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MARCH 2005

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STAIRMAKER'S STORY

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COVER PHOTO BY BRUCE BUCK
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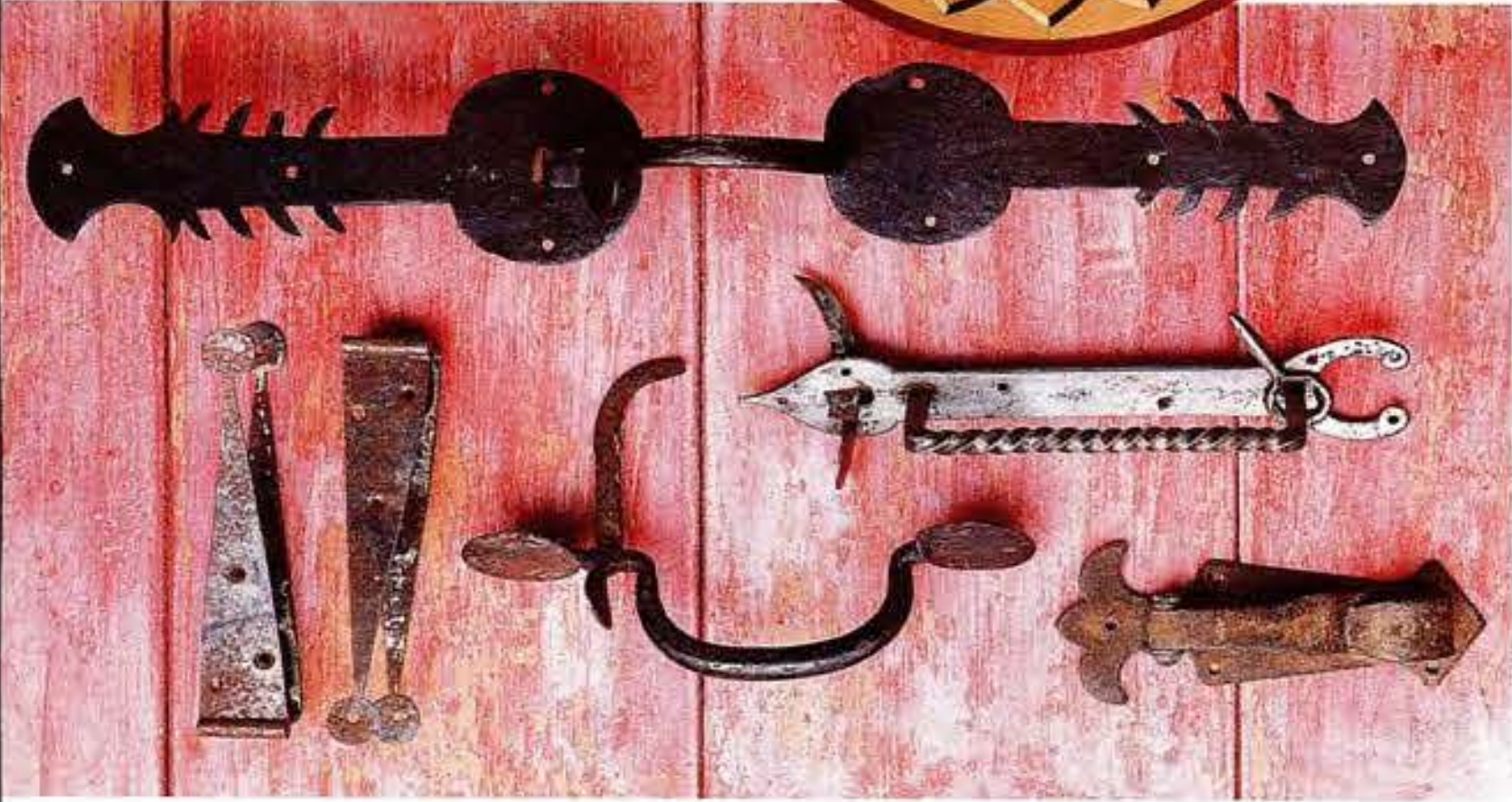
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PHOTOS (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) DAVID HAMBLEY; WILLIAM A. BOYD JR.; ALAN SHORTALL; CHARLES SCHILLER

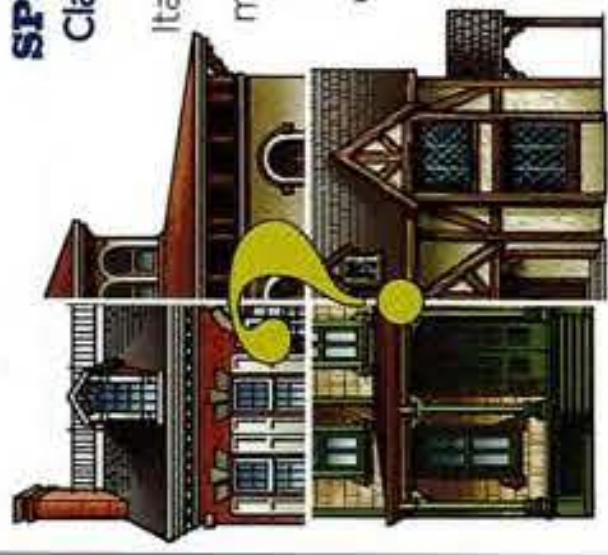
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BARN AMBITIOUS

The December 2004 issue's article on barns being renovated into homes [above] was fantastic! My fiancée, Mary, and I have a big old red dairy barn on our property that serves as our garage and heated shop. Your article made us give converting it serious consideration. So now we are planning the renovation of the barn. Since we both have full-time jobs (I am a project manager for a large construction company) and plan to do much of the work ourselves, it will probably take a couple of years to complete. Thank you for your terrific magazine, and keep the great ideas coming!

LYLE DIETRICH, NORTHWOOD, N. DAK.

CORRECT WIRING

In your November 2004 Homeowner's Handbook, at Step 6, your instructions specify to connect one wire to the black and one to the white. It should be to either connect the wire from the center, or energized, tab of the bulb socket to the black, or "hot," wire and the shell, or neutral side, to the white wire. Or use a meter or continuity tester to verify which lead is indeed the one intended to have the energized leg of the circuit.

PAT WALSH, VALLEJO, CALIF.

WRITER JOE TRUINI REPLIES: You're right; if there's any doubt that a fixture is properly wired, a continuity tester should be used to determine if the socket is energized. Most light fixtures, including the chandelier we installed, are pre-wired with brown two-wire lamp cord; One wire is typically differentiated or "identified" from the other by a ridge or groove running along its

length, or white lettering stamped on the brown plastic insulation. Lamp cord sheathed in clear insulation has one silver wire (the "identified" wire) and one brass-colored wire.

The identified wire should be connected to the neutral (white) wire in the ceiling box; the other lamp-cord wire is connected to the hot (black) wire. In fact, that's exactly how our chandelier was wired, though we didn't get into the specifics in the photo caption. Incidentally, if the wires were accidentally reversed, a modern, porcelain-socketed fixture would still operate properly and safely, and the only shock hazard would be if someone were to stick a finger into a live socket, touching the threaded metal ring.

SAFETY ZONE

As any architect or builder or as any homeowner who's engaged an architect or builder knows, materials are often delivered late, one subcontractor sits idle while another sub hasn't yet finished his job, and deadlines are rarely met. Such was the case with our "Split Personality" story (December 2004), when our photographic and printing deadlines came before Mark Davis's loft and stair railings arrived on site to be installed. Naturally, such a space—both for safety and to meet building codes—requires railings, which is why we acknowledged the soon-to-arrive barriers in the caption for the photo of the loft. Nonetheless, we were pleased to receive many letters from sharp-eyed readers questioning the use of the photograph—a snap crucial to telling the story of the building's refurbishment—and the missing railings. To our minds, such a response is a fine testament to the passion, education, and safety-mindedness of TOH readers. —The Editor

punch list

definition: a list of items incorrectly done or remaining to be finished on a construction job

- In "Deck the Walls," December 2004, p. 119, we misstated that Stinson MDF Wainscoting "can't be adjusted for specific wall lengths"; detailed installation techniques for doing so are on Stinson Technologies' Website, www.wainscoting.com. The panels are also not embossed, as we said, but machined using CNC routers, and the deep, crisp profile leaves distinct shadow lines.

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In "More on Your Floor" (page 49), photographer **William Boyd** approached each wooden medallion not as flooring but as a work of art to focus on its unique characteristics. "The detail work was incredible," says Boyd. "The richness of the wood just spoke to me." The photographer, a former draftsman for an engineering firm, says he appreciates the precise symmetry and balance of the medallions and sought to highlight these qualities in his pictures. Boyd is currently taking photographs for a Harlem comfort-food cookbook and has worked for *Metropolitan Home* and *Essence*. He has a studio in Brooklyn and resides in Lansdowne, Pa.



While reporting on house tours for next month's *TOH*, **Sallie Brady** met Richard Pasquarelli and Valerie Pels, whose kitchen remodel ("Great Adaptation," page 92) was inspired by a page they'd found in a dog-eared copy of *This Old House*. "The way that they adapted elements of a 1920s butler's pantry photo to meet their own contemporary kitchen needs is truly instructional," says the writer. Brady is a former editor at *GQ* and has contributed to *Country Living* and *Art & Antiques*. She lives in New Jersey.



While most homeowners chase squirrels out of their gardens, one seemed to chase photographer **Matthew Millman** after jumping out of a tree and nearly onto his head during the shoot for "Second-Story Job" (page 110). With the squirrel incident behind him, Millman notes the unique connection between homeowner Dean Kavanagh and the home, particularly since Kavanagh was the builder for the project. "The great joy in shooting architecture is taking pictures of something someone created themselves. It's cool to be able to document that," he says. Based in San Francisco, Millman has contributed to *Architectural Digest* and *Interior Design*.



"I always liked playing in the dirt," says author **Ken Druse**. A good thing for *TOH*, which tapped the *New York Times* contributor to help us through the step-by-step of building a DIY hypertufa garden trough ("Rock From an Easy Place," page 96). All that playing in the dirt has led to a passion for purely organic gardening that spans 30 years, not to mention lush gardens in Brooklyn and New Jersey. Druse regularly lectures about gardening and has penned 17 books on the subject. He has also contributed to *Martha Stewart Living*, *House Beautiful*, and *House & Garden*.

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[LETTER FROM TOH]



Time to Take Stock

BY TOM SILVA, TOH GENERAL CONTRACTOR

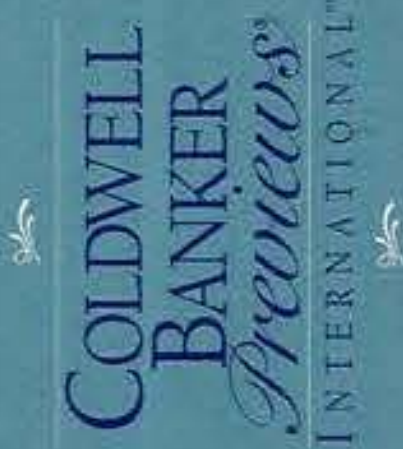
Around this time of year, when the oncoming spring keeps the weather bouncing between warm and frigid, I find out a lot about my house. Last March, the gutter over my front steps delivered a kind of water torture—drip, drip, dripping melting snow through a broken seal during the day and icing up my steps at night. Since I've been sidelined more than once by knee and foot injuries, I didn't take any chances. As soon as I could, I got up there and applied new sealant.

If you live in a snow-prone part of the country like I do, your house has been put to the test over the last four months. So now's a good time to make some notes, before the cold weather goes away. Take stock of problems that surfaced this winter. Which windows are drafty and where does the roof ice over? Was the furnace efficient? Did the fireplace smoke? As the weather warms, check driveways, paths, and porch supports for cracks from frost heaves.

Write it all down, then make a repair schedule. Spread out the fixes over the year. That'll make keeping up the house easier to deal with, and you won't have to drop a bundle of cash to do it all at once, just before winter. By then, you'll be snug in your home—at least until you discover what needs your attention *next* spring.



WHAT'S BENEATH THE SURFACE- THE VALUE IN LUXURY KITCHEN MATERIALS



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Surface changes are more than skin deep when it comes to decorating your kitchen. Let Coldwell Banker® help you transform the heart of your home and increase its value with the following guide to a selection of top kitchen surface materials.

METALS. Real cooks love metal surfaces in the kitchen. Stainless steel has long been a favorite counter choice among professionals because of its durability and sleek, reflective appearance. Copper, a fine metal with a history rooted in the kitchen, comes in a variety of finishes, ages beautifully, and offers a naturally antibacterial surface for backsplashes, venthoods, wall accents, and even door panels. Hand-finished aluminum makes ideal flooring with its polished look and easy-to-care-for surface, giving you more of that precious commodity everyone appreciates - time.

EXOTIC WOODS. Used for years in estate homes and yachts, rare woods can also bring elegance to your kitchen. The rarer the tree, the higher the cost of the wood. Often these gems of international forests, like African anigre or Brazilian satinwood, are available in veneer form. Made from very thin slices of wood, veneer is ideal for adhering to hand-crafted cabinets, counters, walls, or even your refrigerator as seen here. For solid wood flooring, consider non-endangered exotics like Jatoba (Brazilian cherry), White tigerwood, or Patagonian teak.

TERRAZZO. Using a technique that hails from 15th century Italy and distinguishes the floors of Doge's Palace, today's craftsmen follow this old world process by mixing colored stones or marble chips with tinted cement and then polishing it. Good news for the modern kitchen: terrazzo becomes even more beautiful as it ages. Typically used for floors or walls, it's also possible to construct countertops with this appealing surface. Designers customize the look by choosing smaller chips-Standard Terrazzo, or larger chips-Venetian Terrazzo.

DECORATIVE TILES. The ancient practice of using ceramic tiles in your kitchen remains a favorite today. For inspiration, explore corners of the world, such as Iznik, Turkey where they've been handcrafting intricate floral tiles since the Ottoman Empire. For a sensuous look, investigate Sassuolo, Italy where the tiles glisten with semi-precious stones and leaves of real gold. Consider even creating a three-dimensional landscape with a wall panel composed of hand-painted ceramic tiles from Jerusalem where the Balian studio draws on Persian traditions.



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ON THE JOB

Good Hues

House paints get more and more green

Mindful of the safety concerns of pros and DIYers everywhere, the paint industry has recently redoubled its commitment to green paint. Not Jolly Green Giant green or the color-of-a-summer-lawn green, but green meaning environmentally friendly, with a "low-VOC" content. VOCs (or volatile organic compounds) are thought to be among the potential culprits behind illnesses often lumped under the heading of Sick Building Syndrome. VOCs can be found in a range of common household products including cleansers, aerosol sprays, disinfectants, even the materials on or in your floors and walls. In the case of paints, the VOCs helped them flow easier and dry faster. Now, thanks to new formulations, VOCs can be markedly reduced.

Many manufacturers have decided to offer goods that have fewer VOCs than allowed by the Environmental Protection Agency standards. Look for labeling that says the contents have less than 250 grams of VOCs per liter. Some manufacturers have gone even further, offering "zero-VOC" for paints with half a gram or less of VOCs per liter. Fortunately, you won't need to shell out more green for such green paint—prices are comparable to those already on your shelf. Also expect the same smooth brush-on performance. And there's this: Low VOC paints come in a full palette of cool to warm colors—including, of course, 161 shades of green.

—Scott Schilling

For specific low-VOC paint brands, see the Directory, page 122.

COLORFUL HISTORY

Early eco-friendly paint The first people to paint their living rooms—okay, caves—lived 42,000 years ago. The first colors? Black, from charred wood. Yellow and red, from iron oxides in dirt. Green, from clay. And white, from crushed bones.	Paint by number In Aztec times, red dye was more prized than gold. To make the hue took hundreds of minions combing the desert in search of its source—the female cochineal beetle. Making a quart of paint wasted a million bugs.	Gilded age Pope Leo X once anointed a boy in gold paint as a symbol of the Golden Age of the Medicis. Unlike the real-life actress in <i>Goldfinger</i> , the boy died from toxins in his paint.
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—C.J. Hughes

PHOTO: TED MORRISON

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[ORIGINS]



(TURN TO "ORIGINS," PAGE 24 FOR THE ANSWER.)

- A. 1928
- B. 1918
- C. 1728
- D. 1896

Windows—just like old

When the British government imposed a hefty luxury tax on the Colonies in 1767, which included a levy on window glass, the fledgling Americans got creative. To avoid filling the king's coffers, they cleverly glazed their windows—most often the transoms above front entryways—with the bottoms of used bottles and with “bull’s-eye” discs cut from the center of sheets of blown glass. These days, getting the nearly forgotten but historically significant bull’s-eye look is a lot less political. You don’t even need a bottle. Robert Lichtman, owner of Sugar Hollow Glass, makes these beautiful re-creations for old home renovations. In his New Fairfield, Connecticut, workshop, Lichtman handblows bull’s-eye glass in sizes ranging from

5 by 5 inches to 9 by 7 inches and offers them cut square or blown round in clear and light green. Most go to historic colonial-era homes, which often have five-pane transoms above the door, though Lichtman notes that more and more of his work ends up in new homes built in older styles. Ranging in price from \$40 to \$65 per piece, a pane of bull’s-eye glass is a fairly inexpensive (yet, sadly, still taxed) way to give a new house a vintage look. —Jason Carpenter

For more information, contact: Sugar Hollow Glass, (203) 746-0456; www.sugarhollowglass.com.



REMINDER: REFRIGERATOR SAFETY

What homeowner doesn't love the cold storage provided by posh built-in refrigerators like the Sub-Zero, Viking, Jenn-Air, and KitchenAid? How about those who've been put in cold storage by them? Though it's by no means common—and reports of injuries are purely anecdotal—such pro-grade units (which have top-mounted compressors) have been the subject of increasing reports of tipping over if they're carrying a full load of groceries and aren't properly installed. “Contractors must secure them to the wall, but sometimes they throw away the instructions,” said Mitchell Weissberg, owner of Krups Kitchen & Bath in New York City. When properly fixed in place, however, such units are completely safe and just the thing for your own luxe kitchen renovation. Just make sure to read the directions. —C. J. Hughes

10 THINGS:
WD-40

It started when we discovered there was nothing like it for on-the-trunk-deck polishing of neglected golf shoes.

Then we found the WD-40 (“Water Displacement,” perfected on the 40th try,” introduced by the Rocket Chemical Company in 1953) fan club Website and discovered 2,000 more uses. Turns out to be the anti-duct tape, not sticking to anything and pretty much unsticking anything else. And yes, you can use WD-40 to remove duct tape, along with:

- 1 Removing liquid nails and dried caulk from fingers, and paint from shoes
- 2 Removing tar, grease, and darn near anything else from floors and carpets
- 3 Pre-lubricating nails—and, when sprayed right into the box, keeping them from rusting in the basement
- 4 Easing, really easing, assembly of plastic and vinyl parts
- 5 Sliding up wood chisels so they slide right through the material
- 6 Rehydrating paintbrushes
- 7 Keeping rust off those air conditioners you never got around to covering or removing
- 8 Keeping grass from sticking to mower blades—and clay from throwels and snow from snow shovels
- 9 Unkinking small chains
- 10 And defeating balky triple-track storm windows, the enemy of knuckles everywhere

—Terry Sullivan



PHOTO: (GLASS SAMPLES) TED MORRISON

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CABIN CLASS

Repress those unpleasant memories of Boy Scout camp, college orientation, and that last business retreat—the cabin is the new dream hideaway, at least according to Linda Leigh Paul's enchanting *The Cabin Book*. From Lake Michigan's dunes to the Rockies' peaks, the tome—perfect for those inspired by the small-summer-home trend—ranges the landscape to showcase 29 reinterpretations of this American architectural icon for a generation that wants their rustication with lots of space and light. Cabin fever? Cured.

—C. J. Hughes



Lather, Rinse, Tan, Repeat

Close your eyes and imagine the extravagant amenities in George "Man-Tanner" Hamilton's bathroom. Now open 'em and take a peek at what we at *This Old House* think *should* be there: The Idrolux custom-made tanning shower, which puts the bronze on while you wash off. The Idrolux's acrylic, watertight panels cover the housing for 24 tanning lights, 12 on each side of the shower walls. The lights claim to be low-UV, which means you'll need to make multi trips to the stall to get Hamilton's perma-tan. Don't have the \$21,000 for the shower/tan booth combo? You can always retrofit your existing shower for \$11,000, but that model stacks all its rays on one side of the shower—which means you need to rotate as you rub-a-dub-dub. —Jason Carpenter

LINOLEUM FLOOR(I)SHING

Invented in 1860, and a kitchen mainstay into the 1950s, linoleum sheet flooring—a mix of linseed oil, lime, pine resin, and wood flour—nearly disappeared in the '60s due to interest in easier- and less-costly-to-install vinyl.

That's changed, though, thanks to a desire for more traditional products and handsome offerings from companies such as Forbo. If you'd like such a look but installation costs step on your flooring dreams, Forbo's do-it-yourself interlocking squares are for you. Each square is a sandwich of linoleum (top), HDF, or high-density fiberboard (middle), and cork (bottom), which provides cushiony support. Squares (12 by 12 inches) and rectangles (12 by 48 inches) come with interlocking grooves and lay over existing flooring, no adhesive needed. Make a checkerboard or other pattern by interlocking different colors, or you can lay down a solid color. To cut the squares to fit your floor's dimensions, use a jigsaw. One caveat: While ideal for high-traffic areas like kitchens, linoleum isn't suitable for wet areas such as bathrooms because, as with any product with seams, water can seep in and cause damage. —Scott Schilling

Marmoleum Click by Forbo costs \$5 per square foot; for more information go to www.themarmoleumstore.com



[ORIGINS: ANSWERED]

D. 1896. Invented by David Misell, the partner of Conrad Hubert, whose company The American Electrical Novelty and Manufacturing Co. (later renamed Eveready) built the first flashlight. Police officers were early big fans. —C.J. Hughes



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Tools for the Do-It-Herselfer

If you're thinking about buying hand tools for that lucky lady in your life—or if that lady is you—the home-improvement industry is clamoring to sell the long-neglected do-it-herselfer lightweight hammers and hacksaws with ergonomic grips. Curious to see how well the gender-specific tools performed, *TOH* asked three handywomen to put some popular kits to the test.

—Amy Hughes



Ralph Monroe, the female half of the burning brother-and-sister carpentry team on *Green Acres*, could have used one of these kits.

RUBBERMAID TOUGH TOOLS, \$49.99

www.Target.com

TOOLS: hammer, crescent wrench, level, tape measure, tongue-and-groove pliers, long-nose pliers, multi-bit ratchet screwdriver, picture hooks, nails, screws.

Tested by Leslie Monahan, *TOH* copy chief

PROS: Overall, the quality is very good, and the rubberized grips are hand-friendly.

CONS: The 16-ounce hammer is overkill for hanging pictures and underpowered for serious framing. And the nail, screw, and hook selection is paltry.



WHAT I'D CHANGE: The kit could use a pair of multipurpose electrician's pliers, with strippers sized for different gauges of wire.

TOMBOY TRAVELER, \$49.95

Tomboytools.com

TOOLS: hammer, slip-joint pliers, utility knife, multi-bit ratchet screwdriver, tape measure, sanding block, level, hacksaw, carpenter's pencil, gloves, safety glasses

Tested by Alexandra Bandon, *TOH* senior editor

CONS: The 8-ounce hammer, 6-inch slip-joint pliers, and hacksaw are too small for many household projects. And the magnetic torpedo level isn't level in this kit.

PROS: The gender-free bag and tool designs respect the idea that women don't want to be treated differently.



WHAT I'D CHANGE: I'd prefer larger locking pliers and a lightweight titanium 10-ounce hammer, which is both light and powerful.

BARBARA K SIGNATURE TOOL KIT, \$45.99

Amazon.com

TOOLS: hammer, slip-joint pliers, adjustable wrench, painter's tool, tape measure, multi-bit screwdriver, 16 hex keys, level, picture hooks, nails, screws, anchors, home repair guide

Tested by Keen Gat, carpenter and set designer



CONS: The 6-inch adjustable crescent wrench is toylike with a stubby grip. And the jaws are loose and could slip off a nut.

PROS: The tool selection is pretty good. The 6-inch slip joint pliers and 6-in-1 screwdriver are well designed.

CONS: The molded plastic case makes it impossible to fit anything else in there if I wanted to expand the kit.

WHAT I'D CHANGE: A manual on how to use the tools would be more helpful than the repair guide. Who really knows how to use all the different blades on the 6-in-1 painter's tool?



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PHOTOS: TED MORRISON; (MARY GRACE CANFIELD) COURTESY OF MGM CLIP + STILL

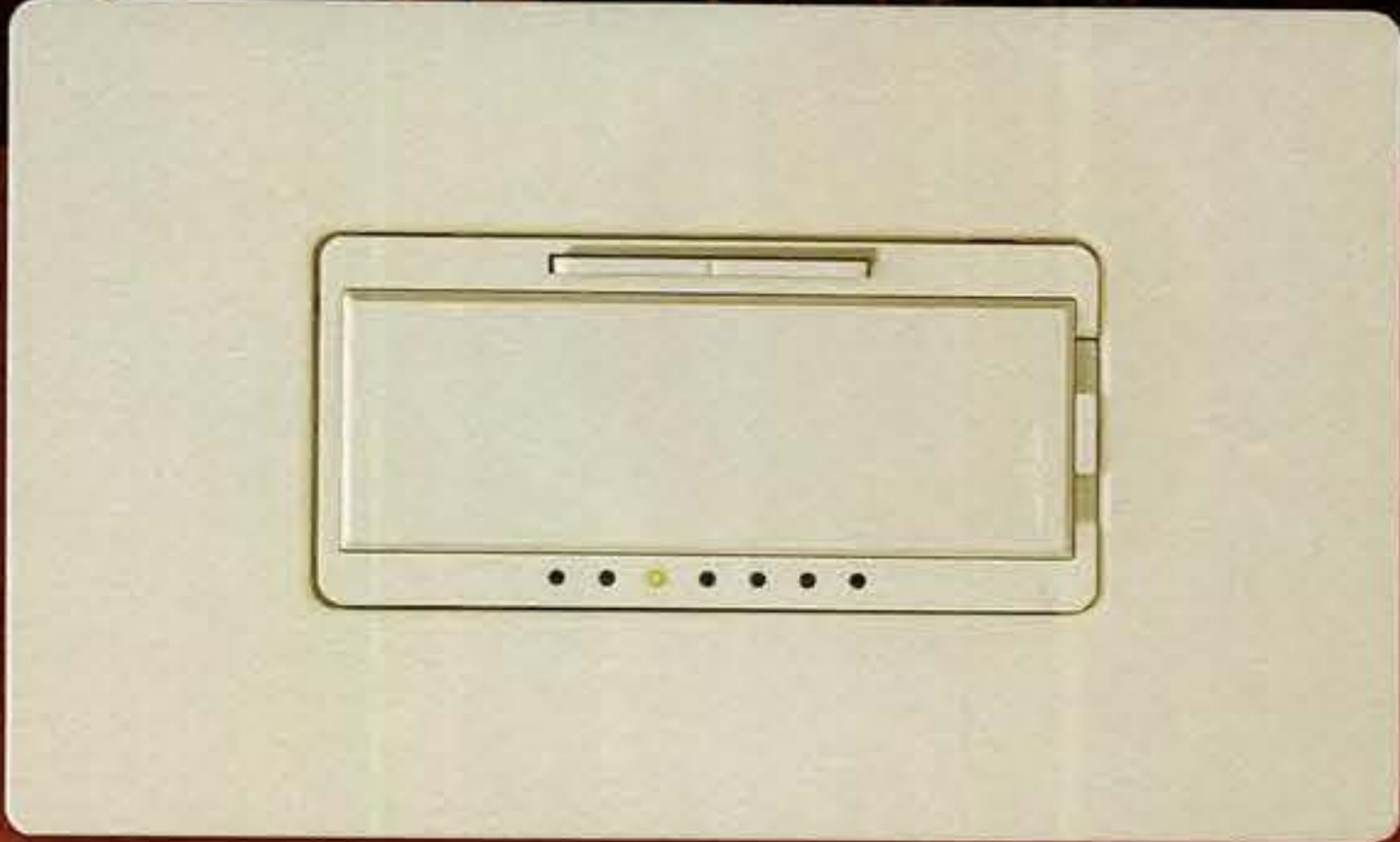
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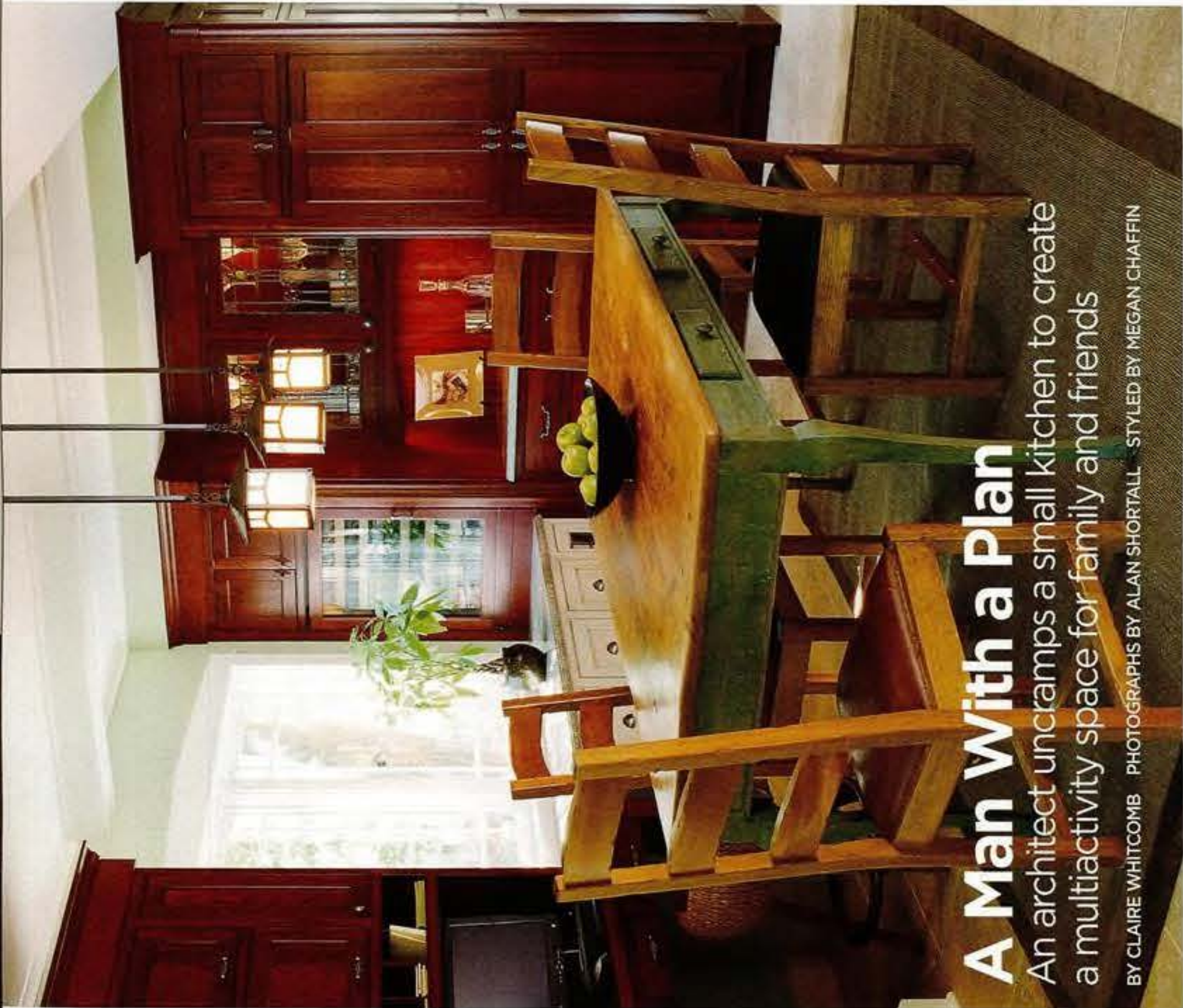
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A Man With a Plan

An architect uncamps a small kitchen to create a multiactivity space for family and friends

BY CLAIRE WHITCOMB PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALAN SHORTALL STYLED BY MEGAN CHAFFIN

The new eating area is outfitted with a bar for entertaining (background) and a computer station (far left) where the kids can do homework. The pantry cabinet (near right) holds cereal and snacks; art supplies are stored in the white file drawers beneath the window. Using a mix of painted and natural wood finishes fits the Craftsman style of the house. The pine table and chairs are all that remain of the old kitchen.

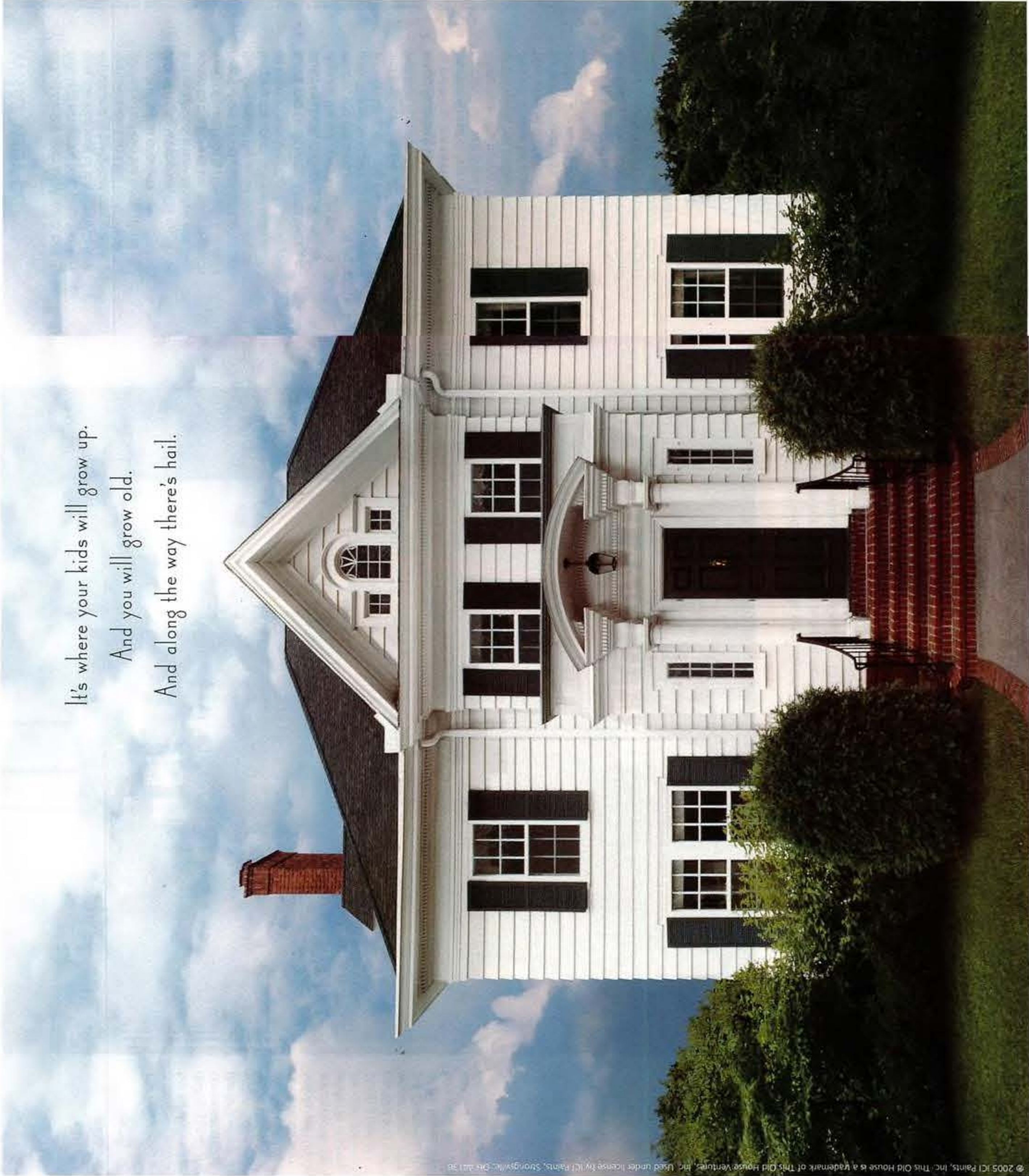
In a household with growing kids, spending time in the kitchen is all too often a squeeze play. Mom and Dad are colliding with hot baked goods in hand, there's never enough room to sit down, and nobody can open a cupboard door without a box toppling out. That's what finally prompted architect Charles Cook and his wife, Tricia, to remodel the kitchen in their 1920s Wilmette, Illinois, bungalow. They knew just what they needed: a microwave low enough for their three boys—aged 5, 10, and 13—to reach, a designated area for Tricia to do the baking she enjoys, food-prep counters at different heights (Charles is 6 foot 4; Tricia, 5 foot 4), and a big, storage-packed island where the kids could have a snack or guests could hang out when the couple entertains.

Since the existing kitchen flowed into a larger eating area, Charles's first move was to flip-flop them to take advantage of the bigger space for cabinetry and appliances. Then he widened the footprint by borrowing from an adjacent family room, which was being added on to. He organized work zones by function—a baking center next to the range, for instance, and a sandwich-making area next to the fridge. Where possible, the cherry cabinets were put together in floor-to-ceiling groupings that minimize long runs of countertop and give a more polished, furniturelike look.

"When you design houses for a living, you know how to build in every little thing you've ever wanted," says Charles. "This kitchen's got something—and plenty of room—for everybody."

[continued on p. 32]

www.thisoldhouse.com



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And you will grow old.
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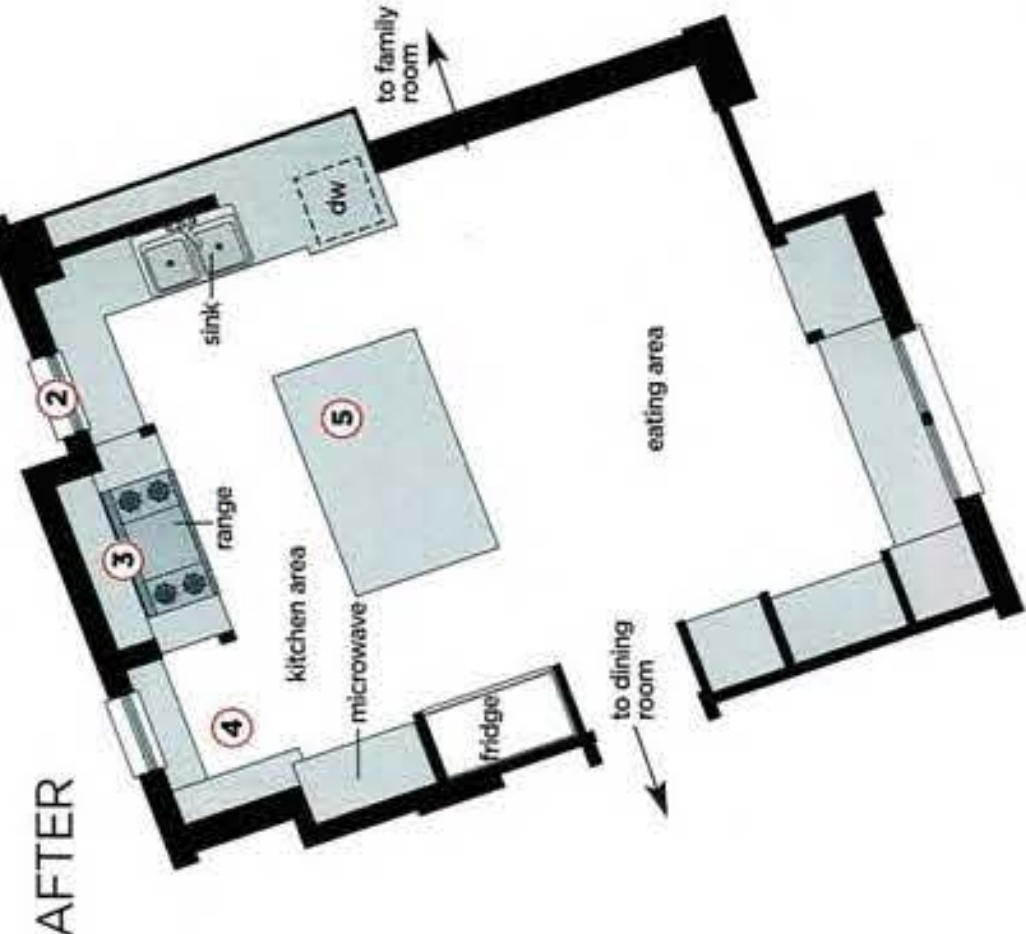
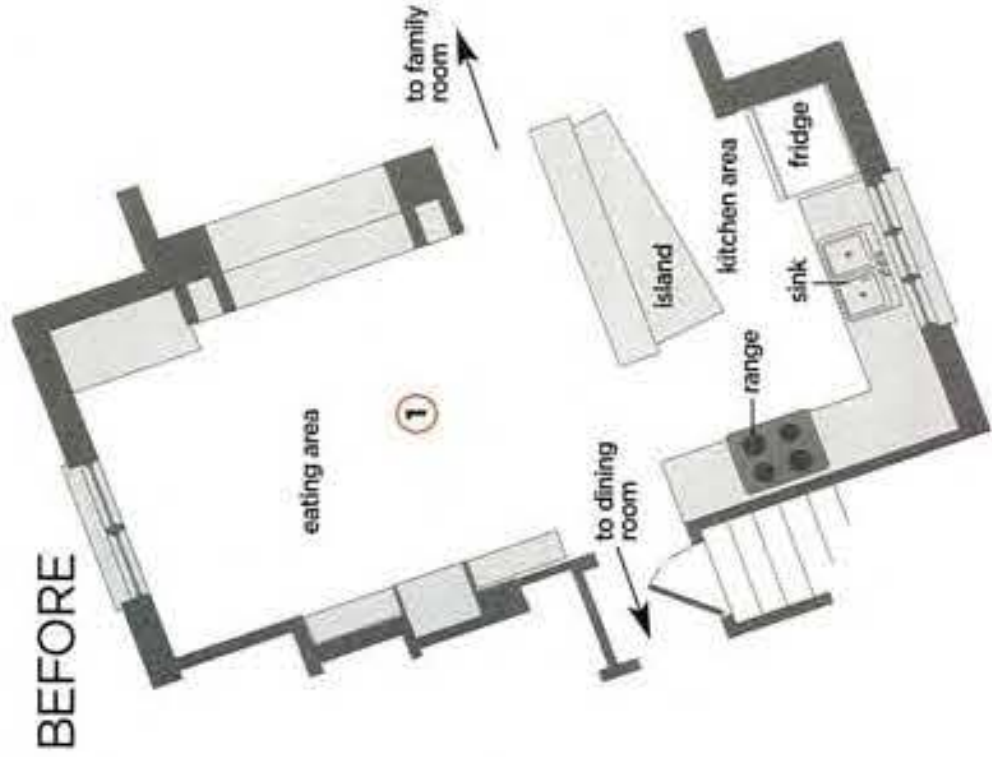
The Plan

Creating specialized work areas and a kid-friendly island made a place for everything (and everything) in this open-plan space.



WHAT THEY DID

- 1 **REARRANGED AND EXPANDED THE OLD KITCHEN.** To enlarge the work area, the locations of the 8½-by-12-foot kitchen and 12-by-12-foot eating area were swapped, and the footprint was pushed 6 feet into the family room, which was also enlarged.
- 2 **PUT IN MORE WINDOWS.** For symmetry and ventilation, a new window was added to the right of the stove to match a reconfigured one on the left. A skylight over the sink lets in more light, offsetting the darkness of the wood cabinetry. Keeping the upper sink wall open creates an interior “window” into the family room.
- 3 **GAVE THE UPGRADED APPLIANCES A BUILT-IN LOOK.** Cabinetry panels disguise the Sub-Zero fridge, the dishwasher, and the wine cooler in the eating area. The range is set into a mantel-style surround that conceals the exhaust hood and a spot where the kitchen’s exterior wall jogs 18 inches into the room.
- 4 **MADE MULTIPLE WORK STATIONS.** Next to the fridge is a sandwich-making counter 42 inches high for the very tall husband; below it is the kid-height microwave. The baking center, to the left of the range, has a standard 36-inch-high counter, storage for ingredients and bowls below, and a narrow base cabinet for baking sheets right by the oven. In addition, the eating area has a computer desk and a bar for entertaining.
- 5 **ADDED A BIG CENTRAL ISLAND.** The furniturelike island is approximately 4 by 7 feet. It holds a pull-out trash bin, linen and utensil drawers, and open shelves for pots. It also doubles as a casual eating area.



BEFORE: The old kitchen was worn and outdated, and the layout was confined by an island too large for the space. **AFTER:** The repositioned, U-shaped cooking area has a large central island. With drawers on either end, furniturelike legs, and a snack counter, it is the homeowner/architect’s modern interpretation of a big farmhouse table. The stainless steel Wolf range is tucked into a mantel-style alcove.

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1

The Details

Flair follows function in this stylishly equipped, eat-in kitchen.



4



2



5



3



6

- 1 The **WINE COOLER** from Sub-Zero was installed at waist height as a convenience for the 6-foot-4 homeowner. To create a more attractive display, the toe grille was covered with cherry paneling; it is vented down to the basement.
- 2 The **DISHWASHER**, made by Miele, is hidden behind cherry panels and elevated 7 inches off the floor for easier-on-the-back loading and unloading. It takes up the lower portion of a china cabinet designed by the homeowner/architect, which has stained-glass doors on top.
- 3 The **BACKSPLASH** behind the range has a granite ledge to hold hot pans and cooking ingredients. Above it, a travertine arch mirrors the curve of the mantel-style range surround. The limestone tiles inside it are set diagonally and punctuated by three decorative nickel-glazed tiles; the whole field is framed with a border of green tumbled-marble mosaic.
- 4 The **COMPUTER DESK**, custom-built in cherry to resemble an old-fashioned secretary, holds the family PC and a TV that can be concealed behind an awning-style lift-up door. Cubbyholes keep paper and envelopes handy.
- 5 **SHALLOW CUPBOARDS** built into both sides of the range surround hold spices and cooking utensils.
- 6 **OPEN SHELVES** on the range side of the island roll out for easy access to pots and pans. The stainless steel towel racks are recessed for maximum comfort while working at the countertop.

For more kitchen design ideas, trends, and products:
www.thisoldhouse.com/kitchen

MY THREE SONS

“It’s no accident that there are three metallic tiles in the backsplash, three cabinet doors above the range, and trios of pendant lights. I chose the motif of three as a tribute to my sons, Connor, 6, Alex, 10, and Kyle, 13.”

—Charles Cook, homeowner/architect



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ASK THIS OLD HOUSE

Tune in to Ask *This Old House* on PBS, Thursdays in the second half of The New This Old House Hour at 8 p.m. ET (visit www.thisoldhouse.com or check local listings).

STUD SPACING

My house was built in 1950, and its exterior walls are made of cement block. When I removed some interior walls while renovating the bedroom, I noticed that the studs were spaced 24 inches on center. When I install new walls, should I keep that spacing? I plan to cover them with drywall.

BRAD BAKER, EAST PEORIA, ILL.

TOM SILVA REPLIES: Codes generally allow 24-inch on-center spacing for studs in interior nonbearing walls, and under certain circumstances even for load-bearing walls. But I don't see why you'd want to do it, even if you can. You don't save much money in materials or much time in installation, and the finished wall is likely to flex if you lean on it. I build interior walls with 2x4

studs spaced 16 inches on center and cover them with at least 1/2-inch-thick drywall. They're stiffer and more solid-feeling than anything built with 24-inch spacing.

PUMPING TANKS

How frequently should a septic tank be pumped out? We have lived in our house for four years and don't know when our tank was last pumped.

EDWIN COFFIN, WINCHESTER, VA.

RICHARD TRETHEWEY REPLIES: Most tanks should be pumped about every three years, so it's time to have yours taken care of. If you wait too long, the solids that normally drop to the bottom of the tank will have nowhere to go but into your leach field, which is meant to absorb liquid waste only. You'll end up writing big checks to dig up your yard and replace the clogged field.

The timing for the pumping session after this one will depend on how big the tank is (your town should have a record of the tank size) how much you use it, and how much solid waste you generate. If you have a small or average-size tank, a garbage disposer, a big family, or entertain a lot, go for a shorter time between pumpings. But if you have a large tank or a small family, travel a lot, and compost all your kitchen scraps, you can probably go longer. Ask the pumper to assess how full the tank is the next time you pump it out and then schedule accordingly. In any case, err on the side of more often rather than less. Pumping a little early won't cost much, but leaving the job until the tank overflows will ruin your whole day.

FENCE SITTING

What's the best way to build a 2-foot-high fence on top of an existing cement-block retaining wall? I was thinking of using joist hangers to connect the 2x4 posts to the wall's face.

E. HAL TATE, SIERRA VISTA, ARIZ.

TOM SILVA REPLIES: I wouldn't do it. Joist hangers aren't designed for that purpose, especially on brittle concrete block. Besides, I don't think the exposed metal brackets would look all that good on a fence like this. Neither will 2x4 posts,



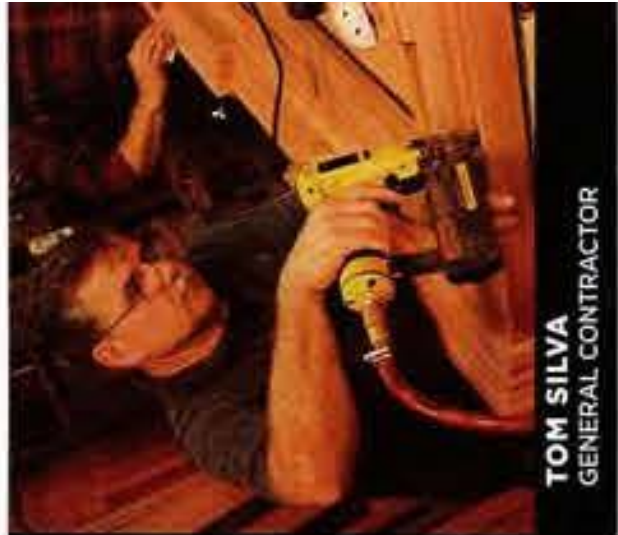
Although building codes allow walls that don't bear loads to be framed with studs spaced 24 inches on center, Tom Silva installs his studs 16 inches on center because that makes for a stiffer, stronger wall.

PHOTOS: (RIGHT, FROM TOP) SACHA BLACKBURN; BEVAN WALKER (3); (LEFT) DAVID CARMACK



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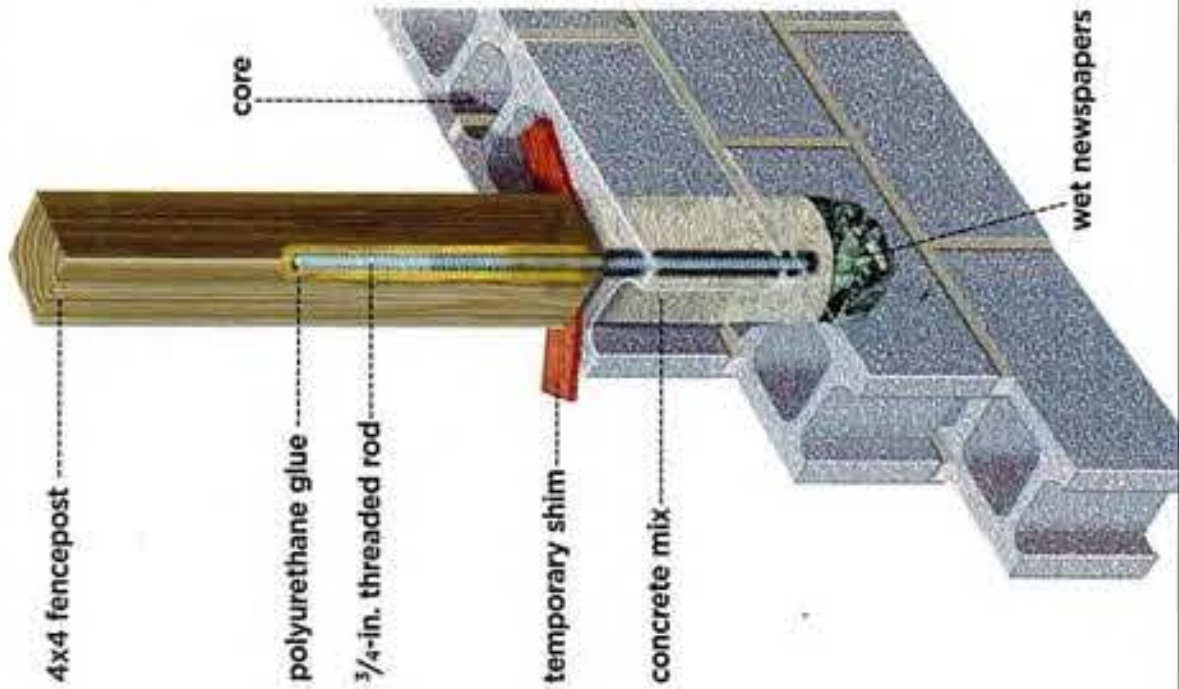


ROGER COOK
LANDSCAPE CONTRACTOR

ASK

THIS OLD HOUSE

FENCE POST ON A BLOCK WALL



which just aren't strong enough in any case. Your fence will be stronger and look better if you use 4x4 posts anchored in concrete.

To do this right, you'll have to fill the cores, the holes in the blocks, with concrete at each post location and anchor the posts in the mix. But first, get the posts ready. Use a 3/4-inch auger bit to bore a 12-inch-deep hole in the bottom of each post. Then soak the ends of the posts in a water-repellent wood preservative—you won't get another chance to do this once the posts are set. The anchors will be 3/4-inch threaded rods, each one cut 22 inches long. Spread polyurethane glue over half the rod length and screw the rod that far into each post's hole.

To fill the cores, wet the inside of the blocks and stuff wet newspapers at least 14 inches down the block-wall cavity. They will act like a plug and save you from mixing more concrete than you need. Now fill the cores to the top, agitate the concrete with a stick to eliminate air pockets, smooth the surface, and stick the posts' rods into the mix. Make sure to keep the ends of the posts

out of the concrete; you don't want them to be stained by the wet concrete or to rot prematurely. Use wooden shims to create a 1/4- to 1/2-inch space between the wood and the concrete. Finally, check that the post is plumb on two adjacent sides, and brace it temporarily on those two sides until the cement sets the next day.

Once you have all the posts in place, assemble the fence sections between them and remove the shims and braces. You'll now have a strong, good-looking fence that's even a little mysterious—nobody will quite know how it's staying up on the wall.

SOGGY PLASTER

As we were renovating our 1920 Craftsman bungalow, the tarp covering on our roof blew off on an extremely windy day, and water poured in and collapsed some of the ceilings. Now we're wondering if the walls have been damaged as well, though they appear to be in good shape. Is there some way to check?

JULIE VILLANUEVA, DECATUR, GA.

ILLUSTRATION: IAN WOPPOLE
PHOTO: BRACHTEL WEILL/PICTURE ARTS/BOTANICA

NORM ABRAM REPLIES: First things first: Is the roof back on? No sense in doing anything with the walls until everything's snug overhead. Assuming that's taken care of, you're right to be suspicious of the walls' appearance. Plaster can be dry on the surface and wet inside the wall cavities. To find out, drill some 1-inch-diameter holes through the plaster and lath and reach in with a finger, or maybe with a stiff wire to determine if the insulation or the back side of the wall is damp. If the inner surfaces feel dry, you should be okay. Just fill the holes with a patching plaster.

But if you do detect moisture, call in a firm that specializes in drying out water-damaged houses. They have giant fans and dehumidifiers to quickly lower the moisture content of wet interiors, as well as the instruments to measure progress, even inside walls. With any luck, they'll have everything down to a 10 percent moisture content in a few days. At that level, you eliminate any chance of mold taking hold on the plaster.

To find a company in your area that takes care of soggy houses, log onto www.iicrc.org, the Website for the Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration Certification.

BATTLING BAMBOO

When we moved into our house, we had a lot of bamboo growing on a hill beside a river. Every spring the bamboo shoots

up and I have to cut it down weekly. Is there anything I can do to get rid of the bamboo permanently?

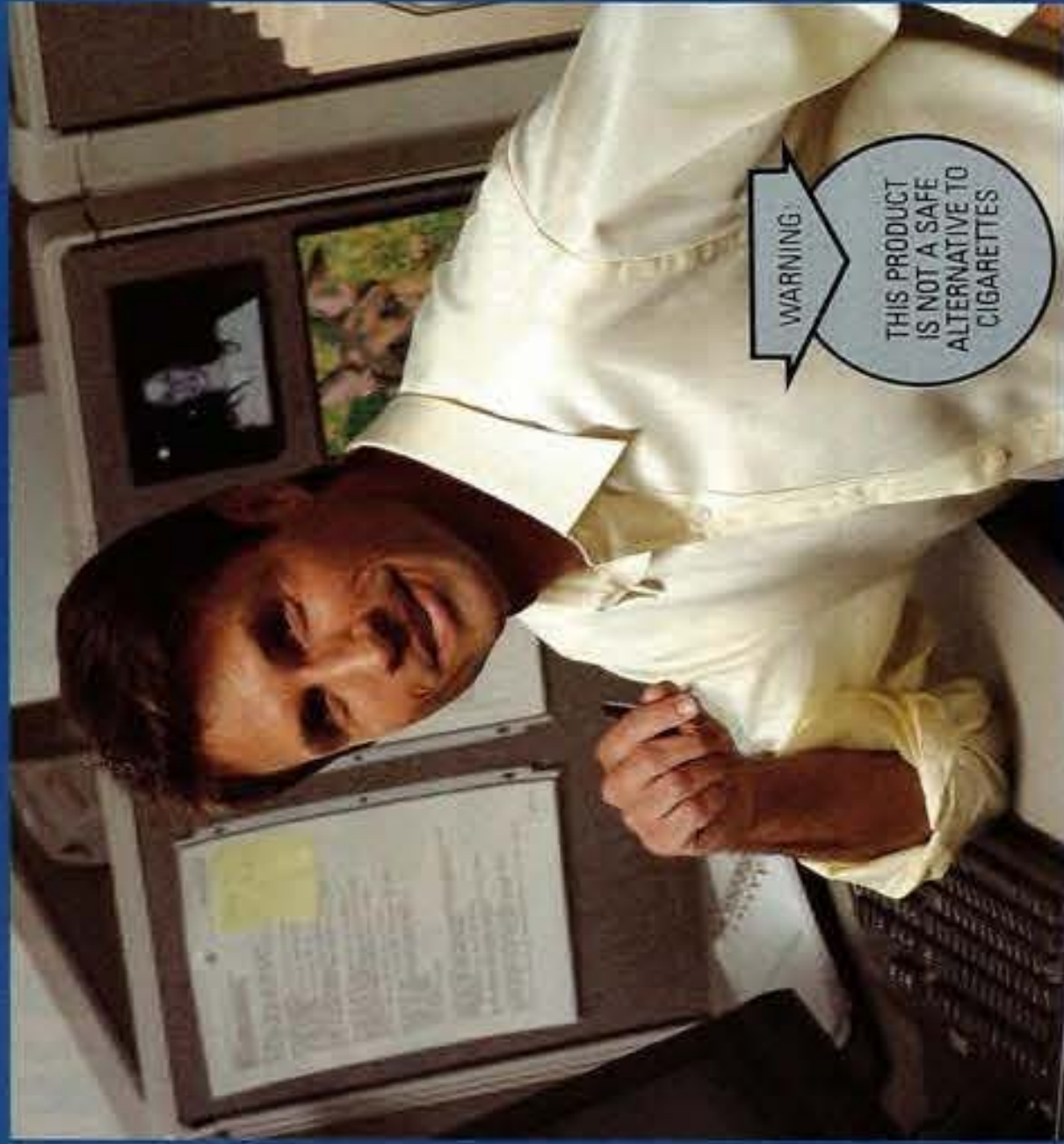
KEVIN SCHIAVONE,
PASADENA, Md.

ROGER COOK REPLIES: Too bad you can't hire a panda to do this job. They happily eat up to 35 pounds of bamboo a day. But with pandas in short supply, the only practical way to get rid of bamboo is to keep cutting it down to ground level or spray it with an herbicide, or both.

A small chainsaw will make short work of the mature stalks. Follow up with a weekly trim using a lawn mower. Also, keep an eye out for shoots beyond the perimeter of the grove; some bamboos will send underground runners, called rhizomes, up to 25 feet from their base. By next season, hopefully, your bamboo will be gone.

Once bamboo is established, there are two ways to eradicate it: Chop it down to the ground and mow over it until the roots die, or poison the shoots.

WITH ALL THE SMOKING AREAS REMOVED FROM THE BUILDING, PHIL KNEW HIS BEST OPTION WAS TO HEAD STRAIGHT FOR (THE NEXT PAGE).



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cpi BY APPOINTMENT

If you decide to use chemicals on your bamboo, glyphosate-based herbicides are usually effective. Be sure to follow the instructions exactly. They kill any plant they come in contact with, and you don't want them to reach the river. One approach I've found to be effective is to let the bamboo shoots grow to 2 or 3 feet in early spring, then spray them with herbicide. Then every time a new shoot reaches that height, spray again.

Here's another option to consider: Rather than eliminate your grove entirely, cut it back to a manageable size, then contain it with a physical barrier. One off-the-shelf product uses thick interlocking polyethylene sheets buried about 3 feet in the ground. Containment systems do require vigilance because rhizomes will try to grow over the barrier. If any of them succeed, you'll need to remove them.

By the way, not all bamboo is such a headache. "Clump-forming" bamboo is not invasive and doesn't call for heroic containment efforts.

SEALING A FOUNDATION RACEWAY

We upgraded the electrical service in our 1887 Victorian about 10 years ago. The new wiring comes into the house through an opening in the foundation wall that was originally used to pipe cistern water into the house. But now when it rains, water seeps through the opening and drips on the service panel in the basement, where the circuit breakers are. My son temporarily solved the problem by lean-

ing a piece of plywood against the house to deflect water. I was hoping you might have a better-looking solution.

ANN GOW, NORTH ST. PAUL, MINN.

NOEL WILLIAMS REPLIES: First of all, don't mess with the panel if it's wet inside; electricity and water are a dangerous combination. It's not a problem to be ignored, either. Water in the service panel means corrosion, which can prevent the breakers from tripping when circuits overheat. Your only choice is to call a licensed electrician. However, you should be able to make the necessary leak-stopping repairs yourself.

First, find out how the water is coming in. If it's seeping in on the inside of the plastic conduit that comes through the foundation wall, the problem might be something as simple as a loose access cover on the pull box; that's the fitting on the exterior of the house where the outside wires make a 90-degree turn and go inside. All you need to do in this case is tighten the screws that hold the cover in place.

But if water is coming in around the outside of the conduit, which is more likely, head to the basement and look for gaps between the conduit and the concrete. For any gap that's less than 3/8 inch or so, stuff foam backer rod into the crack, then seal it with a triopolymer sealant. This is a very flexible sealant and sticks to all sorts of building materials, even when they're slightly damp.

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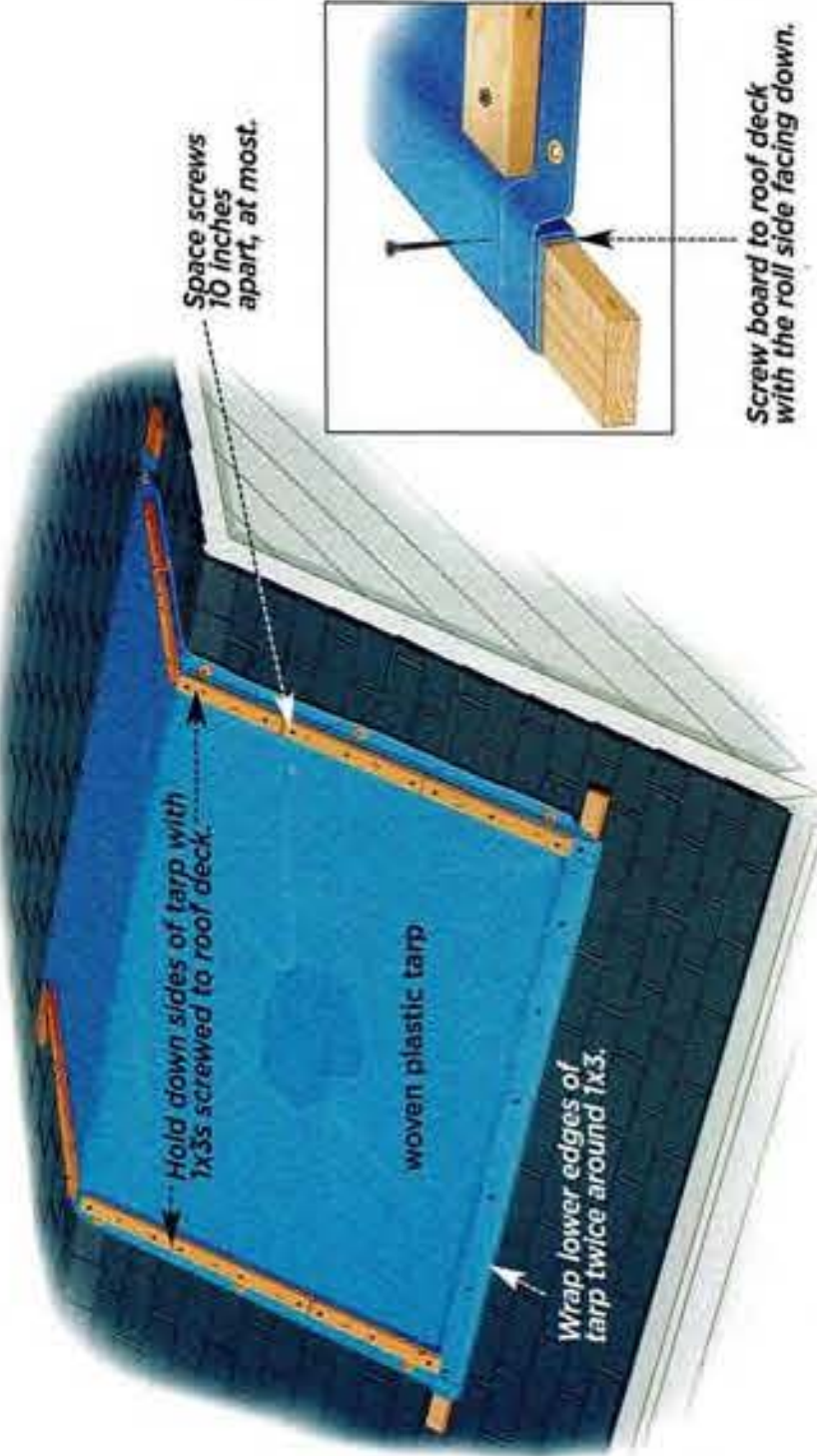


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TEMPORARY ROOFING



For bigger gaps, hand-pack both inside and out with hydraulic cement. Wear rubber gloves to protect your skin against chemical burns, and work quickly because hydraulic cement sets up in minutes.

While you're at it, do what you can to make sure water doesn't collect near the pull box. Sloping the ground around it away from the house should help a lot. And finally, make sure your gutters aren't dumping water into this vicinity.

Noel Williams is a former electrical contractor and building inspector and the author of several books on electrical codes. He lives in Herriman, Utah.

EMERGENCY ROOFING

Any hints for temporarily protecting a storm-damaged roof? We sure could have used this information during the hurricanes we had last year.

NORA NIX, PENSACOLA, FLA.

TOM SILVA REPLIES: Anybody who lives where hurricanes or tornados are a regular threat needs to know a little about emergency repairs. But that same know-how can be helpful in other parts of the country, too. It doesn't take much for a heavy tree limb to snap and take out part of a roof, for instance. Basically, what you want to do is cover the damage with a woven plastic tarp that is held in place with 1x3 wood strips. Here's how I do it. First I roll one end at least twice

around a long 1x3, then screw it to the undamaged side of the roof. The 1x3 "roll" should be against the roof so it won't collect water and debris. The rest of the tarp goes over the ridge and down the other side of the roof several feet beyond the damage. Then I roll the opposite end of the tarp around another 1x3 and screw it to the roof sheathing, roll side down. Now it's just a matter of using more 1x3s and screws to hold down the tarp's sides. They don't have to be rolled in the tarp. A "blue roof" isn't pretty, I'll admit, but it will keep the weather out until someone can repair the damage.

Having said that, this type of emergency repair is best left to someone who has the equipment and skill to do it safely. Roofs are treacherous, particularly when wet, and tarps are slippery even when dry. You don't want to be wrestling with one in high winds, either. Better to submit a claim for property insurance than to have your family submit a claim for life insurance. ■

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