

Kitchen-Remodel Reality Check

With careful planning, you can avoid common pitfalls and get yourself into your new kitchen sooner

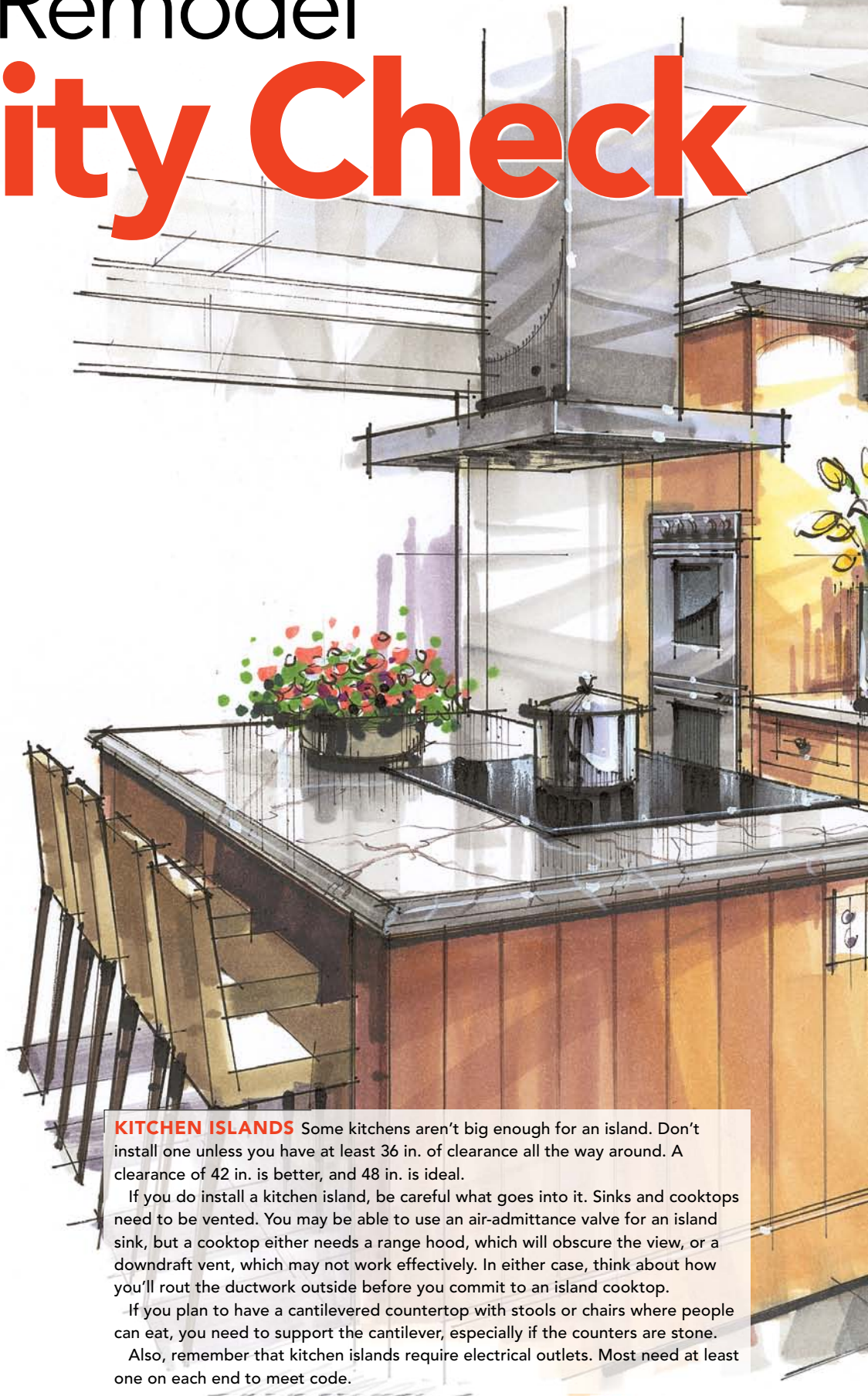
BY KEVIN IRETON

It was late. I was trying to finish a kitchen remodel. Thanks to the polar vortex, my plumber was busy repairing broken pipes, so I agreed to help Tom, the homeowner, hook up his sink and dishwasher.

The kitchen was small, and the dishwasher had to go into the corner, where the cabinets turned to form a peninsula. I connected the supply line, and together Tom and I slid the dishwasher into place. It fit and looked great. Time to go home—except that for some inexplicable reason, Tom reached down to open the top drawer on the abutting cabinet. It came out only a few inches before it hit the handle on the dishwasher. He looked at me, and I thought, “Oh no. When did they start putting refrigerator-door handles on dishwashers?”

Even for experienced builders, remodeling has its “oh no” moments. And if you’re remodeling a kitchen—the most complicated and expensive room in most houses—you’re navigating a minefield of them. But with planning and a little luck (I was able to slide Tom’s dishwasher a bit farther into the opening, which solved the problem), you can avoid the most common mistakes.

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KITCHEN ISLANDS Some kitchens aren't big enough for an island. Don't install one unless you have at least 36 in. of clearance all the way around. A clearance of 42 in. is better, and 48 in. is ideal.

If you do install a kitchen island, be careful what goes into it. Sinks and cooktops need to be vented. You may be able to use an air-admittance valve for an island sink, but a cooktop either needs a range hood, which will obscure the view, or a downdraft vent, which may not work effectively. In either case, think about how you'll rout the ductwork outside before you commit to an island cooktop.

If you plan to have a cantilevered countertop with stools or chairs where people can eat, you need to support the cantilever, especially if the counters are stone.

Also, remember that kitchen islands require electrical outlets. Most need at least one on each end to meet code.



ELECTRICAL In most places, homeowners can do their own electrical work, but that doesn't exempt them from code requirements. Here are the most common electrical-code violations committed by do-it-yourselfers in the kitchen:

- Failing to provide two 20-amp appliance circuits
- Powering lights with the 20-amp appliance circuits
- Failing to protect countertop circuits with a GFCI
- Not installing enough outlets along the counter (no spot can be farther than 24 in. from a receptacle)

SCHEDULING There's a lot to plan when remodeling a kitchen, so don't start demolishing your old kitchen too soon. Have appliances, cabinets, plumbing fixtures, and any other major components on hand before you begin. Suppliers may be willing to store bigger items for you, but make sure they are really in stock. Otherwise, you may end up with a long delay if something is back-ordered. Also, having everything on hand lets you confirm exact measurements and installation specs. Yes, you can and should check specs online while designing your kitchen, but it's wise to verify them.

Schedule the plumber, electrician, tile setter, and other subcontractors well in advance. Again, the goal is to avoid waiting because someone isn't available. Plus, you don't want subs working on top of each other. The tile setter can't work on the floor if the plumber and the electrician are in his way. A proper remodel is carefully choreographed, and even then you'll have to juggle schedules at the last minute.

LAYOUT If you want to open up the kitchen to other rooms, don't assume you can simply remove any wall you want. Some walls are load bearing, and some aren't. Know which is which before you drag out the sledgehammer and reciprocating saw. Conversely, don't assume you can't remove a wall just because it's structural. There's usually a way to support the load with a header or a beam. And if you can't afford to hire a structural engineer, keep in mind that some lumberyards provide free engineering through the manufacturer that supplies them with engineered lumber.

Many homeowners also assume that the sink, stove, and refrigerator have to stay where they are. That's a mistake.

Yes, plumbing and venting can be expensive to move, but sometimes that's the best thing to do. And just thinking about alternative layouts doesn't cost anything.

Be especially careful to check the clearances and ventilation requirements for your new refrigerator. The doors are big and thick (and have huge handles), so they need room to open. And if you're installing a wall full of cabinets with built-in appliances, you'll probably need filler strips to make anything fit perfectly. Remember that most refrigerator doors have to open beyond 90° in order for you to be able to access the vegetable bins or to remove them for cleaning.

VENTING Don't relocate the cooktop without taking ventilation into account. Most building codes don't require a range hood ducted to the outside, but most experts recommend one. For maximum effectiveness, duct runs should be as short and as straight as possible. Be sure to think about where the vent will terminate on the outside of the house, and keep in mind that venting through or near an eave soffit is not a good idea because the fumes and moisture you're trying to exhaust will just get sucked back into the attic. Also, it's common to try to save space by installing a microwave/range-hood combination, but these units do not vent nearly as well as dedicated range hoods.

CABINETS Before you even order cabinets—and certainly before you install them—assess the existing conditions in the room. Do the floors slope? Do the walls lean? Are the corners square? If the answer is yes to any of these questions, then have a lot of shims on hand, and think hard about where to start installing the cabinets. Countertops are supposed to be level.

If there's no lazy susan in the corner, you'll need filler strips (typically 3 in. on either side) to make sure that drawers will clear the handles on abutting cabinets (or on dishwashers).

Also, make sure that whatever sink you buy will fit inside the sink-base cabinet. It's sometimes possible to notch the sides of an already installed cabinet for a sink that's too wide, but it's no one's first choice.

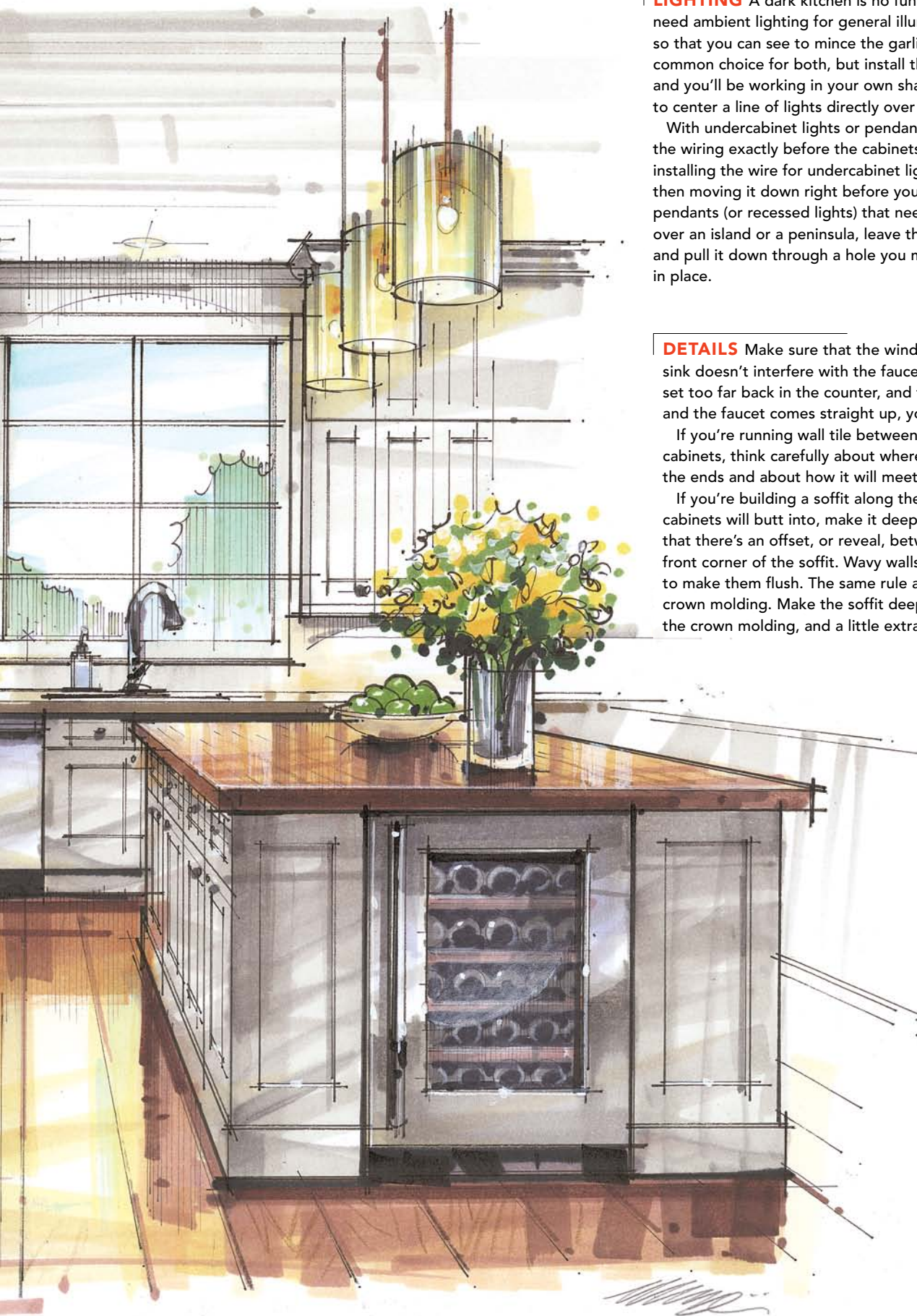
If you're installing a tall pantry cabinet, be sure you have room somewhere to stand it up (which requires a space considerably higher than the cabinet is tall).

FLOORING Don't create a trip hazard with new flooring. If you're switching from vinyl to tile, you may have elevation issues at the doorways into other rooms. Tile also usually needs either another layer of plywood to stiffen the subfloor, or an isolation membrane, such as Schluter's Ditra mat, to prevent cracks.

If you're not changing the existing floor but plan to change the kitchen layout, check that the flooring runs under cabinets and appliances or you'll have a challenging hole to patch.

And whatever you do, don't trap the dishwasher by installing new flooring in front of it. Either run the new flooring into the dishwasher opening, or use plywood that flushes out even with the finished floor. If you're keeping the existing cabinets and countertops in place, make sure you have enough room to get the dishwasher back in.





LIGHTING A dark kitchen is no fun. At a minimum, you'll need ambient lighting for general illumination and task lighting so that you can see to mince the garlic. Recessed lights are a common choice for both, but install them in the wrong location and you'll be working in your own shadow. One rule of thumb is to center a line of lights directly over the countertop nosing.

With undercabinet lights or pendants, it's tough to locate the wiring exactly before the cabinets are installed. Consider installing the wire for undercabinet lights a little high and then moving it down right before you hang the cabinets. For pendants (or recessed lights) that need to be carefully centered over an island or a peninsula, leave the wire up in the joist bay and pull it down through a hole you make after the cabinets are in place.

DETAILS Make sure that the window stool over your kitchen sink doesn't interfere with the faucet installation. If the sink is set too far back in the counter, and the stool overhangs a lot, and the faucet comes straight up, you could be in trouble.

If you're running wall tile between the counter and the upper cabinets, think carefully about where the tile will terminate on the ends and about how it will meet any window trim.

If you're building a soffit along the ceiling that your upper cabinets will butt into, make it deeper than the cabinets so that there's an offset, or reveal, between the cabinets and the front corner of the soffit. Wavy walls will frustrate any attempt to make them flush. The same rule applies if you're installing crown molding. Make the soffit deep enough for the cabinets, the crown molding, and a little extra (at least 1/2 in.).

A TEMPORARY KITCHEN

Living without a working kitchen is a strain, especially if you have kids. Here are some survival tips:

- Set up a temporary kitchen by moving the refrigerator, the microwave, and the toaster oven to another room.
- Cook on your outdoor grill (and don't remodel in the dead of winter if you live in a cold climate).
- Yes, you can wash dishes in the bathtub, but it's no fun. For the sake of sanity, suspend your ecofriendly tendencies just this once and load up on paper plates and plastic utensils.