

The New Kitchen Triangle

BY ANN M. MORRIS

How to accommodate more appliances, more cooks, and more activities

The “work triangle” has been a part of good kitchen design for nearly 50 years. The idea is to arrange your refrigerator, sink, and stove in a triangle, with no leg of the triangle longer than 9 feet or shorter than 4 feet.

This makes for efficient movement as you gather food from the fridge, prepare it at the sink, and cook it at the stove.

But kitchens have changed over the decades. They’re bigger, they hold more appliances, and they’re often at the center of family activities. The challenge is to make sure they’re still good places to cook, which is, after all, what the triangle is designed to do. But where does a second sink fit in to the traditional triangle? Where’s the cooking corner when your oven is in the wall and your stovetop is adrift on an island? And where should the espresso machine go?

The work triangle is still an effective way to think about kitchen layout. But it is important first to figure out the role each of your kitchen’s features plays in the cooking sequence—if it plays a role at all—to determine whether it fits in the triangle or is better left outside.

Inside the basic triangle

The traditional work triangle is built around “centers” anchored by the three major appliances. The sink center is the site of food prep and cleanup, the refrigerator center functions as a place for

WHAT GOES INTO THE TRIANGLE?

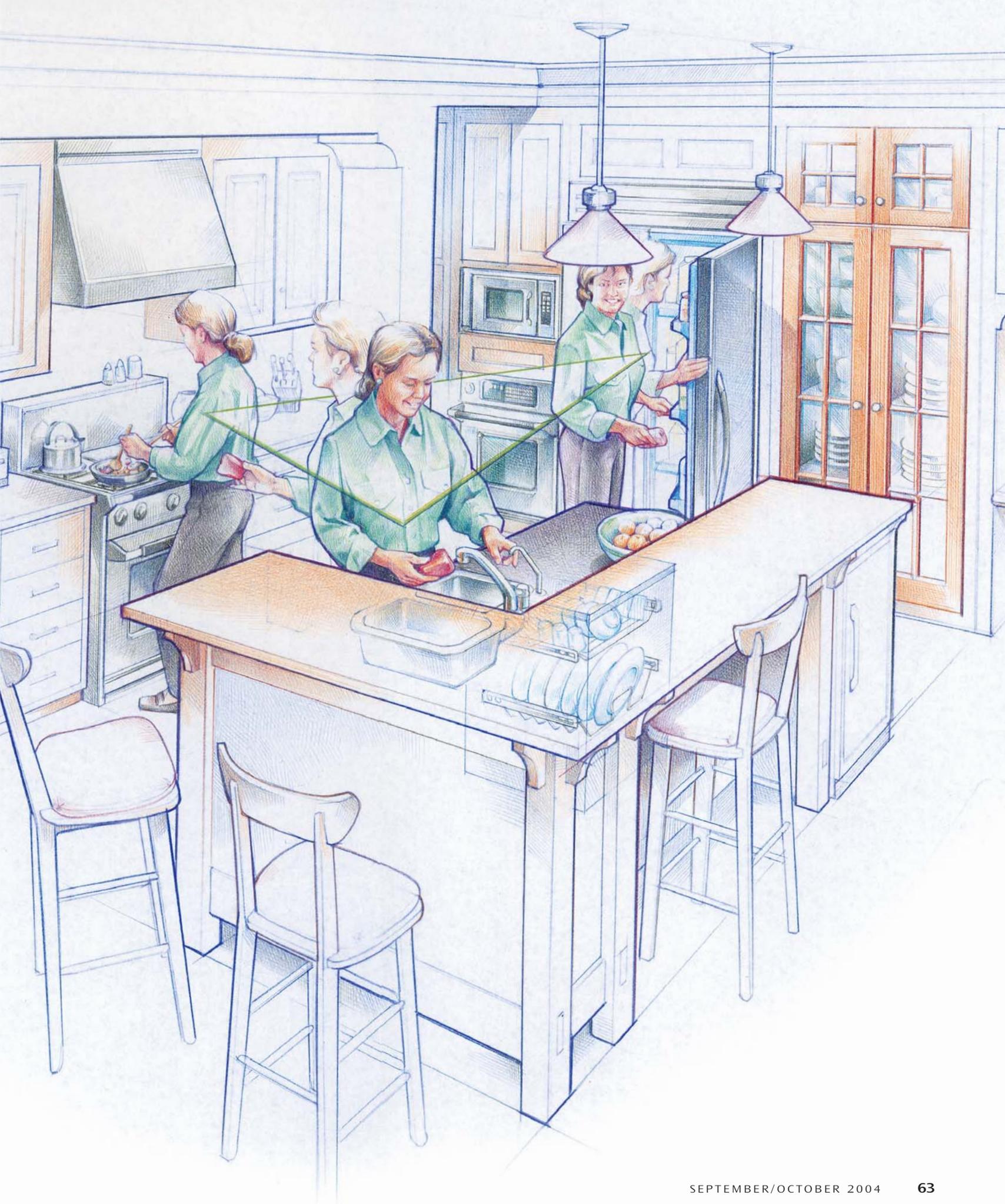


The traditional kitchen triangle consists of an imaginary line connecting the three main areas used in cooking. They include:

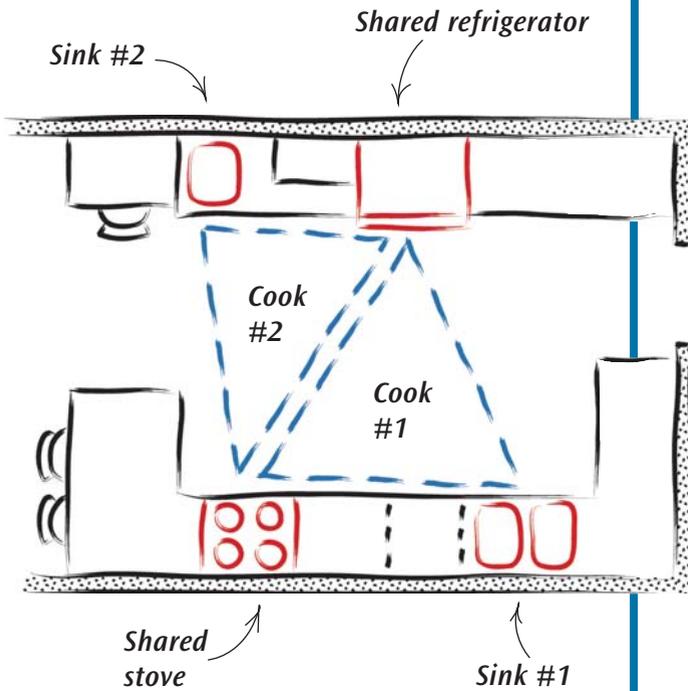
SINK CENTER: Focused around the sink, this combined food preparation and cleanup area also includes the dishwasher and recycling bins.

REFRIGERATOR CENTER: Usually included in the “tall” area of the kitchen, this food storage area may accommodate a microwave oven as well.

COOKING CENTER: Traditionally a unified range, the cooking center today is generally considered to be the stovetop, even if the oven is elsewhere.



Today's kitchen is not only organize one's



TWO COOKS, TWO TRIANGLES

HAVING A PARTNER cook alongside you can be either a joy or a nuisance. To avoid collisions, a two-cook kitchen needs either an expanded triangle or, even better, a double triangle. The National Kitchen and Bath Association generally recommends two adjacent work triangles in a kitchen in which two or more people cook simultaneously. In this configuration, the cooks share one leg of the primary and secondary triangles, but their triangles do not cross, so the cooks can work without bumping into each other. In a small two-cook kitchen, they might share the stove and the refrigerator but have two sinks.

Adding not only a second sink but an additional cooking station for the second cook—for instance, a two-burner cooktop on an island—is ideal. This arrangement is easier with today's separate down-draft cooking elements, which can be placed almost anywhere. That way, each cook gets his or her own sink and cooktop and shares the refrigerator. This also helps minimize the size of each triangle in a very large kitchen, so that neither cook is running from one end of the kitchen to the other.

food storage, and the cooking center is, of course, where you heat, sauté, grill, and fry. Thinking of each center as a place with a specific function rather than simply an appliance makes it easier to adapt the concept to today's kitchen. These days, even the most basic kitchens consist of more than a sink, stove, and refrigerator. Most of us have a microwave and a dishwasher and recycling to be collected. When you keep function in mind, these and other add-ons can usually fit easily into the traditional triangle's centers.

Separate cooking appliances, where the cooktop is in one place and the oven (or ovens) somewhere else, can confuse the triangle concept, which is based on the idea that a kitchen's cooking area consists of a single, unified range. But generally, the cooktop—because it is used more often and more actively than the oven—is considered the primary cooking center and is the appliance included in the basic triangle. The oven, then, is free to be placed anywhere. One good solution is to place it so that it forms its own triangle with the sink and the refrigerator. Or, for aesthetic and practical reasons, you might stack ovens near the refrigerator, keeping “tall” features together. A **warming drawer** can be placed in either the cooking center or outside the general triangle, where it would be convenient for serving.

Microwaves, because of their frequency of use, should also be part of the work triangle. While their function—and many manufacturers—might suggest microwaves belong in the cooking center, I often place them with the refrigerator. This makes sense when you consider that most microwaves are used to reheat or defrost food taken from the refrigerator and freezer.

An extra sink is an ideal addition for almost any kitchen. Because it plays a dual role as a site for both food preparation and cleanup, the sink is often considered the central point in the traditional triangle. The question of where to fit a second sink can be answered by considering what role that sink will play. In a one-cook kitchen, the extra sink can be an asset in or near the cooking center for filling and draining pots, but it can also be positioned as a separate work center used exclusively for cleanup or food preparation. In this case, placing it in a secondary triangle with the cooking center and refrigerator—an approach you might use in designing for two cooks—can help keep the work space cohesive. An island, if you have one, is one of the best places for a second sink. A natural add-on to any sink center is your **recycling bin**. You rinse your recyclables, then toss them into their bin.

a place to cook but also a place to entertain, day, and communicate with family members.

Under-counter refrigeration is a growing trend, and with a wide array of cooling drawers and refrigerators as small as 18 inches wide, you can scatter cooling components around your kitchen. Again, where these extra appliances fit into your work flow is best determined by what's inside: a component that holds basics used in cooking—milk, eggs, butter—can be integrated into the triangle, but one used for soda, juices, and snacks is better placed out of the cook's way. If I'm designing a large kitchen, I find it ideal to place under-counter refrigeration in an island. There, if used primarily for cooking ingredients, it's usually within easy reach and forms a sort of mini-triangle with the stove and sink. If it's used for snacks and beverages, it can be incorporated into the side of an island that is also used as a social center.

Pantries and storage areas that keep staples close at hand are important to a good work flow. Many kitchen plans now include floor-to-ceiling storage cabinetry. One of the best places to put tall storage is right next to the refrigerator. Not only does it work aesthetically (keeping tall objects together) but its function (food storage) is the same as that of the refrigerator. Consolidating food storage here also saves steps when unpacking groceries.

Dishwashers, for reasons of practicality and plumbing, are nearly always located beside the sink and are generally considered part of the cleanup center. Auxiliary dishwashers or dishwasher drawers are usually paired with an additional sink.

TIP: CONTROL THE COST OF REARRANGING

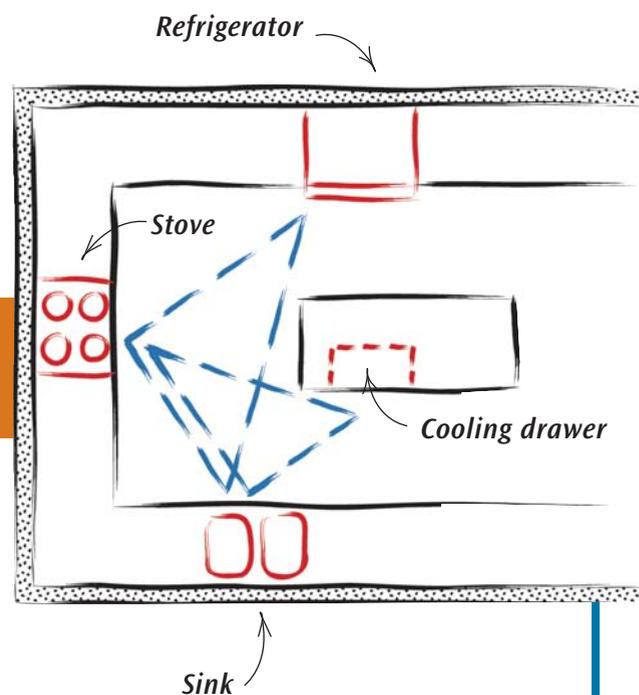
If your present triangle isn't working, your most economical option may be to move the electrical components—the refrigerator or an electric range if you have one. It's costly to move plumbing and even costlier to move a gas line.

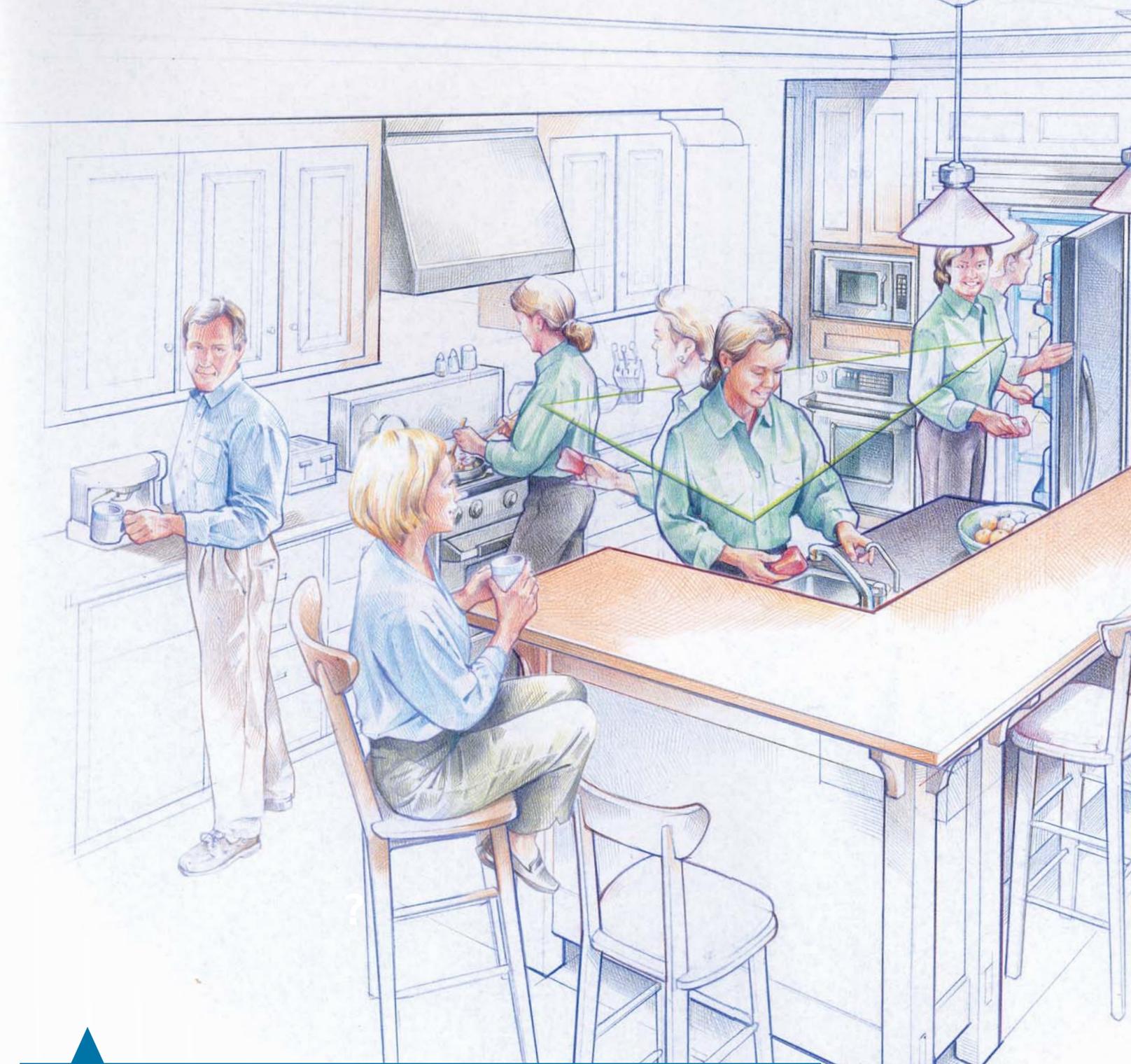
SHORTENING THE TRIANGLE



SAVE STEPS by adding an under-counter refrigerator, a second oven, or an extra sink. This addition can create a mini-triangle that allows you to work more efficiently. In this illustration, a cooling drawer set in an island brings additional food storage a bit closer to both

the sink and the stove. This is especially helpful in a large kitchen, where the distance between points is especially long. Other forms of supplementary refrigeration, such as a wine cooler, should be set outside the triangle, where they won't be in the way.





WHAT GOES OUTSIDE THE TRIANGLE?

Keeping activities unrelated to food preparation outside the triangle is one way to maintain order in a kitchen that is not only a place to cook but also a place to socialize, entertain, and perform household tasks. Here are the areas that are best kept outside the triangle:

WINE COOLERS AND COFFEE CENTERS create constant traffic, and therefore are best placed

where those traffic patterns won't intersect the triangle.

A COMPUTER OR DESK for doing homework or keeping household records is handy in the kitchen, but best kept away from food preparation areas.

SEATING FOR GUESTS should be placed close enough so that the cook can carry on a conversation, but not so close that visitors are in the way.



MY PERFECT TRIANGLE

I find the kitchen triangle works best in a U-shaped space, where the cook is surrounded on three sides with continuous countertop and storage areas and where the basic appliances are balanced around the triangle. This, to me, makes an ideal one-cook kitchen. —A.M.

Thinking outside the triangle

Today's kitchen is truly the heart of the home and functions not only as a place to cook and eat but also as a place to entertain, organize one's day, and chat with other members of the family. But incorporating all these uses into one room can easily invoke chaos, especially when hot pans and sharp knives are part of the traffic. Recognizing that some appliances and work stations should be placed outside the triangle is as important for a smoothly functioning kitchen as knowing which appliances to include. Here are a few suggestions:

A home office center with space for the telephone, computer, and household records is important in a home and often most conveniently located in the kitchen. It should not, however, be allowed to interfere with the primary function of the kitchen, which is cooking. It's common sense to keep computers and paperwork away from the cooking and food-prep areas. If I can't find an out-of-the-way space, I put the desk near the refrigerator. The most important thing is that it doesn't obstruct the triangle.

Wine coolers and coffee centers are extremely popular in kitchens, a result of this room's becoming as much a place to socialize as a place to cook. Having a coffee station in your kitchen is a real conversation piece. And most espresso machines are attractively styled, easy to use, and make delicious coffee. But because a coffee station has less to do with food preparation than enjoying one another's company, it's not necessary—or even recommended—to confine it within the triangle area. It's best, if possible, to place it within easy reach of where your guests sit and socialize. If that's not possible, one logical place in a small kitchen is the tall area near the refrigerator, where the coffee station can be stacked with a warming drawer for cups as well as be in easy reach of milk.

Televisions are often found in kitchens, and they should be placed so that they're easy to see. TV technology makes it possible to fit them almost anywhere. One option is a flip-down TV attached under the wall cabinet. For a conventional model, a good place is the tall area near the refrigerator. Occasionally I will put a small TV in a wall cabinet above a microwave; in this case, it's important to put a metal plate between the two to block interference.

Socializing space is as important in today's kitchen as room to clean up or cook. A casual furniture setting or additional seating area so family members and friends can visit with the cook should be placed outside the triangle but close enough that the cook is part of the conversation. Remember, it's easy enough to invite guests into the triangle—if they're willing to help. 

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