

By CJ Hurley

Sensitive to History:

Remodeling A Period Kitchen



Photo © Tim Street-Porter / Gamble House

Kitchens from the Late Victorian and Arts & Crafts periods 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. Our older homes were crafted from materials superior to those available today and are an irreplaceable piece of our nation's architectural legacy. 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.

To visit the Gamble House:

Open for guided tours Thursday-Sunday 12pm-3pm
Admission for adults is \$10
4 Westmoreland Place Pasadena, CA
(626) 793-3334, www.gamblehouse.org

Above: In a pristine state of preservation, Pasadena's Gamble House [1908-09] is an excellent example of the kind of kitchens found in upper class homes. Despite architects Greene & Greene's use of elaborate joinery in a few choice areas, this kitchen is ultimately utilitarian. Note the centralized freestanding workstation and tiled walls made from standard white 3"X6" subway tiles. The current flooring is the home's maple sub floor, originally covered with linoleum. The wooden countertops are sugar pine and duel drain boards of enameled iron flank a cast iron sink. The original range was either wood or coal burning, while the pictured stove is a 1930 Magic Chef by the American Stove Company [taken from Greene and Greene's 1905 Arthur A. Libby house before it was demolished]. The lighting is restricted to targeted work areas specified by the architects as bare bulbs to maximize light. The light fixtures are typical of the kind found in middle-class homes of the period. Interior windows gain borrowed light from the adjoining screened porch, which was likely used by the Gamble's kitchen staff for rest breaks and to take meals.

Defining the Scope of the Project

Below: The kitchen of Portland's 1914 Pittock Mansion is a great example of a restoration. The epitome of the sanitary kitchen, this room featured clean enameled and tiled surfaces, painted cabinetry, and rubberized flooring. The original rubber flooring was lost to history, but has been meticulously translated into linoleum in the original pattern. The room across the narrow hall is the food storage pantry. Most foodstuffs were not stored in the kitchen proper, which made for a simple, open, and convenient workroom.

To visit the Pittock Mansion:

Open daily 11am-4pm
Admission for adults is \$8
3229 NW Pittock Drive
(503) 823-3623
www.pittockmansion.org

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 they are still intact. Since most kitchens have been altered over the years, preservation is rarely undertaken. Preservation projects are commonly undertaken by the most hardcore preservationists, who have a deep longing to maintain things as they were when a home was first built.

Restoration entails taking an altered kitchen back to its original form. This is accomplished by interviewing older neighbors and former occupants with strong memories of what was there, and period photographs. Gathering facts regarding the original details can be arduous, yet fulfilling work. Restorations are for those who wish to recreate a kitchen from the past.

The most common form of kitchen rehabilitation is a Remodel. Remodeling redesigns the kitchen, because it is no longer practical, or has been poorly updated requiring upgrades to meet modern needs. Remodels are notorious for being insensitive to architectural history, and are known today as *Remuddles*. They needn't be. A remodeled kitchen can be kept in harmony with the rest of the house, and time period. One of the best ways is to become familiar with the history, characteristics, and materials that make up a historic kitchen.



Photo Courtesy of Pittock Mansion Society

Late Victorian and Arts & Crafts Kitchens: Their History and Characteristics



Above: Butler's Pantries were adjunct kitchen spaces dividing the kitchen from the dining room. The cabinetry was often more formal than the utilitarian cabinets found in the kitchen proper, but were less elaborate than those found in the dining room. Spaces like this Arts & Crafts example would store much of the formal serving wear used in the dining room, and was the place where final food preparation was carried out before serving. Note the spindled supports on the open storage shelving, soapstone countertop and easily cleaned tile floor.

American Arts & Crafts kitchens [1900-1925] were extensions of their Late Victorian [1890-1900] predecessors and both periods share much in common. What we recognize as kitchens today began in the 1890's. A growing middle-class, and cultural shifts did away with servants and housemaids that catered to the family. Kitchens became the realm of the housewife, simple, utilitarian workrooms organized for efficiency.

Kitchens during both periods had plumbing and housed a wet sink, a cook stove, and ice-chest refrigeration [1890-1922]. By 1915 electric refrigeration furnished the homes of the wealthy, but the middle-class would not see truly modern refrigerators until 1922.

Fitted cabinetry and built-in cupboards were standard, made from wood that was often painted. Painted surfaces readily show dirt, therefore, painted kitchens were considered sanitary in a society recently made aware that bacteria caused illness. Cabinetry was ample, yet note the prevalence of separate pantry spaces for canned and jarred items. Most foodstuffs were not stored in the kitchen proper.



Left: This 1880's ad from the Grand Rapids Refrigerator Co. illustrates a classic freestanding ice-chest and was the height of modernity in its day. The cabinet was made from old growth ash wood and it sported features like moveable flues, air tight locks, and required less ice to keep things cool compared to competitor models.



Photo courtesy of Craftsman Design and Renovation

Below: 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 & 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.



Above: A sensitive remodel, this kitchen [on the AHC tour] is modest in its amenities, practical in its layout, and takes the homes original trim elements as inspiration for the room's architectural details.

Countertops, frequently made from wood, were lacking because they were not the work surface of choice. Most cutting, chopping, and food preparation was done on portable work stations, which acted as the kitchen "island" of today, but were easily rolled away when not in use.

The 1920's saw the rise of truly modern kitchens, yet they remained relatively small continuing their function as utilitarian working spaces. Ample electricity, electric refrigeration, enameled surfaces, and modern cabinetry made from metal became commonplace. More cabinet space accommodated greater storage, and linear countertops replaced workstations as the workspace of choice. Double sinks, with one side deeper for washing larger pots and pans, were standard.

Knowing the key characteristics and materials used in vintage kitchens makes for better decision making when choosing products for a period sensitive remodel.

Remodeling Your Older Kitchen Sensitively

Below: This virtually untouched period kitchen showcases numerable original features. Continuous lower cabinetry has galvanized metal grain bins and hexagonal tile countertops; while above, closed front cabinetry that stretches to the ceiling provides hidden storage and protection from dust. Another area features a built in ice-chest and ironing board. This kitchen can be seen on the AHC tour.

Suggestions: The following list of products are appropriate for a period kitchen. An added bonus is that all of these materials are not only historical, but sustainable.

Flooring

- Wood [fir and oak most common in the Northwest]
- Linoleum [1845-present]
- Tile
- Rubber [1894-present]
- Cork [1890-present] Cork was not used in kitchens until the 1950's. However, it was used for flooring from the 1890's onward and is a durable material for both kitchens and bathrooms.

Countertops

- Wood [not commonly used in homes built after 1920]
- Tile
- Stone [slate, soapstone, granite, marble]
- Slatescape [a cast cement material that functions like soapstone]

The key to authentically remodeling a kitchen is having sensitivity to the vintage character of the home. Kitchens with historic integrity are not designed for entertaining, they are workrooms, better kept separate from the formal areas of the home.

Learning to cherish a kitchen for what it is, while resisting the urge to alter the home's original footprint, will help retain its

authenticity. Kitchens that are too large feel awkward and out of proportion to the rest of the home. Gaining space needn't be a worry, a period kitchen should afford ample room for all of the cabinetry, countertops, dishwashers, and refrigeration needed. There should even be room enough for an informal eat-in area. These were highly coveted spaces for Late Victorians, and many kitchens were built with one. If meeting needs requires increasing the size of the kitchen, refrain from cutting into formal rooms to gain space. Moving into a pantry space or mudroom will help keep the rest of the house feeling period perfect.

Necessity sometimes requires building a small addition off the back of the house. However, additions require extra sensitivity to retain the home's historic qualities. Unfortunately, additions often look disjointed, and out of proportion; it may be wise to invest in a specialized designer whose expertise is architectural history, to help ensure a successful outcome.



Be forgiving of older homes, relish in their unique characteristics, and avoid conforming to modern standards and trends. If luck spared the kitchen's original cabinetry or other fittings, rejoice and restore them; original is authentic. In the spirit of its history as a workspace you should keep your kitchen simple and sturdy, remembering it's going to take a lot of abuse over time. Cabinets and other accoutrements were well built, but they weren't precious. A period friendly kitchen should be easy to clean, uncluttered and user friendly. Reserving finery for the formal rooms, while investing in practical, period friendly materials will help produce a kitchen with period sensibilities.

Keeping aware of the elements that made up Late Victorian and Arts & Crafts kitchens with a keen eye on details of scale, function, and materials ensures good stewardship, leaving a historic home to be cherished by the next generation.

Photo Courtesy of Karla Pearlstein



Above: This 1910 kitchen boasts original sturdy 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 and is mounted over cabinetry rather than on more traditional cast iron legs. Wall mounted faucets are set in a backsplash of standard white 3”X6” subway tiles. This kitchen can be seen on the AHC tour.

To learn more:

You may find it helpful and inspiring to attend the **Architectural Heritage Center’s annual Kitchen Revival Tour** to see what other people have done with their period kitchens. The tour will include eight homes around the city representing a range of time periods and home styles.

Date: Saturday, April 10, 2010.

Time: 10am to 4pm

Tickets: \$20/members, \$25/general public

More information: <http://visitahc.org/content/kitchen-revival-tour-2010>, (503) 231-7264



Left: This 1914 kitchen from Portland’s Hollywood neighborhood has been nicely renovated with period modesty. Sporting glass front cabinets, ceramic tile countertops and backsplash, this gem of a kitchen has retained a vestige of its wooden countertops as pictured in the lower right hand corner of the photo.

*With his wife Barbara Pierce, Roycroft Renaissance Master Artisan **C.J. Hurley** operates CJ Hurley Century Arts, a small studio specializing in color and design consultation for the restoration of vintage homes from the 1850’s-1950. www.cjhurley.com, 503.234.4167*