



Anatomy of a Budget Kitchen

With owners as general contractors, \$7,000 covered new cabinets, new appliances, the electrician and the plumber

BY CYNTHIA SMITH

Location isn't everything. Our 1965 block-and-stucco ranch sat in a great location—shaded by a stand of oak trees on a barrier island in St. Augustine, Florida. But the house also had that other real-estate buzzword: potential. We replaced the roof, upgraded the windows and did minor bathroom remodeling. The kitchen, though, was too scary. We pored over remodeling magazines, but they always made our \$7,000 budget seem inadequate.

In our 10-ft. by 10-ft. kitchen, stock countertops sat on cheap cabinets. We lacked a dishwasher, microwave and adequate wiring to install them. (Our temporary solution, a

portable dishwasher with microwave on top, tripped the breakers.) We also had only 3 lin. ft. of counter space and one storage drawer.

To save money, we acted as our own general contractors, a strategy that carries risks and can frustrate professionals who have to work with inexperienced management. It took some study, clear communication and careful organization; but this job came in on budget and on time (photo above).

Hire good people and communicate clearly with them

Paying fair wages to good tradespeople and communicating clearly with them makes all

the difference. Starting with the cabinets, we got several layouts and estimates from recommended contractors. One of them, Mark Priester of Priester's Cabinets in St. Augustine, deserves much of the credit for our success. First, he solved the counter-space and dishwasher problems. He suggested putting the stove with microwave/hood above it against the blank wall where the portable dishwasher had been and a built-in dishwasher where the stove had been (drawing facing page). This arrangement gave 2 ft. more counter space. We needed an electrician to run new wiring and a plumber to bring water to the dishwasher, and we got



Attractive, efficient kitchens don't need to break the budget. Without enlarging the kitchen, the owners now have better cabinets and counters, and more work space, shelving and drawers. Tight planning limited kitchen downtime to just 72 hours. Photo taken at A on floor plan.

written estimates from contractors who had done good work for us in the past. We cleaned up between stages and did some touch-up painting after the cabinets were installed. But mostly, we saved the pros many hours of legwork by shopping for laminate, tile, paint, light fixtures, hardware, faucets and appliances.

Initial estimates for cabinetry, plumbing and electrical work came in around \$4,000 (sidebar right), leaving \$3,000 for appliances and everything else. The middle-of-the-line dishwasher, stove, microwave and refrigerator ate up most of that, but left a few dollars to upgrade the cabinets.

Mark suggested beveled edges on the laminate countertops, and to make best use of the space, he recommended a lazy Susan in the corner cabinet and pull-outs under the sink. He also helped us to integrate open display shelves into the design, which softened the sharp corners at the doorways and left room for extra drawers. These minor expenses in the project were money well spent.

Schedule the work carefully

Thanks to careful planning and good subs, we were without a kitchen for only 72 hours. When we hired the crew, we made sure that we fully understood the scope of each trade's involvement, the sequence of tasks and the length of time each step would take. When the guys gave us the estimates, they explained what needed to be done before they could do their work. By making sure that we understood how they wanted things sequenced, we could be certain that everything was ready when each of them arrived.

When Mark took measurements, he indicated on the wall the location of the new outlets and appliances so that the electrical rough-in could be done before tearout of the old kitchen began. With that done, we had the old appliances hauled out on a set day, and the job went like clockwork, with no wasted time—ours or theirs.

Mark hauled off the old cabinets on day one, disconnecting the cast-iron sink and leaving it for the plumber to reinstall. On day two, he installed the new cabinets, and the appliances arrived. On day three, the

plumber installed the dishwasher and reconnected the sink; another installer hooked up the new microwave/hood and oven/range.

We now had a working kitchen. Undercabinet lighting fixtures, materials for a tile backsplash and miscellaneous cleanup expenses exhausted the budget. A friend who is a tile installer had offered to install the backsplash as a return favor. We turned him loose and then bought him a gift certificate to a nice restaurant, bringing the final bill to \$7,105. □

Cynthia Smith is an office manager in St. Augustine, Florida. Photo by David Ericson.

Good planning limits surprises on budget

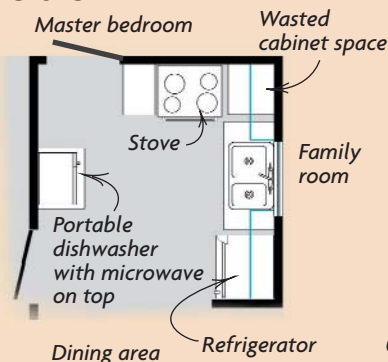
	Estimate	Final
Cabinets	\$3,350	\$3,500
Electrician	400	500 <i>(higher price includes add-ons)</i>
Plumber	250	250
New faucet	130	130
Tile <i>(materials \$275, gift certificate \$100)</i>	375	375
Appliances <i>(dishwasher, stove, microwave, refrigerator)</i>	2,150	2,150
Misc.	345	200*
Total	7,000	7,105

* Floor touch-up, new glass for old light fixtures, paint, steamer rental to remove wallpaper, sprinkler repair due to plumber driving over yard

SAVING SPACE

Putting the stove where the portable dishwasher and microwave had been gave more counter space. Curved counters and shelves soften the entrance to the master bed and bath.

Before



After

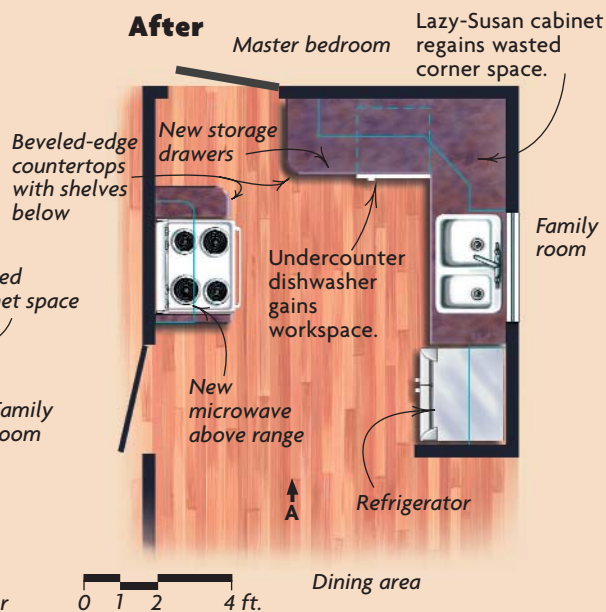


Photo taken at lettered position.