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# Kitchen & Bath Business

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**KBB's 2018 Design Award Winners  
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A Conversation with Designers of all Ages**

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## Solutions



# Light and Airy Lake House

**A designer faces the challenges of renovating a large space and brings home honors**

A MASSIVE KITCHEN RENOVATION that was part of a whole-house project challenged a Milwaukee designer to make sense out of a dysfunctional layout and bring in a crisp, new style. The homeowners had given up two homes and purchased this spacious lake house in the Village of Merton in Wisconsin. Suzan Wemlinger, principal designer with Suzan J Designs – Decorating Den Interiors, was called in to update the entire home with the dark, outdated kitchen high on the priority list.

“The clients felt that the current vibe was not what one would expect in a lake house, and I wholeheartedly agreed,” she said. They wanted a home that was light and airy, child friendly and capable of incorporating multiple functions for everyday living and entertaining. With plenty of square footage with which to work, the project presented the designer with a test to her existing skillset and some problems symptomatic of large spaces.

**ABOVE** Although the support post had to stay, designer Suzan Wemlinger turned it into a decorative element that adds drama to the white kitchen.

**ABOVE RIGHT** With cherry cabinets, dark countertops and a massive black coffee and wine station, the original kitchen did not provide the relaxing feeling of a lake house.

By **CARRIE WHITNEY**

### CHALLENGE 1: WEARING MANY HATS

Wemlinger had previously designed a home for the clients and was willing to rise to the challenge of completing the project in the requested five-month timeframe – even when the homeowner, a commercial real estate development professional, asked her to work directly with his tradespeople and go without a general contractor. Throughout the renovation, Wemlinger and cabinetmaker Mike Farina of Gen III Woodworks acted as liaisons with the trades to keep the project moving forward and in the right direction.

“This was a little more than I was used to, taking on that big of a role,” said the designer, who explained that although she always stays involved on projects, planning lighting, keeping a project on schedule and delving into details like how the cold and hot water function in a faucet were new skills. “That was definitely a bit of a learning curve. [But] being able to oversee that much of a project made me see that I really was capable of a lot more than a renovation.”

### CHALLENGE 2: WORKING AROUND ODD FEATURES

In addition to expanding her competencies, Wemlinger found plenty of challenges in the space itself. While it did not lack in size, the kitchen had several poorly functioning elements, the cabinets were in terrible shape, and a support post interfered with the ability to enjoy the lake view.



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## SOURCES

**DESIGNER:** Suzan Wemlinger, Suzan J Designs – Decorating Den Interiors; **PHOTOGRAPHER:** Photographic Design Ltd.

**BACKSPLASH & COUNTERTOP:** DuPont; **BAR STOOLS:** Furniture Classics; **CABINETS:** Mike Farina of Gen III Woodworks; **CEILING FANS:** Monte Carlo; **COFFEE MAKER:** Miele; **FAUCET & SINK:** KOHLER; **OVEN:** Wolf; **PENDANTS:** Kichler; **REFRIGERATOR & WINE COOLER:** Sub-Zero

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**FAR RIGHT** The new wine and coffee area complements the overall kitchen design but boasts its own flourishes like a Zodiac Coarse Carrara backsplash and bronze fixtures.

**BELOW** Making sure that the light and airy kitchen has flavor, the azure island adds interest and a nod to the lake setting.

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One of the kitchen's two islands included a raised breakfast bar, but its narrow overhang did not allow for seating, and building it out would have encroached on the wine and coffee bar area. A small pantry, out of scale with the large kitchen, sat in the corner behind wall ovens.

By going with all-new custom cabinets, the designer was able to create a functional layout that offered opportunities to partake in the view. She removed the little pantry and used that area for food prep. The big black wine bar that previously overstretched its alcove was eliminated and replaced with a wine and coffee area that coordinates with the rest of the cabinetry and fits into the space.

"The idea of having two islands in a kitchen of this size was very appealing," said Wemlinger, who kept the island and the bar but changed the angles, enabling functional seating at the bar, which is covered in shiplap on one side. The smaller island no longer has a cooktop, so it provides significant prep space, and it is painted a deep azure blue that stands out within the otherwise white kitchen.

"I really love the idea of a white kitchen, but given the size of this one, I just felt like it would be too much of a good thing," said the designer. "Blue seemed like a good way to carry the outside in without being literal."

While these solutions added function to the new kitchen, there was one existing feature that had to stay – the support post.

"We tried to come up with ways we could remove it, but with the expanse of the kitchen, there was no way," said Wemlinger. "They weren't thrilled with it, [but] you've got to keep the house standing."

Instead of trying to hide the post, she decided to make it more attractive and coordinate it with the fireplace mantel in the adjoining living space, which was also part of her whole-house project. The now distressed-wood-covered post received the same dark stain that was used to freshen up the existing floors.



### CHALLENGE 3: BRINGING IN THE LIGHT

The original kitchen's cherry cabinets and dark countertops did nothing to impart the feel of a lake house. And even with a significant number of windows, the pendant lighting and minimal amount of recessed lighting were not enough to counter the kitchen's dark wood.

"The goal was to lighten everything up and keep that airy look," said Wemlinger.

The addition of more recessed lighting and attractive Edison-bulb pendants provided a partial solution. Painting millwork white, selecting white cabinets and light countertops and adding white subway tile created the airy feeling the homeowners sought. In the wine and coffee area, the designer used the countertop material as the backsplash and opted for bronze hardware. Limited darker touches like the hardware, support post, oil-rubbed bronze pendants and the fun blue island keep the space from becoming too blank.

"I like the fact that we went with white cabinets because it's so fresh," said Wemlinger. "[We] kept some dark elements too, which adds a little bit of drama."

In addition to growing her professional abilities, the renovation earned the designer multiple honors. From Decorating Den Interiors, the parent company of her firm, the designer received first place for the kitchen and won awards for other rooms, as well as the coveted Designer of the Year title for 2018. ●

