

What's Wrong with Builders' Kitchens?

(and how to make them right)

by Geoffrey Taylor

For many builders, kitchens are nothing more than a necessary aggravation required by banks before a house can be sold. Given the choice, most builders probably would prefer to avoid them altogether, leaving their purchase and installation to the new owner.

In Europe, where I was trained in cabinet building, such an arrangement is common. In fact, people often take their kitchens with them when they move. Here, on the other hand, the average builder designates a space near the back door as the kitchen, provides a window for the sink, installs a straight line of stock cabinets with space left for major appliances, then covers it with a stock, postformed countertop.

The goal is to get the job done as quickly and cheaply as possible. The result is a burden to the builder, and probably to the new owner as well—when the builder finally sells the house. But this need not be the case. Rather, see the kitchen as a major sales tool, not a burden.

A Sales Tool

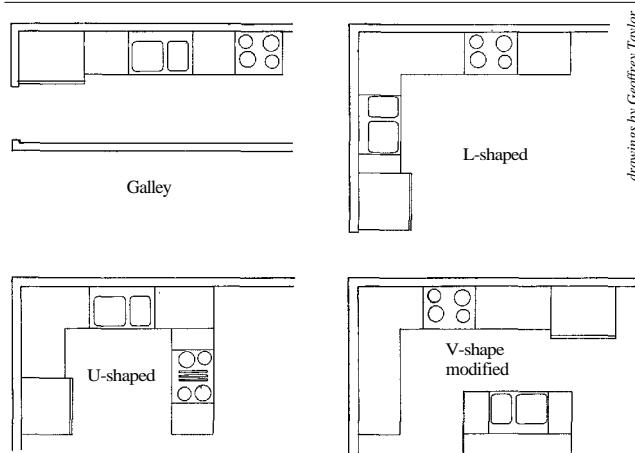
The kitchen is probably the most important room in the American home today—a room that has steadily grown larger even as houses have shrunk in size. It has become both the eating and social center for most families, not to mention its use as a work area for everything from washing and sewing to repairing appliances. It is essential that the plan take into account all the functions that kitchens now serve.

Builders should see kitchens as a unique opportunity to show off their skills by adding some excitement to an otherwise empty house. The kitchen is the only room where buyers have little trouble picturing themselves living. Make that experience enjoyable for your customers. A well-executed kitchen with a few extras will show buyers that you care about them, and greatly improve your chances for a sale.

The kitchen is the one major room whose function and decor often lie completely in the builder's hands. The buyer hopes the builder has made intelligent decisions in both the general floor plan and in the work flow created by the layout of cabinets and appliances. Many buyers expect the most thought and best planning to be put into the kitchen. Bad kitchen design tells them that the builder doesn't care about the house or them.

Find a Cook

How should you proceed? First, do not do your own kitchen planning if you do not cook! This is the number-one criticism I hear about builder-designed kitchens. You wouldn't allow cooks to organize your job site, so don't try to organize theirs.



The best place to prepare the four basic food groups? The four basic kitchen shapes.

This does not mean you have to get professional help. Rather, find someone in your organization who is a serious cook and let that person go over the plans by trying to visualize cooking

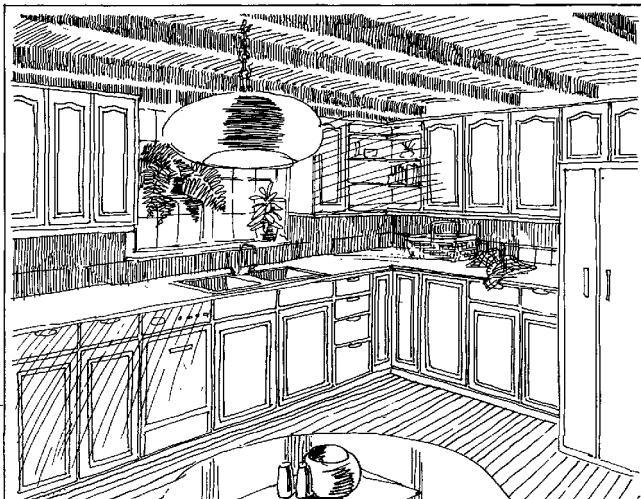
built-in trash drawer, which, although not necessary, are appreciated by buyers.

When doing your own planning, follow four basic steps. First, determine

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in it. He or she can correct many of the more glaring deficiencies often by simply moving a cabinet or adding a drawer to fulfill some specific function. Or your "cook" may suggest special touches, such as sliding shelves or a

where in the plan the kitchen should go. Second, decide what shape it should take and how it should relate to the rest of the house. Third, position cabinets and countertops to best fulfill the intended function of the kitchen.



Fourth, choose a style and color that complement the house decor. And make sure the room will have plenty of natural light during the day.

Where to Put It

The location of the kitchen is critical to its enjoyment and convenience. There are some mistakes that no amount of cabinet changes can correct. Locating the kitchen next to the back door often ensures that it becomes the de facto mudroom and staging area for outdoor activities.

It's better to locate the kitchen out of the main traffic flow, but close to the family room and major eating area so the cook is not isolated from family activities. One approach is to connect the kitchen to a combined dining/living room, using the "open room" concept. Whatever you decide, be sure to reserve enough space. A too-small kitchen can undermine an otherwise good house plan.

Choose a Shape

Once you've determined the space, you must decide on the form. Although kitchens come in many shapes and sizes, most can be reduced to a basic form made out of parts of a rectangle. You have the one-sided or galley kitchen, two-sided or L-shaped kitchen, three-sided or U-shaped kitchen, and the four-sided or V-shaped kitchen with island (and many variations and combinations of these).

In choosing a form, always give the kitchen as much of its own undisputed floor space as possible. That is, use the cabinetry to wall off the work area from direct through traffic. (I call this "circling the wagons.") This is particularly effective when planning a kitchen out of a larger, shared space. Be sure to incorporate an informal sit-down eating area at this stage. This is especially important if the main eating area is far from the kitchen.

Placing the Cabinets

Once you've chosen the form, begin to place the cabinets, making sure you have enough storage and counter space at each work station. Everything the occupants need should be close at hand, whether they will be preparing food, cooking, baking, or emptying the dishwasher.

Make sure you have enough drawers. Nine is considered minimum, although seven often works well. If space allows, put in a trash drawer. Since the area under the sink will not accommodate the large cans used today, you will avoid a common complaint of buyers.

Also make sure that all major appliances have enough countertop

space on either side for immediate work and temporary storage. Refrigerators and wall ovens need space on one side. Sinks and ranges need storage at least 12 inches wide on two sides.

Space the appliances so they are easily accessible but not bunched together. Don't put the refrigerator in a corner where the door will open against the wall, limiting its opening to 90 degrees or less. Most crisper drawers require at least 130 degrees to be removed.

Plan for under-counter task lighting, as no kitchen works well without it. Also put in a ducted vent for the cooktop. (Many people do not use them but it is foolish to limit your market, and the exercise will ensure that you don't plan the cooktop for an area that's inaccessible to venting.)

Finally, choose the kind of materials, door style, and colors. This is where you give the kitchen its character and determine how it will blend or contrast with other aspects of the house. This is also what buyers notice most and will color how they judge the house and you.

If the kitchen has only one window or is dark, choose light woods and stains, or even a laminate. Installing light-colored countertops and painting

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the ceiling white will also help. Kitchens that need lights during the day are inherently dreary.

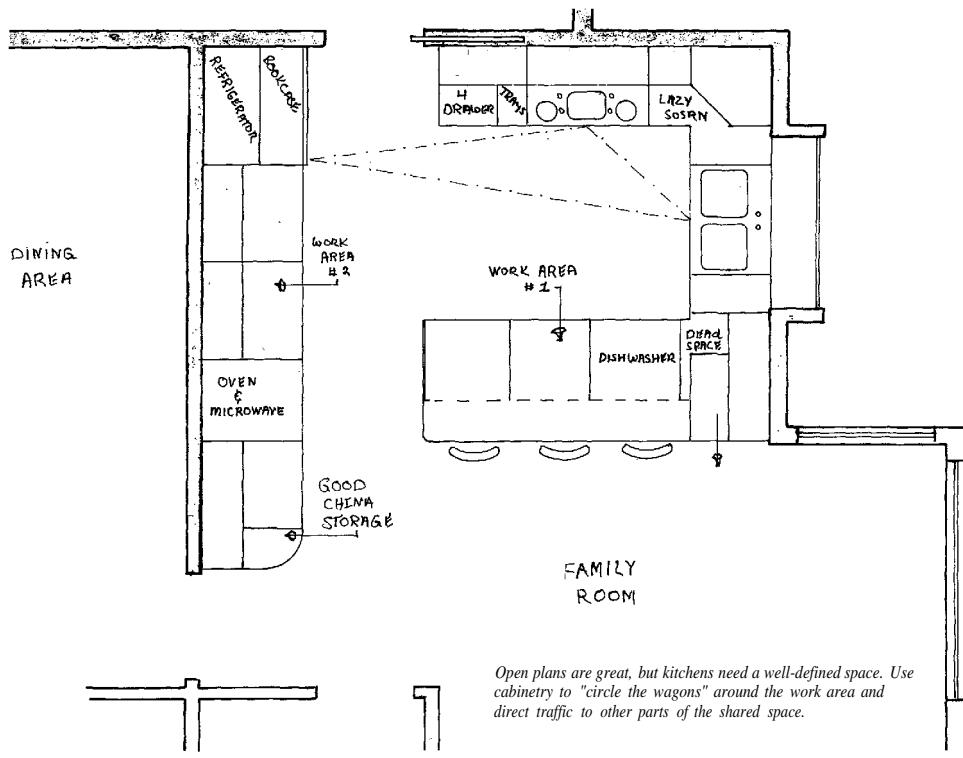
Personalize the cabinets with one or two special touches, such as wood-banded countertops or special handles. These are eye-catching and don't add much to your costs. After the installation, put in a few decorations and plants; you will be surprised at the difference they make.

If you decide to seek professional design help, find an established kitchen studio. Builders often shy away from them because of cost. But, in fact, these firms eagerly court builders' business, and will offer them free design and hefty discounts. They offer competitive prices because builders represent their only source of repeat business. Builders are also attractive customers because they usually do their own installation, which is not a big money-maker for a kitchen studio.

Studios also offer the builder a readily available showroom to take clients to when doing custom houses or major renovations. Such professionalism is appreciated by clients, especially when they realize that working with you will avail them of additional expertise. This is a strong selling point.

Regardless of how you go about it, the effort and time will be well spent. The result will be a better-planned house that looks better and should sell quicker at a higher price, more than justifying your additional cost. Try it next time—and see. ■

Geoffrey Taylor designs, sells, and custom builds kitchens in Peterborough, N.H.



Open plans are great, but kitchens need a well-defined space. Use cabinetry to "circle the wagons" around the work area and direct traffic to other parts of the shared space.