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In a Tiny Kitchen, Lots of Idea Room

By **STEVEN KURUTZ**

AS veteran New Yorkers know, apartments are much like romantic partners: you are unlikely to get everything on your checklist, no matter how far and wide you search.

Consider the brownstone apartment in Brooklyn Heights that I call home. To put it in overheated real-estate broker language, or what the blog [Curbed.com](#) calls “brokerbabble,” the third-floor apartment is on a “tree-lined block” and has “well-proportioned rooms,” “great light,” “charming architectural details” and “responsive on-site landlords.”

When I found it on Craigslist two years ago, after an exhausting hunt of several months, I wasn’t fazed by the dark, narrow kitchen that hadn’t been updated since the early 1960s.

No problem, I thought. I’m not a big cook, and I don’t hold dinner parties. There wasn’t even enough space for a microwave, but then again, I don’t use one. And the two metal cabinets stuck on the wall seemingly at random had a certain period charm.

Over time, the drawbacks became more noticeable.

The kitchen, which sits between the bedroom and the living room, is tiny and barren-feeling, with only the two poorly configured cabinets above the sink and nothing on the opposite wall. There’s not much in the way of prep or counter space, so if I wanted to whip up any meal more elaborate than a reheated chicken cutlet, it would be difficult. And while I don’t care about having a microwave, there is no space for culinary gadgets of any kind — not even a toaster.

Because I plan to stay in the apartment for a while, I’ve been thinking about what I could do to update the kitchen and make it more functional. My landlords, a kindly older couple who live on the bottom two floors and take meticulous care of the five-story building they bought in the 1960s, seemed willing to entertain a proposal.

My goals were modest: I wanted modern-looking cabinets that would maximize storage in the 95-square-foot space, at least a little counter space and new flooring to replace the tired linoleum. To that end, I consulted with three experts, each at a different price level, and asked them to create a plan to transform the space.

THE MIDDLE ROAD

“It’s a kitchen in a hallway,” said Gita Nandan, standing in front of my stove one morning last summer, holding a clipboard.

Ms. Nandan, a partner in Thread Collective, a Brooklyn design firm specializing in sustainable architecture, was equally direct about the other challenges. “When you have these mini kitchens,” she said, “by the time you get in the stove and sink and refrigerator, you only have a 24- or 48-inch space left over for doing everything else.”

While Thread Collective does a range of projects, usually larger than kitchen renovations, I admired kitchens the firm had designed for a Brooklyn row house and a small city apartment. And I wanted the advice of an architect before speaking with someone who specialized in kitchen design because, like superheroes, architects can see through walls and imagine another spatial reality.

So how about blowing out the room to get more square footage? How about an open kitchen?

“In this situation,” Ms. Nandan said politely, “you’re probably not going to do any of that.” The budget we agreed on, about \$20,000, prohibited a “monster renovation.”

Instead, her redesign would work within the existing parameters, she said, while being “super space-efficient and super functional. You have to make sure that every nook and cranny is designed in a way that can be used for storage or built-ins or hidden things that can pull out.”

Still, Ms. Nandan identified two easy structural changes I hadn’t considered. By moving the doorways on either side of the kitchen a foot in one direction, a recessed nook could be created on the empty wall. There, built-in cabinets would provide storage, shelving and a shallow pantry.

She also suggested knocking out part of that wall and pushing into the bedroom closet, so the refrigerator could be moved into the recessed space, where it would be flush with the built-ins. “You could put a wood-panel door on it so it looks like a piece of cabinetry,” she said.

After snapping some photos, she scheduled an appointment for an assistant to take measurements and told me her firm would come up with several proposals. Two weeks later, we met at her office in Bushwick, where she presented three plans.

The first had the built-in pantry, with upper and lower cabinets and a counter in between, but it left the refrigerator where it was. It gave me much-needed counter space, and by not knocking into the closet, I’d be cutting the cost in half. But I’d also be forfeiting the extra prep space and sleek look of a built-in that would result from moving the fridge.

Ms. Nandan agreed. “It still has the same sensibility as your cheapest, dumbest kitchen, because it’s the same shape objects next to each other,” she said.

The second, “expanded” plan moved the refrigerator into the closet, creating an additional two feet of counter space. It also altered the configuration of the pantry wall: there were still upper cabinets, but the lower ones were gone and the center countertop was cantilevered and extended into the foyer. This lightened the space visually, and connected it to the living area, without overwhelming the room with a wall of wood.

A slightly altered version of that plan took the top cabinets to the ceiling to create more storage.

All three plans had a Verona oven, a Miele cooktop and a Heath tile backsplash, and they replaced the linoleum with hardwood that matched the flooring throughout the apartment.

Because I was spending theoretical money (and theoretical money belonging to my landlord, no less), I chose the expanded plan without the cabinets extending to the ceiling.

Total cost: \$20,000 for materials and installation, \$7,000 for the architect’s fee.

ON THE CHEAP

In one of my meetings with Ms. Nandan, she mentioned that her firm sometimes designed custom kitchens that combined inexpensive Ikea cabinets with a high-end backsplash. “You wouldn’t even know it was Ikea,” she said. Because my landlord is unlikely to pay \$25,000, this option seemed like one to explore.

But anyone who has visited the mammoth Ikea store in Red Hook, Brooklyn, knows that cheap comes at a price. The vexing, mazelike aisles reminded me of lab-rat experiments, and the salesclerks were like apparitions flashing by.

For this reason, I opted not to use the Ikea kitchen planner, a self-guided in-store computer program that was likely to cause stroke-level stress. Instead, I signed up for the company’s measuring service (which is about \$50, but is reimbursable if you buy a kitchen) and the personal planning consultation (for about \$200).

Which is how a man named Cezary with a thick eastern European accent came to be standing in my kitchen, wielding a tape measure the way a samurai wields a Katana sword.

Cezary is an employee of Everlast Contracting, a company Ikea has outsourced its installations to in the New York area. He was unmoved by my kitchen and my attempts to elicit sympathy. “I’ve seen worse,” he said, looking around. “No rats here.”

He began rattling off a dizzying list of options and measurements (“If you want the 39-inch cabinets so you can have more storage, usually you hang them 18 inches above the counter. You’ll have an 18-inch backsplash and 10 inches on top ...”), while recording my kitchen’s dimensions with impressive speed.

“Now let’s talk about appliances,” Cezary said.

Wait. We’re done with the cabinets?

Cezary, it quickly became evident, wouldn’t be guiding the design the way an architect does. He was more like a walking Ikea catalog, spitting out product specs. Or, as he put it: “I just present you an option, so you can decide.”

But I had Ms. Nandan’s design to use as a road map.

The main choice was between one row of cabinets above the sink or a “double stack” reaching to the ceiling. Not wanting the room to feel closed in, I chose a single row, trading storage for a 10-inch breathing space above the cabinets. There would also be a new sink, a small counter beside it and new cabinets below.

The built-in pantry that Ms. Nandan envisioned for the far wall wasn’t an option, but Ikea kitchens are customizable, and on a visit to the store I had seen a floating counter-and-shelving unit I liked. With a few snaps of his tape measure, Cezary came up with the best height and length for my kitchen.

We discussed other details, including a backsplash and flooring that I would buy and Everlast would install, and several days later Cezary e-mailed me detailed plans. I was to bring them to Ikea, where I would select cabinets, a countertop, a sink and fixtures.

Back at the store, I once again received nominal guidance. Any questions beyond price and materials received only vague answers, and I was more or less on my own to figure out things like the difference between Caesarstone and granite, and whether the counter finish would look better in “cloud white” or “meter gray.”

I finally settled on medium-brown plywood cabinets and Caesarstone “blizzard” counters, along with a sink, faucet and cabinet handles. But the cost (\$1,460 for the countertop, \$2,540.70 for the cabinets and other items, plus the \$3,313 installation fee quoted by Cezary — \$7,313.70 altogether) seemed far too high for the bargain version of a tiny kitchen.

My landlord’s handyman could do some of the installation, I realized, which would help reduce the cost. But I also went back to Ikea and picked out a less expensive counter in particleboard, pressed-wood cabinets and a sink that was \$100 cheaper.

I briefly mourned the pricier kitchen, but the cheaper plan felt more realistic and would still be a big improvement. Maybe I’d get a toaster, and stop making toast over the gas stove using tongs, campfire-style.

Total cost: \$2,398.70 for materials (minus flooring and backsplash), \$2,113 for installation.

THE HIGH LIFE

Let's pretend for a moment that I have the most unbelievably generous landlords in the history of New York City rentals, and they hand me a blank check to renovate the kitchen. How much luxury could I stuff into 95 square feet?

I posed this question to Roger Zierman, a designer for Poggenpohl, the 120-year-old German company that practically invented the modern luxury kitchen.

Like the other consultants, Mr. Zierman quickly sized up my tiny kitchen. Told there were absolutely no budget restrictions, his smile turned carnal. "We're not going to do your standard white kitchen," he said, gears turning. "It can't just work well. It has to be a sexy kitchen."

Days later, I met him at the company's clean, modern showroom on Park Avenue South. The occasion had all the solemnity, mixed with rising giddiness, of those moments when you are about to spend a boatload of cash. (It's remarkable how pretending to spend money produces the same rush as actually doing it, without the queasy aftereffects.)

"My goal for this meeting is to choose finishes," Mr. Zierman said.

Spread out on a table were samples. For the cabinets, he suggested a quarter-sawn "holm" oak with a grayish-white stain or a sandblasted "terra" pine, and aluminum for the backsplash, which has a "softer look," he said, than stainless steel. The creamy Caesarstone he picked out for the counter was similar to the blizzard style I had chosen at Ikea.

I agreed with Mr. Zierman's choices, except for the cabinets. I have an unlimited budget, I reminded him. Doesn't Poggenpohl offer a more impressive finish — say, rhino tusk?

Mr. Zierman steered me to the "exotics," starting with Zebrano, which replicates the look of zebra wood, an endangered species, by stacking numerous layers of poplar.

I pointed to a wood with the warm hue of a California sunset. What's that?

"Swiss pear," Mr. Zierman said. "They do it in a satin finish or in a high-gloss. There are nine price groups in Poggenpohl. Swiss pear is a nine."

Bingo.

"This could be kind of fun," he said. "I wouldn't want to do a ton of it, to be quite honest. It should be something special. I think I know how I might use it in your kitchen."

Two weeks later, he presented me with a finished design. Some of the elements recalled Ms. Nandan's plan, like moving the doorways to create built-ins on the far wall and breaking into the bedroom closet to accommodate a 27-inch Sub-Zero refrigerator.

The built-ins included an almost floor-to-ceiling pantry 30 inches wide and a foot deep, plenty of cabinets (in Swiss pear, with a matching horizontal grain) and a floating shelf that extended to the foyer, to hold mail and keys. “You’ll walk into the apartment and see that, and it draws your eye into the kitchen,” Mr. Zierman said.

But the biggest revelation was the working side of the kitchen. Along the bottom was a 24-inch Miele oven and gas cooktop, drawers for utensil storage and a dishwasher by Fisher & Paykel compact enough to fit in a single drawer.

On the wall above were two simple cabinets, much like the ones I have now, although these were made of high-gloss lacquer with lighted glass shelves and sliding doors, a minimal look Mr. Zierman was able to achieve by shifting storage to the pantry on the opposite wall.

Still, the starkness of the design troubled me. Why was I spending so much imaginary money on a kitchen that sort of resembled the one I have now?

“There’s something about the luxury of space,” Mr. Zierman told me. “You’re almost saying, ‘I don’t need to use that space.’”

And I had to admit, the Swiss pear was nice, too.

Mr. Zierman laughed. “You might need a Swiss bank account to pay for it.”

Total cost: \$62,381.76 for materials, \$6,300 for installation.

Tips on Solving Your Appliance Puzzle

TAKE a moment to drool over the double-wide refrigerators and commercial-grade ovens in the kitchens of your suburban friends. Now forget about them. In the city kitchen, appliances must fit into the space like tiny pieces of a tiny puzzle. We asked experts for tips on their favorite brands and styles, and what to prioritize when renovating an apartment kitchen.

OVENS Gita Nandan, a partner in Thread Collective, an architecture firm in Brooklyn, recommends Bertazzoni ranges, which are expensive (around \$2,300 for a 24-inch model), but have cleaner lines than many other brands, and she’s heard good reviews from clients about the performance of Wolf ranges. She suggested avoiding ovens that have knobs and controls on a raised back panel, as opposed to the front, because they look bulky and take up potential shelf space.

Keith Steier, general manager for Knockout Renovation, a Manhattan firm, prefers Viking ranges for their precise temperature control. He also cited the GE Cafe as a favorite (around \$2,500 for the 30-inch model). If a range doesn’t come in the space-saving 24-inch option, Mr. Steier said, don’t rule it out. “If you do a fair amount of cooking, I would recommend saving space with the

dishwasher, not the stove,” he said. “A cook doesn’t like to be squeezed into the corner.”

Because it’s hard to install an external duct in most New York apartments, a recirculating oven hood is the best alternative. Mr. Steier advised finding one with both aluminum mesh and charcoal filters, and recommended Zephyr and Jenn-Air.

REFRIGERATORS Ms. Nandan and Mr. Steier recommended Liebherr refrigerators as a good option for someone with a small New York kitchen. “They make a fantastic counter-depth refrigerator,” Mr. Steier said. “LG makes a nice one, too.” (The Liebherr model sells for around \$2,900, and the LG for about \$2,000.)

Roger Zierman, a designer for Poggenpohl, the German kitchen company, favors Sub-Zero because “they are really devoted to refrigeration,” he said. The 27-inch model (around \$6,000) is the ideal size for small kitchens, he added, if a bit expensive. And while Sub-Zero has a reputation for frequent breakdowns, Mr. Steier said, recently the company seems to have been ironing out the problems.

DISHWASHERS Mr. Zierman recommends the Fisher & Paykel single-drawer unit (around \$650), which leaves room for storage underneath. He’s also a fan of Miele dishwashers, he said, because “Miele’s reputation is water” (around \$1,000 for a 24-inch model).

Mr. Steier agreed about the quality of Miele products, noting that the dishwasher is not the place to choose the budget option. “Something that could potentially flood, it’s a good place to put money,” he said. A dishwasher that is efficient in its energy and water use is a must, Ms. Nandan said, as is a model that offers plenty of heat and cycle settings. And “if you can get one that accepts a cabinetry panel, it will look seamless,” she added.