



Old-World Honesty

A strategic layout and choice materials transform a dated kitchen into a highly functional and social space

BY SUMMER THORNTON

For years, our client Neil had driven past the French Tudor-style house in Bloomington, Illinois, that he now calls home. Its storybook charm wooed him, and he longed to see the interiors. When he had the chance to purchase it, he jumped at the opportunity, only to discover that it hadn't been updated in over 20 years. Far from dissuaded, he brought my firm, Summer Thornton Design, on board to help realize the place's potential.

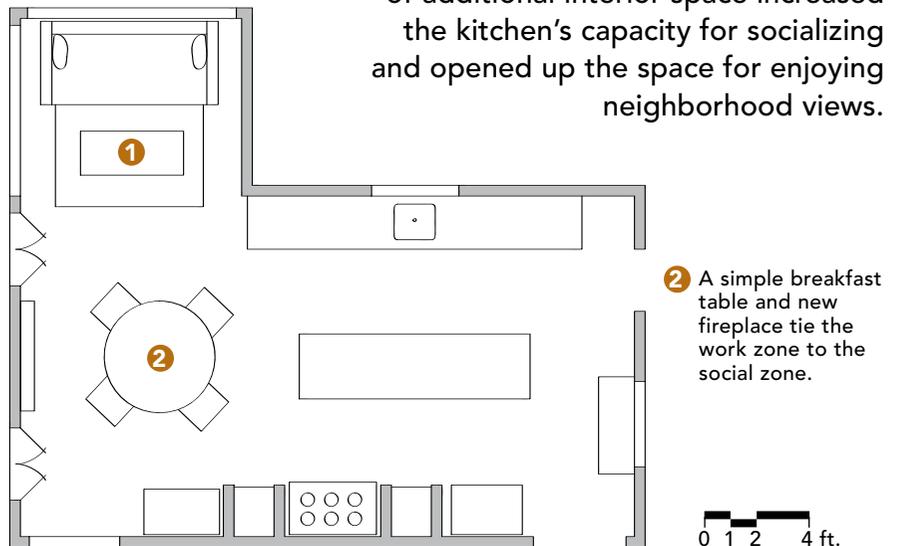
Neil enjoys renovating homes as a hobby. He had done two already, both of which he sold for a profit. But this property was different. Given how long he had fantasized about owning it—and the fact that



- 1 Formerly a screened-in porch, the sitting area offers a comfortable social space rich in natural light.

OUTSIDE IN

Eliminating a screened-in porch in favor of additional interior space increased the kitchen's capacity for socializing and opened up the space for enjoying neighborhood views.



it was to be his forever home—he wanted it to be something special. And the kitchen design was paramount.

Establishing flow

The existing kitchen was dark and closed off, and had an odd butler's-pantry area with no natural light. Plus, in order to get to the screened-in porch or to the backyard, you had to cut through the kitchen. Without some major reworking of the layout, it would feel choppy and tight. We gave a great deal of thought to how to open things up, and ultimately decided to bring the screened-in porch into the house

as conditioned space. We also opted to get rid of the separate pantry altogether, and instead built a custom metal cabinet for storing dry goods and a microwave. Enclosing the porch completely transformed the kitchen—it afforded us the space for a breakfast table and a large fireplace, and now the room is brimming with natural light.

Establishing feel

We used the word “honest” a lot when describing what we wanted to achieve. The new kitchen needed to feel as if it had always been there. If it looked new, we would have failed, so we made sure to incorporate



Added conveniences. Reclaimed wood-plank shelves and a pot filler are among the many strategic design decisions meant to make the kitchen comfortable and functional.

MORE DETAILS

Builder: Nick Uphoff, Uphoff Homes

Cabinets: Custom by Greg Williams, Custom Woodcraft

Hardware, metal shelves, metal cabinet: Custom by Aaron Bladon

Counters: Soapstone

Backsplash: Daltile white subway tile

Flooring: Paris Ceramics antique reclaimed French oak

Sink: Kohler

Faucet: Waterworks

Light fixtures: Vitra Prouve Potence sconce over dining table, Design Within Reach lamp; Waterworks island pendants

Appliances: SubZero fridge; Bosch integrated dishwasher; Best hood insert

Windows & doors: A&S Window Associates, NYC

texture and patina wherever we could. For example, the brass on the cabinetry is not lacquered, which allows it to really wear and feel less pristine. Antique oak floors in a chevron pattern were imported from Paris, which lends the space a feeling of age and character, and the brick detailing around the classic French range enhances the interior architecture while giving the whole room an old-world vibe. The farm-table island with its marble top also adds to the feel.

Because the goal was to create a light and airy space, we went with open shelves rather than upper cabinets. We always map out the storage of items during our drawing phase; we know where every utensil, gadget, pot, and pan will go before we begin building the cabinetry, so we knew Neil would have sufficient storage space in the lower cabinetry.

We wanted to keep the kitchen pendants really clean and simple so as not to distract. Again, the idea was that they should feel honest—not decorative—so the eye can focus on other things. Of course, they

Double doors. Steel framing adds a modern edge to an otherwise old-world vibe created with warm-toned materials.



still provide effective task lighting above the island. We did want to call attention to the fireplace and steel doors, so we used a bolder, more-modern wall sconce to illuminate the breakfast table—its black frame and exposed round bulb visually draw you through the space.

In terms of the color palette, we decided on blacks and grays for their straightforward, masculine quality. A near-monochromatic scheme provides a nice foil for the soapstone countertops, mismatched metals, and handmade goods.

Weighing the elements

Generally speaking, I don't think that any one element should be the focal point in a room. I believe that all the pieces should work together, and the whole should be greater than the sum of its parts. But there are a few things that really helped elevate this space. One of them is the French range framed in painted brick that we also used to adorn the built-in hood and as support partitions for shelving.



Brass touch.
Custom metalwork by Aaron Bladon adds a distinct warm element.



See more photos of this kitchen at FineHomebuilding.com/magazine.

Equally eye-catching are the brass-plated steel angle frames set into the walnut doors and drawers and fastened with countersunk brass screws. The brass was aged using a hand-applied antique patina, and handmade pull hardware complements the assembly.

Though this wasn't a budget-driven project, we always try to approach things with efficiencies in mind without cheapening the look and quality of the final result. We had a millworker build the walnut cabinetry, while Bladon Conner (formerly of Aaron Bladon, now Giant Construction Group) did the metalwork. Dividing up the work this way was more cost effective than hiring one shop to do the whole thing. We also spoke to a few different antique flooring importers to get the best value. And since the backsplash wasn't a focal point, we went with one of the least expensive subway tiles on the market. Finally, it was key to be efficient when it came to the steel windows. We received prices from a handful of different companies, and the range was significant. Neil decided he was okay with single-

pane rather than insulated glass. He knew his utility bill would be higher, but it helped bring down the initial investment.

Arguably, the windows steal the show. They are certainly one of the biggest improvements. Before the remodel, outdoor views from the kitchen were almost completely blocked by the screened-in porch, which had a half-wall and two wing walls. By enclosing the porch and adding all that glass, we were able to flood the kitchen with natural light. The addition of a breakfast area as well as some sofa seating resulted in a modernized layout that enables people to socialize while someone is cooking. Yet we stayed true to the traditional floor plan by keeping a formal dining room, a formal living room, and a den as separate spaces on the main level.

Dated and tight master bath made modern

In terms of square footage and floor plan, few changes were made. The issue was the 1980s finishes—they were in desperate need of



Finish work. The angled ceiling of the master bath is finished with white-oak planks that put craftsmanship on display.

MORE DETAILS

Mirror: Casa Midy

Vanity: Custom steel by Aaron Bladon

Shower enclosure: Custom blued steel

Sconces: Circa Lighting

Shower fixtures: Waterworks

Tile: Daltile subway tile

updating. What made the master bathroom distinctly challenging was the sharp-angled ceiling. Though visually interesting, it gave the room an uncomfortably cramped feel. Initially, we weren't sure how to address the problem. When the contractor tore out the old drywall in order to replace the electrical system, and we saw the exposed structure supporting the slate roof, we were inspired to make the slanted ceiling an architectural feature. A layer of insulation was installed between the finished wood and the roof, but we chose not to mask the angle. Instead, we finished it in white-oak planks, the outside edges of which are mitered for a seamless transition between planes.

Many clients express concern about using wood in bathrooms, but we've found that as long as you properly ventilate the space, it performs just fine. Neil understands that he shouldn't create a heavy-steam environment, and in this case, we added a Can-Fan in the shower, which helps to draw out moisture. We also tiled the entire shower ceiling, using wood only on the outside of the enclosure. Another material that can be challenging in wet conditions is

unpainted steel, but we really wanted steel framing for the shower to emulate the steel casement windows and to complement the slate floor, giving the space a rustic-industrial feel. To do that, we had the steel blued and sealed, as you would a gun barrel, and it has held up exceptionally well.

Totaling the triumphs

Beyond the creation of a highly successful kitchen with old-world appeal and the renovation of an outdated bathroom, this project is special for another reason. The storybook charm that initially drew Neil to the house led to a fairytale ending. A few months after renovations began, he met the sellers' daughter, Jen, and the two began dating. As the project neared completion, they were engaged, then married, and now they have a son, who is being raised in the house in which his mother grew up. □

Summer Thornton is an interior designer in Chicago. Photos by Werner Straube, courtesy of Meredith Corporation.