

THE HEART OF THE HOME



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The kitchen is the hub of the modern home, and renovations in this room will pay off, writes **Sharon Newey**. From a quick fix to a total overhaul, a good-looking kitchen seriously attracts tenants.



MAKE OR BREAK: That's how important your kitchen can be when it comes to being able to rent your property. If it's battered and shabby, prospective tenants will just think "grimy and old". They'll have visions of the families of cockroaches and rodents that will set up home in the back of the cupboards.

It's also notoriously one of the most expensive rooms of the house to renovate. It may be that a coat of paint will do the trick for now and certainly a good-quality enamel will withstand quite a bit of wear and tear, not to mention liberal doses of spaghetti sauce on the splashback.

If the actual carcasses of the kitchen (the inside bits) are fine, another quick-fix idea is to have the doors and drawer fronts resprayed in a paint that's designed for kitchen cabinetry, such as Resene AmourCat. Or you could remove the old doors and drawer fronts altogether and replace them with new lacquered or laminate ones.

Kitchens can also be given a facelift by replacing the benchtop. Because this is the most obvious visual surface in the kitchen, it's the one that will have the most impact if it looks tidy and new. Many hardware stores sell ready-edged lengths of high-pressure laminate benchtops at very reasonable prices. If you marry this up with a new sink insert and a row of tiles for a splashback, this can instantly transform the room.

STARTING FROM SCRATCH

If you're up for a whole new kitchen, try to keep it in the same place, especially the sink and the cooker, as shifting plumbing points and hard-wiring for the oven can be expensive.



If your rental property is older, chances are the kitchen is separated off in its own room. If so, consider modernising the space by opening it up to the dining or living area. For a smaller rental, this will open up the living spaces and make them lighter and brighter. Perhaps you can replace a dividing wall with just a stretch of benchtop, or place a generous over-bench opening in the wall to better connect the spaces.

At any one time TradeMe has a selection of kitchens for sale. Second-hand kitchens will be difficult to customise for a new space, but some are simply ex-display models, so never used and fairly standard in terms of size and configuration. Do price out your options first though as you may end up paying more for the kitchen in the long run with the extra expense and hassle of modifying it to fit the space you have.

The longer it takes to refit a kitchen, the longer the time you're not getting rent. This

applies to any type of kitchen renovation. Paying a small premium to have a flat-pack kitchen ready-assembled, for example, or finding a builder who can also tile the splashback, will save you time and lost rent.

Also before you go forking out for a new kitchen, consider whether you actually need a traditionally formatted full kitchen. Many apartment dwellers or those in smaller units will never use the oven – so do you need to provide one or would a bench-top oven do? Do they need four hot-plates or will a smaller hob with two suffice? Along with a decent microwave, a small hob-top may be all a tenant needs if they are a young city-dweller who is more likely to eat at the local noodle house or reheat readymade supermarket meals.

Also think laterally about cabinetry. Tenants may be just as happy with a set of shelves (maybe those cube-style one sold at budget furniture outlets) in the kitchen

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rather than more enclosed cupboards, and this will be far cheaper for you.

When it comes to new cabinetry, most big hardware outlets offer very reasonably priced flat-pack kitchens. You can often pay a small premium to have these ready-assembled for you or your builder to slot into place, and there are often staff who can help you with the design. These are made to modular sizes for economy but there is still plenty of flexibility with the componentry.

Flat-pack kitchens are generally made of a laminate interior (like Melteca) and a laminate cupboard front, and often come in a limited but useful range of colours.

Display kitchens can provide design inspiration. You don't have to go for boring or naff colours and designs. As you'll see when you start looking, the display kitchens in the various outlets show how affordable materials can look great just by choosing the right colours and design. Just adding contemporary-looking handles can lift a 'budget' kitchen above the ordinary.

Having suggested flat-packs, you might be surprised at the reasonable quotes you can get from local cabinet-makers. Again, if you stick to modular sizes (400mm, 600mm; basically anything that's a fraction of 1200mm) they are able to make the most out of standard material sheet dimensions (1200mm x 2400mm) and reduce waste. They can also install and will often give you a better-quality result.

One area of concern is the type of hardware used in cheaper flat-packs, ie hinges and drawer sliders that are tricky to adjust and are not that robust. A kitchen that has badly fitted doors and drawers is one that will break easily. It may be worth upgrading these to a better product. Likewise with taps: There are some cheap ones around but they can be of dubious quality and made with low-grade chrome.

You can't really go past a high-pressure laminate benchtop for durability and cost-effectiveness. If you can't get one of the preformed ones mentioned above to work for the space that you have, there are companies that will make them for you.

APPLIANCES

Once you've decided what type of appliances your tenants are likely to use and appreciate, go for known brands so that you have ongoing service support (it's amazing what tenants can do to what you thought was a robust cooker).

Keep it simple though. Your tenants are

unlikely to be interested in learning how to use some multi-functioned cooker that has electronic controls that flash and sparkle. Go for simple and easy to decipher.

Install a decent extractor fan or rangehood – nothing makes a place smell worse than stale cooking smells. An extractor will also pull greasy steam away from your walls.

There are many second-hand appliance dealers who sell well-renovated units at half the price of new, and will offer a warranty, albeit short-ish. Or, if you don't mind the risk, TradeMe offers rich picking grounds for second-hand appliances.

Good average quality is the way to go with appliances – tenants might pay more rent for the presence of a fridge and dishwasher but they're not going to pay more for the fridge to be a high-quality brand with a plumbed-in ice-maker.

A smaller underbench fridge may suit smaller rental properties, although most people want a decent freezer space, even if it is for frozen ready-made meals.

Most tenants today will expect you to provide a dishwasher. In fact, many tenants now expect a full whitewear package, including a refrigerator, especially in apartment buildings where lugging such items up and down lifts is impractical and where your tenants are likely to be of a demographic that likes to travel light.

FLOORING

Hard flooring is, of course, the most practical choice for a kitchen. If the property has existing timber floors, then great. Just sand and urethane them for a durable surface. Lino tiles or vinyl are easy to clean and soft (as in, softer than tiles) underfoot. They came in a range of colours and design for flexibility. Cork tiles are also a good option.

WALLS

Use a good-quality washable paint for kitchen walls. These walls are going to take a beating, not to mention the splashing, so the easier they are to clean, the better they

will look in the long run. And the less often they will need repainting.

Also consider some of the many additives you can get to make kitchens and paint last longer, for example, Resene make an anti-mould additive as well as one that has a fly deterrent.

In areas of high splash risk, whether that's food or water (behind the hob top and the sink), tiles provide a robust surface.

If you're a buy-and-hold investor, it's best not to cut too many corners. You don't want to have to go through the whole process again in five years time.

As usual, a little planning goes a long way. Take a hard look at the typical tenants for your property – how do they live? Which appliances get the most use? What do they want? Balance your budget against these requirements, do your research, and you could make improvements which improve both your rent and your property's value. ■