

boston.com

Home /Globe /Boston Globe Sunday
Magazine

Designing

Necessary Ingredients

Those dreamy kitchens you see in ads and on TV may look good, but are they functional? An architect shares tips for a successful renovation.



(Illustration by Isabelle Cardinal)

By Leah Greenwald

January 11, 2009

The magazine cover shows a gorgeous room -- a huge kitchen with enormous windows over the double sink, tasteful slate countertops, a copper pot rack hanging over an island cooktop, open shelves stacked with choice crockery. The wall cabinets have gleaming glass doors. Some people look at it and think, "I wish it could be mine." I look at it and think, "Thank heaven it's not mine."

As an architect who cooks regularly for my family of five, I'm always interested in lavishly illustrated "dream" kitchens. They're beautiful, flooded with daylight, and fitted with the latest appliances -- but too many of them just don't work. Of course, if you get take-out on the nights that you don't dine out, the following observations may not be important. But if you actually cook and clean up afterward, the kitchen layout and product choices are important.

Here's how to avoid some common mistakes I've seen:

1.) Resist installing too many open shelves. Such storage may make the kitchen seem more serious (like a restaurant kitchen), more informal (colorful cans and whimsically shaped pasta on display), or more personal (a place for cherished and handsome serving pieces), but the dust that accumulates on open shelves is not regular dust. It is dust kept in place by particles of grease, a side effect of stir-frying (even when using a hood). Solution Limit your open shelving, and try to place it far away from the active cooking area.

2.) Stick with the shine. Countertops are losing their polish as more home renovators opt for those with a subtle honed finish. The result is a more natural look, but it also makes it easier to see every spilled grain of salt. Even after you clean a honed top, you can still see a few flecks of something you missed, plus streaks from wiping it. A polished finish is more forgiving. Solution Bring home a sample piece of the countertop you have chosen. In bright light, sprinkle it liberally with flour, salt, pepper, wine, oil, and tomato paste. Wipe (don't scrub) it, and make sure you like the result.

3.) Remember: Solid cabinet doors exist for a reason. Everyone loves glass doors in the kitchen. They add lightness and texture, but you aren't going to want to look at a jumble of sippy cups, cereal boxes, and cat-food cans, even through textured glass. Solution Make an inventory of the kitchen items you want to display, and get glass doors only for the cabinets that will showcase those things.

4.) Don't dis the dishwasher. In many homes, the dishwasher (like the one

shown above) isn't in the right place; it should always be positioned next to the sink. Another mistake: Siting dishwashers so that clean dishes can't be put away until you place them on a counter, then close the dishwasher door, so that you can stand close enough to the cabinet to put the dishes away, or siting the dishwasher so that you must go back and forth to a distant cabinet to stow the dishes. Solution Locate the dish cabinet near (not above) the dishwasher, and make sure it is placed so you can reach that cabinet easily when the dishwasher door is open.

5.) Skip the island cooktop. You love the idea of cooking on your island cooktop while you chat with guests seated opposite -- but after you make those sauteed carrots with ginger, you notice a fine haze of grease on everything within 48 inches of the burners, including the pans hanging from the copper rack. Hot vapors like to rise; they don't usually cooperate with a down-draft vent unless it's strong enough to pull your apron strings. An overhead hood at an island does a somewhat better job if it's low enough, but then it might block your view. (Wall hoods work best, because they don't have to fight the crosscurrents of air at an island.) Solution If you stir-fry or saute often, the hood should be over your cooktop, preferably against a wall.

6.) Think sink. To drain a pot of boiling pasta, you shouldn't have to walk far from the stove to the sink. Children and dogs like to tag along when you're cooking, so it's safest to keep those hot spots close together. Make sure your layout keeps casual kitchen traffic from crossing critical pathways. Solution Try connecting the stove and sink with a small run of counter, straight or L-shaped, over which you can hold a hot pot if you want to avoid carrying it over the floor.

7.) Make sure your new sink isn't too small to soak your largest pots and pans. This problem is more likely with a double sink -- two identically sized side-by-side sinks, neither big enough to soak the broiler pan. Solution Measure the inside of a sink before you buy it; make sure it's a comfortable depth and at least 20 inches from side to side (more if you have a giant turkey roaster).

Architect Leah Greenwald is working on a book about kitchen design. Send comments to designing@globe.com. ■

© Copyright 2009 Globe Newspaper Company.



Designing

Those dreamy kitchens you see in ads and on TV may look good, but are they functional? An architect shares tips for a successful renovation.

The magazine cover shows a gorgeous room -- a huge kitchen with enormous windows over the double sink, tasteful slate countertops, a copper pot rack hanging over an island cooktop, open shelves stacked with choice crockery. The wall cabinets have gleaming glass doors. Some people look at it and think, "I wish it could be mine." I look at it ...

READER COMMENTS (15)

“ Common sense in kitchen design! So rare. Kudos to Leah Greenwald.

by

housekeeper

January 11,

8:50 AM

“ My recollection of kitchen design is that the sink, stove, and refrigerator should be configured in a close triangle. In both the illustration and text, there was no mention of refrigerator placement, however, there are many good points raised in the article.

by

deardushka

January 11,

9:43 AM

“ Also, stainless steel appliances can be difficult to clean compared to enamel.

by

joshbear

January

11, 3:12

PM

“ Great article! It's wise to consider how easy the kitchen will be to clean before you build it, especially how to contain the spread of greasy vapors from frying and grilling. A clean, simple kitchen is always more appealing than one that's ultra-fancy but grungy. And as this article also shows, size isn't everything. Working in a kitchen that's too big can be even more inconvenient and tiring than one that's very small.

I would add a warning about those trendy professional stoves. Many professional cooks say that the average home cook can't deal with all that heat and power. If you're smitten by the prestige of such a stove (and plan to use it rather than keep it as a showpiece while you microwave takeout) be sure you learn how to handle it. Or hope your family learns to like blackened food.

by **Ms-**

Demeanor

January 11,

4:16 PM

“ Good recommendations! I'm leery tho of shiny countertops since 'stuff happens' and an area that loses it's shine or gets scratched will stick out like a sore thumb. We installed a slightly textured black (with tiny white spots) Formica countertop and it has kept it's stunning appearance for 5 years with lots of daily usage. Very inexpensive.

Hint: If you have older wood cabinets, re-face them with Formica - outstanding appearance, simple to keep clean, and so cheap to install... 25 cabinets cost us around \$500 and it made the kitchen look like new! Just cut and glue, but we had a contractor do the work. Modern handles were bought on eBay at a bargain, too.

And for flooring, may I suggest Pergo or another quality 'wood' laminate? We've had ours for 8 years and it still looks brand new.

by

chefjeff100

January 11,

5:16 PM

“ Strongly agree with deardushka, above, who refers to the "working triangle" where the total length of the three legs does not exceed 24', between the refrigerator, sink and stove or cook top. Following this basic rule forces the designer to keep it real.

by

triguy08

January

11, 5:21

PM

“ Strongly agree with deardushka, above, who refers to the "working triangle" where the total length of the three legs does not exceed 24', between the refrigerator, sink and stove or cook top. Following this basic rule forces the designer to keep it real.

by

triguy08

January

11, 5:21

PM

“ Great advice on the sink. I bought the largest one I could get. I can fit my roasting pans, cookie sheets and my oven racks to clean.

I never understood the point behind a divided sink. I thought those dated back to the old days before dishwashers when one sink was used for drying dishes - but in my opinion it's a waste of space.

by

**red-
mama**

January

11,

6:47

PM

“ I am the proud and pleased owner of a Leah-designed kitchen. As home owners, we got what was important to use. I want to add some of her less generic recommendations:
First, as collectors of a gazillion refridgerator magnants we were horrified to learn that they don't stick to stainless steel refridgerators. Solution: Leah spec'ed a metal door to the garage! Brilliant! We were delighted (and yes, I know not many of you would have had the same priority, but fess, up, a few of you out there would be lost without your memories.
Another wonderfully practical thing, was to spec a desk with drawers underneath. We never sit at the desk, but need the surface. Again, Voila! More space, more function, no compromise.

by

SusanWestofBoston

January 11, 8:52 PM

“ Don't know if it's done to post on one's own article, but thank you for all your interesting and useful comments. When figuring out what (and what not) to do when designing a kitchen, try to consider all sorts of specifics: methods of cooking, frequency of shopping, where groceries come into the house and where garbage and recycling go out, height and number of users, kids, pets, plants, etc, etc. There's no single perfect kitchen layout or guideline, but rather a good match between a particular set of needs and a particular kitchen.

In response to one comment: shiny plastic laminate is certainly not good for a kitchen counter, while matte or patterned laminate (Formica is one brand)can be a good and affordable choice-- if you can be careful about too much water exposure at the seams. And while cost is certainly a factor, shiny granite probably won't scratch unless you do it with a diamond. Granite that has a pattern will show fewer crumbs than a monochromatic stone.

by

ArchLeah

January 11,
8:58 PM

“ Can you make prize winning noodle kugel in one of your kitchens?
Seriously, interesting ideas presented here, they make such good sense.

by

ThreeLeaves

January 11,
10:39 PM

“ Thank you thank you thank you for addressing what I have always wondered about in the beautiful kitchens I see in the magazines! My pet peeve, aside from the lack of the aforementioned work triangle, are islands that shows no signs of either dirty dishes or actual food preparation--not to mention the frequent lack of food prep area near the stove itself.

As for countertops, we put a beveled edge in a slightly darker color on our formica countertops, which got around the seam problem--granted not as stylish as granite etc. but it worked with our budget at the time and still looks good, even though not the style of the moment.

by

acsd

January

11,

11:02

PM

“ Wow! An architect that understands how a kitchen works!

One thing I do wish was mentioned was the safety issue of cooktops/ranges in islands or peninsulas. That grease that splattered all over everything will also splatter onto anyone sitting across from or next to the cooktop/range. Additionally, someone will eventually reach over that cooktop/range and risk scalding or burning or even catching on fire that piece of artwork your child is so proud of as s/he reaches across to show it to you....

Overall, a wonderfully useful (and needed) piece!

by

TKOer

January

12,

12:56

AM

“ What a great article. My kitchen, which was redone by the previous owner, has every single layout problem mentioned as well as a few others. For example, the refrigerator door opens against a wall. Ever tried getting things in and out of a fridge that only opens 90 degrees? Oy. He was a contractor, and did the work himself as well as planning the design. You can tell that he had NO idea how a kitchen works.

I do give him credit for choosing a patterned formica for the counters which shows nothing no matter how dirty they are.

Nice to see an article about kitchen design that focuses on the practical, instead of the latest expensive toy or hippest design choice.

by

MJ927

January

12,

10:03

AM

“ Great tips! The only thing missing was a companion picture showing a kitchen done the right way.

by

woobiewoo

January 14,

7:51 AM