



## Personality Change

An outmoded kitchen gets a remodel that's in sync with the house's style

**T**he Montclair, New Jersey, real estate listing was calculated to seduce: "1924 Eng.-style Tudor, on prime lot. 6 BRs. 'G.E. Dream Kitchen.'" Intrigued, Karen and Jace Wagner drove over to investigate. The couple, both from the area, had been looking for just such a house, a place where they could raise a family. Like many listings, though, this one hid the facts behind a haiku of hype. The worn, narrow kitchen, which had been designed and fitted out by General Electric in the 1950s, did exemplify the modern efficiency that American women craved—back then. In addition, "everything, including the appliances, was painted robin's egg blue," says Karen, who loves to cook. Though the Wagners' initial impulse, she adds, was "to play up the room's retro, kitschy charm," they soon abandoned the idea. For one thing, Karen found out she was pregnant with twins and realized she and Jace would need a larger space in which to prepare and eat meals with their kids. For another, the '50s elements in the kitchen clashed with the Tudor details in the rest of the house.



The blue metal cabinetry aside, the walls were covered with tile-patterned paper; the ceiling was dropped acoustical tile; and the flooring was dismal speckled linoleum. As a final flourish, there was knotty-pine wainscoting on the wall opposite the cabinets and sink, where a rickety dinette set still reigned. "It was a period piece," says *This Old House* host Steve Thomas, "but not worth saving."

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### PROBLEM

"The major obstacle to a redesign was structural, not cosmetic," Montclair designer Sally Ross says. Across from the range, G.E. had run a chase to carry wiring and pipes, creating a niche for the



*The 1950s kitchen (BEFORE, LEFT) sang a tired rhapsody in blue. After unsuccessfully trying to sell the cabinets to a film company, the Wagners gave them to Karen's dad, who uses them in his garage to store car parts. AFTER, ABOVE: With its recessed-door cabinetry and open shelving, the updated room feels more stylistically in tune with the 1924 house.*



*Removal of a chase that housed wiring liberated one end of the kitchen for an L-shaped built-in banquette and a mahogany table. Ross laminated the seat cushions to resist the spills that come with feeding two rambunctious 4-year-olds.*

fridge; they tucked a pantry behind them. The arrangement took up a lot of room. "Back then, a niche was helpful for camouflaging a big ugly fridge," says Steve, "but these days, fridges are so good-looking, most people want to see them."

The other big issue concerned traffic flow at one end of the kitchen, where there were opposing entrances: to a mudroom on one side and up a couple of steps to the living room on the other. Doors opened from both into the kitchen, crowding the space and partially obscuring a window—one of three that brought light into the room.

### SOLUTION

A tour of the basement convinced Ross that she could demolish the pantry and chase and reroute the utilities down there; in so doing, she freed up a 5-by-7-foot nook for dining. Although the kitchen was 15 feet wide and 17 feet long, G.E. had concentrated all the cabinetry above and below the sink counter. So next to the eating area, Ross added a second bank of cabinets, plus the fridge and microwave. Tearing out the acoustical tiles pulled the ceil-

STEVE THOMAS PHOTO: KOLIN SMITH

ing up six inches; rather than run soffits over the cabinets, Ross filled in the gaps with double-wide cornice molding that matches trim elsewhere in the house.

The pathway between the mudroom and living room could not be physically widened without interfering with the main work zone. So instead, Ross removed both doors and bumped out the window wall to fashion an 8-foot-long, 18-inch-deep box bay with built-in bench seating. She also added a small peninsula to define the pathway and provide added work space. The bay offers several benefits: The enlarged window units augment natural light (on dull days, recessed mini halogen lights along the top of the bay provide illumination). The seating in the alcove invites people to hang out with the cook. It also provides a convenient drop-off spot for groceries.

When she's cooking, Karen appreciates having pots and utensils out in the open, within reach. One Ross design hallmark is to combine ledges for spices and condiments with open shelves and hooks used to store pans next to the range. "That way, what I need is right in my line of sight," Karen says. Though she had envisioned an eight-burner professional-style cookstove, Ross persuaded her to go with a smaller, six-burner dual-fuel model with a larger oven to maximize her cabinet space.

Materials for countertops vary according to function. Naturally heat-resistant green slate extends to the left of the range. All other counters (and matching 8-inch-

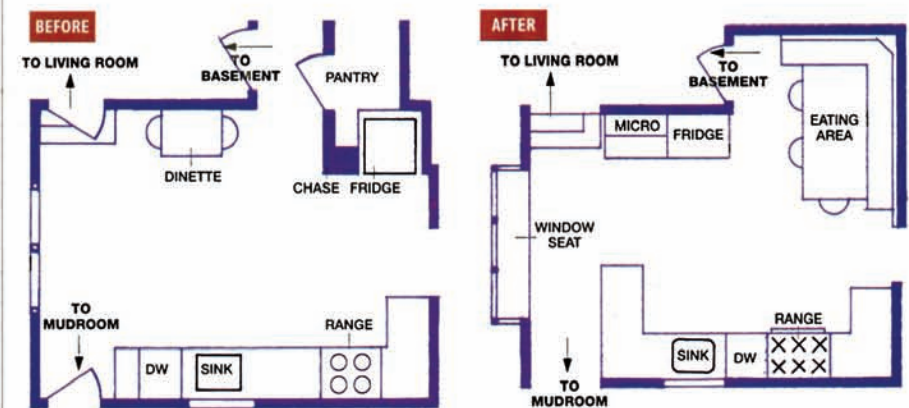
high backsplashes) are mahogany, sealed with marine varnish, which has a warm look and holds up well to liquid spills. "It's a popular material for bars and boats, after all," says Steve. "But," he cautions, "before installing the sink, I'd ensure a watertight seal by covering all exposed surfaces—including the cutout for the sink—with a coat of boatbuilder's epoxy, topped with two coats of urethane."

To minimize cleanup around the sink area, Ross set in a deep stainless-steel bowl with an integral drainboard. "It works like a countertop," Ross says. "Karen can cut melons or pour the kids' juice there without worrying about splashes and drips."

### FINISHING TOUCHES

One concession to vintage styling is Ross's choice of flooring: linoleum tiles set in a checkerboard pattern. The gray-blue-and-ivory floor echoes the soft hues on the walls and cabinets, including a shallow display unit she modeled after an antique Welsh dresser to showcase heirloom china. Schoolhouse-style pendant lights complement a wrought-iron chandelier over the dining banquette.

Karen and Jace were so pleased with their kitchen renovation that they invited Ross to undertake other remodeling projects in their home. The design gets Steve's seal of approval, too. "It's simple and straightforward, it suits the house, and the materials are robust and serviceable. It's a kitchen that will last—and work well—for years." ■



*The former 15-by-17-foot kitchen concentrated the work space along the sink wall, with the fridge in a niche across the way. In the upgrade, cabinets above and below the fridge and microwave were added, as well as a small peninsula near the entrance into the mudroom.*