

In Over My Head: Designer to the Rescue

BY ASHLEIGH SAWDON

THIS IS NOT my first rodeo, I figured. I got this. See, I've renovated three kitchens in the past and designed a new one from scratch. No problem.

I'd bought a little fixer upper in Knoxville with a 1985 kitchen, which was, to say the least, far from a dream kitchen. The entry foyer opened into a solid blank wall (behind which was hidden the dark, old, depressing kitchen – shut off from the rest of the house but with possibilities). It was full of dark wood cabinetry with what I began calling “Rococo meets Byzantine” style hardware. The kitchen shelving all sagged dangerously in the centers of the shelves. There was no saving any cabinetry or appliances.

I'm a cook, so I wanted – no, needed – a fabulous kitchen with massive counter space, storage, and a gas cooktop. None of that existed. No counter space. No gas. And the cherry on top? My house is built on a slab, which means rerouting plumbing and electrical is that much harder.

My original objective was to do this as inexpensively as possible by opening up a few walls but retaining much of the original footprint of the kitchen. I began working to lay out my new kitchen myself. Then I read the fine print. If my measurements were off by even 1/4 inch, I'd end up with \$10K in cabinets sitting in my garage, which would have to be shipped back at my expense to resize. Oops. I'm a concept person, not a detail person. Maybe I need help.

I was brand new to Knoxville and didn't know anyone in the kitchen design field. I saw Shae Designs' column in this magazine, called to book an appointment, and fell in love the minute they walked into my foreboding little house.

Shae's energy and enthusiasm coupled with her team's insights and planning meshed with my creative juices. You might think that three strong-minded, creative people all pitching in on one project would develop friction. Far from it. We thrived on each other's ideas and the challenges. We were off and running.

Shae came back with three different designs. The first two had significant improvements over my original design. I loved them both and was mentally weigh-



ing my odds when they showed me the third design. My concept and my kitchen were about to change dramatically. Why be constrained by the existing footprint? There was so much wasted space and so much that could be done differently. Open your eyes, Ashleigh.

The third layout blew my mind. Entire walls removed, the whole front of the house opened to light and air. A huge island and second countertop/bar big enough for several people to cook and prep. But could I afford it? I mean, we're talking massive changes here. Turned out the third mind-blowing design was not the most expensive. I could afford it.

Did I mention that their designs were shown in 3-D? As we talked and I asked for some changes, they worked their magic, and everything we discussed appeared on the screen. We worked through cabinetry options, and I got exactly what I wanted. With Shae Design's cabinetry options, I could afford the look without cost overruns.

But the process didn't stop there. I already knew what color scheme I wanted, the old brick New York SoHo flooring I'd dreamed of, what countertop options I would search for, etc. And at every step it became a collaborative effort. They took my requests and improved on them. They referred me to contractors, granite and marble suppliers, and even an appliance store who made my dreams come true – without breaking the bank.

I got visits and estimates from their recommended contractors. I could have happily worked with any of the three. Except for one thing. I fell in love again... with Paul Fritts of Ace Home Improvements. On the spot.

Then I continued to fall in love with each of his crew. They are true craftsmen and artisans, and they'd worked with Shae so often that they could complete her sentences.

I won't tell you that the renovation was flawless. Like any renovation, we had hiccups. Some big, some small. But none that could not be modified with a little creative thinking and Paul's crew innovatively making changes on the fly to make dreams come true.

We added several design elements, additional storage in two other rooms, and storage/display ideas for special pieces that added elegance and grace. These were huge changes, and still we stayed pretty close to budget.

As my new kitchen evolved, I was ecstatic. It was worth eating off a card table, cooking on a baby Weber grill, and washing dishes in the bathtub for seven weeks.

My kitchen is the center of my home, and every room that surrounds flows seamlessly. It is the perfect solution, and if I do say so, a showplace. People are slack-jawed when they see the finished product. So am I. My kitchen and dining are ideal for entertaining, gathering, friends perched at the bar, on the window seat, with wine and laughter and camaraderie.

Thank you Shae and everyone at Shae Designs. Every single one of you has been a delight to work with. In fact, Shae Designs is our go-to favorite. Not just for cabinetry, but furniture, accents, lighting, and advice. We will be friends for a long, long time.

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