

Custom Kitchen Design: Gathering the Facts

by Sandy McAdams



When designing a custom kitchen, it can sometimes be difficult to get clients to verbalize their wants and needs. To help with this process I use a handy tool — the “Kitchen Planning Questionnaire” (below). It helps me capture my clients’ ideas so that I can turn them into a viable plan.

One of the most important things you need to know before you begin to design the project is the budget, or as one of my clients described it, their “affordability target.” This is the amount of money they can pay to accomplish the entire job. If you design a kitchen with no regard for this cost limit, you may end up with a beautiful project, but one that can’t be built.

After determining the budget, I use

the Kitchen Planning Questionnaire to get the information I need for the basic design of the space. Each question provides insight into the kind of finished product the clients will be happiest with.

Family makeup. Questions 1 and 2 are important for several reasons. By knowing how many people there are in a family, you get an idea of how much storage you must plan for, and whether you need to plan multiple work areas. The ages of family members can affect where certain items are stored and at what height you place countertops and appliances. For elderly family members, for instance, it’s helpful to install the microwave lower than usual so that they don’t have to reach too high while

holding hot dishes. If there are small children, you’ll need to provide locked storage for cleaning supplies and fine breakables.

Who does the cooking? Questions 3 and 4 help me decide the basic layout of the work space. If more than one person cooks at the same time, I usually provide additional work triangles or extra work areas to keep the cooks out of one another’s way.

Left- or right-handed? Knowing this helps me decide how to position appliances for ease of use. If there are both left- and right-handed family members, you need to determine which person does which task. If a left-handed family member always does the dishes, for example, it’d be best to locate the dishwasher on the left side of the sink.

Physical impairments. Question 6 is very important, but you also need to know if the physically challenged person will be cooking or just visiting or eating in the new kitchen. The requirements for a kitchen in which a physically challenged cook will be working are, of course, very different than for the average person. You must plan for details such as lowered work areas and open knee spaces (see “Remodeling for Accessibility,” 5/92; “Accessibility on a Shoe String,” 3/93).

Grocery shopping. Knowing how often the client shops tells me how much food storage is needed. If the family is large and shops once or twice a month, buying in quantity, a large pantry area is a must. A small family that stops at the grocery store every other day probably doesn’t need a large storage area.

Dining table. Questions 8 and 9 help determine the overall size of the space required. It’s important to know how many people will need to be seated and whether or not the kitchen will be used as the main dining area. In some cases, seating at a bar area may suffice.

Entertaining. The question, “Do you entertain in the kitchen?” needs to be followed up with a description of the type of entertaining the clients will do. Will guests be helping with meal preparation? If so, you may need more carefully designed work areas. If the guests are only going to be visiting with the cook, then a strategically placed bar can provide a seating area

Kitchen Planning Questionnaire

1. How many people are in your family? _____
2. What are their ages? _____
3. Will more than one person be cooking at the same time? _____
4. If yes, how many? _____
5. Are they left- or right-handed? _____
6. Is anyone in the family physically challenged? _____
7. How often do you grocery shop? _____
8. Do you want a table in the kitchen? _____
9. How many people do you want to seat? _____
10. Do you entertain in the kitchen? _____
11. What other activities do you do in the kitchen (baking, canning, arts and crafts, etc.)? _____
12. Which appliances will you be keeping? _____
13. What kinds of things do you need to store? _____
14. Do you watch TV or listen to the radio in the kitchen? _____
15. Do you want a desk or planning center? _____
16. Do you want a computer center? _____
17. What do you like and want to keep about your present kitchen? Make a list: _____

18. What don't you like? _____

that will keep them involved but out of their host's way.

Other activities. Question 11 sometimes points up the need for specially designed work or storage areas or unusual storage requirements. If arts and crafts are done in the kitchen, for example, you may need to provide counters of different heights to accommodate the specific activity. The art supplies may have special storage needs as well. Or the clients may want a customized counter for baking, or an extra sink for food-processing needs.

Appliances. Question 12 is important because frequently in a kitchen remodel, the client will have a relatively new appliance that may not need to be replaced.

Special storage needs. Question 13 has been partially addressed previously. But there are usually additional items that need to be considered. Frequently used appliances such as food processors, blenders, and mixers need to be stored near the work area where they will be used, for example.

TV/radio. You have to plan spaces

for these appliances. I always ask a follow-up question to find out what the TV viewing habits are. Sometimes I have to locate the TV so that it can be viewed from more than one location.

Desk area and computer center. If the clients want a desk area, I follow with questions about the type of activities that will be done there. Will it only be for meal planning and cookbook storage, or is it to be used for paying bills and household accounting? If so, the space may require a file drawer, a place for mail, and a telephone area. If the clients want a computer center, find out how many people will be using the computer and for what activities. If it will be used by the children for homework and/or game playing, you may want to locate it well away from the work areas of the kitchen. If the primary use is for recipes and meal planning activities, however, you may want to locate it close to the primary work areas.

Present likes and dislikes. Questions 17 and 18 give the clients an opportunity to tell me all the things

they like and don't like about their present kitchen. This helps me avoid designs that don't work for them while including the elements that do. For instance, the sink in the existing kitchen may be on an inside wall while the clients want it under a window. Or they may really like their island cooktop and want the same feature in their new kitchen.

These questions help me gather the information I need to provide the best possible kitchen design for a wide variety of clients. You may have other questions that you wish to add to your list. The important thing is to discover as much as possible about your clients' lifestyle. This will ensure a design that comes as close as possible to providing for their needs and wants, while still meeting their budget. ■

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