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Milwaukee Av. home improves on history

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How small was Dianne Brown's former kitchen?

So small that her refrigerator couldn't open wide enough to get the drawers out.

So lacking in cupboards that she had to store groceries in her living room.

So cramped that an appliance repairman once had to call for a smaller repairman.

"It was very dysfunctional," Brown said. She lived with her tiny dark kitchen for more than 25 years. But last year, she decided it was time to add some elbow room. It wouldn't take much more space to make the kitchen a lot more workable; just a 5-by-2-foot bump-out.

But because of Brown's location, in the Milwaukee Avenue Historic District, even a small addition is a big deal -- requiring a lengthy process of review, public notices, a hearing and approval by committees for both the neighborhood and the city.

That careful oversight is the reason the district has retained its 19th-century charm into the 21st century. Tucked into Minneapolis' Seward neighborhood, Milwaukee Avenue remains a stroll back in time, an enclave of Victorian houses with open front porches facing a two-block pedestrian mall. These aren't grand mansions, but modest houses on small, narrow lots, built in the late 1880s to house immigrant Scandinavian laborers and their families.

Milwaukee Avenue, named for the railroad where many of its earliest residents worked, was almost lost to the wrecking ball. By 1970, many of the houses had deteriorated to the point that the whole area was targeted for demolition. But neighbors fought back, winning a reprieve for the remaining 78 houses and ultimately their inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.

Brown bought her townhouse in 1984, after Milwaukee Avenue was rehabilitated. As a longtime owner in the district, she was familiar with the restrictions that come with historic designation. When she changed her exterior color scheme, from yellow with black and cream trim to green with plum trim, for example, she'd had to choose from a book of approved, period-appropriate shades.

To rework her kitchen and help her navigate the approval process, Brown turned to Orfield Design & Construction Inc., the Minneapolis design-build firm that had helped her with an earlier lower-level remodel.

The challenge for the Orfield team was to make the kitchen roomier and more functional without detracting from the home's and the neighborhood's vintage aesthetic.

Exact match

"The historic committee was very strict about what you could do," said Laura L. Orfield-Skrivseth, the firm's co-owner and designer. The foundation for the addition and all architectural details had to match the home's original ones.



Dianne Brown's dining room looking toward the kitchen. The addition is only 5x2 but it vastly improved the kitchen functionality in this historic, century-old building.

Provided by Orfield Design,

Owner/architect Ron Orfield (Laura's father), salvaged and re-used the original trim, woodwork and other materials, and hand-milled a new window apron and storm window to exactly match the other windows.

Inside, Orfield-Skrivseth and designer Amy Hinck reconfigured the kitchen to create a more user-friendly layout. The stove stayed in the same place, but everything else was moved, including the poorly placed refrigerator, to create better focal points and more work space around each appliance.

Lighting was crucial to improving the kitchen, said Orfield-Skrivseth. "Before, there was one ceiling light." Now there are surface-mounted ceiling fixtures that complement the home's historic character, as well as under-cabinet lighting. "It made a huge improvement."

She created an off-white color palette to brighten the space and blend with Brown's existing appliances. The old orange countertops were replaced with granite-patterned laminate, and the linoleum floor was removed and replaced with a new hardwood floor, stained to match that of the adjacent dining room.

Finishing touches included a tile backsplash with a stone mosaic border, textured glass doors in some cabinets and brushed stainless-steel fixtures and hardware.

While the kitchen was the focus of Brown's project, a few other improvements were made, including installation of a slate-tile entry floor near the front door and painting the dining room, formerly white, a rich plum color to define the eating area.

Familiar habit

There was one modern improvement Brown chose not to make: adding a dishwasher. "I like to wash dishes by hand and listen to the radio," she said. So one lower cabinet was designed with a future dishwasher in mind.

"The plumbing and electricity are roughed in," Orfield-Skrivseth said. "So if she gets tired of washing by hand or wants to sell, she can easily put in a dishwasher."

The 5-by-25 foot addition ultimately got the seal of approval from all necessary departments and committees. "The fact that it was on the back of the house, not the mall, was a plus," Brown said.

And while it might be the smallest addition Orfield-Skrivseth has ever worked on ("It's right up there," she said), it's had a big effect on Brown's enjoyment of her home.

"It's more conducive to cooking," she said. "Now you can have two or even three people working together in there. My daughter loves it!"

And Brown, who used to sit with her back to the kitchen when she was at the dining-room table, now faces the other way. "Before it was just ugly. Now I like to look at my kitchen."

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