

Finding extra kitchen space on a standard lot

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Back a century or so ago, when large swaths of Vancouver were being carved up into 33-by-120-foot lots, the kitchen wasn't where it all happened. The standard designs found a large living room and entranceway along the front, a dining room, and the cooking area squeezed somewhere into a back corner of the floor plan.

That layout has largely continued into recent times, but local architect John Henshaw wanted to break the pattern when he recently had the chance to design a home on West 15th for his sister-in-law. The result? An ultracontemporary but family-friendly solution with an airy open plan and a huge kitchen area along almost the entire back of the West Coast-style house. There's no separate dining room, but a cooking-eating area with a big island in the middle as well as a double desk along one wall where kids can do their homework while the parents make dinner. In other words, the party in this house is in the kitchen.

"What makes this house unusual is the main floor is one big open plan, with the living-room-lounge at the front and the back all kitchen and eating area," Henshaw explains, looking over the original blueprints for the house at his office in southwest Vancouver. "So what you're getting in this house is a really big kitchen—normally, on a 33-foot lot it's jammed in the back. We've said, 'You probably don't live in the living room—the kitchen is the real focal point.'"

The house feels much bigger than it is, with sightlines right through the main floor, sweeping hardwood that runs from the front to the back, and expansive windows.

What's also unique about the house, which features a contemporary mix of wood, glass, and stone on the outside, is that inside it mixes that open-concept comfort with a sleek, modern look by interior designer Joy Chao. It doesn't sacrifice kid-conscious comfort for style. In the kitchen, that means dark, durable hardwood floors offset by white cabinets, pale Caesar-stone counters (a mix of recycled concrete and stone), and subtly shimmering pearlized backsplash tiles.

"So many contemporary designs are so stiff and hard and too by-the-books," Henshaw says. "This one is contemporary but family-friendly and comfortable to live in."

The dark floors extend into the living room, where the centrepiece is a modular fireplace made from white, quartzlike stone tile that extends chicly to the ceiling. Devoid of clutter, the room has a single, comfy yet

sleek-lined sectional couch in stone grey. For Henshaw, the trick to maintaining the flow of a house is to know what furniture is going into it before you do designs. “Sometimes you do a beautiful floor plan and can’t fit the furniture. That’s the reason why the spaces feel comfortable.”

The other trick to the house is a back-entrance mudroom walled off to one side of the kitchen, offering a pantry and laundry room on the main floor. That means the residents don’t have to travel down an extra set of stairs with clothes baskets. They also don’t have to share washing facilities with the students who live in their basement (and who have their own stacked washer-dryer).

The upstairs also has an airier feel: instead of four bedrooms, the family opted for three larger rooms, allowing for a big master bathroom with a freestanding rectangular tub, double sink, and shower, as well as a walk-in closet. “They’re the kind of rooms you might see in a 50-foot-lot house,” Henshaw comments.

The entire home has been built to green standards, with a big flat roof that slopes to the south in case anybody ever wants to install solar panels. The windows are high-performance, the floors have radiant heating with a high-efficiency gas boiler, and there’s even an in-home energy monitor in the kitchen—a great place for kids to see how much electricity they’re using.

There are clever details, but the design was kept simple and straightforward to keep the budget under control. When you look at the outside of the house, with its tempered-glass, steel, and aluminum porch awning and unique, tongue-in-groove cedar window frames, it might not be immediately apparent that it’s a basic cubelike design. But what the house proves is that you can do a lot within that 33-foot-lot box—and not have it feel like a shoebox.

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