

Ten Ways to Improve Your Kitchen

Expensive appliances and stone counters won't add up to a dream kitchen if the counters are too low and there aren't enough sinks

BY JANE K. LANGMUIR



A gathering space amid the action. Surrounded by counters of different heights, this kitchen has a breakfast table at its heart. On the far wall, a long, shallow prep sink is topped by a slatted pot rack.

Like others born in 1935, the average American kitchen is 65 years old and eligible for retirement. That's the date a federal task force working on behalf of President Herbert Hoover set the standards used to design most kitchens. Hoover's aim was to pump some life into the depressed economy by putting American men to work building kitchens for American women. Standardized cabinets and appliances were at the core of the idea.

The result was the demise of the traditional unfitted kitchen, in which individual pieces of furniture comprised a kitchen's storage space and work surfaces. In its place, the fitted kitchen emerged, with its linear runs of built-in base and wall cabinets separating the triangle of sink, stove and refrigerator. For 50 years, the only things that changed were colors, trim styles and materials. But there are signs that that era is over.

The kitchen is now the most-used room in the home. It is everyone's domain. It is the place for nurturing body, mind and soul. It is communication and food central—ground zero for planning and scheduling, the center for social contact and information, and last but certainly not least, the workplace with the engines that prepare our meals.

Beginning in 1993, I directed a five-year study at the Rhode Island School of Design that eventually included more than 100 students and faculty members. Our goal was to identify the reasons that kitchens are typically bastions of poor design. All too often, our kitchens make us bend, stoop, retrace our steps and work in poor light at counters that are too high or too low. Based on what we learned in our studies and on the lessons I've learned as a designer, I offer these ten ways to help move your kitchen into the 21st century.

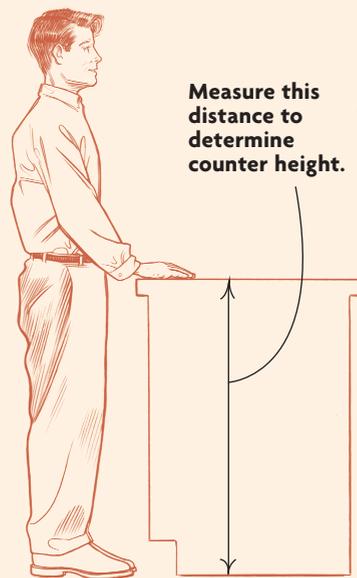
1. Consider the comfort zone

For a kitchen to be your own, it has to fit your comfort zone. What's a comfort zone? It is the space defined by the comfortable reach between one hand raised above your head and the other dropped to your side (drawing below). This range applies to both sitting and standing; the key is that everybody has a different comfort zone. This means you should adjust a kitchen's components to fit its primary user. To that end, start by:

- Getting rid of upper cabinets, or pulling out the counter a bit and bringing the cabinets down to counter level (photo p. 47).
- Storing less-essential tools, dishes, cookware and foodstuffs in tall, pull-out storage

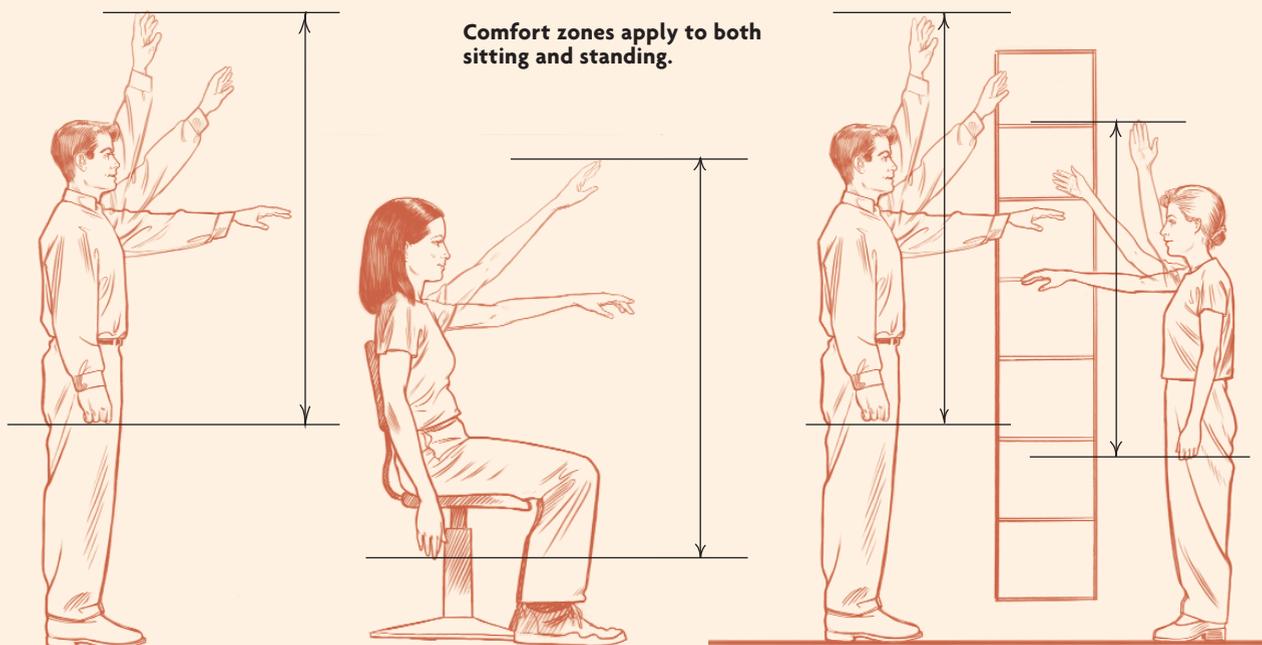
Find the counter height that's right for you

The primary work height is the height of the counter that is best for most food preparation. Calculate it by resting your palms on a horizontal surface with a slight break in your elbows. Then measure the distance from the surface to the floor.



STORE KITCHEN SUPPLIES IN THE COMFORT ZONE

The comfort zone is the space defined by the comfortable reach between one hand raised above your head and the other dropped to your side. Use these measurements to locate storage areas for your most-frequently needed supplies and utensils.



units or in pantries away from work zones. Everybody can find their comfort-zone range within either of these storage options.

2. Who needs a 36-in. high counter?

The standards set back in the '30s called for a 36-in. counter height. It was set to meet the ergonomic needs of the average homemaker. She was 5 ft. 4 in. to 5 ft. 5 in. tall and fully able. Today, we are designing for a much broader population range, and we need to acknowledge that everyone's needs are different. In fact, each person should have a minimum of three different counter heights for performing kitchen tasks.

First, you want to establish the primary counter height by resting the palms of your hands on a horizontal surface with a slight break in your elbows (top drawing, p. 45). Next, have someone measure the distance from the floor to the surface. This counter height is best for most prepping.

At the sink, the height of the counter should ideally be 3 in. to 5 in. higher depending on the depth of the sink. For cooking, the counter height should be 2 in. or 3 in. lower so that you can easily see in the cooking pots and so that you can have increased reach with a utensil in hand.

3. Shrink the kitchen triangle

The triangle has been the basis for organizing the kitchen footprint since the beginning of fitted kitchens. The theory is that the work areas should be inside a triangle that

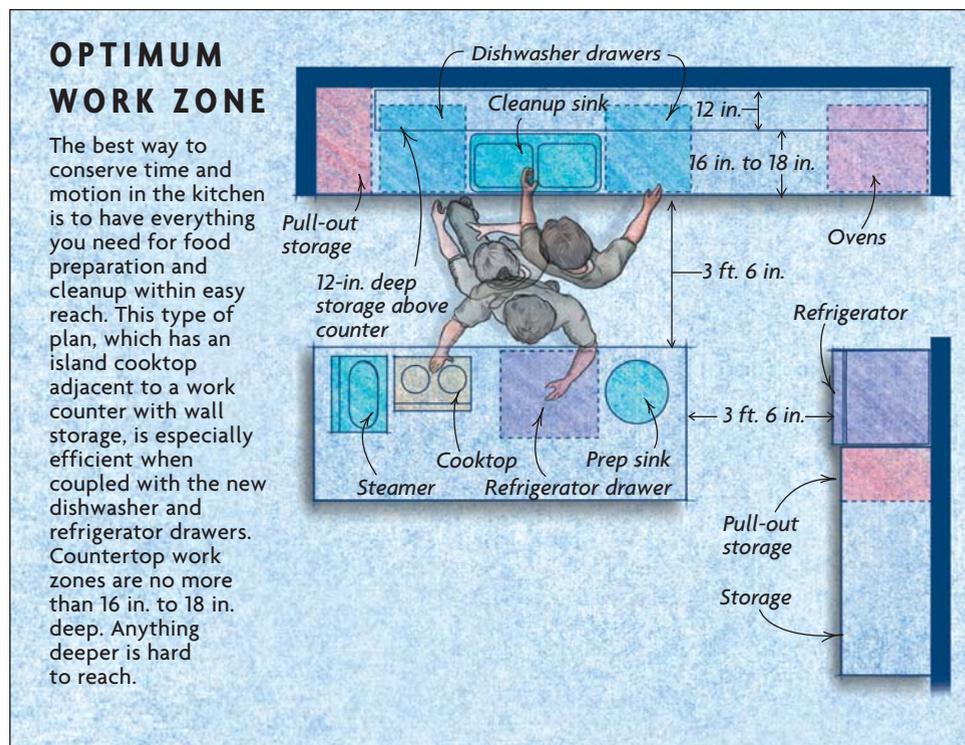
connects the refrigerator, sink and stove. This arrangement supposedly yields the most efficient work flow. But over time, this triangle connection has been undermined as kitchens have grown. Contemporary kitchens often have more counter space between the three points of the triangle. An island in the center of the kitchen will further impede traffic between the stove, the sink and the refrigerator.

We conducted time and motion studies in our kitchen project and concluded that you can reduce by half the time taken to prepare a simple meal by eliminating unnecessary walking. The way to do this is to make sure you have the essential elements for preparing a meal within reach of your work zone. Frequently used foods and condiments, water, utensils, pots, pans and a cooktop should all be within reach. A good layout for a kitchen is an island backed up by a work and storage wall (drawing below).

4. Water, water everywhere

There is not one task in the kitchen that doesn't require water. So isn't it odd that there is usually only one sink or water source in a kitchen? For food preparation, I prefer a long, troughlike sink that isn't too deep—4 in. to 5 in. at the most (photo p. 48). I don't know of any commercially available sinks like this. We had the one shown here fabricated by a local metal shop out of stainless steel.

Keep in mind the cleanup sink should not be used as a holding dishwasher. Instead,





Put essentials within easy reach. Bringing the upper cabinets down to counter height makes it easy to grab frequently needed supplies. As a bonus, lowering the upper cabinets makes room for a row of windows. Open shelves below the cooktop provide ready access to pots and pans.



A flexible prep sink. Long and shallow, this custom-made stainless-steel sink is designed specifically for preparing food. Generous drain boards and a pair of chopping blocks make additional work surfaces.

consider the dishwasher as a holding sink. This usage frees the sink, or sinks, for prepping and cleaning, ready for the next task.

5. A cart offers flexibility

A cart with a work surface can serve several functions in the kitchen (photo right). It can act as a ferry between two work surfaces, allowing for easy conveyance of hot, heavy pots. It can become an additional work surface when necessary. More elaborate versions can be made with adjustable-height work surfaces, or even refrigeration or cooking capabilities.

The cart shown here serves yet another function: It has twin trash receptacles that ride on heavy-duty drawer slides. And trash/recycling/composting space in the kitchen is right up there with water in importance. When not in use, the cart should slip under a counter out of the way.

6. Watch out for the doors

It would be a great boon in the kitchen if doors could disappear at the click of a switch or on the command of a voice. Alas, we are not there yet. However, there are solutions to get rid of the knee and shin bangers.

- If at all possible, don't place the oven below the counter. A wall oven within your comfort zone is much better.
- Raise the dishwasher 6 in. to 10 in. off the floor. This placement will save your shins and a lot of unnecessary bending.



Carts provide storage and work surface. A rolling workstation such as this one can expand counter space as needed or act as a truck to ferry heavy, hot pots from one part of the kitchen to another. This cart is outfitted with trash bins on heavy-duty drawer pulls at each end.



Pots and pans at the ready. Above the prep sink, a pot rack is purposefully positioned to let freshly washed cookware drain harmlessly into the sink. Pans rest on teak slats in their own cubby holes.

- Eliminate all door-and-drawer combinations. You will save the doors from getting banged around and also the time it takes to accomplish two operations. Whenever possible, a drawer below counter height is a better option than a cabinet shelf.

7. Appliances that make it work

There are several great appliances that have been introduced to the marketplace in the past few years that make working in the kitchen a dream. They are still a bit pricey, but if you can afford them, they're worth it. And as they gain acceptance, competition will likely force down prices.

- Sub-Zero's 700 series refrigerator drawers can be placed under the counter in your work zone, bringing fresh produce to the task at hand (photo right, p. 50).
- Fisher-Paykel's drawer dishwashers can be placed under the counter in the prep or cleanup zone. They provide easy, visible access with no bending or shin-cracking doors, and they are great as holding sinks until you are ready to run a cycle of dishes (photo bottom left, p. 50).

- Two-burner cooktops and individual grills and griddles (photo p. 51), such as General Electric's Monogram series and Maytag's Expressions Collection series, have several advantages over conventional cooktops. First, you can turn the units 90° so that you don't have to reach over hot burners. Second, you can select different fuel options, such as a high-Btu gas burner for wok cooking or an electric burner for boiling water. And third, you have the option of placing different units for different tasks wherever you like.

- Another modular appliance that can add convenience to your kitchen in Gaggenau's VK 111 built-in steamer (photo top left, p. 50). At approximately 20 in. by 12 in., the unit takes up little space. You can cook a variety of foods in it, from rice to fish to vegetables. And it can be hooked up to a drain line for easy cleanup.

8. Use materials that combine beauty and durability

There are a number of interesting new materials flooding the marketplace, but none can beat the inherent qualities of natural materi-

A built-in steamer that's easy to clean. Mounted in a counter, Gaggenau's electric steamer expands a cook's options and frees up cooktop space. The steamer can be hooked up to a drain for easy cleanup.



Pullout fridge. Sub-Zero's refrigerator drawers let you strategically place fresh foods near kitchen work zones.

A drawer full of dirty dishes will get clean if they're in Fisher-Paykel's dishwasher drawer (photo left).

als for their efficiency, durability, sustainability and beauty.

WOOD is excellent for all surfaces: counters, cabinet doors and drawers, and floors. Whether painted or left natural, it brings warmth and color. Wood can easily be refurbished, lasting a lifetime.

STAINLESS STEEL, as a countertop material, is easy to clean and nonporous, withstands hot and cold, and lasts a lifetime.

GLASS panels in cabinet doors are a delight in a kitchen, especially if the cabinets include glass shelves and are lighted from within. Either transparent or translucent glass does the trick. You can see where things are, and especially in small dark places, the transparency creates lightness and brightness.

STONE makes a great counter, bringing warmth and personal color choice. One caution: It can discolor and hold stains.

TILE, whether ceramic or stone, will add color and durability to a kitchen. But try to

avoid it on horizontal work surfaces, where its grout joints are hard to keep clean. Tile is best used as a backsplash or wall finish behind a sink or a stove.

9. Good kitchens need good lighting

If they have not been recently remodeled, most kitchens suffer from bad lighting. The common kitchen-lighting scheme is one light in the center of the ceiling and maybe a light over the sink. That's not enough. There should be three types of lighting in the kitchen:

- **GENERAL CEILING LIGHTING** provides light for passage and overall clarity.

- **TASK LIGHTING** over counter or under upper cabinets highlights specific work zones.

- **MOOD LIGHTING** changes the kitchen from a workplace to a place for meals from simple supports to fine dining or a social gathering.

These uses can all be achieved by recessed lights or by a combination of recessed, surface-mount, pendant, cable or track lighting.

Each type of lighting should be switched separately with light levels controlled by dimmer switches. (For an in-depth look at kitchen lighting, please turn to pp. 68-73.)

10. The kitchen window isn't what it used to be

A window centered over the kitchen sink is fine, but it isn't the driving design force that it once was. The new window view is the kitchen itself (photo p. 44) and all that is going on: the kids eating or playing, friends or family helping, guests relaxing or just enjoying the layers of light and complexity from the other windows within sight. Use this concept to create places within the kitchen that people want to occupy. □

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A cooking wall. Modular burners can be arranged in the traditional front/back relationship, or turned sideways to make a cooktop that is one burner deep.