

# Avoiding Common Design Mistakes

by Lynn Comeskey

**O**n most topics, I compare notes with suppliers, tradespeople, or other contractors to make sure I have the widest range of experience from which to write. But on this subject—simple but often disastrous mistakes you can make in remodeling a kitchen—I didn't need any input. All I had to do was search my memory. Despite the fundamental nature of the dozen errors and oversights listed below, I have committed all of them in the 15 years I've been in the kitchen business.

Most were made because I was so focused (or scattered) that I missed the obvious. Others were temptations I gave into because I was trying so hard to please the client I wasn't willing to draw the line and say no. ("No, the edge look you want just won't hold up over time," or "It isn't possible to shoehorn that last little bit of storage into this wall.")

Even if you're not making these simple errors, you might look for them in the plans you bid or review—it's surprising how often they crop up.

**Don't get locked in.** When designing a complete kitchen remodel, leave the existing location of the utilities, and even windows and doors, out of your initial sketches. It's easy to miss an excellent floor plan because you feel constrained by existing conditions. You can always decide later that it's too expensive to move something, but at least you tried for the very best plan.

**Keep your distance.** In an effort to maximize storage space or to keep from paying the cost to move a door or window, it's tempting to place cabinets too close to an opening. In the worst case, this means shaving down window or door casings, which never looks professional. But even at an inch or two away, you've hamstrung whoever is doing the hanging, because the cabinet edge must run parallel to the door or window (whether that's plumb or not) to look good. This also comes up frequently when hanging wall units on either side of a kitchen sink window. If you leave too little wall showing, any discrepancy between one side and the other will be very obvious.

**Make sure of appliance clearances.** When locating appliances, be certain all doors or drawers can be fully opened. One that's easy to forget is a refrigerator that sits next to a wall and is hinged on that side; many models need the door to open more than 90 degrees so that interior drawers can be pulled out. Anticipating these problems can be difficult when homeowners are slow to choose brands and model numbers, but an early discussion with them about the problem will help.

**The same goes for drawers.** This comes up every time you deal with inside cabinet corners. Doors and drawers have to be far enough away from the corner so they won't hit drawer pulls or appliances which extend beyond the face of the adjacent cabinet. The same is true at an

end wall, where drawers have to clear nearby door or window casings that protrude beyond the plane of the wall.

#### *Take care when raising the floor.*

This is always a problem, but it's exaggerated by the thicker floor coverings like wood and tile that are being used regularly in kitchens now.

The worst case is adding a tile floor to a kitchen where the base cabinets aren't being replaced. I am still convinced the only way to provide a long-lasting tile floor is to set it over a mortar bed. With a thin paver, this will raise the floor level at least one inch, and with a Mexican paver you're closer to two inches. In either case, you

the way so the trays can come out without scratching the backs of the doors—I curse the design. A drawer base is much more practical.

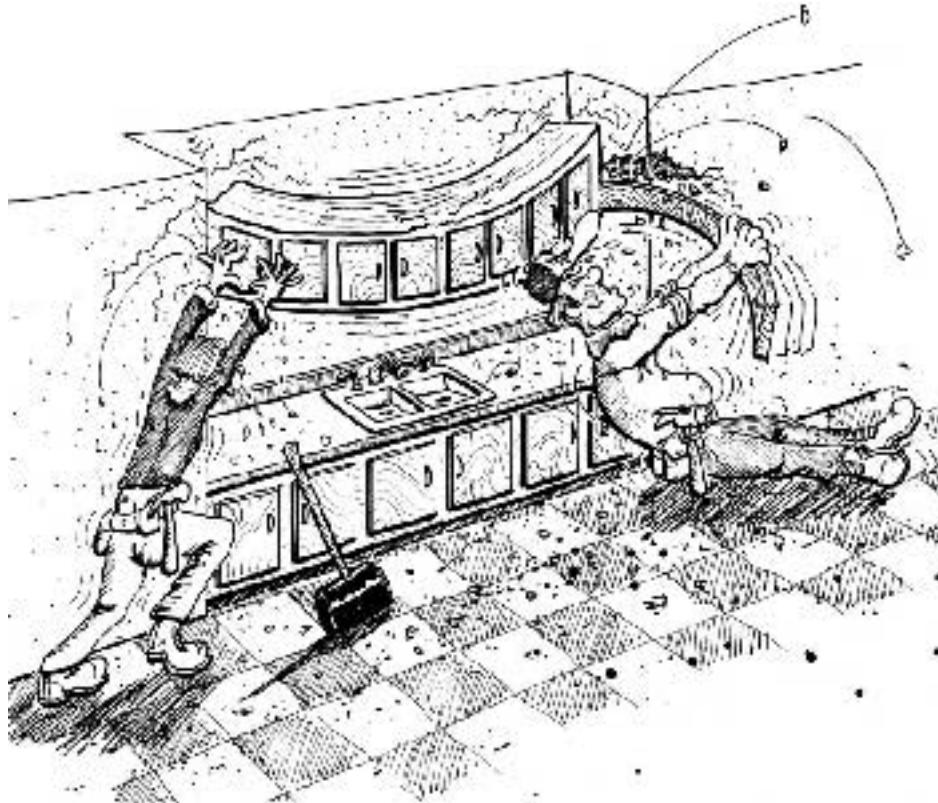
**Leave enough room for ducts.** It's easy to forget room for the ducting that's necessary with down-draft cooktops and some ovens. When you do, it's inevitable that the space will be occupied by cookie sheet storage, a drawer unit, or pull-out trays.

**Forget the sink base.** In the relentless search for space, it's easy to think of the sink cabinet as a spot that will accommodate storage accessories. But the drain and disposer almost always take more space than anticipated.

but I don't know of any way to keep these two dissimilar materials together over time. Once moisture expands the wood trim (especially at the sink), it opens up a crack that just collects residue and expands further.

**Lay off the easy target.** If you are bidding on plans that contain one of these "stupid" mistakes, there's no reason you can't tactfully make a correction. I constantly hear contractors and their carpenters complaining about how bad designers and architects are—often within their hearing. This is a good way to cut off your nose.

Sure, these guys make mistakes, but so do contractors and carpenters. And



have to be certain that the bottoms of the appliances can be raised to the same height as the new floor so that they can be removed for service or replaced when necessary.

**Hold back upper cabinets.** When planning wall cabinets over a peninsula or island, resist the temptation to extend the cabinet to the end of these counter areas. It may gain a little extra storage, but it will eliminate the ends of the peninsula or island as work surfaces once clients bump their heads on the wall cabinet ends a few times.

**Avoid unnecessary doors.** One of the greatest nuisances I can think of in a kitchen is having to open a set of base cabinet doors in order to get to pull-out trays. I have such a cabinet, and every time I open the doors—all

**Hold the line on blind corner cabinets.** Look at inside corner cabinets to determine how large a door is necessary for comfortable access to the deepest part of the corner cabinet. Then stand firm on your decision so you don't end up with a smaller door that makes access difficult.

**Stay with practical edge treatments.** There are two counter edge concepts that designers try to impose on the public year after year:

One is holding the counter edge flush with the door and drawer fronts. This design allows garbage of all kinds to drip off the front of the counter and onto (or into) the door or drawer directly below.

The other is a wood edging applied to a tile counter. It looks very chic,

the designers and architects I know provide me with a lot of business. As long as they do, I will go out of my way not to denigrate them. In fact, I have gone so far as to cover design mistakes and even pay for them.

There are as many potential pitfalls in kitchen design as there are people out there doing it; these are a few of the most embarrassing. If you have a favorite, I'd love to hear about it (write me c/o JLC, 1233 Shelburne Road, Suite C1, South Burlington, VT 05403). ■

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