A small space demands creative planning in order to best meet the most important needs of the clients and their family. I believe such attention to detail is the foundation of designing such kitchens. While I’ve addressed this in two previous stories over the past six years, the topic remains a timely one in 2012.

In designing a small kitchen, it’s important to establish the client’s priority list. Here’s a starting-point strategy for identifying the “must have/would like to have” items:

- First, define everything that’s on their “wish list.”
- Next, work with the clients to prioritize everything on that “wish list.”
- Finally, identify possible “trade-offs” – making sure everyone agrees on “I would give up that, if I could have this.”

Equally important is the need to understand how the family cooks in the kitchen and lives around the kitchen space. Such a focus on the family and the way they cook, dine and live is still step number one when I am designing a small kitchen space for a client who dreams of living in a great gathering and cooking room.

Next, it’s important to consider whether it’s possible or desirable to expand into floor space adjacent to the defined kitchen space. This also remains a key “first step” when laying out a small – and smart – kitchen. Expanding into other spaces is a “big idea.” For example:

A separate laundry room with side-by-side equipment can be reconfigured or combined into the kitchen. The concept of one large living center that includes entertaining, dining, snacking, computing, laundry, hobbies and cooking is the new norm. Front loading laundry equipment can free-up space for more counter lengths or pantry shelves. Stacked laundry equipment can provide an area for special purpose appliances not associated with laundry: a wine storage appliance, for example, or a second refrigerator/freezer. Rather than isolating this hard-working, functional area — including it along the perimeter of the kitchen space means a kitchen countertop, and even a kitchen sink, can do “double-duty” as the laundry facility as needed.

Creating more space can also be made possible by better managing passageway doors. Substituting traditional swing doors with bi-fold doors, doors that slide along the outside of a wall or pocket doors takes up less floor space and does not block work/storage centers.
Relocating some kitchen storage into a furniture piece in an adjacent room makes sense. I have often thought a dining room could become the pantry/laundry room/desk with a wall of built-in cabinetry behind an elegant table. It’s an avant garde idea, but one that might work in a small space.

Another great way to “steal” space from other areas is to rethink the concept of a table and chairs as the dining area preference. A straight wall or L-shaped banquette with a table and several traditional chairs saves a huge amount of walkway space. For the family that really wants a table – try attaching it to a kitchen counter area (see photo and floor plan at right).

I’ve been on the look-out for great new examples of small, smart kitchens to share with you, my colleagues, in 2012. Here are some great ideas.

First off, be ready to rethink the appliances: not only what they look like, but what they do and where they might be located.

In Christine Nelson’s kitchen (see floor plans, Page 42), the plan of the original kitchen certainly presented a challenge. Although there was an inviting 42”-high pass-thru into the adjacent dining area, the cooking center was across from the primary work space, with a tight walkway separating the edge of the countertop and refrigerator. A pantry was limited in its usefulness because of a nearby radiator. The kitchen was so small – barely one person could stand in the room.

The solution is a great one! The designer moved the refrigerator out of the formal kitchen and into the pantry area. She convinced her client to invest in relocating the radiator so that pantry space was not lost – it is now located in a “mid-height” cabinet. The French door refrigerator was a wise choice: Someone can move behind another person when the appliance door is open.

I am impressed with Christine’s decision to reduce the depth of the base cabinets on the left hand leg, which allowed the dishwasher to be immediately adjacent to the apron sink.

All the prep, cooking and food preservation now takes place safely away from a primary walk space. Opening up the kitchen to the adjacent living area and planning an island on castors (so it can be moved out of the way during large gatherings) finished off the room nicely.

This tiny kitchen was challenged with four doorways and a large window, and clients who would not give up their ‘breakfast table.’ The designer creatively attached a table to the back of a small island. The overall visual space feels large because the angled range and hood in the corner allow counter space to stretch along each of the remaining adjacent surfaces.

Kitchen Design by Kathleen Donohue, CMKBD, Neil Kelly Designers/Remodelers
In another smart, small kitchen project (see photos at bottom right), designer Marie Lail-Blackburn took a fresh approach to the ventilation system. A major request of the client was to be able to visually "open up" the space between the kitchen and dining area. In the existing room, a very awkward over-the-range microwave interfered with the open space between the kitchen and the dining area.

Marie installed an island hood over the range in this "non-island" kitchen. It made a huge impact on the look and feel—as well as the function—of this kitchen. The negative space on each side of the island hood dramatically increases the sophistication of the plan and the feeling of openness. A floating shelf added under the sink wall cabinet allows the client to have a sink run full-height cabinet that then gracefully transitions to the stepped-up peninsula units on each side of the hood.

In this design, Lail-Blackburn opted to move the dishwasher away from the sink so the two corners could provide much better storage. Building the microwave into the wall cabinets adjacent to the refrigerator provides a much safer installation for the cook.

**CHANGE THE COUNTERTOP FORMS**

To maximize a kitchen's efficiency, consider changing the shape and form of countertops so they serve a specific task, rather than simply being a continuous run.

Kathleen Donohue of the Neil Kelly Company created a wonderful kitchen in a tight space by stretching the kitchen into an adjacent room (see photo, Page 41). She used a mid-height cabinet to serve as the pantry and the enclosure for the multi-tasking microwave/convection/broil oven. In the before plan, the large pantry cabinet dramatically limited the "socialization" aspect of this kitchen. In the new design, the reduced height cabinet helps the two spaces flow together beautifully.

The designer shifted the kitchen and the eating counter into the living area. She minimized the eating counter overhang (a very acceptable "trade-off" for the client) so that her solution did not compromise furniture placement. She also added a second sink and a wine area—a special item coveted by the homeowner.

A kitchen designed by Joseph Irons, CGR, GMD, CAPS, CGP, Terence Tung, COD, and Wendy Albee of Irons Brothers Construction Inc. (see floor plans, Page 44) offers an excellent example of creatively managing a small space. The design team carved out new storage areas and included an unexpected eating counter, as well as planned a dramatic cooking area.

The existing plan was one of those tiny U-shapes again, with a lot of floor space being devoted to a table. The solution included a curved counter with seating for two at the end of the sink run, which then freed up a 9'+ wall. This wall now houses the tall appliances.

When tall items are "ganged" together, the room will have an open feel to it. The designers...
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placed two ceiling-to-counter cabinets at the end of the opposite cabinet runs, and then installed a recessed shallow cabinet along the back wall. In effect, they transformed the U-shaped kitchen into a corridor kitchen that functions much better than the old plan.

The client dreamed of a dramatic commercial-looking cooking area, and the designers delivered. Above the special range is an oversized curved hood. The curved shape of the range hood is then echoed in the curved decorative tile backsplash. Utensils, spices and extra shelf space are all planned at the wall below the hood. An “island-type” pot rack finishes off the space on one side of the hood.

Additionally, it’s always a good idea to seek out small ways to make the design solution very personal for the client. I recently had the pleasure of judging a design competition for Mid-Continent Cabinetry, and was impressed with some of the award-winning kitchen solutions (see example below and on Page 40).

**ELIMINATE CLUTTER TO ADD SPACE**

As you explain your solution to the client, share the following storage guidelines with them. Remember, if the clients “declutter” the space as they are packing up the old kitchen, the new one will have much more “new” storage space. Below are some storage guidelines to share with them:

1. **Tell your clients that storage guidelines are based on three basic tenets:**
   - Store at the center of use
   - Keep all supplies clearly visible.
   - Keep all supplies easily accessible.

2. **To accomplish this, suggest they consider the following guidelines when deciding where to store things.**
   - Store items at the first or last place of use.
   - Store items in multiple locations if used for different tasks.
   - Items used together should be stored together.
   - Stored items should be easy to locate at a glance.
   - Like articles should be stored or grouped together.
   - Frequently used items should be stored within easy reach. (Easy reach is normally defined as between eye level and hip level at the front of the cabinet’s shelf, or placed anywhere within the confines of a pull-out or roll-out shelf. Items should be easy to grasp at point of storage.
   - Items should be easily removed without removing other items first.
   - Heavy equipment should be at, or near floor level.

3. **Help the clients “declutter” by encouraging them to use all shelf/drawer space for utmost efficiency by prioritizing items according to frequency of use.** Most frequently used things get the best location. And if something is not used frequently? An important question is, “Should everything be returned to the new room?” A “one year test” is a good rule of thumb – if an item has not been used in one year, perhaps it should be repurposed or given away rather than stored in a valuable location.

Small kitchens need not be simple, boring or inadequate! They can be great spaces if you look for “found space” outside the perimeter of the kitchen, rethink the appliances’ specifications and/or placement, and reshape your countertop sections.

While the decorative hood might be considered the artistic focal point in this award-winning kitchen, the raised seating area is a very special – and personal – creation for the homeowners. It serves double-duty: shielding the sink area from view, as well as providing a ‘hang-out’ counter. This double-angled corridor kitchen is nicely scaled in that this raised counter does not continue the entire length of the island section.
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