain diameter is smaller than current sink drain sizes.)

Our lighting is a mixture of new and old. It's important to have good overhead lighting in a kitchen, so we installed recessed lights in the ceiling and hung a pendant lamp above the sink. The vintage halophane industrial light, made of fluted glass and steel, brings a lot



BEFORE

A DRAMATIC CHANGE
Turning the decrepit dining room (above) into a new kitchen (right) required a labor of love but allowed the homeowners to reinvent both spaces with clever details. Large drawers on the back side of the counter (inset) keep linens and serving pieces accessible to the dining area.



AFTER



A KITCHEN AT ONE THIRD THE COST

According to our research, the average American kitchen renovation costs around \$50,000. Starting with nothing, ours cost just over \$15,000. Our biggest expenses were cabinets (\$8,000), appliances (\$3,200), and plumbing (\$1,000). We did a lot of the work ourselves, and we used vintage materials and fixtures, which are usually cheaper than new. Salvage yards carry all kinds of appliances and fixtures, from sinks to pot racks to lights. Here are some of the specific things we did to save money:



SALVAGED GLASS IN THE CABINET DOORS lets the owners' collection of Russel Wright dinnerware bring punches of color to the otherwise neutral tones of the kitchen.

- ▶ Bought marble (\$2,100) through a supplier in February, which seemed to be the off-season. People tend to do renovation work in the spring and summer and not so much in the winter. We drove to the docks in Delaware and picked out our own piece.
- ▶ Collected antique glass from discarded windows, then installed it in our upper kitchen cabinets, for aesthetics as well as economics.
- ▶ Purchased a vintage sink for \$150. If we had bought a new porcelain sink we would have spent closer to \$1,000.
- ▶ Bought the faucet over the Internet, after first visiting a high-end plumbing supply showroom to see (and feel) faucets. The one we bought has just the right look, presence, and heft for our old/new kitchen. At the showroom it was \$700; we found the same fixture for \$350 online.
- ▶ Ordered nickel-plated hardware from a catalog, saving us the mark-up a cabinetmaker would have charged and allowing us to do a lot of comparison shopping. We got hinges, bin pulls, and knobs online.
- ▶ Installed tongue-and-groove beadboard as a backsplash instead of marble, which we would have used if we had had a bigger budget. But the beadboard gives an authentic charm and still looks clean and sophisticated. —Tom Strianese



YOU HAVE TO REALLY LOVE AN OLD HOUSE

“What is it about old houses? What strange spells do they cast, so that otherwise perfectly rational human beings are compelled against all sanity and sense to commit large amounts of energy, money, and time to their rebuilding?”

—George Nash, *Renovating Old Houses*

My husband and I loved our house at first sight. We were fearless when we took on this fixer-upper as a project, thinking we had enough experience to handle it.

I had interior design and construction management experience, and Tom had been a landlord and handyman for many years. We also had substantial encouragement, support, and advice from my stepfather, Charlie, who had restored the Arts and Crafts house where he and my mother live. When our spirits sank and our skill level was insufficient, Charlie was the first to help us through whatever phase had bogged us down.

When you buy an old house, you have to be willing to work your way through the struggles. Things are never cut and dried, and they don't look like textbook diagrams. You need plenty of ingenuity and a bit of daring to solve problems. Salvaging materials and using them in new ways becomes an art.

Mostly, you have to understand and accept that everything will take longer than you expect. It's important to just go with the flow. If sleeping in a ski cap because the house isn't yet fully insulated bothers you, or making do without a kitchen gives you fits, then a fixer-upper may not be for you. —L.S.



of light into the room and adds a cool contrast to the warmth of the kitchen.

We used real tongue-and-groove beadboard as the backsplash above the counter—it adds charm to the kitchen at a fraction of the cost of marble, which was our original choice.

We used beadboard as the backing in the glass-faced cabinets as well.

The entire kitchen project took 10 months, and we estimate it ran about a third the cost of the average kitchen renovation (see sidebar, p. 27). Although during the process we were miserable, toting armfuls of dirty dishes to the basement laundry tub and cooking one-pot

meals on a plug-in burner, in the end it was worth it.

Not long after we finished the kitchen, I threw Tom a surprise birthday party and invited 20 friends and neighbors. Here we were in this enormous house with a well-furnished living room, parlor, and new dining room, and everyone pulled chairs around the peninsula in the kitchen—the true sign of a successful kitchen design. **H**

Liz Strianese and her husband, Tom, live in Beacon, N.Y., where they own an antiques shop called Relic.

For more information, see Resources, page 84.