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# HOME & GARDEN

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# Marvelous makeover

San Francisco designer uses experience and expertise to remodel her city home

**A**

fter living in her three-bedroom, two-bath condominium for almost 11 years, interior designer Denna McLaughlin decided it was time for a change.

"I finally got around to doing what I wanted to do for ages," explains McLaughlin, 53, a partner with Celeste LeSage-Gish in City Studios of San Francisco.

"For a long time, I was really busy with work with no time to make the changes."

Wanting a fresh look and better storage, McLaughlin set out to remodel and improve the three main public spaces of her home: the kitchen, living room and dining room. The 1934 San

Francisco condo, an upper unit in a

two-unit building in the shadow of the University of San Francisco's Lone Mountain campus, has art deco features, crown molding and rich hardwood floors.



By Jeannie  
Matteucci  
SPECIAL TO THE

two-unit building in the shadow of the University of San Francisco's Lone Mountain campus, has art deco features, crown molding and rich hardwood floors. McLaughlin wanted to improve on what was already there, and used her experience and expertise as a designer as a guide.

With outdated appliances, bad lighting, older cabinets and a 1960s "harvest gold" color, designing a more attractive and efficient kitchen was the first priority on McLaughlin's "To Do" list.

"The old kitchen had tile countertops that drove me crazy," recalls McLaughlin. "I don't like having that grout, it's hard to keep clean. I also hated the old enamel sink and some cabinets that were placed at a short height. I'm 5 foot 9, and I was tired of always bending over to get what I needed. The lighting was also horrible. There was one single light mounted on the ceiling in the middle of the room that created shadows."

The saving grace of the old kitchen were two good-sized windows that added lots of natural light. Because of local building codes, McLaughlin was unable to expand the 12-by-9-foot kitchen, so she used the space available — including a small alcove that leads to a back door to the outside — to create a more user-friendly kitchen that better suits her needs.

Before construction even started, McLaughlin did some research, planned ahead and decided on a \$75,000 budget.

"I wrote down a wish list of what I wanted," explains McLaughlin. "I couldn't have all of it, because of room and money, so I had to prioritize."

Finding the right contractor for the job was not difficult.

"This was easy for me, being in the business," admits McLaughlin. "I already knew who I wanted

(general contractor Mike Austin of Siena

Pacific, Inc. of San Francisco), but I think the average homeowner needs to interview a few different contractors and ask to see their previous remodels. You want to find someone you can communicate with and has experience doing your kind of project."

McLaughlin had to then figure out a way to live and work in her home while the construction was taking place. She set up a "mini-kitchen" in a front entryway with a refrigerator, a small electric oven and some dishes.

"Not having children made it easier," admits



MICHAEL MACOR/The Chronicle



**KITCHEN:**

Denna McLaughlin's San Francisco condo kitchen before, above, is now the elegant, workable space at right.

# Condo redo

## ► MAKEOVER

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McLaughlin. "I also eat out a lot, so the inconvenience was not too bad."

McLaughlin made sure the construction crew sealed off the rest of her condo with plastic sheets to contain the dust. That was a major concern, because the construction crew was removing all the old appliances and finishes. Once the initial demolition was completed, McLaughlin walked around the shell of the kitchen to decide where she wanted electrical outlets.

"You really want to make sure your light switch doesn't cut into your trim," advises McLaughlin. "That is a common mistake you see in many kitchens."

McLaughlin decided to leave the location of the appliances the same, but moved the opening to the dining room to add more space for storage. She designed her own custom cherry cabinets with bird's-eye maple accents and cast bronze hardware.

"I like wood, so I knew I didn't want a painted finish," explains McLaughlin. "I like the way cherry ages, and it's warm without being too dark. But because I was installing all this cabinetry, I knew it would be overwhelming, so I used the maple as a relief."

McLaughlin also made sure her new cabinets were user-friendly, installing full extension drawers



MICHAEL MACOR / The Chronicle

**LIVING ROOM:** Denna McLaughlin designed display cases and a casual seating area for her living room. Below, the kitchen plans.

## Resources

■ **City Studios**, 2942 Turk Blvd., San Francisco; (415) 386-2521.

■ **Siena Pacific Inc.**, 1914 Polk St., No. 206, San Francisco; (415) 931-8294.

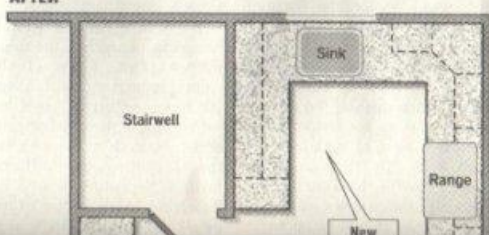
— J.M.

\$30,000 and gave McLaughlin the chance to use pieces that have memories and meaning.

As a designer, McLaughlin knew she needed to choose a focal point for the room. A corner fire-

## Kitchen floor plans

AFTER



## Lessons learned

"I am a designer, but I learned things on this project," says Denna McLaughlin of her condo remodel. "You need to plan things out, and if you're doing a complete remodel, have a professional help you."

McLaughlin offers other advice for homeowners thinking of taking on similar kinds of projects:

■ "All the prep work I did before the remodeling paid off. I didn't have any delays in terms of

the dining room to add more space for storage. She designed her own custom cherry cabinets with bird's-eye maple accents and cast bronze hardware.

"I like wood, so I knew I didn't want a painted finish," explains McLaughlin. "I like the way cherry ages, and it's warm without being too dark. But because I was installing all this cabinetry, I knew it would be overwhelming, so I used the maple as a relief."

McLaughlin also made sure her new cabinets were user-friendly, installing full extension drawers and chrome pull-out pantry units with baskets for onions and potatoes. Before she finalized her designs, she measured her dishes and platters, so everything placed into the cabinets would fit.

To help break up the all-wood look, McLaughlin included some glass-front cabinets with inside lighting that allow her to display crystal and special dishes. She also included open shelves for cookbooks, wine storage and glass bowls. A new oak floor with inlays complements the new cabinets. Two different kinds of black-and-amber granite countertops add to the rich look of the room.

"I knew right off I wanted granite," adds McLaughlin. "I love the look, and it's a stable, tough surface."

A pale amber tile backsplash with inset glass tiles for extra sparkle lines the wall behind the new stainless steel range. A new stainless steel refrigerator, under-cabinet lighting and an amber-colored Italian glass light fixture mounted on the ceiling complete the room.

"The new kitchen works because I now have lots of storage, more counter space and plenty of places to work," says McLaughlin.

#### Living room lessons

Once the kitchen was done, McLaughlin turned her attention to her living room. "The old living room didn't have a unified feeling, and I didn't like the fabrics on my sofa or the lack of display space," says McLaughlin. "I wanted some-

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\$30,000 and gave McLaughlin the chance to use pieces that have memories and meaning.

As a designer, McLaughlin knew she needed to choose a focal point for the room. A corner fireplace provides that focus, and she placed her two new 7-foot sofas at an angle as a contrast. The sofas, covered in a comfortable, tightly woven French cotton, join an open-arm side chair, a floating ottoman and a rosewood coffee table she purchased in China a few years ago to create a casual sitting area.

Wanting more storage in the room, McLaughlin designed two large display cases to flank the living room window. These units keep the look of the room clean and offer storage space for a stereo and books.

McLaughlin then layered the light in the room, using wall scones on dimmers, a new lamp by the seating area and candles above the fireplace to illuminate the space for the evening hours.

#### Dining room transformation

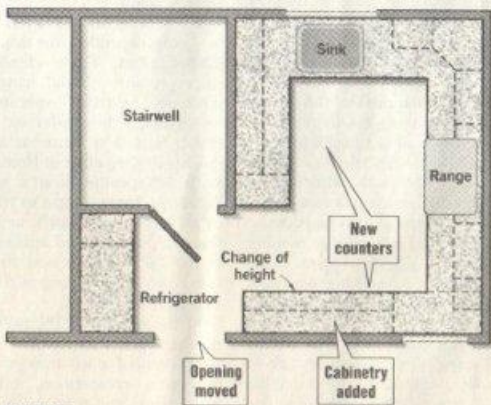
Located between the kitchen and the living room, McLaughlin's existing dining room was the next project on her list.

"The old dining room had a glass-top table on a base, and it was cold and fingerprint hell when I had lots of guests over for dinner," recalls McLaughlin. "I grew tired of that look and wanted something different."

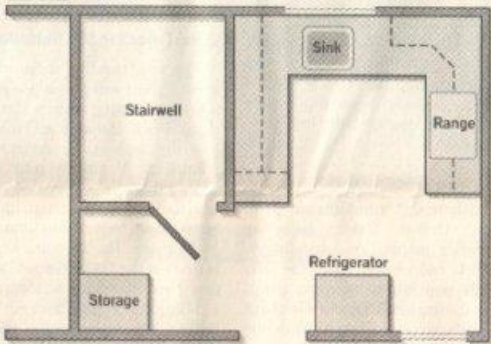
Since she had a strong idea of what she wanted, McLaughlin designed her own custom dining table as a focal point for the room. The contemporary cherry table seats eight and features a simple design, with tapered legs and inlay accents of African wenge hardwood. She loves the finished re-

#### Kitchen floor plans

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Source: Denna McLaughlin

Chronicle Graphic

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#### Lessons learned

"I am a designer, but I learned things on this project," says Denna McLaughlin of her condo remodel. "You need to plan things out, and if you're doing a complete remodel, have a professional help you."

McLaughlin offers other advice for homeowners thinking of taking on similar kinds of projects:

■ "All the prep work I did before the remodeling paid off. I didn't have any delays in terms of product not being there, ready to be installed."

■ "I think space planning is really important, to make sure everything fits and the scale is right. That is especially important in a living and dining room."

■ "Don't be afraid of color. Stronger colors really do enhance what you're doing. Pick a color and go a step up. Paint is cheap and easy to change, in case you make a mistake."

■ "Being diverse in your choice of finishes is very important. Don't be afraid to mix. In my kitchen, I have two different kinds of granite on my counters."

■ "Some people are really afraid to have patterns in their room. You can mix fabrics with different kinds of patterns, but just watch the scale of the pattern. If you have a big, bold stripe, don't add another big bold stripe. Instead, use a smaller-scaled square pattern or a smaller geometric pattern for contrast."

## Keeping the neighbors happy during a remodel

One of Denna McLaughlin's big concerns during her remodel was keeping peace with the downstairs neighbors. With a couple living in the condo below her, it was crucial that McLaughlin, her construction crew and the neighbors all be on the same page.

"For me, it was important to talk to the people downstairs and discuss any issues they might have before the project started," says McLaughlin. "You need to keep the lines of communication open."

came up as the project went along, she would stop by and talk to the neighbors to see if they had any concerns or questions.

Because the couple below both worked outside of the home during the day, the noise of construction was not a big issue. There was only one point — when the kitchen's hardwood floor needed sanding and the crew had to work past 6 p.m. — that noise became a concern.

"Make sure everything is clear," advises McLaughlin. "They are really nice people and that helps, but

refrigerator, under-cabinet lighting and an amber-colored Italian glass light fixture mounted on the ceiling complete the room.

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#### Living room lessons

Once the kitchen was done, McLaughlin turned her attention to her living room. "The old living room didn't have a unified feeling, and I didn't like the fabrics on my sofa or the lack of display space," says McLaughlin. "I wanted something more contemporary-looking with deeper tones, and I wanted display room for the artwork I have found during my trips abroad."

Instead of buying all new, McLaughlin incorporated some of her favorite existing furnishings — including a late 1700s Japanese tansu and a large porcelain Chinese horse — with a few well-chosen new pieces to make the new living room inviting. This helped keep the room's budget under

next project on her list.

"The old dining room had a glass-top table on a base, and it was cold and fingerprint hell when I had lots of guests over for dinner," recalls McLaughlin. "I grew tired of that look and wanted something different."

Since she had a strong idea of what she wanted, McLaughlin designed her own custom dining table as a focal point for the room. The contemporary cherry table seats eight and features a simple design, with tapered legs and inlay accents of African wenge hardwood. She loves the finished result, but believes the table taught her an important lesson.

"If I had to do it all over again, I would design the table with a leaf for those big holiday dinners when I need more seating room," says McLaughlin. "It would give me more flexibility."

McLaughlin likes the look and comfort of fully upholstered chairs, so she designed dining chairs with deep navy blue mohair on the seat and front of the chair, with a whim-

Source: Denna McLaughlin

Chronicle Graphic

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During the remodel, McLaughlin made sure a shared stairway was cleared daily and made a point to tell the neighbors when water was going to be turned off or major demolition was happening. When things

came up as the project went along, she would stop by and talk to the neighbors to see if they had any concerns or questions.

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"Make sure everything is clear," advises McLaughlin. "They are really nice people and that helps, but we made sure to talk and work out any issues beforehand. Communication is the biggie, and be willing to be flexible."

— J.M.

sical tiger pattern on the back. A hanging glass pendant above the table in a similar tiger design helps unify the look of the space.

A large Danish wood cabinet McLaughlin inherited does double duty in the new dining area, providing extra storage for wine

glasses and adding a personal touch to the room. Heavyweight cotton sateen window treatments in a warm gold color with cream accents complement the now-gold walls. A refinished hardwood floor, a contemporary Tibetan wool area rug and a few accent

pieces complete the look that was created with a budget of \$24,000.

"The new dining room works because everybody has lots of room and the chairs are very comfortable," says McLaughlin. "It's a great place to sit and talk after a long meal."

pattern of a smaller geometric pattern for contrast."

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