



Kitchen Island Design

by Paul Turpin

Islands serve two main purposes in the kitchen: They give the cook added workspace and they give the kitchen a focal point. Depending on the layout, an island might also provide extra eating space or additional storage. If it is located at the edge of an adjoining room, an island may serve as a border between rooms or as a screen to hide everyday kitchen mess.

An island must be properly proportioned. I've seen large ones crammed into tight kitchens and undersized islands cast adrift in enormous spaces. Passageways and work areas need to be wide enough to allow the cook room to move, but compact enough to prevent the work triangle from becoming

too big (see Figure 1). The best way to define the size and shape of an island is to lay out the necessary clearances first. Whatever space remains in the center is what you have to work with. If there's no room for an island, remove the wall separating the kitchen from the adjacent dining or family room and put the island in its place.

Rerouting traffic is one of the benefits of adding an island: It gives you two possible paths through the kitchen. This is a bonus in an often-crowded family kitchen, although young children like to run racetrack patterns around the island. Warn moms and dads of this possibility and, if

it's a problem, recommend a peninsula layout instead.

Looking Good, Working Well

Unlike other kitchen cabinetry, island cabinets are seen from all four sides. It's a good idea to visualize how your cabinet layout will look from adjacent rooms or even from the other side of the kitchen. Breakfast bars are popular with some clients, but others don't like how they look. If this is the case, try finishing the cabinet backs with a layer of drywall that's painted or covered with wallpaper to match the walls. Or use the back (and even one or both sides) for additional storage. One option is to put a customized bank of drawers below, or next to, some open shelves.

If the island is particularly large, you can do a variety of things with the ends and backs of the cabinets. For example, on a long island you can provide a mix of seating, storage areas, and decorative details, such as finely detailed trimwork.

Putting standard base cabinets back-to-back sounds good, but up top it creates a counter 50 inches across. That's too wide, although it might be acceptable on a curved or hexagonal island (see Figure 2). A better choice is to limit the counter width to 42 inches, the same as many dining tables. That way the entire work surface can be reached from one side.

If the backside of the island serves as a seating area, the counter must overhang at least 12 to 18 inches to provide knee space. When planning the counter height, consider the following: Standard dining table height is 28 inches, standard bar height (that barstools fit) is 42 inches. Standard kitchen counter height is halfway between these at 36 inches. That makes dining-room chairs too short and barstools too tall.

One solution is to find barstools that can be shortened by 6 inches without looking weird. Another is to make the eating portion of the island a separate counter that's raised to 42 inches or lowered to 28 inches. This second solution fulfills height requirements and creates a division between the work and eating portions of the island.

Anchoring the Island

Most kitchen cabinetry is fastened to the wall, but island cabinets must be secured to the floor. I screw a series of 2x4 blocks to a floor joist, if I can get at one. Otherwise I use 2x6 or 2x8 blocks and, using plenty of screws, affix them to the subfloor. I then set the cabinets over the blocks and screw them together. Some remodelers

fasten cabinetry to the stub walls set up for plumbing and electrical chases. These are not stiff enough for the job unless there is a continuous post going up to the ceiling framing.

If the cabinets themselves are flimsy, or if the island is tall and narrow, you have to improve the rigidity of the cabinets. Otherwise, with adequate pressure (such as someone falling against the island), they will collapse like dominoes. I reinforce cabinets by putting a sheet of 1/4- to 3/8-inch plywood across the back, fastening to each cabinet partition as I go. I cover the plywood with whatever finish material the customer selects.

Islands at Center Stage

When designing an island, pay close attention to the height of the counter, the layout of the cabinetry, and the positioning of the lighting. Nothing will bug your customers more than not being able to see what they're doing. So forget the funny, fancy lights and go with floodlights, good general room lighting, and, for pinpoint bursts of brightness, some spotlighting (see "A Practical Guide to Kitchen Lighting," 5/92). Floodlights are good for task lighting, while spots have a narrow beam spread and should be used strictly for aesthetics.

Remember that overhead floods and spots will emphasize the counter and leave the sides of the island in a pool of shadow. This may be the desired effect: It can make the counter look like it's floating. If you have an island that looks good all around, you'll need additional lighting to illuminate the sides. Using dimmer switches for island lighting is appropriate for kitchens where one part is primarily functional while the rest serves as a dining or family area.

Pot and pan racks are a nice decoration in a country-style kitchen. Beware of coming down too low, though. You don't want to cut off the line of sight. Stove hoods pose a similar problem: If they're low enough to function properly, they block lines of sight. But if they're high enough to be aesthetically pleasing, they don't draw well. That's why I like downdraft ventilators here.

As for the cabinetry you choose, custom cabinets allow greater flexibility, as well as dramatic and unusual shapes. If your customers want something different but don't have a lot to spend, try mixing stock and custom cabinets to create an unusual look at a lower cost. ■

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Clearances at Islands

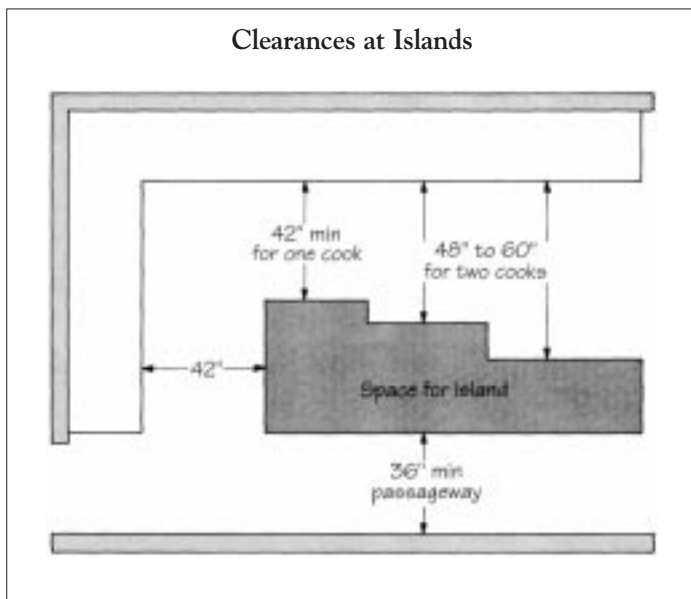


Figure 1. The National Kitchen and Bath Association recommends allowing at least 42 inches of clear space between the island and adjacent countertops. If the kitchen is to be used simultaneously by two cooks, allow between 48 and 60 inches of clear space. Passageways should be a minimum of 36 inches wide.



Figure 2. A countertop wider than 42 inches should have curved or angled corners to make it easier to reach the entire work surface from all sides.