


POSTWAR REVIVAL

KITCHENS & BATHS EDITION



SPACECRAFTING



A remarkably sensitive restoration in a Minnesota kitchen made use of not one but two sets of vintage steel cabinets. **INSET** The layout is nearly identical to the original; subtle changes include the removal of one full-height cabinet, using taller upper cabinets, and a change to pale green from terra-cotta red.

Walk into the kitchen of Lynsey and Roger Struthers' 1953 home and

you'd swear the St. Charles cabinets are untouched originals, except for the celery-green paint color. That's not quite the case. Yes, the steel cabinets are original, but not all of them are from the same kitchen, or even from the same state. • Overjoyed to find a period kitchen in a house they could afford, these owners had no intention of doing a major overhaul. They hit a sticking point, however, when they tried to find a solution for a narrow wall oven that had to be replaced as a condition of their mortgage. One night, they removed the full-height cabinet that housed the tiny oven, thinking they would replace the cabinet with drywall. "When we pulled it out, the kitchen opened up," says Lynsey. They couldn't go back. Taking out that cabinet was like plucking out one block in a complex LEGO construction, and it led to a months-long renovation and major kitchen restoration.

BY MARY ELLEN POLSON

It's rare to find an intact kitchen or bathroom that doesn't need work, even when a house is only 60 or 70 years old. Given the popularity of Mid-century Modern style, the question becomes: what's worth saving, and what should be replaced?

Just about any fitting or fixture in a mid-century kitchen—from hardware to cabinets, vintage appliances to tile—can be saved and reused. What cannot be saved is obsolete (and dangerous) electrical wiring; wallboard and flooring that's rotted, mildewed, or laden with asbestos; and plumbing pipes and fittings that are rusted or blocked. Naturally, many such components are underneath or concealed by the desirable finished and fitted elements. Bringing the underpinnings of a kitchen or bath up to modern code requirements often means precious cabinets, plumbing fixtures, or even trim moulding will need to be removed carefully. Any of these aged components might be damaged during removal or turn out to be too fragile for reuse.

For the Struthers family, there was no question that they would save and reuse their original cabinets. Along with (three!) Sputnik chandeliers, the steel cabinets were the stars of the house. After some brainstorming on what seemed like a minor adjustment to the layout, Lynsey and Roger realized they would need more cabinets. Roger struck gold the following morning, discovering a full set of nearly identical St. Charles cabinets for about \$1,500, online. The only catch was the color, a vivid blue that would need repainting. To pick them up, Lynsey and Roger drove 10 hours round-trip from their home in the Twin Cities to Omaha. Once the blue beauties were safely stowed in the garage, the couple brought in professionals to help them bring the two sets together to fit into the unusual space, which is angled along one long wall. "There are angles everywhere in this house," says Lynsey. [text cont. on page 40]

triage FOR OLD CABINETS

The kitchen in Evan and John Degenfelder's 1948 postwar Ranch had been hard-used and neglected but the cabinets were sound. The plywood walls were not. After carefully removing the cabinets in preparation for new wiring and insulation, the Degenfelders set up a garage-size tent in the backyard and got to work. It took months to strip multiple layers of paint from every surface. Sanding followed, then a primer coat. Opting for a two-tone look reminiscent of classic cars of the era (also appearing in late-1940s kitchens), Evan painted two coats of Sherwin-Williams Shoji White on the boxes and Sherwin-Williams Slow Green on doors and drawer fronts. All but one of the cabinet pulls are original (soaked overnight to remove paint).



BELOW As with cars, two-tone cabinets were common in postwar kitchens. The 4" x 4" wall tiles are a period grey from Make it Mid-Century and the in-laid floor is 12" vinyl composition tile (VCT), which resembles Fifties-era linoleum. **INSET** Before: Evan and John Degenfelder saved and reused the cabinets, hardware, and original windows in their 1948 kitchen. **LEFT** Evan at work with the sander.





When **Nothing** Can Be Saved

Many mid-century kitchens endured later "updates" that robbed them of Retro character. When Lauren Skrivan bought a 1941 worker's cottage as accessory space for Wren & Willow, her design/build firm in Tacoma, Washington, she inherited a kitchen remodeled in the 1970s. Wiring and plumbing were obsolete. Similarly, John and Evan Degenfelder's only bathroom had lost all evidence of the original and the Sixties remodel had failed. • Skrivan decided to treat the 1941 cottage as though it were a modest Art Deco dwelling of the early 1940s. She liked the results so much she moved in and still lives here. A key feature of the remodeled kitchen is a set of Crosley cabinets, acquired at little expense. "These steel cabinets became popular in the 1940s and '50s, after the war," says Skrivan. They were dented and rusty but rescued by a classic-car restorer who sandblasted them, bent them back into shape, and repainted them a luscious jadeite. Like cabinets of the 1940s and earlier, they have no toe-kicks. "We did a rubber base instead of leaving the steel exposed," she says. "Our research showed they did that or they painted the bottom strip black." • The Degenfelders' only bathroom was in worse shape than their kitchen (see p. 36). Long-term leaks had rotted through the white-oak flooring to the subfloor. The remodel had involved cheap plywood installed even behind the tub. Only two things were salvageable: the door (now stripped and refinished) and the privacy-glass window. The tall bathroom cabinet came from a local house built the same year.

RIGHT Nothing was left of the original bath except one door and the only window. The owners of the 1948 Ranch added shoulder-height tile in teal with black trim and accent strips; a Streamline, wall-hung pedestal sink; and an enamel-over-steel tub, a close match for the damaged original. **TOP** In the 1941 house, Wren & Willow's vision for a Forties kitchen incorporates refurbished steel cabinets, period hardware, and a laminate-topped, built-in desk with custom-fabricated metal trim.

RIGHT A deck-mounted faucet with integral soap dish accompanies a replica drainboard sink from NBI Drainboard Sinks. The 'Apple Betty' wallpaper, from Bradbury & Bradbury, is a reproduction of a 1940s postwar paper.



➔ **SAVE IT *if you can!*** Reusing the kitchen cabinets that came with your Mid-century Modern home can save tens of thousands of dollars over replacements, even compared to modestly priced, semi-stock cabinets from a home-improvement store. **The same goes for vintage bath fixtures and fittings, appliances, and windows and doors.**



← **cabinets** Wood or metal, postwar cabinets may be candidates for reuse. They're often well built, especially the steel cabinets that flooded the market post World War II. (Research by Pam Kueber of the archived website RetroRenovation.com turned up more than 90 brands.) Among the most desirable is the St. Charles brand (1935–1980s) found in the Struthers house. Sometimes a coat or two of paint and new hardware are all that's needed. In other cases, decades-old cabinets may need extensive cleaning and stripping due to grease, smoke, and dirt embedded in multiple coats of paint. Roger Struthers says refurbishing their cabinets cost about \$5,000 before installation. Stock cabinets typically start at about \$12,000 for a small kitchen.

LEFT Existing cabinets in good shape—even humble knotty pine—can be cleaned and stained or repainted. These were washed with Murphy's Oil Soap diluted in hot water, then buffed with a dry cloth.

appliances →

Mid-century ranges and the occasional refrigerator from brands like Westinghouse, GE, O'Keefe & Merritt, Wedgewood, and more are rightly prized: Many offered desirable features and accessories. There were built to be indestructible. Ranges often are clad in thick, white or colored enamel and trimmed with real chrome (which can be restored). If you are lucky enough to own a Magic Chef stove or Philco refrigerator, consider refurbishment. It isn't cheap but appliance retrofitters will replace gaskets and electrical parts, reporcelainize or repaint surfaces, and rechrome trimwork as needed.

RIGHT A vintage range, ca. 1950, is the centerpiece of a kitchen by NR Hiller Design.



← PLUMBING fixtures

Vintage sinks, tubs, and even toilets made in the 1940s and '50s are often heavier and more durably made than contemporary ones, even good-quality reproductions. Unless exposed to unusual abuse, they were built to last. If you are in possession of original porcelain cast-iron sink or bath fixtures in a signature postwar color such as mint green, light teal, or Mamie Eisenhower pink, count yourself lucky—even if the idea of matching tile and wallpaper to salmon-color fixtures gives you fits. Are the old fixtures long gone? A salvage market is booming in towns and cities across the country. Research the style that's right for your house through catalogs online (try brand names like Crane, Standard, etc., at archive.org) before you stroll the dusty aisles of architectural salvage stores.

LEFT The original, salmon-pink sink and other accessories in a Fifties bathroom are complemented by replica tile from Make it Mid-Century.



HARDWARE & LIGHTING →

A great thing about finding a set of intact, mid-century cabinets, whether at a salvage yard or in your own house, is that they may have their original hardware. Before you ditch those ersatz colonial strap pulls, take a minute to examine and clean them. If they suit the cabinet style and are in good condition, they probably have more life ahead. Same thing with light fixtures. Some, like the Sputnik chandeliers at the Struthers house, are highly recognizable and therefore valuable. Others—say, Sixties fixtures made with modern-age materials like plastics and odd-looking metal strapping—take some getting used to.

RIGHT This triple-pendant light fixture was already in the kitchen of the 1953 Mid-century Modern home owned by the Struthers family.



DOORS & WINDOWS, WOOD FLOORS →

Sometimes all that's reusable after 70 years is the original door to the bathroom, or the single-hung sash window over the kitchen sink. Renovators are often delighted to discover hardwood strip flooring in good condition under decades of cheap vinyl flooring. All are worthy of saving and restoration. Reusing windows is a plus in a kitchen or bath, especially since it's likely they were expressly fitted to the opening over a sink or at privacy height between the bathtub and toilet. Having the same door style throughout the house adds a level of cohesion many renovators overlook.

RIGHT One of the few saves in the Degenfelders' restored bathroom is the privacy window with original obscured glass in a starburst pattern.



WHAT (OFTEN) *can't be saved* *The hardest working surfaces are countertops and floors. After 60 years, even the most durable laminate countertop might be beyond saving because of burns, nicks, and the pattern layer wearing away with use and cleaning.*

Luckily, several manufacturers still make period laminate patterns from the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, including classics like Boomerang and Cracked Ice—that favorite from Retro diners and dinette tables. • As with laminates, the pattern layer in a vinyl floor eventually wears away. The exception is vinyl composition tile (VCT), which has a pattern that goes completely through the material from top to bottom. Complicating matters is that many lines of vinyl tile were made using asbestos, which means they ultimately should be replaced following asbestos removal and disposal protocols. **Good replacement options include newer, asbestos-free VCT, linoleum, and cork.** Both cork and linoleum floors have been known to survive for a century with good care.

LEFT It would be unusual to find a floor in good condition laid with this Fifties pattern, but something similar can be re-created with modern linoleum or vinyl composition tile.



SHOP TOUR: MAKE IT MID-CENTURY

Susan Halla has always been a handy person. In 2017, she turned her aptitude for precision sawing and custom-layering of sparkly laminates into the company Make it Mid-Century, a supplier of mid-century-specific finishes. "I lived in a mid-century house and there were products I couldn't find," she says. "I thought if I was having a hard time, other people might be having a hard time, too."

She began with 72 door kits, which turn any slab door into a Retro-style entry. She based her designs on real-life examples in St. Louis neighborhoods as well as online research. Her bestselling kits for entry, garage, and interior doors are hand-cut from clear Douglas fir; all glass inserts are made from tempered glass (a code requirement). She's also added field and deco tiles and a Fifties replica laminate she trademarked SparkleLam. Shutters, fabrics, and home accessories round out the offerings.

What's most remarkable is that Susan Halla designed and makes everything herself. "I'm the everything. This is a one-person show... and this is the first time I've

'fessed up to that!"

Her fanciful line of deco tiles coordinates perfectly in size and color to standard field tile made by Daltille. As for the SparkleLam, "I knew that was a holy grail of what mid-century owners were looking for."

To develop the line, Halla worked with Pam Kueber of RetroRenovation.com, who had samples from the era. The era's sparkly laminate originally was made on a paper template, with the sparkles embedded in a sheet of almost translucent paper that was topped with a clear wear layer. All the layers were impregnated with resin, then pressed under high heat to bond the laminate together. Kueber

located the company that still makes the translucent paper. Halla developed a way to attach the sparkle layer to the decoration layer—which she puts together herself in her backyard shop, then sends to a factory for lamination and shipping. "Ours is made a little differently, but after it's pressed it looks like the original laminate."

Halla hopes to introduce a second line this year called SparkleStar. Almost everything she sells involves talking with her customers, a part of the job she loves. "When I get the 'after' pictures from people, I know why I'm doing this. That's what it's about." Make it Mid-Century, St. Louis, Mo., (844) 696-6462, makeitmidcentury.com

LEFT (from top) SparkleLam is her own proprietary line of sparkly laminate. • The 'Mary' is one of dozens of door kits available. • Deco tiles include a starburst-clock and whimsical fork-and-spoon patterns. • Susan Halla working on a set of fan door inserts for the 'Carol' door kit.

"The angle is bizarre, like 107.3 degrees," recalls Calie Pierce, senior designer for Che Bella Interiors, the designer and contractor on the project. The weird angle added to the complexity of a reinstallation that was like a 3D puzzle. "Every cabinet had so many gadgets and gizmos," Pierce says. "And the door swings were different on each one! Roger and Lynsey were so organized. They labeled every cabinet, and we worked together to come up with elevations."

Another wrinkle: The upper cabinets from the blue kitchen were 36" high. The terra-cotta originals in the house were only 30". Shortening the soffit above the run of upper cabinets to about 5" from the

original 12" solved the problem, but it was not an easy fix. Plumbing, electrical, and ventilation runs tucked into the soffit had to be reworked. To create a clean edge between the cabinets and shortened soffit, the owners had a local metal shop fabricate new trim, which wraps around the soffit.

Both sets of cabinets were treated to professional repainting with two-part epoxy paint formulated for metal. Because the configuration of the cabinets changed, the tile counters couldn't be saved and were replaced with modern laminate. Pierce came up with the new pale-green color (present in the massive brick fireplace along the opposite wall and similar

to 1950s greens) to complement new flooring and other warm tones in the restored room. After seven years, it's holding up well. One cabinet too large to remove was painted electrostatically in place. The couple replaced the old concealed under-cabinet lighting—St. Charles cabinets came with it—with new LED strips.

The couple reused the chrome wave pulls from the blue cabinets. The black hardware from the original cabinets moved downstairs to leftover cabinets used in the mudroom. Other cabinets migrated to the office and the garage. Besides that narrow cabinet that had housed the tiny oven, Lynsey says, "I don't think we threw a single cabinet away."