

# Island Design Guidelines

by Jim Kregel

No question about it, kitchen islands have been hot for a long time and they continue to be hot. If there's one thing I've heard clients say over and over again for the past 20 years, it's that they *want an island* — even if it won't fit into the space. The fact is, an island (when it fits) makes good sense in the kitchen layout.

The island has its origins in the old kitchen farmhouse table, where all of the food preparation took place. Usually, it was situated in the middle of the room. This table was approximately 30 inches high — the perfect height to stand at when rolling dough and to sit at when snapping beans.

A good island acts as a stepping stone between the range and refrigerator, making kitchen tasks easier and, in some cases, less dangerous. However, many islands become stumbling blocks instead, impeding the flow of traffic and requiring the user to walk around them to go between any two points in the kitchen.

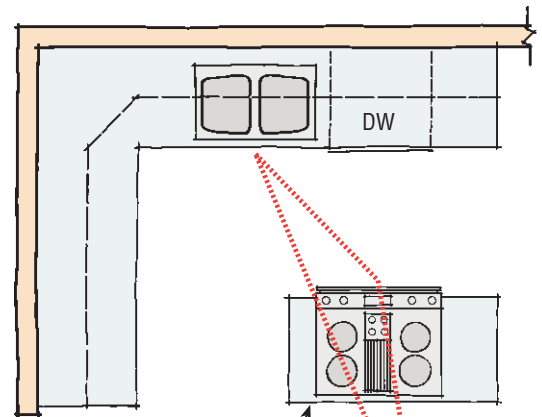
## Triangle Rule

You should be able to draw a straight line from the center of the sink to the center of the range or cooktop, from there to the center of the refrigerator, and then back to the center of the sink. No leg of this triangle should measure more than 9 feet or less than 4 feet. If you can't make such an unobstructed triangle, your layout will be less than desirable (see Figure 1).

For an island to be really useful, it must serve some function. Either the kitchen sink or the cooktop should be placed there. Whenever possible, I locate the sink in the island, because it

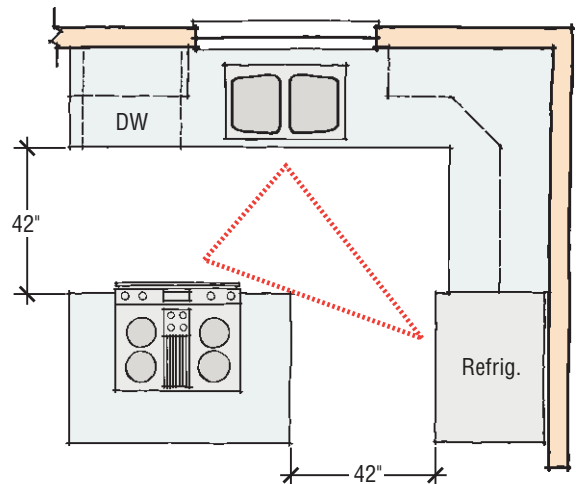


## Work Triangle Refinement



Island blocks work triangle

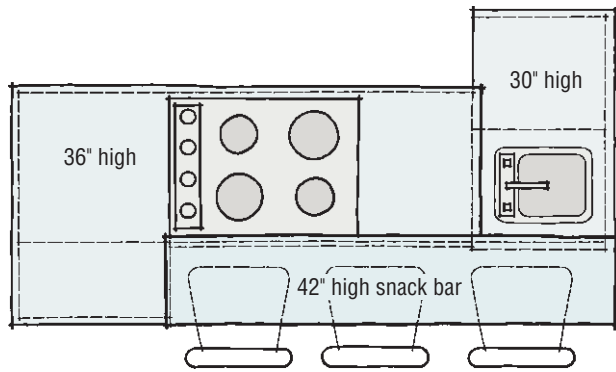
**Wrong**



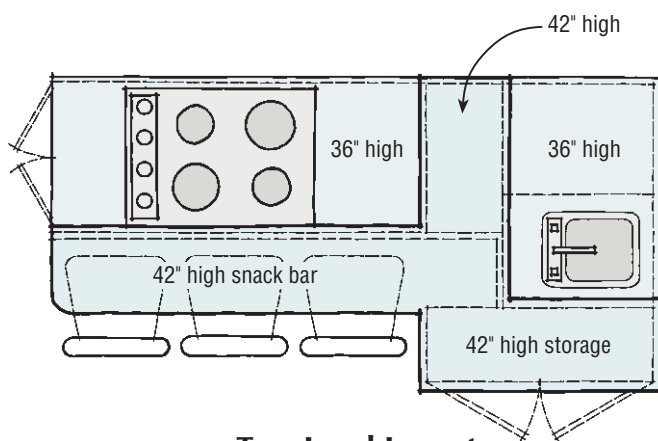
**Better**

**Figure 1.** A kitchen island goes from stepping stone to stumbling block if it breaks the “work triangle” convention. Locate the island so that it doesn't interfere with a direct path between the sink, stove, and refrigerator. Put the sink or cooktop in the island to make it truly functional.

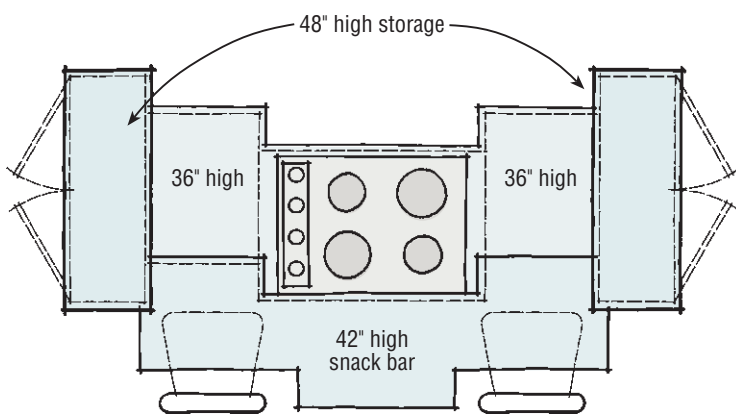
## Varying Island Heights



**Three-Level Layout**



**Two-Level Layout**



**Three-Level Layout**

**Figure 2.** A monolithic island may be a missed design opportunity. Varying cabinet and countertop heights adds versatility and eye appeal. Lower, 30-inch-high counters and cooktops assist shorter users, while a high counter can serve as a snack bar or tall storage, and screen the kitchen mess from outside view.

allows the cook to face family and friends during meal preparation (up to 70% of which takes place at the sink).

An island is an ideal location for a second sink, an item on the wish list of more than a third of the population. Consider placing this vegetable or bar sink at the end of the island, perpendicular to its length, so that the sink and faucets can be used comfortably from either side.

### Clearance

The National Kitchen and Bath Association (NKBA) has established kitchen design parameters that most designers use as a standard reference. According to these, the ideal space between an island and an adjacent countertop or appliance is 42 inches. While this sounds simple enough, there are many nuances to consider. First, where is this distance measured from? To allow an honest, 42-inch-wide walking space, the measurement should be taken from countertop edge to countertop edge. Second, if the range or refrigerator projects into the walkway space, the measurement should be taken from the farthest projection of the appliance, across to the opposing countertop edge.

Forty-two inches is a tried-and-true space for a single cook to work conveniently and efficiently within. The most common question I hear from other professionals is "Can the passage be less than 42 inches wide?" The answer is a qualified yes. I've worked successfully with less space between island and counter and have often seen it done. But before I reduce the space, I advise my customer that we'll no longer be meeting an established kitchen design guideline. To demonstrate its practicality, I often mock up a space, using boxes spaced at the same distance as the proposed new kitchen cabinets. I ask my clients to pretend they're working in this space and to consider how it feels.

If the client is a large person, I delicately advise against making the space narrower; if the client is petite, I may be happy to oblige. Most often, I compromise at 39 inches. The dead-minimum space I consider is 36 inches. Anything less will simply not work, because every time the client bends to use the island base storage, she'll bump into the cabinet behind her. And nothing is more embarrassing to a designer than to discover that the refrigerator door hits the island because the passage is too narrow.

When the opposite side of the island is used primarily as a walkway and not a workspace, a 36-inch space is acceptable, but a 42-inch-wide passage is still best.

If you're designing a two-cook kitchen, you should increase the walkway measurement to between 48 inches and 54 inches.

### Designing the Island

What is the ideal island size? Assuming that the space will permit it, I like to start at a nominal 36 by 84 inches. This may seem large, but it really isn't — for one thing, a



**Figure 3.** An overhead lighting soffit can follow the contours of the island surface, providing even illumination and visual interest.

skinny island has no “character.” And if you think that 84 inches seems too long, consider that, at minimum, a 36-inch sink base, a 24-inch-wide dishwasher, and one decent 24-inch base cabinet may have to fit under the counter.

**Toe kicks.** Island toe-kick placement should also be carefully considered. The rule of thumb is that a toe kick should be included at the base of any cabinet that one might stand in front of to prepare food. A toe kick is unnecessary below a snack bar counter, for example.

**Duplex outlets.** Electrical codes require a duplex outlet at each end of an island. This is a safe and sensible location because it eliminates the potential hazard of an appliance cord lying across a burner or a frayed cord coming in contact with water. But I’m always disappointed when I see a duplex outlet placed right in the center of a raised panel at the end of an island. To avoid this eyesore, I often surface-

mount a Wiremold outlet strip to the underside of the countertop, even though it’s a little less convenient to use. Or I’ll use a raised panel end with a false drawer face above it. I hinge the bottom edge of the drawer face (similar to a tilt-down sink front) and install the outlet behind it, using a shallow device box. This detail looks great and functions well.

### Multiple Levels


Rather than settling for a plain 36x84-inch monolith, I like to add some sizzle and character to the island through the use of multilevel surfaces. A multilevel island frequently includes a standard 36-inch countertop height (best for most users of the kitchen), with a 42-inch-high section for comfortable use by taller cooks, or as a serving area. A taller section also provides a visual buffer between the dining space and the kitchen (Figure 2). The third

practical height falls between 30 and 32 inches, which works well for rolling dough, or to provide a lower eating center, especially nice for children. Another benefit of a low snack bar is that the chairs used in this space can be used at the main dining table when more seating is required.

While a multilevel island is visually more attractive and does have many functions, the smaller surfaces may not be particularly useful for large cooking tasks. If your clients do a lot of cooking or baking, they may prefer one continuous counter. There is no one-size-fits-all solution.

### Overhead

When I design a multilevel island, I often create a multilevel soffit above it that follows the outline of the countertop. This is an attractive and functional feature when high-hat or recessed can lights are installed in the soffit. Installing them at equal distances from the countertops makes the lighting more uniform (Figure 3).

I discourage the use of wall cabinets above an island, because they interfere with the view and feel as if they are “in your face.” However, if you must have wall cabinets in this location, there are a couple of things to consider. First, make certain that the ends of the wall cabinets are set back at least 6 inches from the ends of the island, to prevent painful engagement with shoulders and heads. Second, consider installing glass doors on both sides of the upper cabinets. The see-through effect creates the illusion of more space and provides a less closed-in feeling. 

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