

# Small Kitchen for a Small

A Chicago couple makes imaginative use of stock cabinets and salvaged materials to rebuild an old kitchen

BY LEAH MOSKOFF



**Two hutches and a transom lead the way.** A portal composed of a pair of hutch frames the new kitchen. The hutches are composed of stock kitchen cabinets mated to plywood shelves. Below, a refurbished floor of heart pine ties the rooms together. Photo taken at A on floor plan.

# House on a Small Budget

In a once blue-collar Chicago neighborhood, built by laborers for laborers, our Bucktown bungalow sits small and simple amid rapid gentrification. When my partner Charlie and I decided to fix up our little old house, built mostly of bricks in 1901, people were highly skeptical. They insisted our house was a "tear-down" not worth saving.

There was some truth to that. Our house had suffered from years of neglect and contained little worth salvaging. The house had no vintage trim or hardware, and it had a poor layout. Because Charlie and I are not developers with deep pockets, we instead decided to use our skills to build some sweat equity.

This journey would prove to be long, complete with all the ups and downs that accompany trying to live in the middle of a building project. It takes blind faith and optimism to do this—the kind of faith that led me, soon after closing on the house, to buy all our kitchen appliances, never dreaming we would only now be unpacking our new dishwasher, its warranty long expired. Its box faithfully served for five years as our kitchen countertop.

## This kitchen started with the floor

Charlie and I agreed that one thing worth saving was the old-growth heart-pine floor. We knew that under its gummy layer of varnish lay a diamond in the rough (photo facing page). First, though, we had to fill in the gaps.

When we gutted the house, we tore out the wall that once divided the kitchen from the living room. This step left us with a larger room and a number of empty spots with no finish flooring where the walls used to be. Where do you get more of the same century-old material? It turned out to be all around us, in the Dumpsters scattered around the

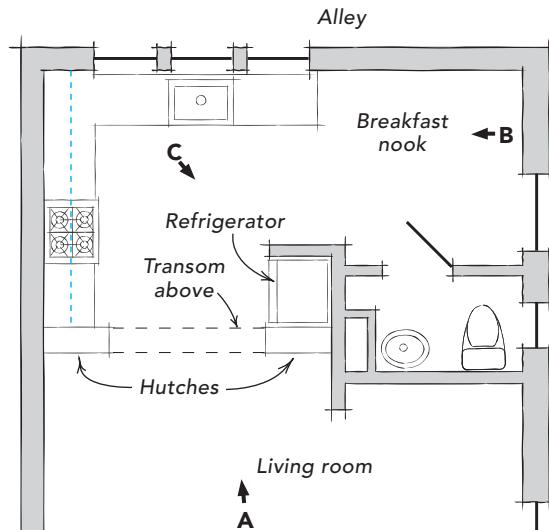
**Room to work, room to sit.** Slat-back benches and a trestle table are tucked into the corner, overlooking the L-shaped kitchen. Pendant lights echo the vintage style of the house, and recessed lights and big windows do the real task lighting. Photo taken at B on floor plan.

## Living room with a view—of the kitchen

Framed by built-in hutches, the remodeled kitchen has become the focal point of the house, and daylight from the kitchen now can penetrate deeply into the living room.

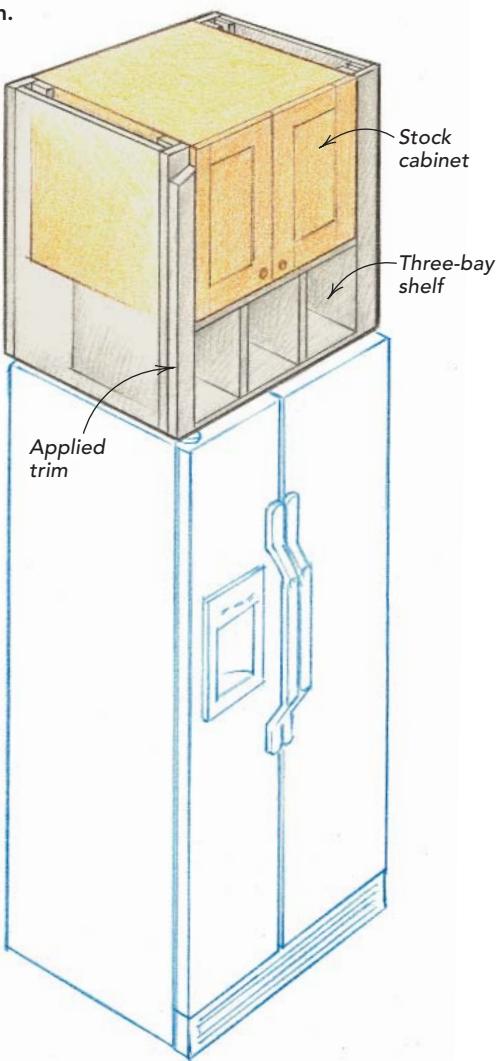
Photos taken at lettered positions.

0 2 4 8 ft.



## BASE CABINET MAKES IT TO THE TOP

Supported by a three-bay shelf affixed to the sidewalls, a stock IKEA cabinet takes on a custom look above the refrigerator. Photo taken at C on floor plan.



neighborhood from other demolitions taking place. Most of the original houses around here had the same type of tongue-and-groove flooring, thus making a little Dumpster-diving a fruitful adventure. We laced together our old floor with the scrounged boards, and after sanding, the lacing was undetectable.

Sanding the floors was a point of contention between Charlie and me. He wanted to hire professionals to do the sanding, but I insisted on doing it myself to save money. I now can say with great confidence that it's best to leave the floor-sanding to the pros. It is difficult for a novice to achieve a smooth floor, and it is well worth \$1 to \$2 per sq. ft. to have someone else do that back-breaking work.

Heart pine's deep amber color gets better with age. To emphasize this color, I flooded the floor with three coats of boiled linseed oil. After a proper curing and buffing, I applied three coats of oil-based polyurethane in a satin finish. Heart pine is a relatively soft wood that scratches and dents easily. This finish strengthens the surface, helping to prevent such flaws.

### Ready-made cabinets tweaked to suit different situations

Charlie is a journeyman carpenter, and I am a scenic painter. At our woodshop, Mother

### ONLINE CONNECTION

Tour this kitchen on our Web site at [www.finehomebuilding.com](http://www.finehomebuilding.com).

## FEEDBACK

### What's it like to use IKEA kitchen cabinets?

In my opinion, the only disadvantage of IKEA cabinets is that they require assembly. The advantage, however, is that they are easy to assemble. You do not have to be a carpenter to put them together.

Like many of the ready-made kitchen cabinets, the IKEA cabinet boxes are made of veneered fiberboard. The door and drawer fronts, on the other hand, are solid wood. The cabinets come with user-friendly pictorial directions, with nothing left to chance. Every hole has a purpose. Every bolt has a task.

The drawer boxes, consisting of a metal back and two extruded metal sides, a melamine bottom, and a hardwood

face, snap together to create a drawer that glides on full-extension slides. The cabinet doors swing on adjustable snap-on hinges.

The base cabinets assemble into a box, with the toe-kick plates and adjustable legs sold separately. Upper cabinets are mounted on a clever suspension-rail system that enables one person to hang and level upper cabinets easily.

IKKEA sells its cabinet parts separately, so you can create your own look by combining the door and drawer styles. The average price for a 30-in. base or tall upper cabinet is a little more than \$200. At our local IKEA, most of the styles were in stock. Visit [www.ikea.com](http://www.ikea.com) to locate your nearest store.

Hubbard Studios, we build sets for TV commercials and print ads. Even though we have the resources to build kitchen cabinets, doing so was simply not cost effective given the affordability of ready-made cabinets.

We purchased our cabinets from IKEA because of their design, low price, and user-friendliness ("Feedback," facing page). Our entire kitchen was outfitted with birch cabinets from floor to ceiling. The total came to about \$2,500, a pretty reasonable amount given the thousands of dollars more we could have spent for similar cabinets.

Besides using the IKEA cabinets in their intended applications, we found two other ways to use them. In one example, we divided the kitchen from the living room with a pair of hutches. To save time and money and to foster continuity with the kitchen, we used a pair of IKEA upper cabinets as the base cabinets for the hutches. A transom atop the hutches links them together, creating a passageway that indicates where the living room ends and the kitchen begins. The transom includes a pair of matching antique stained-glass windows at each end. They are boxed in on their back sides and are illuminated by a set of white Christmas-tree lights.

We used another IKEA cabinet to create storage over the refrigerator (photo facing page). In this case, we combined a 30-in. base cabinet with some custom cubbies and a few pieces of trim to make a simple thing that looks fairly complex.

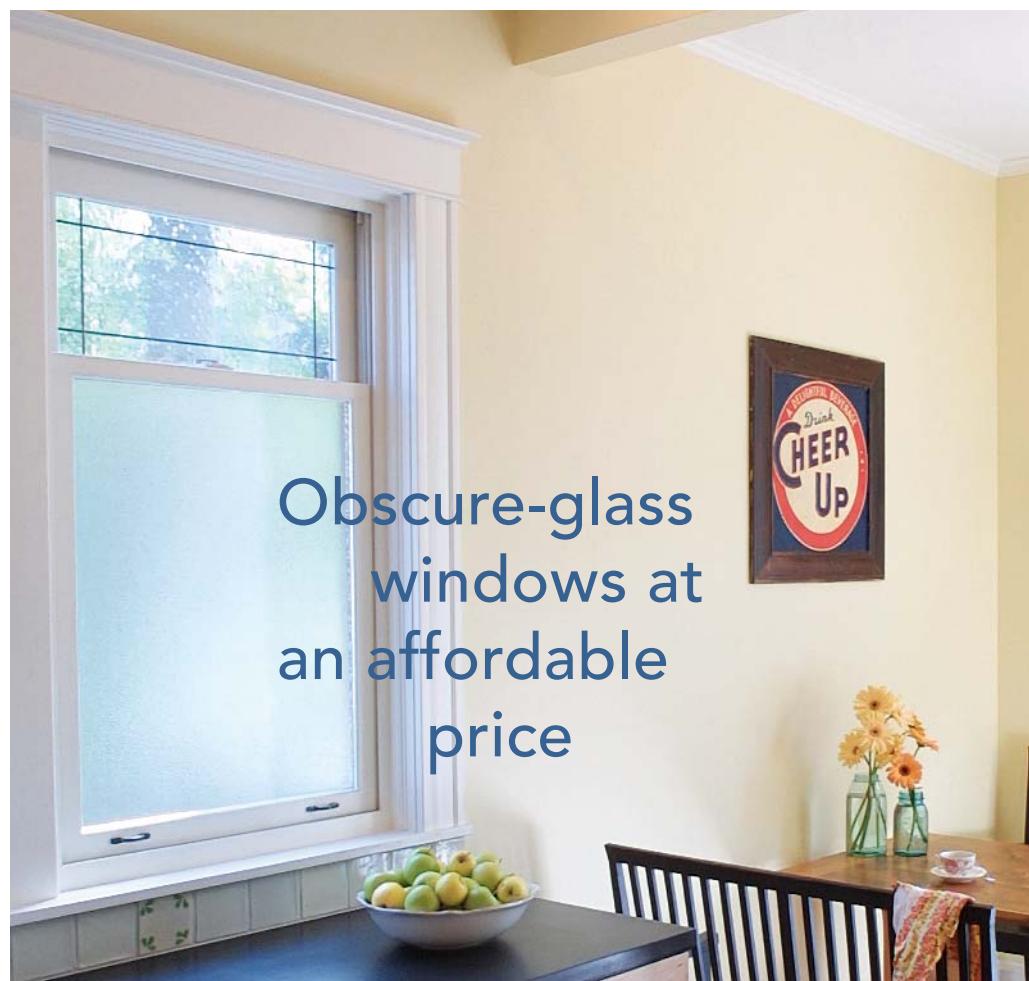
#### A well-lighted corner table

Our kitchen takes up about 100 sq. ft., leaving just enough room to carve out a little corner for a breakfast nook. It takes up another 50 sq. ft. or so, which is all we need (floor plan p. 91). The kitchen feels roomy because it has plenty of light, and that is partly because of the three windows over the counter. They overlook a potentially unpleasant view, which we avoided with obscure glass ("Great Ideas," right).

The breakfast nook is the perfect spot to sip a cup of tea, work the day's crossword, and enjoy our new kitchen. We may never embark on doing an entire house again, but no matter which house we're in, we always want to have a big hand in shaping the kitchen. And why not? It's the best part. □

Leah Moskoff is a scenic painter and a freelance writer in Chicago. Photos by Charles Miller, except where noted.

## GREAT IDEAS



### Obscure-glass windows at an affordable price

The windows above our sink overlook a city alley. Blinds or curtains did not seem like the right solution, so we used obscure glass. Customizing any new window order can easily double the cost, so we ordered stock double-hung windows and customized them ourselves.

I ordered pebbled and seeded obscure glass from a local shop; the glass was cut to be  $\frac{1}{8}$  in. shy of the window panes. I applied each piece to the interior side of a window pane, anchored the glass with glazier's points, and ran a thin bead of clear latex caulk around the edges of the glass to glue it in place.

The upper windows include overlays of lead tape (Decra-led; United Art



Pebbled glass below, seeded glass above. Obscure glass in two patterns conceals the view of the alley behind the house while admitting daylight in unexpected textures. A thin bead of caulk anchors the glass to its window. The upper windows are detailed with lead tape to give them an antique look.

Glass; 630-369-8168). This is a trick we use in the film industry to create imitation leaded glass: Simply sandwich colored gel cellophane between the glass panes, then add the lead tape.

Obscuring and "leading" our windows cost an extra \$180 for the bank of windows. Now we've got privacy from the alley, with no loss of sunlight.