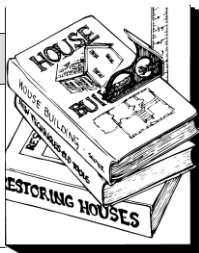


Kitchen Help

by Paul Hanke



This Old House Kitchens
by Steve Thomas and Philip Langdon
(Little, Brown & Co., 1992; 800/759-0190).
Softcover, 273 pages. \$24.95.

To design a kitchen well, you need to actually work in one, cutting up veggies, scrubbing pots and pans, and mopping the floor. You also need a sense of aesthetics, and a knowledge of materials and detailing that will help you make the kitchen pleasant and attractive as well as useful. Beyond that, a certain amount of “book learning” will help you to coordinate and optimize storage, counter space, traffic flow, and other factors critical to this very function-oriented space.

Steve Thomas and Philip Langdon, authors of *This Old House Kitchens*, seem to have all of these qualities. Their book is based on projects undertaken for the popular PBS television series, and it rivals Rodale's *Build Your Harvest Kitchen* as the book to which I would turn first for advice and inspiration, and to help educate my client. The authors' personal, anecdotal style reinforces their claim that there is no “best” countertop, flooring, or kitchen layout, and echoes a philosophy of kitchen design that is summed up by the caption to a photo of Julia Child's kitchen: “Julia's kitchen was never ‘designed’ — it developed over the years until now it is an extension of her mind and personality.”

As Thomas and Langdon lead the reader through the actual process of pre-design and design (which they believe should take up as much time as construction), they note that successful projects are often “inspired by limitations,” not hampered by them. They encourage designers to search for what scientists and mathematicians call “elegant” solutions,

beautiful in their simplicity, instead of striving for a trendy style or costly appearance.

The book emphasizes planning, including layout and dealing with “problem corners,” the influence of cabinets on “style,” and using “inspired design” to make the most out of basic materials. Beautiful color photos illustrate points made in the text. Final chapters discuss subcontracts, demolition (including how to deal with problems like rotted sills), plumbing and electrical rough-in, heating (avoiding the “cold seventy” syndrome), ventilation, and lighting. There is also detailed information on modern equipment and appliances, cabinetry, countertop and flooring materials, and decoration.

Another important element of kitchen design is the ability to suspend judgment about everything you've learned, because a kitchen is a very personal matter, and transcends all the rules you've been taught about work triangles or lighting design. Thomas and Langdon agree, noting that after you've finished a kitchen, you will have built only a “prototype” and should be prepared to eliminate glitches and incorporate all your new ideas on your next project. This book will definitely help you to improve your prototypes.



Complete Book of Kitchen Design
by Ellen Rand, Florence Perchuk and the editors of Consumer Reports Books (Consumer Reports Books, 1991; 800/272-0722).
Softcover, 8 1/2 x 11, 224 pages. \$16.95.

For years my wife and I have turned to *Consumer Reports* magazine for definitive, unbiased information on purchasing everything from toothpaste to cars and home appliances. Our son even reads *Zillions*, the kid's version of the venerable consumer's bible. So I expected great things from their

book on kitchen design, especially since I knew that the work of one of the editors (Perchuk) has appeared in such prestigious magazines as *House Beautiful*. What I got instead was an informative but dry, just-the-facts-Ma'am book of basics without much pizzazz or design flair.

The *Complete Book of Kitchen Design* is divided into two parts. The first discusses conceptual issues, like where to get design ideas (certainly not from the book's sparse and plain illustrations), how to apply a problem-solving approach to kitchen planning, and how to evaluate return on investment (upon resale, 75% to 125% of kitchen renovation costs may be recovered). There is also a discussion of how kitchens are changing in response to sociological and other factors, such as two-income families, as well as advice on working with certified kitchen designers, architects, interior designers, and other design professionals. This section concludes with general guidance on planning and layout, including three full pages on recycling centers. But there are no illustrations — a shortcoming throughout the book.

Part Two focuses on product categories. This is *Consumer Reports'* strong suit, and it shows. There is solid advice on cabinet, appliances, flooring, and countertops. You'll learn about polymer/steel drawer slides, new developments in cooktops, and what water purification systems can and can't do. There are also 11 functional case studies, which are, however, uninspiring, accompanied by weak line drawings and only three photos (with no before-and-after shots). Useful appendices include one on handicapped access resources and another with *Consumer Reports* product ratings for major appliances.

The *Complete Book* is informative, but it suffers mightily from a short supply of illustrations, most of which are of poor quality. And if you're seeking design inspiration, I suggest you look elsewhere. As for the product reviews, many libraries carry *Consumer Reports* magazine. Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free? ■

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