

# Bang for the Buck.



## Professional Remodeler

January 1, 2009

By Wendy A. Jordan, Senior Contributing Editor

A luxurious remodeled kitchen cost surprisingly little

The remodeled kitchen in the Fletchers' 1967 Denver tri-level not only looks great, but "given all they did, it was a screaming bargain," says architect **Doug Walter**, AIA, of **Doug Walter Architects** in Denver. Even remodeler Micah Flenard says, "I was pretty surprised that they got it done for under \$100,000." The \$80,500 kitchen was rejected from consideration in the under-\$100,000 category of a design competition because the contest sponsor couldn't believe it cost so little.

How did Flenard and **Walter** deliver such bang for the buck? Clever retooling of space, smart product choices and impressive problem solving.

Over the years, **Walter** had updated other rooms in the home, but except for a tunnel-like skylight and some new finishes the homeowners added when they bought the house in 1981, Stan and Lois Fletcher had left the kitchen as-is -- cramped, dim and dated. When they became empty-nesters, they started looking for a house with a good kitchen. Soon they realized that any affordable house in an equally desirable in-town location would require remodeling anyway, so they decided to stay put and fix the problem kitchen.

### Pinpointing the Problems

The Fletchers asked **Doug Walter** to make their kitchen feel bigger and function better; improve the traffic flow; upgrade the finishes; and add light. He used a six-page questionnaire to probe their lifestyle and kitchen preferences more deeply.

**Walter** spotted three design fixes right away. One was overhead. "The kitchen had an oppressively low ceiling" -- 7 feet, 3 inches -- says **Walter**. "You felt trapped." A vaulted ceiling in the adjacent living room made the 15- by 20-foot kitchen seem all the more compressed. With no truss roof and nothing but unused attic space over the kitchen, the

solution to create a vaulted ceiling in the kitchen was clear, **Walter** says. This would add volume and skylight opportunities without costing too much.

The second way to gain space was to remove the 6-by-6-foot pantry and laundry room, which took a big bite out of the kitchen and confined the workspace. **Walter** moved the laundry area upstairs to a closet by the master bedroom and replaced the pantry shelves with floor-to-ceiling cabinets along the kitchen wall.

Third, he suggested moving the wall between kitchen and garage, stealing a 15-inch strip of space from the garage to gain much-needed kitchen room and allow the proposed kitchen island to be a safe distance from the stairs.

Before fleshing out the kitchen design, **Walter** asked the Fletchers to select all the appliances so he could determine appliance placement and the cabinet supplier, BKC Kitchen and Bath of Englewood, Colo., could work up precise cabinet measurements. "I had a lot of pushback on this," he says. Stan admits that "it seemed odd going to get the appliances" so early. He gets it now. "It probably would have slowed things considerably not to mention adding cost if the choices were done during the job." The Fletchers chose complementary stainless steel appliances including a slim, space-saving microwave and elegant wall ovens with bowed front. They picked quality cherry cabinets in a simple, not-too-pricey Shaker style.

**Walter** and staff architect Eben Casperson gave the Fletchers seven design variations to consider. That's standard for **Walter**. "You want to make your mistakes on paper," he tells clients, before production starts. Taping out the plans on the backyard grass, the Fletchers narrowed it down to three. We were trying to figure out walking patterns between appliances and whether we wanted [a table-height] eating space on the island" Lois says. They opted for a separate breakfast table, a large island with cooktop, a generous sweep of cabinets and a repositioned garage door that channels traffic past, rather than through, the kitchen work center.

### Precision Pricing

Armed with **Walter**'s detailed drawings and a rough cost estimate, the Fletchers interviewed three contractors in November 2006. **Walter** had recommended all three for remodeling urban houses. One -- Micah Flenard of Flenard Construction in Littleton, Colo., -- also was recommended by a friend of Stan's. The friend had raved about him, says Stan, because of Flenard's good work, reliability, fairness and reasonable pricing. Flenard impressed the Fletchers too and his estimate was the lowest by a bit. "We were pretty open

on what we were going to spend, but we didn't want to totally out-price our house for the neighborhood," says Lois.

The comprehensive plan and specs meant Flenard could estimate close to the bone. He was able "to run bid numbers off the plans," while including allowances for items such as the structural beam that went in where the garage wall had been. "**Doug Walter** is a good customer advocate," Flenard adds. It's doubly important to bid accurately on his projects, he says, because "it's not fun to go back and ask for more money if you missed something."

Estimating that the job [including a few other projects around the house] would take 15 weeks, Flenard began demolition in mid January 2007. The Fletchers moved to a nearby apartment.

For Flenard's clients, demolition is often a money-saving process: bad cuts are kept to a minimum, and finishes are salvaged to minimize a redo.

### Challenges and Choices

Production challenges threatened to offset those economies. The coffered ceiling, for instance, became a giant geometry problem. The large coffer rises to the roof pitch, where **Walter** ganged four skylights, placing smaller ones in the center to clear the intersecting garage gable. Each side of the shaft, where the rafter links wall to ceiling, has a slight degree of difference, says **Walter**. Frenard says his crew had to create double-compound angles and bend drywall around them to connect everything smoothly, which took about eight hours.

A set of upper and lower cabinets arrived with mismatched frames. Rather than risk waiting for replacements, Flenard says, "We took a cabinet apart and reformed it." The cabinet retooling took four hours.

To correct an odd bulge in the floor, Flenard had to pull off the sub-floor, plane down the joists and install a new sub-floor. It was the biggest change order in the project. It took the framer 16 hours, but did not cause other delays, says Flenard.

Despite good intentions, the Fletchers had trouble with some product choices. "From the beginning," says Lois, "Micah gave us a timeline for when decisions were needed. We stuck with it," with a few bumps along the way. One involved the finish for the new birch flooring. After choosing a stain to contrast with the cabinets, Lois came home to discover that the chosen color -- by then covering most of the floor -- looked wrong. The whole floor had to be

sanded and re-stained, adding several days to the schedule. "My floor guy wanted to make them happy," says Flenard, and didn't charge for the change.

For the backsplash, the Fletchers chose large tiles set in a diamond pattern. When they saw the tiles in place they hated them. Flenard "had to tear off the tile and redo that wall," says Stan. "It put the project on hold a couple of days." To minimize lost time, Flenard drove Stan to the store one day to choose and buy tile.

Settling on light fixtures took time, too. "We were being particular," says Stan. Flenard figures he put 20 hours into helping the Fletchers choose lighting.

Despite these hurdles, the job progressed remarkably efficiently. The crew stayed on task. Plus, Flenard says, "we ran all our questions through **Doug** and the clients, instead of making work for ourselves by making a call on our own." In fact, the project was "ahead of schedule until the painters arrived," he says. (They had a small crew and took twice as long as Flenard expected.)

The entire project, including some add-ons around the house, was completed in early May, close to Flenard's time estimate. "It was the fastest project I've ever had," says **Walter**. "For Micah, decisions became critical path items."

That's true, says Flenard: "I'm a little bit of pressure, but if I'm lax, homeowners get upset later." Indeed, the Fletchers have all good to say about Flenard Construction, pressure included. "They were great about making it all happen," says Stan.

## PRODUCTS LIST

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Cabinets: Crystal Cooktop and downdraft vent: Wolf Dishwasher and refrigerator: LG Door and window: Weathershield Microwave oven: GE Ovens: Jenn Air Paint: Benjamin Moore Recessed lighting: Halo Skylights: Velux

### Project Timeline

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Initial meeting and bid	Nov. 6, 2006
2007	
Start demolition	Jan. 14
Rough plumbing	Feb. 5

Install skylights	Feb. 12
Begin installation of window and sliding door	Feb. 19
Begin drywall	Feb. 22
Rough electrical	Feb. 27
Frame vaulted ceiling	March 1
Install hardwood flooring	March 5
Begin cabinet and trim installation	March 15
Final plumbing and electrical	April 16
Install granite counter tops	April 23
Install appliances	April 26
Final cleanup	May 1
Payments	
Jan. 14	\$10,000
March 7	\$11,000
March 22	\$5,800
April 7	\$4,200
May 15	\$18,279

## COMPANY SNAPSHOT

Wendy A. Jordan

Flenard Construction

Owner: Micah Flenard

Location: Littleton, Colo.

2008 sales volume: \$650,000

Projected 2009 sales volume: \$650,000

Contact information: 303/905-1045

Biggest challenge of the project: Keeping design decisions from stretching the schedule

The Financials

Wendy A. Jordan

To keep clients happy but protect his profit, Micah Flenard balances close estimating with flexibility when things happen. On the Fletcher project, he opted to charge cost for the backsplash and took care of small changes, such as trim color, without charge to get the job done efficiently. The allowance for the garage wall beam fell short, because the beam was "super beefy," he says. Still, "I don't think I lost money," Flenard says of the project. "It was a wash." Materials cost more but labor ran lean.

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