

New bay containing part of the renovated kitchen of a house on Fessenden Street, NW. Note the translucent floor.



All photos © Morgan Howarth



Renovated kitchen looking toward the added bay.

Cooking (with) Light

Eric Colbert, AIA, Designs a New Kitchen for His Own 1940s House

by Ronald O'Rourke

Doctors might make the worst patients, and a man who serves as his own lawyer might have a fool for a client. Architects, however, can be quite successful in designing their own living spaces.

A good example is the new kitchen that **Eric Colbert, AIA**, designed for his house on Fessenden Street, NW, in Washington's Friendship Heights area. The project reworked 120 square feet of existing interior space and added 80 square feet of new space, creating a sleek new cooking and eating area that brings more light into the rear of the residence and improves the house's connection to its back yard.

Project: Fessenden Street Kitchen Renovation and Addition, Washington, DC

Architect: **Eric Colbert, AIA**
 Structural Engineers: **Structura**
 Contractor: **Four Brothers, LLC**



The kitchen before renovation.



Rear of the Fessenden Street house following renovation, showing the new bay of the kitchen at left center with storage below, and the new deck at right.

“The old kitchen was the original one in the house, which was built in 1940,” said Colbert, principal of the architectural firm **Eric Colbert & Associates**. “I didn’t even have a dishwasher. The space was about 10 feet by 12 feet, and had four doors going into it, one from the dining room, one from the center hall, one from the rear yard, and a pantry door.”

Colbert’s design converted the dated, cramped kitchen into a more open, T-shaped area that works as both a functional cooking and eating space and graceful passage to the back deck and yard. A narrow, freestanding counter runs down the renovated space’s centerline, reinforcing the kitchen’s new organizational scheme and creating an additional surface for food preparation, eating a light meal, or socializing with guests.

“Although contemporary, the design incorporates symmetry as a reference to the layout of the center-hall colonial house,” Colbert said. “The dark part of the kitchen contains the messy cooking functions while the white section incorporates the cleaning components. The glass-and-steel cabinet doors are a reference to

the old, crank-out steel casement window that was at the kitchen north wall. I personally dislike corner cabinets and countertops in kitchens, and have avoided them in this design.” As renovated, the kitchen “opens the house out to the rear, with lots of glass and a much-larger opening between the dining room and kitchen. The connection to the new rear deck was a critical component.”

Details can make or break an architectural design, and that holds especially for kitchens, which incorporate a lot of surface treatments, appliances, fixtures, and power sources.

“A clean overall appearance was achieved through careful planning that included building the refrigerator and dishwasher into the cabinetry,” Colbert said. “The electric outlets below the wall cabinets are carefully centered on horizontal tile joints. The similar color of the outlets and tile helps the outlets to avoid being visually obtrusive. There’s no wall above the countertop in the addition, so pop-up electric outlets were incorporated.”

The circulation path in the newly added part of the project, he said, “represents open space between old and new. This all-glass



View from the deck, with the new kayak-lined fence in the background.

section includes full glazing on each end, a continuous skylight above, and a backlit translucent glass floor.” The arrangement “extends two feet beyond the edge of the masonry opening from the existing house into the addition, and the exterior brick of the house forms the interior finished wall at this location. The combination of these elements gives one the feeling of being outside.”

A metal stair leads from the deck down to the yard, passing by the lower level of the addition, which provides some additional storage space on the house’s basement level. A few additional paved steps complete the transition to the gently sloped yard space.

“A new dark-charcoal-colored fence was installed around the rear yard,” Colbert said. “On one side of the fence, the posts were designed to support brackets for kayak storage. These colorful boats, floating in front of the dark fence, create a sculptural effect.”

When done well, a kitchen renovation is a small-scale project that can have a big impact on a home. But sometimes, that impact is best measured in quiet moments of satisfaction and enjoyment.

“My favorite element of this project is the glass zone between the old rear wall and the exterior steel framework,” Colbert said. “Standing in this area gives one the feeling of being outside. All the houses to the west of mine were built by one company using a similar plan, and the rear walls of these houses all align. The open slot in the addition takes advantage of the distant view along the rear of the adjacent houses enabled by that alignment.”

Given the generously sized rear yard, Colbert said, “there was little limitation on the potential size of the kitchen addition. Early design schemes were considerably larger. Discipline was required to provide a functional solution that is in keeping with the scale of the existing house.” For homeowners considering their own kitchen renovation projects, he added, a key point is that “careful planning can result in a design that is highly functional without a significant size increase.” 🍷