

By Design

Lighting a Remodeled Galley Kitchen

by Robert Gerloff, AIA

Designers and architects in post-WWII America considered the galley kitchen the epitome of efficiency. Millions were built across the country, first in Cape Cods and later in ranches.

While galley kitchens were efficient — in a time-study sort of way — the homeowners who are remodeling galley kitchens in the millions today complain about the same two problems over and over: that they are isolated from the rest of the house, and that they're too dark.

Most remodelers understand how to solve the isolation problem: blow out the kitchen wall and add an island, a place where friends and family can gather. I want to show some ideas for solving the darkness problem.

The typical galley kitchen has only a single light source: a ceiling-mounted light fixture, often fitted with one or two 60-watt bulbs. This means that if you're making a sandwich at the counter, you're working in your own shadow (see Figure 1). Paradoxically, increasing the wattage of the bulb only makes the shadows harsher and the kitchen feel darker.

The remodeled kitchen shown in Figure 2 combines four relatively simple lighting strategies — task, cleaning, decorative, and mood — to make the remodeled kitchen feel bright, airy, and flexible.

Task Lighting

Task lighting is without question the most important form of lighting in any kitchen. Linear lights mounted under the cabinets illuminate the work surfaces. Because the light is cast directly onto the counter, cooks are never working in their own shadows. Mounting the under-cabinet lighting as far forward as possible under the



Figure 1. The typical galley kitchen is most often lit by a single overhead ceiling-mounted fixture. Cooks at a counter are always working in their own shadow, especially at night, when there's no natural light coming in.



Figure 2. The remodeled kitchen, now open to the living and dining rooms and focused on an island, shows four different lighting strategies that can be used simultaneously or independently, which makes the kitchen more flexible.

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cabinet centers it over the work surface.

Under-cabinet task lighting is available in fluorescent, halogen, and xenon bulbs. Fluorescent is typically blue and flickery and tends to make food look awful. Halogen is a bright white light, often used in grocery store vegetable and fruit displays to



show food at its best. Xenon's light quality is similar to halogen's, but the bulb doesn't create nearly as much heat, making it less of a fire hazard and more comfortable to work under in warm weather.

Cleaning Lighting

In this remodeled kitchen, four recessed fixtures replace the single overhead fixture. These lights, mounted on dimmers, cast a bright beam of light straight down. That light can bounce around the room and pro-



vide general ambient lighting, but its main purpose is to concentrate light on the floor and counters when you most need it: while cleaning.

In a well-lit kitchen, the overhead fixtures will rarely need to be turned on except during cleaning.

Recessed fixtures are available, of course, in any type of bulb, from tungsten to compact fluorescent. I tend toward the warm, yellow light cast from traditional tungsten bulbs. Whatever the efficiency experts may say, a kitchen shouldn't feel like a laboratory or an operating room.

Decorative Lighting

Every room needs a focus. Decorative hanging fixtures mounted over the island cast a warm pool of light there, making it the focus of a combined kitchen-dining-living space. Since this is the place where people gather and visit, read the newspaper in



the morning, and make Christmas cookies, being able to focus on it is important.

Regular tungsten "A" bulbs are best, because they cast a yellow light that emphasizes the warmth and centrality of the island.

Selecting decorative fixtures can be painful — one of the benefits of recessed cans is elimination of the selection process — but well worth the effort. Beautiful lighting fixtures in this particular spot will be noticed.

Mood Lighting

This design shows small "puck" lights — low-voltage halogen fixtures — built in to the tops of glass-faced cabinets. Combined with glass shelves, the puck light cascades throughout the cabinet, illuminating



glassware and other decorative objects with a soft glow.

Obviously, this type of "mood" lighting is intended not as task lighting, but as a way of creating a warm, inviting look to the kitchen. The downside of an open kitchen plan, of course, is that the mess of preparing dinner is clearly visible from the dining room. Turning off all lights except the mood lighting is a simple strategy for distracting guests from that sight. 

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