Ultimate Cheapskate Kitchen

A no-frills fix-up creates a bright, efficient workspace for less than $1,800 in fixtures, materials and appliances

BY SCOTT GIBSON



BEFORE

Rescuing a kitchen from the dark side. *Dating to the 1970s, the house's woodwork was stained a uniform, dim brown, a color scheme most apparent in the kitchen. Photo taken at A on floor plan.*

My wife and I took one look at the kitchen in the 1975 Cape we were about to buy and thought it would make a wonderful something else. From the site-built cabinets stained a muddy brown to the red laminate countertops, we could see little worth saving (photo above). It was just plain beat. Our new kitchen would go in a bigger space on the other side of the dining room with access to an outside deck.

Doubts began to intrude when the guy who cleaned the chimney told us the place would burn down unless we replaced all the cracked flue tiles. That was two months after we ran out of water and paid for a new well. We weren't planning on owning the house forever, and another big cash infusion began to look unappealing.

Susan thought it made more sense to see what we could do in our old kitchen—with as little money as possible. I had to admit she had a point. Despite our first reaction, the kitchen had an efficient floor plan, solid cabinets, no structural problems to correct, and adequate wiring and plumbing. A cosmetic upgrade would make a good winter project.

Lighting is first

With few windows, most of the light came from a two-bulb, 4-ft. fluorescent fixture in the middle of the ceiling. Like the dark side of the moon, countertops were in perpetual shadow. I wanted recessed lighting, but preliminary poking around revealed that the ceiling's framing created location problems. What's more, the wiring would have been a challenge. I decided not to tear out the ceiling.

Instead, we opted for track lighting from the local big-box store. A 10-ft. track would run down the middle of the ceiling and intersect a 4-ft. track to create a T. The new lighting could be powered by the same junction box that had supplied the overhead fluorescent. Even better, the three-way switch was already there. Standing in the kitchen doorway, I worried at first that our new fixtures looked like approach lights at the airport. But the adjustable heads cast a lot of light, and for the first time, we could see what we were doing.

We supplemented the overhead lights with low-profile undercabinet fluorescent fixtures. They are hard-wired into an existing switch box near the sink. A 2-in. deep valance painted white hides the fixtures without reducing the light. Even with good overhead lighting, food prep is easier with the undercabinet fixtures. We also replaced an 18-in. fluorescent fixture over the sink with a simple pendant light.

New countertops and backsplash

The red laminate countertops and backsplash were a major eyesore, and they were next to go. We never had been fans of plastic laminate, but in the end, it made the most sense for us. The counter we peeled up had been in place for 25 years, so we knew the material was durable. New laminate was $2 a sq. ft. All the laminate we needed cost less than a couple of square feet of granite or soapstone.

Instead of tearing out the existing substrate, which was sound, I screwed down a new

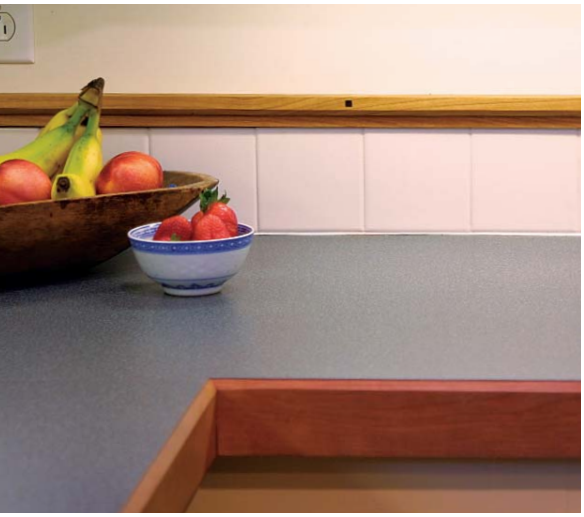
Photo this page: Scott Gibson

AFTER

Pinching pennies and looking good. *With a little planning and some elbow grease, a kitchen renovation can be successful and not break the bank. Photo taken at A on floor plan.*







Hardwood nosing dresses up an inexpensive counter. *To raise the level of detail on the new laminate counter, the author added a beveled cherry nosing. A smaller rail above the backsplash accents the plain white tile. Photo taken at B on floor plan.*

The paying-bills-and-writing-letters portion of the room. *An alcove beside the kitchen is just large enough for a desk that completes the kitchen's set of tasks. Photo taken at C on floor plan.*



Quality hardware is a good investment. *One item critical to any kitchen cabinet's function is hardware. Although an older design, these hinges are well-made and should last another 30 years.*



layer of ¾-in. particleboard and glued down a new layer of laminate; this layering also raised the counter's height to a more comfortable level. The nosing is cherry (photo above left), glued and screwed to the edge of the substrate before the laminate is applied, then beveled with a bearing-guided router bit.

Pulling out the laminate backsplash was satisfying, but it made a mess of the drywall beneath it. Where the drywall could be repaired, we added a skim coat of setting-type drywall compound. Where it was beyond repair, we put in water-resistant drywall. Behind the stove and beneath the upper cabinets on each side, I put in a full-height tile backsplash directly over the drywall. Along the rest of the countertops, I added a single row of 4-in. field tile to create a low backsplash and capped it with cherry.

For $153, we bought a 29-in. by 36-in. piece of maple butcher block to replace the laminate on the kitchen's short peninsula. Another $300 bought a two-bowl porcelain sink and a new faucet. We could have used the old stainless-steel sink, but I bought the new one when Susan wasn't looking.

Paint for the cabinets

Site-built cabinets weren't unusual in the mid-'70s. The ones in our kitchen were made of maple plywood and were still sound. The

entire kitchen had only three drawers but enough cabinet space to store every kitchen odd and end we owned. There was even room for recyclables. Not every drawer front and door were machined perfectly, but mostly what was wrong was the finish and the hardware.

Working on one section at a time, Susan removed the doors, sanded down the old finish, filled holes and repainted with an oil satin paint. She left cabinet interiors alone but painted the front edge of all the cabinet shelves. The process was tedious because we were using the kitchen as the renovation moved along, and oil paint takes a full day to dry. (We kept Jack, our dog, out of the paint.) The new soft yellow color makes an enormous difference. With dingy wallpaper stripped, and walls and ceiling repainted, the room no longer seems oppressive.

The ¾-in. overlay design of the doors limited our choices for new hardware, but we bought hinges in a satin nickel finish (photo bottom left, facing page) for about $3.25 a pair [S] and then added matching door pulls for another $2 each. I also replaced the two battered Lazy Susans in the corner cabinets for about $50 each.

New floor over old

The original flooring was sheet vinyl made to look like clay pavers. It was tired. We settled on commercial vinyl tile [S], the stuff you see in department stores, schools and barbershops. It's durable, and the black-and-white pattern seemed to fit our kitchen's faintly retro look.

Tearing out the old floor seemed like an awful lot of work, and in most places, it was well-bonded to the subfloor. We cut out sections that had started to curl or pull away and filled the voids with a premixed leveling compound [S]. I spread a thin layer of the compound over the entire floor to fill the embossed pattern in the vinyl. If I didn't take this step, the pattern would telegraph through to the new tile. When the compound was dry, adhesive could be spread with a notched trowel and the 12-in. sq. tiles set in place. Tiles could be scored with a utility knife and snapped, just like drywall. We cleaned up rough edges with a block plane or rasp.

The manufacturer recommended the floor be set with a heavy roller, but all I had on hand was the J-roller I use for laminate. It seemed to work fine. Once the adhesive had cured for a few days, Susan cleaned the floor and applied five coats of sealer as recommended by the manufacturer. It brought up a shine and even obscured scratches we'd made by dragging around the refrigerator.

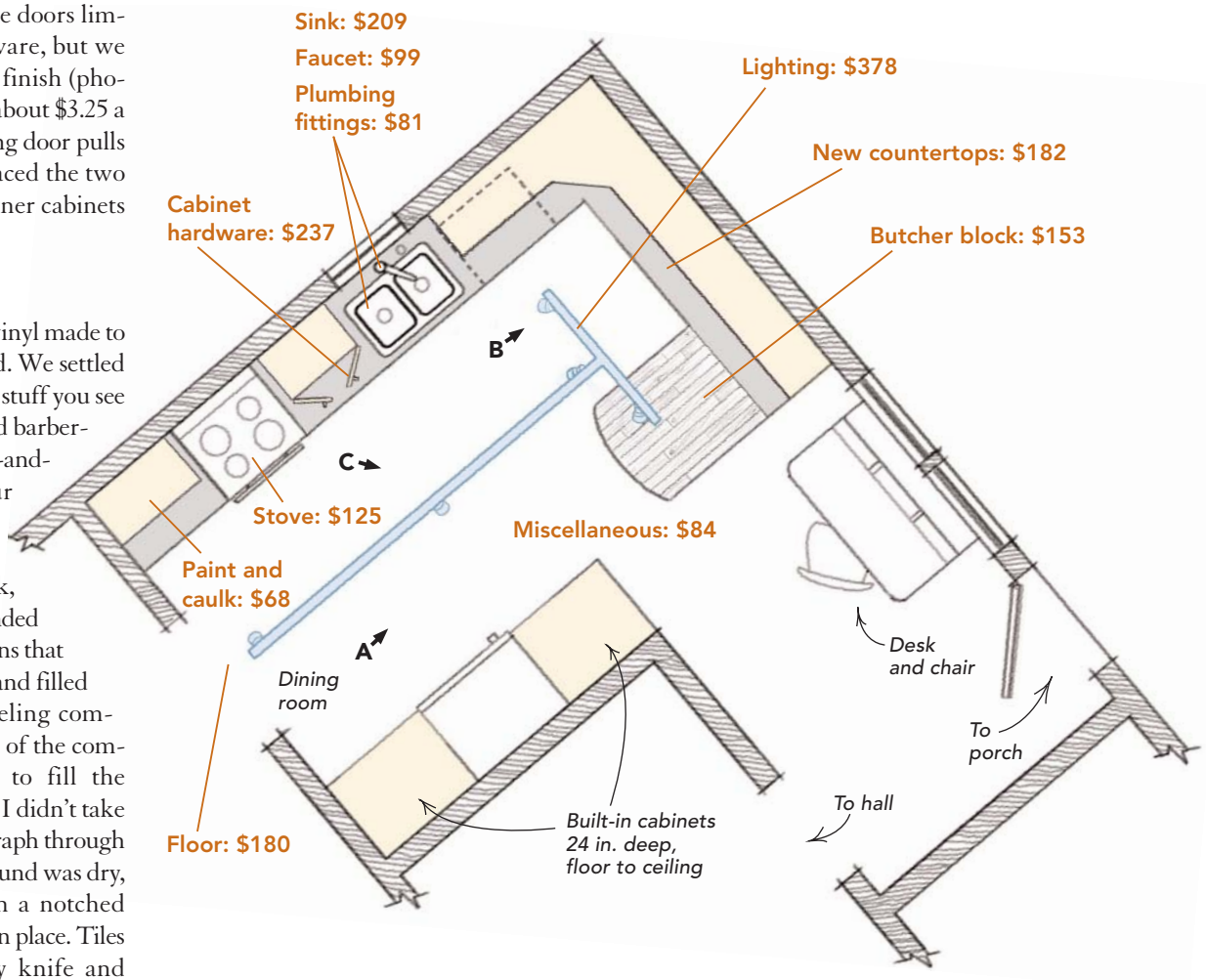
One last thing: a stove that works

I couldn't wait to get rid of the old electric range. Only two of its four burners worked, and then only intermittently. I thought a gas range would be just the ticket, but that would have meant the added expense of running a gas line. Susan found a reconditioned electric range for $125 (the price included removing the old one). It's as basic as a box of oatmeal, but all four burners work beautifully, which is to say when you turn them on. I'd like to replace the dishwasher, too, but it still works. We're hanging on to it for now. □

Scott Gibson, a contributing editor to *Fine Homebuilding*, lives in Maine. Photos by Charles Bickford, except where noted.

TOTAL: $1,796

Faced with a potentially expensive kitchen remodel, Scott and Susan Gibson chose to work with what they had and not spend extra money. The cabinets were structurally sound, the layout was efficient and the space sufficient. A new floor, new counter, more lights and new paint transformed the space.



Sources

Cabinet hardware
Woodworker's Hardware
(800) 383-0130
www.wwhardware.com

Floor
Armstrong Tile
(877) 276-7876
www.armstrong.com

Floor-leveling compound
W. W. Henry Co.
(800) 232-4832
www.wwhenry.com

Drawing: Paul Perreault