

1. OPEN UP YOUR KITCHEN

Cost: \$1,000 for widening the door to \$30,000 or more for removing walls

There are many ways to make the kitchen accessible to the living and dining areas: You can widen a doorway, create a pass-through, knock down the upper half of a wall, or remove an entire wall. In each case, you'll probably need a contractor; if the wall or section you're removing is "supporting," or helping to hold up the ceiling, he or she will install columns or create what's known as a header to maintain that support.

If there's enough room, an island or peninsula can be added to give you back some of the cabinet space you lost by removing the wall; you'll also gain counter space and a gathering place for kids and guests. "The party's always in the kitchen, right?" says Kim Toomey, a general contractor and a principal at Eldon Construction in Randolph.

Designer Jeff Swanson of Renovation Planning in the South End agrees, adding that 90 percent of the kitchen projects he's doing start with opening up the space. It can be a dirty and disruptive job that entails removing drywall or plaster, cutting out studs, sanding joint compound, and matching the floors to create a seamless look, but it's worth it in the end. "You don't want guests in the living room or dining room when you're walled off in the kitchen," Swanson says. "Plus, you're changing traffic flow, which is freeing up space in general."

2. MODERNIZE YOUR KITCHEN

Cost: \$1,000 for DIY to \$50,000 or more for contractor intervention

Even if your kitchen's layout works well, if its decor hasn't been changed in a decade or two, you may want to freshen things up. Replacing the knobs on your cabinets and installing a new faucet can give your kitchen a surprising face lift, as can upgrading to stainless-steel appliances, but it can be a slippery slope. "I just replaced a cooktop and one thing led to another," says Carol Krieger of Carol S. Krieger Interior Design in Cambridge. "I ended up doing the countertops, which led to the backsplash, then, well, how about the flooring?"

One way Krieger saved, though, was by keeping her existing cabinets. Contractors and designers alike say that if you have quality cabinets – wood instead of particleboard – there's nothing wrong with simply painting them. Depending on how handy you are, you can do this yourself, but most recommend hiring a professional who can spray the cabinets for a smoother finish.

If you do decide to replace the cabinets, says Swanson, sticking with clean lines – "not a lot of detailed molding" – and warmer wood tones can help your resale value.

New countertops can also make a significant difference in the kitchen, says Doug Storey of Two Storey Building in Bolton. "Stone countertops usually run \$80 to \$100 a square foot," he says, "but there are some really nice laminates out there now, too. I did one in a vacation home that looks like mahogany." Nancie Dangel of ND Design Inc. in Cambridge advises checking out other materials, even at the higher end. "I'm leaning more toward composites myself," she says, "or glass or various other surfaces. Butcher-block end grain has come back. The more you beat it, the better it looks. All you have to do is oil it. I've gotten really tired of granite."

3. MAKE OVER YOUR BATHROOMS

Cost: \$600 to \$10,000 and up

Spiffing up a bathroom is one of the most pleasing changes you can make to your home without breaking the bank. For as little as \$600, you can do it yourself by changing the vanity, painting the walls, cleaning the grout or re-grouting, replacing sink faucets and fixtures such as towel bars and lighting, and buying a new shower curtain and towels. To make the place look bigger without spending too much, Krieger recommends installing a large mirror, perhaps framed with tile, spanning the length of the vanity and reaching the ceiling.

The next step up usually involves hiring a contractor, but keep your expectations reasonable. "I'm doing one now where we're replacing the flooring, adding a new toilet and vanity, and probably painting the walls," says Storey, "and the difference between that and a complete gut remodel is probably half the price, not touching the electrical, plaster, or shower. But it will change the space significantly."

4. ADD A BATHROOM

Cost: \$5,000 to \$20,000 and up

Many older New England homes were built without bathrooms on each floor or without master baths. If that's your situation, carving out space for an additional bath might be the best home improvement you'll ever make. It's true that you will make only 53.3 percent of your investment back when you go to sell, according to the trade magazine *Remodeling's* 2010-11 Cost vs. Value Report. (cont.) But, as Storey notes about his own project, "it's going to vastly improve the quality of my life at home." Storey recently added a master bath and says he'll never regret it.

"If you've got kids and only one bathroom and everyone's fighting over it," he says, "another bathroom makes all the difference."

You may be able to find space for a first-floor half bath – a minimum of 3 feet by 5 feet is required, Storey says – in an alcove, a large mudroom, or even underneath a staircase. On the second floor, it might be tougher, but taking some space from a bedroom can work. That's what Toomey did in her ranch home in Randolph, and she was still able to keep the bedroom a workable 9 feet by 12 feet. She points out, though, that the cost is higher if the plumbing isn't already near where you want the bathroom. "It's still doable if it's not nearby," she says, "just more expensive."

5. FINISH YOUR BASEMENT

Cost: \$25 to \$100 a square foot

Many newer suburban homes are built with 8- or 9-foot ceilings in their basements because developers expect families will want to use that space in the future. But even in an older home, as long as the ceiling height is at least 6 feet 8 inches, you should consider finishing all or part of your basement. The space can be used as anything from a fancy home theater or wine cellar with bar to a more basic crafts area, playroom, or workout room.

The first step in finishing a basement is doing a simple moisture test, says Toomey. Tape a sheet of plastic wrap "super tight" to the concrete floor and leave it for a day or two. Look for any water that accumulates. Without this test, you might find out the hard way that there's moisture when you put down a hardwood floor and it starts buckling.

Even if you do have a damp basement, it can be remedied by new gutters, better drainage, proper grading, and/or a subfloor made of DRIcore, easy-to-install plywood tiles with a moisture barrier beneath. Once that's taken care of, your contractor will add electrical and heat, finish the ceiling and walls, and install flooring. Now you're ready to paint.

6. FIND STORAGE SPACE

Cost: \$200 and up

Another way to make your home more livable is to uncover storage you didn't know you had. Many older houses, in particular, have what Toomey calls "dead space," such as where a defunct chimney is boxed in with lots of air around it. In earlier decades, says Dangel, "they covered over things. You never know what's behind the walls." Consider converting any unused space into a closet.

Removing the drywall between two studs on an interior wall will allow a carpenter to add a shallow storage nook, with or without a door, to accommodate books, toiletries, or spices. Wall space can be maximized in other ways: Building a banquette into an entry area can give you another place to stash your stuff. And an unused back hall can become a mudroom with the simple addition of a few coat hooks, a shelf to hold baskets for hats, gloves, and dog leashes, and wall-mounted recycling or shoe bins (IKEA's Trones bins, at \$40 for three, can serve as both).

7. CREATE BUILT-IN STORAGE

Cost: \$500 and up

With laptops and Wi-Fi so prevalent these days, designers are getting requests to remove kitchen computer areas. "It's too chaotic in the kitchen," says Dangel. "It becomes a catch for the mail. It's one of those great ideas I have yet to see pan out."

But built-in storage areas, or units that are movable but look built-in, are still in high demand. “Any time you’re creating storage, it’s a great idea,” says Lucas Garofalo, a real estate agent with Keller Williams in Boston. “There’s never enough, for anybody. City, suburbs – everybody wants storage, and if you can make it organized and well-done storage, that’s even better.”

Even though televisions are not the hideous boxes they used to be, many people still want even flat-screens hidden, or at least incorporated into the architecture of the home. Built-ins that can accommodate the TV in the center, with bookshelves flanking it and DVD players and other media components, kids’ toys, and sundry items in cabinetry below can consolidate clutter and add value to your home. In the city, especially, Garofalo points out, you might install a Murphy bed with storage around it in a second bedroom. “It’s the ultimate in functionality,” he says. And since components can be built off-site and assembled in one day, it’s not too disruptive for the homeowner.

8. ADD A DORMER

Cost: \$10,000 and up for a double dormer

By creating a dormer, says Jeff Swanson, “you can really gain more usable living space without adding a lot of square footage. You’re not doing an addition and dealing with foundations and excavation and all that. It’s less cost, and [for what you’re spending] it adds much more value to your house than doing an addition, because you’re basically finding space that’s already there.”

In historic districts, dormers can be less practical because of restrictions on altering an existing structure. But if you live in an area where such changes are allowed and you have a second- or third-floor bedroom with a slanted roof, dormers can give you valuable headroom and the illusion of more square footage, particularly in the case of a double dormer, which can accommodate a full-size bed beneath. It’s also a good way to transform an unused walk-up attic. They can be messy jobs, requiring demolition, framing, insulation, windows, siding, roofing, and inspections, but the time and money they take should be worth it.

9. PUT A STUDIO OR OFFICE IN AN OUTBUILDING

Cost: \$25 to \$75 a square foot

It’s not uncommon to add a studio or office space to the second floor of an existing two-story garage, but a newer trend is to create a separate work space in an outbuilding on your property, from a shed or cabana to a barn or well-built chicken coop. You can even erect a new outbuilding, as long as you live in a suburban or rural area with a large lot, since zoning can be a sticking point otherwise. But if you have the space and you often telecommute, an office that’s “home but not home,” as Dangel puts it, can be a worthwhile investment

“I have one myself,” says Storey, “in my barn. For me – and I hear this a lot from people – not being in your house means that you really are at work. It’s about separation. If you’re in your house, the family comes home from school or work, they interrupt you. It’s hard to be focused. When I’m in the barn, I’m totally focused on work.”

10. ADD OUTDOOR LIVING SPACE

Cost: \$1,500 and up

Increasing the functionality of your outdoor space is also a great investment, according to the Cost vs. Value Report, which pegs the added value of a deck at resale at as much as 72 percent of its cost to build. “I think it’s huge,” says Storey. “Outdoor entertaining has become a much bigger thing.” If you can manage it, just off the kitchen is the best place for a deck, patio, or outdoor “room” – a covered area that can be as simple as a weathered pergola – since it makes for more convenient grilling, even in winter.

If you’re in the city, it doesn’t have to be a large area, and if you’re in the suburbs, a patio can help define your space. “To me,” says Dangel, “I see a lot of grass, I see a lot of work. Anything that gives you a landing place so you’re not looking out into a sea of grass with nowhere to sit is great.”

Outdoor space can be as simple as a DIY patio made of pavers and landscaped with a container garden or as complex as the \$80,000 mahogany deck with grill, counters, and small refrigerator that Storey built for a suburban home last year. The important thing is to know what you want. “I always advise people to get yourself a deck and patio book,” says Toomey. “Nobody can ever picture what they want. You can’t look at too many books.”

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