The Remains of the Day

by Gordon Tully

As we Americans make our way through the world's resources at a rate six times that of the average human, we leave behind a lot of debris. Designers occasionally try to deal with this stuff, but by and large, trash gets left out of the design equation, leaving households with no way to handle the growing variety of recycling chores demanded by a changing world. The single trash can under the kitchen counter doesn't cut it anymore.

Yet the other extreme — the overly specific, custom-built recycling sorting system that becomes obsolete when there is a change in the recycling market, the trash-removal contractor, or the household's makeup or habits — doesn't work so well either. It makes more sense to create flexible solutions that recognize that people are handling trash differently these days, but which can be adapted to different patterns of use.

To do this, it helps to classify the things we throw out, then design solutions aimed at making it easy for households to reduce the part of the waste stream they throw out, and to handle the recycled part of the waste stream as conveniently as possible.

Most households produce four different types of debris: old-fashioned trash and garbage; recyclable materials; compostable food remains and yard waste; and hazardous materials that require special care.

Old-Fashioned Trash and Garbage

This category — the stuff we throw away — keeps shrinking as we recycle more, but it will always be with us. These days the "trash" component includes broken bottles, old pieces of machinery, furniture, dirty or soggy paper, and other things that can't be recycled either because they are made of inseparable unrelated materials or don't meet standards of cleanliness. (Big items such as appliances have special disposal rules, depending on the community, and can't really be accounted for by designers.)

Typically, this trash can usefully be mixed with "garbage," or smelly food remains. This food debris should also be a shrinking part of what we throw out, since composting can handle much of it (more on this below), but it will always contain any cooked or non-vegetable food remains that can't be used as leftovers or pet treats. This trash-garbage mixture, of course, smells bad — a problem that will probably grow as more of the paper component of this mix is reduced through recycling. Inside, ordinary trash containers work well enough, since homeowners will not want to store smelly stuff indoors for long, and there will be some paper waste to absorb odors. Leaving space near or under the kitchen sink space for a flip-lid container will usually do the job.

Outside, cans with tight-fitting lids are a must, made of metal if rats are a problem. The cans should be close to the kitchen but removed from places people congregate, and they should be downwind from prevailing summer

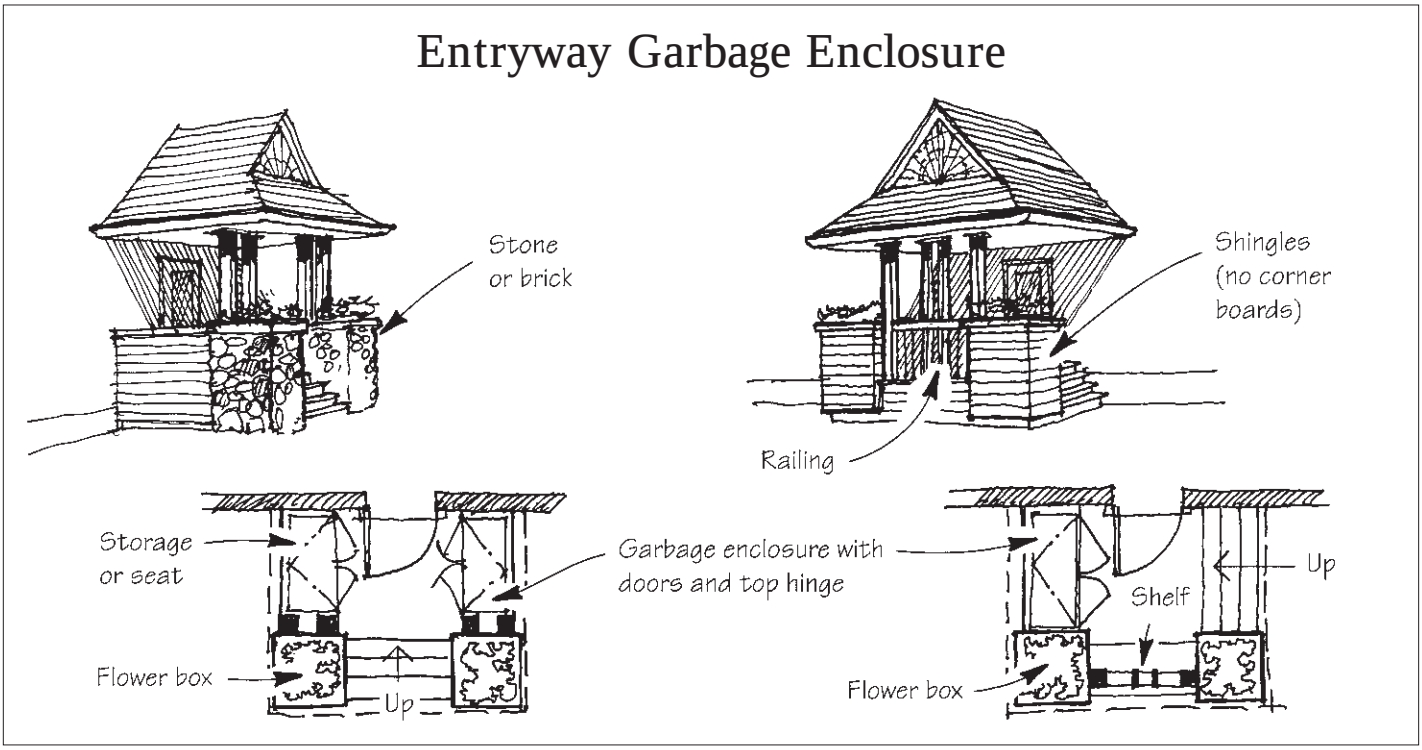

Figure 1. *For trash storage near an entry door, a tight enclosure can be incorporated into a porch design. The enclosure should be slatted to allow odors to vent. The porch shown here is derived from a Prairie School design. Two versions are shown, with front and side steps. The roof can be hipped, gable, flat, or hipped gable, like the original.*

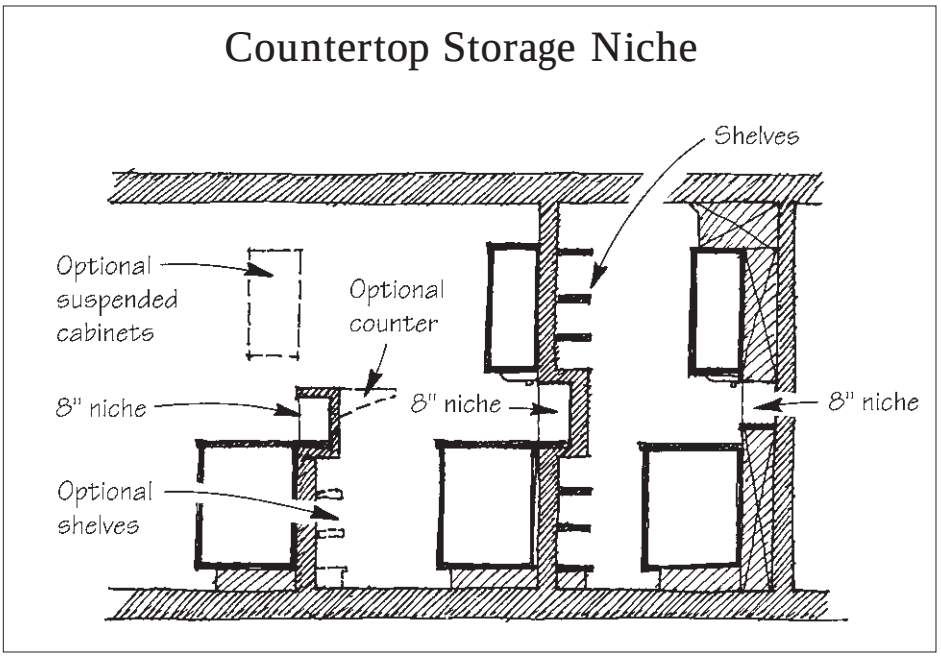

Figure 2. *An 8-inch-deep niche at the back of a counter provides convenient storage for compost, food scraps for pets, and empty bottles and cans. The space can be topped with an eating counter (left), recessed into a wall (middle), or boxed out and lit from above (right).*

breezes. A closed garage is an ideal site for these containers. Failing that, the cans can be left outside. But if roving animals are likely to knock them over exposed or if the cans will be in a spot where they will be offensive to look at, some kind of attractive, vented enclosure is called for (see Figure 1). Such an enclosure can also hold recyclables awaiting pickup or a trip to the recycling center.

Making Recycling Easy

The portion of the waste stream that we recycle keeps growing and changing as communities expand and alter their recycling programs. Last year, for instance, our community's recycling contractor would accept only newspapers, clean glass, aluminum and type 2 or 4 plastic, all of which had to be separately sorted by the homeowner before pickup. Now we can put out one container of clean paper and another with any kind of bulk plastic, glass, and most kinds of metal. Any design solutions for recycling must take the likelihood of such changes into account.

Most recyclable materials (typically glass, paper, metal, and plastic) can be stored almost anywhere, since they are essentially clean and odor-free. Trash bins or boxes at key sites around the house can receive recyclable paper, while glass, metal, and plastic can be collected in bins beneath the sink or near the service door. I remain cautious about elaborate kitchen sorting stations, since sorting requirements change constantly. Leaving space for a changeable assortment of bins probably makes more sense, preferably in or near the kitchen, where most such recyclables are generated and where they must first be washed.

When those containers fill, they can be transferred either to the curb or to an enclosure outdoors. Any outdoor enclosure designed for the regular trash cans should include space for recyclables and hazardous materials. Make sure the enclosure is well-ventilated so the homeowner can safely store oily rags or other fume-producing items in it.

Compostable Food and Yard Waste

Homeowners and even many apartment dwellers can and should compost waste vegetable matter such as coffee grounds, peelings, spoiled vegetables and fruit, and other non-meat and nondairy food leavings. Composting is discouraged mightily, however, by the popularity of in-sink disposals, which take this potential topsoil and use it to pollute groundwater or clog septic systems.

If a client is willing, it makes much more sense to compost these materials. From a design standpoint, this requires a small, covered container at the sink to temporarily store the compost-to-be. Some homes may need a similar container to hold the food for chickens, and another for dog and cat scraps. You can create a space for these containers, as well as for brushes, soap, and other sink-side sundries, by designing a raised, 8-inch-deep extension at the rear of the sink counter (see Figure 2).

The countertop compost container will need to be emptied every couple days or so into an outdoor composting bin or bins; there are many homemade and commercially available compost designs available. These should not be too close to porches or terraces, and they should be downwind relative to summer breezes. I know of no reliable composting bins designed for inside use, although I understand the Swedes are experimenting with such a gizmo; if such a thing comes along, virtually any household will be able to readily compost food scraps.

Much yard waste, such as weeds, grass clippings, and leaves, can also be composted. Woody waste can be chopped up for mulch if you have or can borrow the proper machine, disposed of by the trash-haulers, or stored for use as kindling.

Hazardous Materials

These are the paint cans, bottles of used oil, batteries, and other toxic stuff that we used to toss but must now dispose of carefully. They should be stored separately in a safe and enclosed but vented place (to protect kids and pets) until they are picked up or taken to a disposal site. A garage or shed works well, as would a space within a dedicated outdoor trash-and-recycling enclosure.

Is the Good Life Trash-Free?

It's clear that we'll have to generate a lot less trash in the future, and that means significant changes in the way we live. Designers can't necessarily lead these changes, but we can make it easier for people to recycle more of the waste they now generate. Even if we lack consistent standards for dealing with recycling and waste, we can leave adequate space in strategic locations, anticipating a more rational future. ■

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