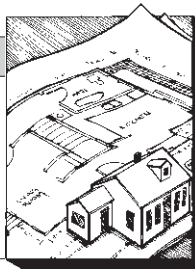


Kitchen Squeeze Play

by Gordon Tully



Kitchen remodelling problems are often solved by combining spaces or by extending sunspaces into the backyard. But there are many times when such tricks are impossible, and extra ingenuity is called for. Careful design and attention to small details really pays off in getting the most out of a small space.

One example is a kitchen we did about 10 years ago in a historic southern farmhouse. Like many large 8th-century houses, the symmetrical main building was flanked by two smaller buildings or "dependencies," one of which contained the kitchen. Originally, servants carried food from the kitchen outside and up a small exterior stairway into the dining room.

Early in this century, a link was built to connect the main house with the kitchen dependency. The link contained a pantry and dishwashing area on the first level, with storage on the second. The link and its symmetrical companion to the east were narrower than the adjoining

buildings, which led to their being called "hyphens."

The new occupants intended to run the place without the cooks and servers needed to negotiate the country mile between the old kitchen and the dining room. In addition, the old kitchen dependency was to become a separate apartment. A new kitchen was called for, and the only logical place for it was in the narrow connecting link.

We were called in to fit a new kitchen and back entryway, along with a stair to a new second floor laundry, into a space measuring exactly 10x24 feet. The family needed facilities to serve large formal meals, but also needed an informal eating space for eight. As it would inevitably be the activity center of the house, the new kitchen had to be comfortable and inviting.

The plan is straightforward. After abandoning any attempt to save the old stairway to the second floor, we settled on a scheme with the cooking and eating areas on the south and the

sink area, refrigerator, and new stair on the north. The real design work was figuring out how small we could make things and still have them function.

Negotiating the Floor Levels

First, some difficult level problems had to be dealt with. The main house floor was about 5 feet above grade, the back and front entries to the link were about 2 1/2 feet up, while the floor of the kitchen dependency was nearly at grade.

Originally, the first floor of the link was up at the level of the main floor of the house, resulting in a very low ceiling (the second floor had to be low because of the lower roof over the hyphen-link). In our design, we decided to lower the floor, splitting the drop from house to back entry into two groups of 2 steps each. This allowed a higher ceiling in the kitchen, while minimizing the steps between the kitchen and dining rooms.

The original windows, designed to look good on the outside, were unattractively low relative to the original floor of the link. Dropping the kitchen floor two steps raised the window height and improved the view. We couldn't change the window size or location because of historic restrictions and cost, but we did replace the old double-hung sash with casements.

We took advantage of every possible place for storage, except that we balked at building drawers into the stair risers, an omission later regretted by the family.

We originally intended to close up the steep old stairs leading down from the back hall into the old kitchen in order to make room for a tiny half-bath. The owner opted to leave the stairs in, resulting in one of the strangest bathrooms I have ever seen, since it also acts as a passage to the kitchen apartment (to ease communication when the apartment dwellers were babysitting).

It features a small mop sink and a toilet with a triangular tank, which fits nicely in a corner, partially blocking a doorway. We didn't think it was possible to combine a passageway, stair, and half-bath in one tiny space, and we were dead wrong.

Putting the Squeeze on Space

We greatly reduced the size of the back entry, which in the old design took up almost half the link. The wall between the wind lobby and the kitchen proper was set as close to the door jamb as possible. We made the tiny resultant space visually larger by glazing the wall behind the breakfast area and glazing the pocket door.

The new occupants forced us to minimize the eating area. They installed a large antique table with great character, and bought some small adjustable wood stools for the two exposed sides. We added narrow but adequate built-in seating along the two walls.

Despite the minuscule size of the eating area (6'6" x 3'6", not including the aisle) it is really a warm and cozy place, providing welcome contrast to the 14-foot ceilings of the main house. Four adults and four children often eat breakfast and lunch there together—small kids enjoy climbing in and out through the table legs.

To minimize the length of the new stair to the second floor we added winders and cut away the stringers so that the refrigerator could fit tight in under the stair tread. As in many old houses (including the original main stair of this one), the stair runs happily in front of a window. Since the window jambs are 8 inches deep because of the brick walls, the stair stringer is well inside the glass and is almost invisible from the outside. (A painted piece of trim encloses the stair carriage.)

Using Every Corner

We took advantage of every possible place for storage, except that we balked at building drawers into the stair risers, an omission later regretted by the family. Cabinets were held short of the ceiling (the upper shelves are always useless) and the tops were used to display a nice collection of pottery.

Since the back hall was two steps down from the kitchen, it was possible to squeeze in an extremely valuable cabinet underneath the built-in bench. This is used for gloves, boots, and athletic equipment. On the wall opposite is a shallow floor-to-ceiling pantry enclosed with panelled doors.

Between the kitchen and the dining room, within the main house, was a passageway filling in the space between two flanking fireplaces. In a space 3'6" wide we installed a bar with an 18-inch counter to accommodate a bar sink. The counter narrows to 15 inches opposite a new set of storage shelves for glassware.

To the left of the sink, well-lit by a window with a view of the entry yard, is the telephone and message center, with the usual pens, paper, and calendars—the brain of the house so to speak.

The range and adjacent counter was moved out about a foot to create a slightly elevated shelf for appliances behind the normal 2-foot counter. We put recessed lighting behind the overhead cabinets, creating a handsome indirect light source.

Under each overhead cabinet we added a small open shelf for little items, simple boxes made of oak boards and matching in detail the 1-inch-thick oak "picture-frame" trim lining the deep window recesses.

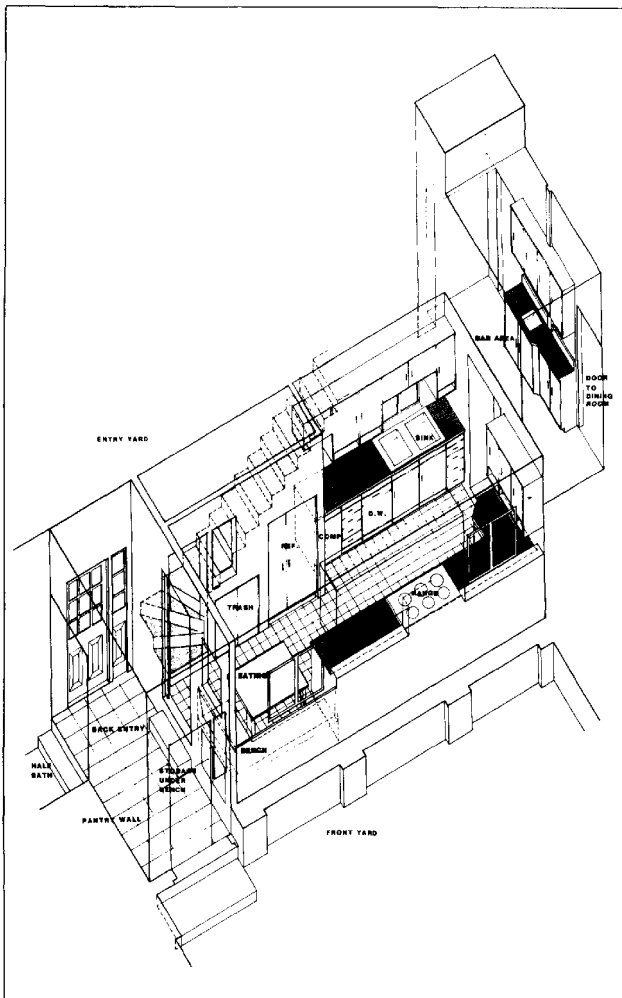
Cabinets are white laminate, with burgundy counter tops. The floor is imitation slate resilient tile.

Mechanical Systems

Heating is from the existing oil-fired hot-water system, using small kickspace heaters. This was a mistake, as they are noisy and get clogged with hair. It would have been better to use proper fan-coil units in the crawl space. Upstairs, we used baseboard heating.

Lighting is a varied combination of undercounter fluorescents and recessed lensed incandescents, with lots of switching options. There is a ceiling fan to help circulate air during the sultry summers, as there is no air conditioning. ■

Gordon F. Tully is president of Tully & Ingersoll Architects in Cambridge, Mass.



The design used built-ins, under-the-stairs cabinets, and multi-level spaces to squeeze a big kitchen into what used to be a hallway.