

Custom Kitchens & Baths

create your dream kitchen!

58 tips from design pros

how to save a bundle on cabinets

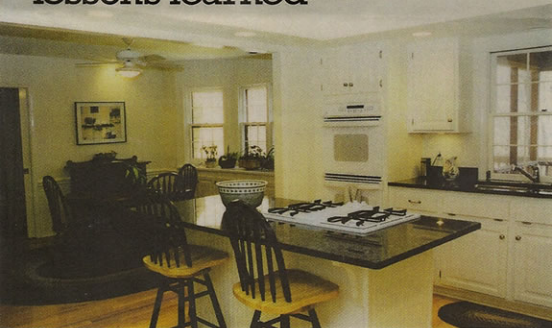
hand-painted tiles: where to find them, what they cost

what's new in microwave ovens



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lessons learned



LEFT: The Wrights are thrilled with their remodeled kitchen, which required raising the ceiling and tearing down a wall. The once-cramped, cave-like kitchen now boasts additional space and bright, repainted cabinets that look new.

the wright stuff

First-time remodelers learn that being your own general contractor requires doing your homework first.



It was a race between relocation and the stork that forced Theo Wright to make a major family decision all alone: to buy, or not to buy, the 15-year-old, five-bedroom, Colonial-style house for his family of four, including toddler Beth and infant son Carl, who was born just a few days before. Theo opted to buy. "He figured we could always remodel," his wife Lisa recalls some six years later.

She also remembers her first look at her new kitchen, with its ersatz detailing, "motel" plastic fluorescent light fixtures, and dark wood cabinets: "Wow!" she said, trying to look on the bright side, "It's, ah, really brown!" Today, she literally sees the bright side. Her house has gained a kitchen and dining area filled with light, gone up an estimated one third in value, and

earned Lisa's unqualified affection: "You couldn't tear me out of here now," she proclaims.

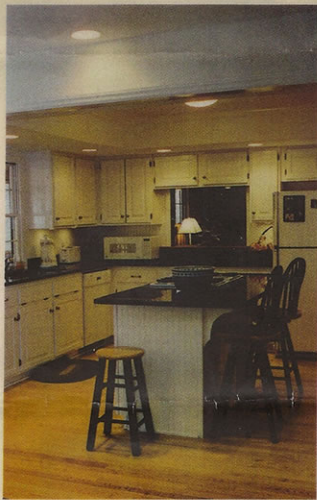
What made the difference was \$18,000—nearly half the price tag that professional contractors had been estimating for the job. "I was getting quotes from \$30,000 to \$35,000!" she recalls. "I was floored! There are many things I could do myself, like painting and papering, but this I knew I couldn't do on my own."

She might be uncomfortable wielding a sledgehammer, but Lisa decided she could handle the role of general contractor—hiring and supervising work crews, and taking bids for discounted materials and appliances. "I'd never done anything like this before," she explains. "But I was going to be home anyway—I had the time and I was willing to trade time for money."

Another element key to her success as a first-time remodeler: the professional advice she received from Fay Hodges, CKD, based in Charlotte, North Carolina. "I knew what I wanted, but I just couldn't picture how it would work. I had seen so many magazines, had so many different ideas, I was really confused." Although she had been taking bids on the project, Lisa says, "I realized I'd better back up and consult a pro." It was one of the best

good advice

The first time she walked into the "really brown" kitchen of the Charlotte, North Carolina, home her husband found while she was in labor, Lisa Wright knew she would remodel it. She didn't expect to become her own general contractor, but that's one reason her great new kitchen materialized in six weeks at about half the cost contractors had quoted. Another reason is good advice from a certified kitchen designer.



FAR LEFT: Old cabinets from a demolished wall were used to create the new center island.

LEFT: Still under construction, the Wrights' kitchen already features its new tray ceiling, which helps give the room the illusion of added space.

20/20 hindsight

- Being your own general contractor can save money, but it takes time and constant attention to details.
- Consult a kitchen design professional, such as a Certified Kitchen Designer (CKD). Even a few hours of consultation can help you clarify your plans. (Contact the National Kitchen & Bath Association at 800-843-6522 or www.nkba.org.)
- Get as many as three or four estimates for each project, including appliance stores. For the best discount, buy all the appliances from one store.
- Insist that the same foreman show up each day. It helps minimize miscommunication.

lessons she would learn. "The designer was awesome! She figured everything out and gave me a sense that it was doable, that I could get what I wanted. She even gave me drawings I could understand."

The designer also suggested several money-saving strategies: repaint instead of replace cabinets; use cabinets left over from the demolished wall to make the work island; gain ceiling height by recessing only the center (saving the \$7,000 cost of taking out the old ceiling). Consulting the kitchen pro turned out to be "the best \$200 I spent on the whole project," Lisa declares.

Now with the new plan in hand, she went back to hiring work crews. Her second lesson learned: "Get a lot of estimates, at least three or four for every project." Lisa was also responsible for managing the workmen's intricately interlocking schedules. Meanwhile, she ordered new appliances for timely delivery. Her advice: "Shop, shop, shop. Ask for the contractor's price, about 10 percent less than regular retail. Let a lot of stores compete for your order, but, ultimately, you should buy all your appliances at the same place. Most dealers will cut you a huge break and maybe throw in, say, a free disposal."

Work began in early November, when one wall was

brought down, opening space into the room next door. The oppressively low overhead was raised to create the illusion of a graceful tray ceiling. Lisa moved the microwave into the dining room and commuted to the old refrigerator for family meals. Still, most of her time was spent cooking up plans for the next remodeling step.

By Thanksgiving, "We had hoped to cook dinner in the new kitchen," says Lisa, who learned that general contractors do earn their money. "It's hard," she confirms, when "some of the workmen didn't want to take orders from a woman." Some things, however, actually went better because the contractor was a woman—with young children to boot. "The workmen were aware of the kids and didn't leave nails and other things lying around." Another lesson learned: Avoid miscommunications with workers by insisting that the same foreman come every day when his crew is working.

By Christmas, all was merry and as bright as Lisa had hoped. "Before, it was like cooking in a cave! I couldn't see if the chicken was done or still pink," she recalls. To celebrate the first post-remodeling Christmas, the entire family came in to cook, Lisa beams. "They couldn't believe it was the same house!"—*Rose Bennett Gilbert*