The Inhabited Island: Kitchen Design Success

Among the many possible kitchen designs in American homes, the kitchen island is the superior design. The kitchen island is a free-standing counter, typically in the center of the kitchen, which allows access from all sides. Although its development as part of the American kitchen is a fairly recent change, the island has proved to be a success in the kitchen. The island provides a successful solution to the work triangle, efficiently using the space in the kitchen, as well as following the changing purposes of the modern kitchen. Through its versatility of function—with uses for storage, preparation, entertainment, and more—the island has become an essential part of the kitchen, provided that sufficient physical space in the kitchen is available. For every American family with enough space, the kitchen island is a necessity and a top priority over all other possible kitchen designs.

Starting in the late 1800s, major kitchen redesigns began to occur, especially as the shift of American family life stopped including the need for servants; however, the major changes in kitchen design developed in preparation for returning soldiers after World War II. In 1869, far before the major design revolution of the kitchen, Harriet Beecher Stowe opted for kitchen design based on efficiency, as household servants were no longer a major part of the lifestyle of the American family (Adams 4). The change in the American kitchen began to reflect a family handling the food preparation, rather than hired help to complete domestic work for them.
These changes of design also began reflecting changing American roles and values: more women began to enter the workforce, smaller families were common, and there was an increased need for quick food preparation (Adams 4). Along with the five subsequent types of kitchen designs, the island kitchen developed as a favored design because it allowed for multiple cooks since it provided two countertop workspaces (Adams 4).

The use of an island was and remains logical for American families. The first use of a kitchen island was very logical for American families with the need for increased space and efficiency in the kitchen. This need also continues as one of the functions of a kitchen island in modern American homes. Two separate workspaces, one on the main counter and one on the island allowed for two cooks, increasing the speed of food preparation and mealtime, and making it easier for families to begin experiencing shared gender roles both in and out of the home.

Despite the small changes throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, the major changes in kitchen design of the American kitchen occurred post-World War II. During the war, concern arose about returning soldiers and the changes in the physical structure of the home to accommodate for growing families (Conran 20). This time in the United States was therefore seen as an opportunity to change the structure and function of American kitchens. In the kitchen, one of the new ideas that occurred during this time was the use of the middle space of the kitchen, rather than allowing it to function only as open floor space. This newly recognized space was one that could be used for many different functions, but was ultimately a new addition to the kitchen that added more space and work area in the kitchen (20). The early idea of the
kitchen island, before the logistics of island designs were worked out, suggests that an island or a similar space in a kitchen is beneficial for the family in many different ways, expressing its importance in the American home. Also during this time, the overall floor plan of homes began to open up, and the kitchen followed suite. The home was designed so that the mother would be able to look after her children while she was working in the kitchen, as shown in Figure 1, beginning of the idea of multitasking in the home. The mother’s gaze shown in Figure 1 successfully covers much of the home. Because of this new idea, islands were used many times as a natural separation between the kitchen and living rooms (Johnson 128). The island not only allowed extra space for food preparation, but slowly became a large part in the successful function of the family unit. Without the island, meals could not be prepared without finding separate care for the children, taking away both from family time and from the financial aspect of the family. Therefore, the island in the kitchen started to become a necessary aspect to the success of the American family.

In recent years, the kitchen has developed, experienced design changes, and become much more flexible. In the late 20th century, the idea of a kitchen began to incorporate much more than just the preparation of food and a place to eat. The kitchen began to encompass the idea of a living space as well as a place for visitors to spend their time, rather than the past idea that guests were to stay out of the kitchen and spend their time in parlors and family rooms (“Kitchens”). “The kitchen is where work mingles with desire, pleasure, creativity, violence, safety, and other people”, says Louise C. Johnson, describing the changes from the kitchen’s previous role in American family life (Johnson 123). The kitchen also began to include many technical changes, in equipment as well as design, which helped make the kitchen a place that
was not only more efficient, but a place that truly became the “heart” of the home. Earlier, the
kitchen was considered only a “laboratory”, but during the 1940s, coinciding with the new
design ideas, the kitchen became the “command center” of the home (Harris 244). The most
common design at the time for the kitchen in the 1940s was the U-shaped kitchen, which then
began to include the idea or suggestion of what would eventually become known as the kitchen
island. This displayed the importance of the island to families of the 1940s as well as families
currently in the United States (244). Although the idea of a kitchen island began as a simple
table in the center of the kitchen with the purpose of extra food preparation space, the island
began to become a key part of the American kitchen.

From these many developments of the kitchen, there eventually became six important
layouts of a kitchen, which were suited to different types of homes. The first type was the simple
single line kitchen, in which all the countertop and appliances resided on one wall (125). The
second was the parallel or galley kitchen in which the countertop and appliances were on walls
opposite of each other (125). Then were the different shaped kitchens--the U, L, and the F (or
peninsula)--in which the countertop spaces and appliances were set up in the different shapes of
these letters (125). The sixth kitchen design was the island kitchen, which could be added to any
of the other five designs of kitchens (125). The simple idea of the island having the capability to
be added to any other layout began to explain the superiority and advantages of the island.

Although many think that the L-shaped kitchen is the best design of the kitchen because it
keeps the work triangle fairly compact, the addition of an island to an L-shaped kitchen allows
for more workspace, freeing the family from the confines of what appears to be a kitchen stuck
in one corner (Conran 111). Some people also believe that the U-shaped kitchen is the most
appropriate style for the home. However, this style actually is the one which creates a lot of wasted space because of the presence of multiple corners in the countertops (112). These corners may become difficult to use and will therefore become wasted space. With the use of an island, a side of the countertop in a U-shaped kitchen can be cut out, opening up a wall and getting rid of one corner of wasted space. The addition of the island would then make up for the space lost from one corner of a U-shaped design. The single-line and galley kitchen have similar disadvantages because of the spread-out nature of the kitchen, whereas including an island would make the kitchen more compact and still allow for the same amount of, or even more, workspace. Therefore, the best kitchen layout for homes with sufficient space, is one that includes an island, which typically is paired with a U or L-shaped kitchen layout.

As previously mentioned, the work triangle is an essential part to the successful design of a kitchen. Simply put, the work triangle is the distance between the refrigerator, the sink, and the cooktop, as shown in Figure 2, which is where most of the food preparation takes place within in the kitchen (Ehrenkranz 124). The work triangle should maximize the efficiency of the workflow in the kitchen, which includes the path in which the groceries are carried into the house, the spaces in which the meals are prepared and served, how and where the dishes are cleaned, and how the table(s) are set (Ahmadi and Carlton). The work triangle should be a space free from major traffic paths in the house, otherwise the function of the work triangle will not be as successful as possible (Ahmadi and Carlton). Special care should be taken to make sure the dimensions of a work triangle don’t get out of hand (Conran 113). The example work triangle of
Figure 2 shows the typical design of a work triangle, in which the dimensions are around 20 feet. If the dimensions of a kitchen work triangle become too great, the amount of work someone has to do while in the kitchen is much greater than necessary.

In the design of a kitchen including a kitchen island, the work triangle many times follows an almost equilateral triangle form, as the cooktop is typically placed on the island, and the refrigerator and sink remain on the countertop placed against the walls, as in Figure 3 (Ahmadi and Carlton). Unlike the sink and the refrigerator, the placement of the cooktop is quite flexible in the kitchen, especially with the use of an island. The addition of an island opens up more space for food preparation on the countertops around the outer walls of a kitchen (Ahmadi and Carlton). Also, food preparation is typically centered around the sink, which usually is placed along an outside wall, but sometimes an additional sink will be placed in the island (Cline). With the use of an island, an extra surface in the kitchen, the removal of the cooktop from the main countertop then opens up more space around the sink. In other cases, the placement of a sink in the island instead of on a countertop against a wall, allows the cleanup to be focused around the island, while the food preparation then takes place mainly on the outer countertop spaces. Therefore, the addition of the island is the best functional arrangement for families who need extra space. Typically with carefully planned additional space comes increased efficiency, such as with the kitchen island, since more people can be in the kitchen at once, in their own workspaces.
The kitchen island is a very useful addition to the kitchen, but when considering the placement of an island in a new home, it is important to go through multiple considerations to be sure that the island will be created in the most successful way possible. The island is also used for many different purposes, showing its versatility and usefulness to every American family. The kitchen is considered the “family center” and encompasses the pleasant, functional, storage, and entertainment aspects of the family (Conran 86). The kitchen island is a part of the design of a kitchen that can successfully bring all these aspects together, and therefore is an important part of the kitchen design process. As the island ties the kitchen together, it also ties the family together more, since the kitchen is the “family center”. Close-knit families are typically desired, therefore the kitchen island plays a key role in tying the family together. The island kitchen unit “acts as a natural barrier between cooking and eating areas”, therefore complying with the more modern open floor plan of the home (275). With less walls separating the kitchen from the rest of the home, especially the living and dining rooms, the island provides a natural division in the spaces of the home, easing into into the changes rather than creating abrupt differences in the uses of space in the home.

However, with the use of an island, there are also couple different concerns. The main one is that there is adequate space in the kitchen for the placement of an island, meaning that the work triangle won’t become too large, making the tasks of a cook more difficult (113). Although there can be difficulties in planning the location, size and use of the kitchen island, with careful attention to details, the placement of a kitchen island typically in combination with a U or L-shaped kitchen, is very beneficial to the family, and is something that all American families should take into consideration when planning their home.
A great advantage to the kitchen island is that it can be made in any shape or size that fits the needs of the family and their desires. Some families have even gone as far as creating octagonal work surfaces (93). These work surfaces are used for a variety of purposes ranging from preparation to seating. As well as the flexibility in plan, the island opens up the floor plan, and in many cases, this helps manage family functions as well as food preparation and serving within the kitchen (Hatje 207).

The design of the island originated almost 60 years ago, but in more modern times, the island has begun to resemble a similar feature of restaurant kitchens. In professional kitchens, they are not referred to as islands, but as preparation tables. The preparation table typically stands in the middle of the kitchen, indicating the need for an extra space that is unofficially provided just for preparing the food, rather than other cleaning and storage functions (Conran 25). Even though American families typically are not cooking for an amount of people close to that of restaurants, the design of restaurant kitchens is meant for efficiency. Therefore, if a home kitchen design mimics the layout of an efficient restaurant, the use of the kitchen island in American homes makes the aspect of food preparation and meals in everyday life more efficient.

For many American families, another important feature of the kitchen island is the presence of more storage space, useful for kitchen utensils and cooking supplies among many things. In cases with the placement of the cooktop on the island, many times there is a ventilator hood above the island, which is often used for storage (260). Utensils such as pots and pans can be hung in a way that does not detract from space on top of the counter. The top of Figure 4
shows hanging pots and pans, which, because of the placement of the cooktop on the island, the ventilator hood above the island provides adequate space for hanging. This way of storage opens up space for many other preparation, serving, and cleanup activities, successfully utilizing all possible space. Another simple idea of storage with kitchen islands is the idea that underneath the island, typically there are many built-in cabinets (128). Whereas many times the hanging storage on the ventilator hood serves for only kitchen utensils related to the cooktop, the cabinets sitting underneath the kitchen island can be used for any purpose. Simply put, “cabinets are an essential part of today’s kitchen because it keeps the kitchen organized”, and the kitchen island helps immensely with this task (Laskey). In other cases, kitchen islands will contain an open design underneath the countertop or slab on top, similar to the open design of storage in the island in Figure 4 (Conran 128). Although these types of islands will still contain at least the corner supports to the island, they will not use cabinets and walls to block in the island. Instead, these may include drawers or racks for easy access to things such as silverware, cooking supplies, or cooking utensils (128). This use of the kitchen island allows an increased accessibility to American families, making food preparation much easier and faster, therefore becoming more efficient. The versatility of storage provided by the kitchen island makes it a very sensible component to the American kitchen, as many times, the lack of storage is a problem in American homes.

The style and therefore function of the kitchen island can be changed for many different needs of an American family. One example of the use of a kitchen island is similar to the first types of islands, which were simple tables used as extra room for food preparation. In this case, these types of kitchen islands are referred to simply as “chopping blocks” simple blocks of wood,
as opposed to “tiled cooking blocks”, a more home-friendly version in terms of appearance in relation to the rest of the kitchen (86).

Another type of island is designed for the use of food preparation as well as food clean up; these types of islands include sinks or cooktops (137). Many times, the islands that include a sink are larger-sized islands because all islands must include enough preparation space around anything such as a sink or cooktop placed on top; these islands containing a sink typically include a dishwasher as well to make the function of the island the cleanup and disposal of food (37).

Another typical use of the island is for entertainment, especially seating, or what some people use as the breakfast area (188). In some cases, especially with larger islands, there will be a “combined worktop, sink, and breakfast bar”, which allow for multiple functions all within one small area (188). The combination of function in the spaces allows families to save space in the kitchen, so they can use other countertops and spaces for food preparation and disposal. Also, space in the rest of the home can be used for other functions. Figure 5 displays this idea of a combination of spaces, as it combines the cooktop with preparation space. Also, this particular island displays the accessibility of all sides and the natural barrier between the kitchen and the eating space, created by the island. Once again, this natural barrier creates a flow between spaces in the home. The island both provides logistical and aesthetic benefits, multiple reasons to include it in the kitchen. Some islands designed to include seating may “include a lower eating area that is connected while some have a higher part that separates it from another area of the house which may have something to do with the style of the kitchen” (175). In many kitchen
islands, there is also an increased trend in high countertops, allowing a place for guests to stand by and socialize (Spors). These high countertops also correspond with the increased use of two-story great rooms and vaulted ceilings for kitchens in the American home (Spors). Kitchen islands easily fit in with trends of changing households as they are not only versatile in function, but in design, meaning that the kitchen island will most likely be a part of American kitchens for many years in the future.

Exiting the typical realm of kitchen functions, kitchens are also used as a type of office in some homes, with features such as built-in desks (Adams 4). The idea of bringing the importance of work into one of the most used rooms in the home allows the functions of the kitchen in the island to be mixed with the function of the desk. Just as the island is considered a natural barrier between the kitchen and other spaces of the home, the idea of a separation within the island naturally separates the tasks for the island.

Similar to the people who say the best designs of a kitchen are the U and L shapes, some people also believe the island kitchen is too difficult to plan, and therefore should be ignored altogether. “The island can give an imaginative solution to the design challenge of a large kitchen and create work centers of a small kitchen”, but at the same time, design challenges are present; therefore, there are a couple important aspects to consider when planning the placement and design of a kitchen island (Rand and Perchuk 20). Possible design challenges include the lack of planning enough countertop space for working, the small amount of space dedicated to walking paths around the outside of the island, and clashing cabinets when they are opened (20). Even though these are important design factors that could cause a negative outcome of the placement of a kitchen island, in no way are these aspects things that should convince a family to
refrain from adding an island to their kitchen. Every aspect of the design of a kitchen, as well as the design of all parts of a home, requires careful planning, so adding an island is part of the design that is similar to every other part. The benefits of the placement and possible functions of an island greatly outweigh the possible difficulties, therefore any worries should be ignored and that energy should instead put into the careful planning of a kitchen island.

The many different uses of a kitchen island from food preparation to eating areas illustrates the diversity of kitchen islands. Not one kitchen island is the same, because even if the design is the same, each family will use an island to fulfill their unique needs. The size and shape of an island can sometimes determine the use of the island. However, with every kitchen island, families will gain more storage space, an essential part of any American home, especially in a kitchen. Although many families may believe they do not need an island, the addition of an island to any other design of a kitchen, especially that of a U or L-shaped kitchen, will provide another necessary function of the kitchen, usually freeing up space in another part of the kitchen. The use of the kitchen island is an important aspect for every American family, as they will benefit from the functions provided by the kitchen island.
Works Cited


