

Sensitive to history: Remodeling a period kitchen

By CJ Hurley

Period kitchens were not like the great rooms of today, used for entertaining guests and the display of collectibles. They were workrooms used for cooking. So how do we find balance between servicing modern lifestyle needs while being sensitive to the historic integrity of our older homes? No one is expected to live in a time capsule, but when updating a kitchen, it is useful to consider that we are not really owners of our historic homes, but merely stewards for the next generation. Therefore, it is important to preserve what can be saved and replace only what needs replacing. Keeping in mind what came before fosters sensitivity to history and is the best aid in maintaining period authenticity.

Defining the scope of the project

When attempting to rehabilitate a vintage kitchen, it's important to establish if the project will be a preservation, restoration or remodel.

Preservation means sustaining the kitchen's original features and requires that things are still intact. Since most kitchens have been altered over the years, preservation is rarely undertaken. Restoration takes an altered kitchen back to its original form. Period photographs and interviews with former occupants or neighbors, with strong memories of what was there, will aid the process. Gathering facts regarding the original details can be arduous, yet fulfilling, work. The remodel is the most common form of rehabilitation. Remodeling redesigns the no-longer-practical kitchen that requires upgrades to meet modern needs. Remodels, often called "remuddles," are notorious for their insensitivity to architectural history. They needn't be. A remodel can be kept in harmony with the time period of the house by developing sensitivity to the characteristics of vintage kitchens.



This virtually untouched period kitchen showcases numerable original features. Continuous lower cabinetry has galvanized metal grain bins and hexagonal tile countertops; above, closed-front cabinetry stretches to the ceiling, providing hidden storage and protection from dust. Another area features a built-in ice-chest and ironing board. This kitchen can be seen on the Architectural Heritage Center's Kitchen Revival Tour. — Photo by Rosalie Wampler

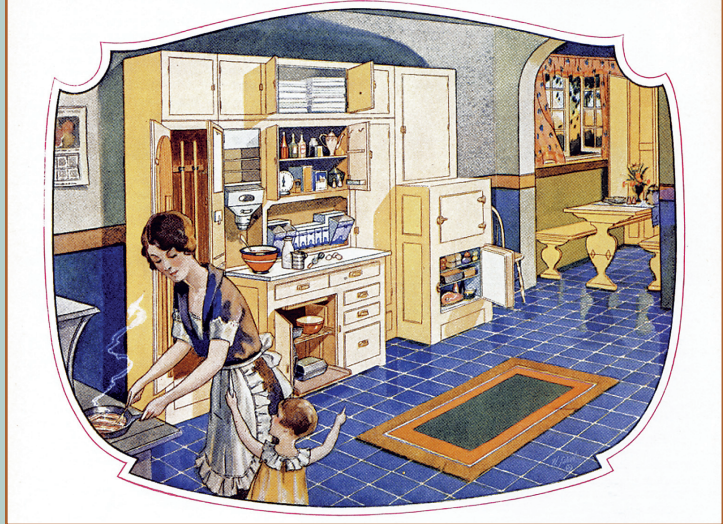


This 1910 kitchen boasts original fir cabinetry with grain bin and drawer storage on the lower portion and glass-front storage on the upper portion. The porcelain-on-cast-iron farmhouse sink is a period reproduction mounted over cabinetry rather than on more traditional cast-iron legs. Wall-mounted faucets are set in a backsplash of standard, white, 3-inch-by-6-inch subway tiles. This kitchen can be seen on the Architectural Heritage Center's Kitchen Revival Tour. — Photo by Karla Pearlstein

For more information

View an expanded version of this article, along with a list of materials for remodeling a period kitchen, at the Architectural Heritage Center's Web site: <http://visitahc.org/content/kitchen-revival-tour-2010>. With his wife Barbara Pierce, CJ Hurley operates CJ Hurley Century Arts (www.cjhurley.com), a small studio specializing in color and design consultation for the restoration of vintage homes from the 1850s-1950.

The Correct Kitchen for the Modern Home



A circa-1920 kitchen design from a builders' catalog advertises the ideal modern kitchen. Freestanding cabinetry is painted white and features items found in Hoosier cabinets. Flower bins, spice racks, sifter bins, meat grinders, breadboxes and assorted dry-good bins were standard. Note the storage for brooms and mops, linens, sliding shelves for mixing bowls and the ice chest for cold storage. Blue floor tiles are period fashion and lead to an eating nook for informal meals. — Courtesy Architectural Heritage Center

The sensitive remodel

Developing sensitivity to vintage character is the key to an authentic remodel. Learning to cherish a kitchen for what it is, while resisting the urge to alter the home's original footprint, will help retain its historicism. Kitchens with historic integrity are kept separate from the formal areas of the home and should afford ample room for all of the cabinetry, countertops, dishwashers and refrigeration needed today. There should be room enough for an informal eat-in area, as many kitchens came with one. Since period kitchens were smaller, resist expansion; a kitchen that is too large will be out of proportion to the rest of the home. If need requires increasing size, refrain from cutting into formal rooms to gain space. Instead, move into a pantry or mudroom area and keep the rest of the house intact. If an addition is required, it will require extra sensitivity to retain the home's historic qualities. It may be wise to invest in a designer with expertise in architectural history to help ensure a successful outcome.

Avoid conforming to modern standards and trends by relishing in the unique characteristics of older homes. The kitchen should be easy to clean, uncluttered and user friendly. If luck spared the original cabinetry or other fittings, restore them. Cabinetry and other accoutrements were well built, but not precious. They should be simple and sturdy, in league with their function. Reserving finery for the formal rooms while investing in practical, period-friendly materials will produce a kitchen with historic sensibilities, leaving a home to be cherished by the next generation.

Kitchen Revival Tour

What: Architectural Heritage Center's 12th Annual Kitchen Revival Tour. See what other people have done with their period kitchens. The tour will include eight homes representing various time periods and home styles.
Date: Saturday, April 10
Time: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
Where: Tour starts at Architectural Heritage Center, 701 S.E. Grand Ave.
Tickets: \$20/Architectural Heritage Center members, \$25/general public. Pre-registration strongly recommended.
More information: <http://visitahc.org/content/kitchen-revival-tour-2010>. (503) 231-7264