

Making Appliances Fit

by Paul Turpin

It seems all kitchen design these days boils down to two different styles: The traditional, old-fashioned look and the super-streamlined, glossy approach. The first uses 18th- and 19th-century-inspired kitchen "furniture," featuring plenty of craftsmanship and period detailing. The kitchen is frequently chopped into designated work areas, free-standing cabinets, and non-continuous counter areas. At the other extreme are the virtually seamless contemporary kitchens that look as if they'd stand up pretty well in a wind tunnel.

I favor a mix of classical and contemporary design. I like classic details, such as raised-panel cabinet doors and ornate moldings. But I also like to streamline the arrangement of the cabinets, countertops, and appliances, especially in a small kitchen.

Small kitchens depend on illusion rather than raw square footage to feel roomy, and demand close attention to what I call "kitchen topography."

To achieve a smooth, uncluttered topography that maximizes space, I follow two basic design tenets:

- Keep horizontal lines, such as

counter tops, kick spaces, and cabinet tops and bottoms, continuous and unbroken.

- Keep vertical surfaces, including cabinet and appliance faces, on the same plane.

In practice, this means building in appliances, such as cooktops, ovens and refrigerators, whenever possible. It also means grouping massive items, such as refrigerators and pantry storage, at the ends of counter runs.

Streamlined Design

Stove ventilation hoods, microwave ovens, free-standing ovens, and refrigerators, along with all the cabinetry that goes into kitchens these days, can create a mishmash of vertical and horizontal surfaces. Here are some techniques I've found to make things line up.

Microwaves. The worst offenders are usually microwave ovens. These almost always look like an afterthought. Leaving them sitting on countertops is a solution for people who either have acres of counter space or who have yet to remodel their kitchens. Yet finding a spot where they are accessible as well as

incorporated into the kitchen's design is tough.

I like to recess the microwave into the wall, making the face of the door flush with the hanging cabinets above (see Figure 1, previous page). Since most microwave ovens are about 15 inches deep, recessing them a full 3 inches into the wall puts the door in line with a 12-inch cabinet. Some of the larger models are deeper than 15 inches and require furring out the upper cabinet to bring it flush with the microwave. I typically set the microwave between the refrigerator and a wall where only one cabinet has to be furred out.

When I'm using stock cabinetry, I make my own microwave "cabinet" from 3/4-inch plywood and trim out the box to make it match the surrounding cabinetry.

Whenever possible, I set the microwave cabinet at least 8 inches above the counter so there's usable space below. This way the oven is accessible for all but the shortest clients.

Refrigerators. Refrigerators are the largest of all kitchen appliances. Where you place a refrigerator can either enhance or reduce the feeling of spaciousness. Put a refrigerator alone against a bare wall and it looks huge. Place base cabinets on either side and its size is diminished. Add wall cabinets to further reduce the refrigerator's mass.

Putting the refrigerator in a cabinet also makes the appliance less conspicuous and ties it nicely to the other cabinetry. The side panels should match the width of the base cabinet sides, and have a face on them when the surrounding cabinetry has face frames. I extend the side panels all the way to the floor so I don't have to mess with supporting the panels on the adjacent cabinetry.

Stove hoods. Stove hoods typically jut out about 6 inches from the cabinetry that surrounds them. For this reason, I like the Vent-A-Hood (P.O. Box 830426, Richardson, TX 75083-0246; 214/235-5201) tilt-out model. When it's not in use, the hood lines up with the standard 12-inch wall cabinet. But it is hinged along the top edge so customers can pull it out when they need it.

A large kitchen, however, calls for some drama. One of the larger hoods, flared at the bottom, can become the focal point of the room. These seem to look best if they don't blend with the cabinetry. Something with a totally different shape and texture provides a startling and attractive contrast.

Ranges and cooktops. Free-standing ranges interrupt the horizontal line of the counter and kick space. Drop in models are some improvement since they allow a continuous kick space, but I prefer cooktops to create unbroken lines all the way around. Not only do these look better, they're easier to clean.

If there's no room for a standard oven cabinet, my favorite alternative is a below-counter, built-in model like those made by Dacor (950 S. Raymond Ave., Pasadena, CA 91109, 800/772-7778) and Gaggenau USA (425 University Ave., Norwood, MA 02062, 617/255-1766). These provide both an unbroken kick counter edge and an unbroken kick space.

Recessing Appliances

Often the 2 to 3 inches that's gained by recessing an appliance into the wall is all that's needed to make the unit line up with the surrounding cabinetry. Recessed openings are framed much the same as a window or door. Since I usually put the microwave next to the refrigerator, I cut out this entire section of wall and frame it like an upside-down L. Removing studs gets tricky since, in most cases, you're pulling out the support and backing for the wall finish in the adjacent room. I use a sheet of 3/4- or 1/2-inch finish grade plywood to serve as a backing and to support the drywall or plaster on the opposite wall (Figure 2).

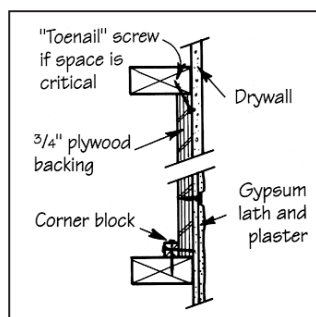


Figure 2. When framing a recessed opening for an appliance, the author screws a plywood backing to studs using corner blocks. He "toe-screws" directly to the studs if space is critical.

Microwave Cabinet

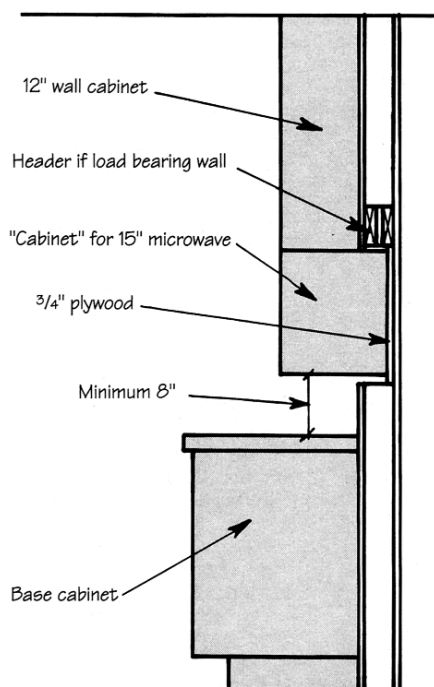


Figure 1. A recessed cabinet keeps the microwave in line with wall cabinetry. Locate the microwave at least 8 inches above the countertop so the space beneath is usable.

Keep in mind that both the refrigerator and the microwave need space around them for air circulation. Restricting their "breathing room" will shorten the life of the appliances. I allow an extra 1/2 inch at either side of the microwave and 3/4 of an inch at the top. Most units have a fan that blows exhaust out the top.

Proper ventilation for refrigerators calls for 1 inch at each side and 1 1/2 inches at the top. These days, most refrigerators have coils on the bottom, but when you run into the old variety with the coils on the back, leave 2 inches of clearance at the top and at least 1 inch at the back.

Another thing to think about with refrigerators: If your clients have a 30-inch refrigerator, it's a good idea to make the recess 32 1/2 inches wide to leave room to upgrade to a larger one. ■

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