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David Robertson's Green Kitchen



BY ROBERT 'MECKI' POHL

When we bought our Capitol Hill house, my wife and I saw as an advantage the fact kitchen was usable, but decrepit. This meant that we knew we would someday get to rip it out and start afresh, with a kitchen that fit our needs exactly. Three years after moving in, with the oven and dishwasher on their last legs, we decided to get started. We had spent enough time in the kitchen to know what would work for us and what would not. We had scoped out other Hill kitchens for ideas. And, most importantly, we had met a contractor, David Robertson of Something Different Contracting, who had done a few small jobs for us and whom we trusted to be able to turn our various ideas into a cohesive whole.

Renovating a Capitol Hill kitchen is always guided by a number of boundary conditions – space and money being the two chief ones. When we began our project, we immediately added two more: historical detail and environmental impact.

Living in a house that I had spent four years researching the history of gave us an added incentive to seek out changes that would be compatible with the age of the

house. Though we knew right away that there was no way that we would be able to install a working vintage

1913 stove, there were other aspects we could consider. We began with our ceiling – the original tin roof. We knew that we would not want to change it in any way, so this became our guide to what the kitchen would become.

The second original piece of the kitchen, a hutch, had been relegated to the garage many years ago, and we knew that only the work of a master cabinet-maker would bring it back to life. Fortunately, through our Capitol Hill connections, we found just the man, and long before the initial demolition began, it was carefully moved out to be worked on.

The good news was that there was often no conflict between our preservationist tendencies and our quest to be green: The greenest thing you can do is to reuse old items. For instance, we found a beautiful old 1940's vintage farmhouse sink, and had that installed. A second, smaller sink, was perfect for the new half bathroom.

The second best idea, from a green standpoint, is to recycle, and so we chose counter



The kitchen before work was started, viewed Towards the back of the house. The big box in the front center is the original Water heater. Photo by Robert 'Mecki' Pohl.

View of the back of the house after renovation Photo courtesy Avner Ofer Photography.

tops that are made of recycled paper.

Other times, we decided to go with the newest technology available: Our water heater is now a point-of-use heater which sits outside, saving not only money (in that it only heats the water we actually use) but space, as we no longer have a water heater sitting in the middle of our kitchen. Our new toilet is a low-flush model which reduces water use noticeably. And the new stove is the newest technology of them all – an induction stove, which rather than heating a surface that then heats the pot, induces the heat within the floor of the pot. It is not only a far better way of cooking – heating times are dramatically reduced – but is also extremely efficient. Of all the changes we made, this is the one that has improved our quality of life the most.

We wanted cork floors and bamboo cabinets. Both of these materials grow rapidly, and are therefore much better for the environment than using slow-growing wood. Cork flooring has become fairly commonplace, so finding a good match for the kitchen was not too troublesome. Bamboo cabinets are, however, still a very specialized product and therefore extremely expensive. Fortunately, David knew a cabinet-maker who was willing to create the cabinets from stock bamboo plywood. The results were magnificent. We presented him with the specifications of the cabinets needed, as well as a picture torn from a magazine about how we wanted the cabinets to look, and he took it from there.

Lighting was another issue that we spent a fair bit of time researching before returning to the simplest solution -- fluorescent tubes. We had originally looked into getting LED undercabinet lighting, but the cost factor (about 1000 dollars for the three areas where we wanted lighting) put us off. Instead, the fluorescent lights that are there did the trick for under 100 dollars.

In all, we are left with a kitchen that is not only functional, but beautiful, green, and reflective of the house's history. We have found that we spend far more time in the kitchen than before, and it is fast becoming the center of our house. ★

Resources:

David Robertson, Something Different Contracting – General Contracting – 202-321 6416
 Eco-Green Living – Green building materials and advice: <http://eco-greenliving.com/>
 Second Chance Inc –Architectural Salvage, Baltimore: <http://www.secondchanceinc.org/>
 Community Forklift – Architectural Salvage, DC: <http://www.communityforklift.com/>

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