



*Top of page:* The "floating shelves" are made of wood and steel; *above left:* A close-up of the new stovetop, showing the Peruvian walnut cabinetry and the unique glass backsplash; *above right:* The quartz counter reflects the lights and objects above it; *below:* The counter in the old kitchen wrapped around the far end of this room, with only a small window for light. Photos by Carrol Krause



# A new kitchen for a "mid-century-modern" home

By Carrol Krause  
Homestyle

**N**ow, here's a dilemma – a modern home with a kitchen that looked and felt old-fashioned.

This is what happened to Christine Matheu, who lives in a classic 1958 "mid-century modern" home. Fortunately, Christine is an architect, and she had plenty of ideas about how to remodel and update her kitchen in a way that would complement the classic lines of the house.

"This home was designed by Edward James, of Indianapolis," she explained. "He was one of the few modernists at work in Indiana at that time. He also designed University School and parts of the Indiana Memorial Union."

The home has large picture windows in the dining room and living room, with dark beams supporting the high sloped ceiling. The generous expanse of glass brings the treetops and the daylight right into the living area, except for the original kitchen. Edward James may have been a modernist architect, but he assumed that a housewife would not dare object to working in a long, narrow galley kitchen with very little natural light.

"It was pretty claustrophobic," Christine admitted. "The kitchen was totally segregated from the dining room / living room except for a sliding door and a pass-through. It was the original kitchen, with a 50-year old wall oven on its last legs."

A U-shaped counter wrapped around the far end of the narrow room, creating a cul-de-sac where a small window overlooked the back yard. Overhead was a single skylight. A large refrigerator loomed just inside the kitchen doorway. Being so narrow, it was difficult for two people to work side by side.

Christine's redesign visually opened both ends of the narrow room with new windows and physically opened up the long wall to the dining area on the other side, replacing the wall with a breakfast bar.

The colors of the new kitchen are elegant and muted.

"The '50s light-stained wood fir ceiling, dark stained wood beams, and natural oak flooring were a given," she observed, "so with cabinetmaker Nancy Hiller's help finding wood veneer samples I decided to build on these colors, using maple and Peruvian walnut cabinetry to coordinate with the existing wood. Then, to expand the palette, we added white and charcoal countertops."

The new oak floor matches the original floors. The quartz counter has a racing stripe that crosses the counter surface directly beneath one of the ceiling beams, as if the beam was casting a shadow. The upper cabinets are maple with frosted glass fronts, and the lower cabinets are Peruvian walnut, all with brushed chrome minimalist-styled pulls.

Where the cul-de-sac countertop used to be, a large window provides a terrific view of the back yard while the other looks out into the home's foyer, allowing natural light to flow all the way through the house.

The new kitchen has more workspace than before.

"I have more counter space because of the breakfast bar," Christine noted, "and although there aren't as many upper cabinets as before, with Nancy's expertise at using every inch of space available, there's about the same amount of storage space because the new cabinets are taller than the original ones. The two full-height pantry cabinets really make a difference. You don't need a big kitchen, really."

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Stools at the breakfast bar, with the floating shelves overhead.

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The backsplash is unique, a faintly sea-green smooth surface that subtly reflects the kitchen. It's Christine's own invention: frosted glass mounted over a mirror.

"It has depth," Christine explained, "and it's pearl-like. I knew I didn't want tile, because I wanted to keep all the materials to glass, steel and wood. Tom Thickstun kindly provided me a box of glass samples, so I just experimented."

The shelving above the breakfast bar appears to float in the air, but it's actually suspended from stainless steel rods with a cantilever at one end. The bottom shelf is hollow, to accommodate wiring for its can lights.

"The house is not symmetrical, but it's balanced," she pointed out. "I wanted the shelves to have the same spirit of asymmetry."

The kitchen makeover was actually part of a larger project that involved the exterior wood siding and roof, and remodeling the master bedroom and lower level. Christine and her 14-year-old daughter Kati lived in the house throughout the renovation despite the noise and dust. Obviously, this was not easy.

"You really need a place of refuge when remodeling is going on," Christine acknowledged. "If you're doing an entire house, I would advise renting temporary quarters. The stress affects your whole life, and it goes on for months. Each morning in the midst of construction with dust

over everything, I would be trying to get my daughter off to school, packing her lunches, and getting myself to the office, and then Kati had her homework to do after school. It only worked out because of the accommodating temperament of Chris and Ben Sturbaum of Golden Hands and their subs on the project. Ben was incredible at solving problems and making things work out."

She laughed ruefully. "Last winter when it was so cold, we lost our electricity. There were no lights, no heat, and there was plastic draped all over the whole living room. I said to Kati, 'Let's give up, let's go get a hotel room.' But she said, 'No, let's stay here. This is fun!'"

The new kitchen is very satisfying to work and live in.

"It's been very interesting to work in a kitchen that's opened up," Christine said. "It's more relaxing to be able to look up and have a distant view rather than being constantly on-task. It feels much calmer."

She summed up, "It's been nice to do a kitchen that feels as though it belongs to this house. The design works with a 1958 house and yet it responds to my desire to have a modern kitchen."

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