

Townhouse kitchen renovation wins grand 'Contractor of the Year' honors



PHOTOS BY GREG HADLEY

An innovative spatial reconfiguration and interior design solution to a townhouse in Merrifield has been named the Washington area's best kitchen remodel in the \$30,000 to \$60,000 range by the National Association of the Remodeling Industry's metro D.C. chapter. Winning contractor Michael Nash Kitchens and Homes grappled with structural challenges that included removing a bearing wall in the middle floor of a three-level townhouse. The precisely designed space plan better accommodates a whole series of needs for a family of four.



BEFORE: The existing 17-year-old production house kitchen incorporated an island that didn't provide enough counter space to support food prep.



Approximately half of the existing 165-square-foot kitchen footprint has been designated for family dining. The counter-height dining table surfaced in "leathered" river rock can double as a food prep station when needed. Michael Nash custom designed the Shaker-style floor-to-ceiling cabinetry. A cabinet above the coffee bar holds a 30-inch television.

■ Michael Nash plan named Washington area's best kitchen remodel between \$30,000 and \$60,000

BY JOHN BYRD
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A kitchen makeover in a three-level town house has won a Washington area "Contractor of the Year" (COTY) award for Michael Nash Kitchens and Homes.

The design solution - in which the primary living area of a 17-year-old townhome has been reconfigured and upgraded - was executed in the residence of Christina Gee and Ryan Watkins. The home is located in Merrifield's Mosaic District.

The project has been named a best-in-category Grand winner for "Kitchen Remodeling in the \$30,000 to \$60,000" range by the metro DC chapter of the National Association of the Remodeling Industry.

In accepting the prize, Michael Nash president and founder Sonny Nazemian praised his company's innovative design culture - which contended with difficult space planning and interior design challenges while staying entirely within the envelope of the home's 800-square-foot second floor.

"Increasing usable living space in a town home is always a tricky, especially when there are structural issues," Nazemian observed. "To meet the owners' requirements, we had to remove a bearing wall on the second floor of a three-level townhouse. Other contractors declined to even bid on this assignment, so we're pleased with the highly functional new space plan and the exceptional interior design."

For the owners Gee and Watkins (who are both professors at George Washington University), the search for improvements began almost three years ago with a simple assessment of goals and priorities.

"The house is appropriately-size for our family, and the easy commute to work via the metro made our decision to remodel an attractive consideration," Watkins says. "Our main goal was to make better use of existing space. We wanted functional improvements, but also a comfortable in-

kitchen dining area and a warm, distinctive interior design.

Early on, the couple began researching ideas online - always keeping an eye out for the building professional who got their vision.

"Ironically, the Michael Nash showroom was only a few miles away," Christina Gee says. "I had been researching on Houzz (online) for quite a while, but Michael Nash offers a significant display of finish-work ideas. The staff designers gave us relevant insights whenever we asked. Also, we were attracted to the fixed price policy."

Price became a particular advantage as other remodelers competing for the bid learned that the couple's plan would entail structural changes.

"Two other contractors wouldn't commit to a fixed price arrangement because of the structural change we wanted," Ryan recalls. "A friend had told me that the lack of a fixed price contract on his kitchen upgrade several years ago ended up coming in at 20 percent higher than the original quote... so we were pleased with the cost transparency we were offered."

Sonny Nazemian adds: "Effectively managing the budget on our client's behalf has always been a critical part of our process. We offer a portfolio of finish-work options at-cost, but we also only use our own workers, and our design team stays ahead of trends."

One of the project's earliest phases focused on what remodelers call "discovery" - i.e., assessing existing systems and how well they function, or don't.

"We looked closely at how the primary activity zones on the second level were built-out," Nazemian recalls. "Not surprisingly, we found a lot of misallocated space, and the consequences of that."

For instance:

- A comparatively small part of the kitchen allocated as a family room contradicted the larger call for an open, kitchen-centric floor plan where everyone could get involved in cooking;
- The wall separating the kitchen from the dining room/living room completely blocked the flow of natural light from the east-facing rear of the house to the living room in the front, making both rooms feel smaller;
- Despite the need for more storage, ceiling-flush bulk heading in the kitchen wasn't necessary and

severely restricted cabinet height; ■ Because the second floor lacked front-to-back visual continuum, it didn't work well when entertaining - a distinct problem when one invites 20 to 30 students and colleagues over to socialize.

To create an "open" plan in the middle of a three-level townhouse, designers deleted a bearing wall between the kitchen and a formal dining area, insinuating an I-beam supported by concealed vertical shafts to bear the weight of the floors above.

The "opening" made way for a counter surface and three-seat dining counter that faces in towards the kitchen. The counter is especially well-situated for clean-up and service but is also a convenient dining and gathering spot.

Better yet, the change invites more natural light and visual continuum from front to back.

To gain kitchen floor space, the team removed a pantry and oven stack, and relocated the refrigerator to the newly surfaced south wall.

"Owing to strict building codes, the possibilities for an open plan in a townhouse are still being discovered," Nazemian adds, "yet the change can significantly improve quality of life without changing the basic footprint."

On a similar note, deleting unnecessary bulk heading allowed for taller cabinets and custom cubbies. Roll-out shelving proved to be a handy space-saver.

There are custom cubbies for favorite pots, dishes and glassware, a special drawer for fruits and vegetables, and a drawer for exotic teas. At the stove, an under-cabinet pull-down shelf with light is a perfect place to mount a cookbook while preparing a meal.

The built-in efficiencies make the room feel larger. Because of the two counter-height surfaces, the whole family can participate in kitchen duties at the same time.

Notably, Gee and Watkins were especially conscientious in pursuing finish-work choices. The couple visited four or five granite shops recommended by designer Oliver Nazemian, eventually choosing "river rock" granite they specified for two surfaces in the kitchen and a new fireplace surround. To keep the shine down, the river rock has been "leathered." Overall, the couple explored a range of offsetting colors and textures that would make the room lively, yet balanced.

"We had always appreciated

the natural beauty of the rocks we had seen in Hawaii when we were first married," Watkins recalls. "The dark granite reminded us of this, and the warm wood tones are a perfect complement. Also, the curved wood of the Kichler Grandbank chandelier provides an effective mid-room element."

The new space has worked par-

ticularly well when entertaining.

"Six can dine on the deck; another eight to 10 at the counter-height kitchen table," Christina says. "The front-to-back sightlines make it easy to stay connected to anyone in the room. It's a really pleasant place to spend time with others. We're very happy with it."

For information, call (703) 641-9800 or go to MichaelNash-Kitchens.com.

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The new interior explores a contrast of lights and darks, traditional design themes, and postmodern sensibilities. The kitchen floors are light tan porcelain; cabinet facings are cherry wood with wide rails for upper cabinets. The light fixtures are from Kichler Grandbank; the curved wood provides an appropriate eye-catching complement in a transitional-style interior.



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