

# Small Changes — Big Impacts



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## Isn't it amazing how even a small change can have a big effect?

In a recent project, a tired old duplex with two units in the basement was proposed to be converted into a condominium building. The upper units each consisted of two bedrooms, with separate living, dining and kitchen areas. Each room was separate from others by full walls. This resulted in a chopped up look and a feeling of a collection of small rooms. The kitchen dated from the original construction and needed to be completely renovated. Renovation of the basement units was not a priority, but the units had to accommodate any changes required by the upstairs renovations.

The budget for the renovation was very restrictive, so we had to find a way to spend money strategically to get the most for every dollar spent. This is not an uncommon situation in our practice. For this project, we needed to update the plumbing and wiring. While adding to the qualitative improvements in the building, these improvements would not add to the visual experience in any way, nor would they add any extra value to the building. These updates are required from time to time just to keep a building safe, sound and useful.

What we needed to find was a way to capture the inherent value of the larger than usual floor plan, presently chopped up into smaller spaces. We felt that the biggest impact could come from tearing down one of the walls between two adjacent rooms. In the end, we decided to remove the wall between the kitchen and dining room (see photo). Although we could have just undertaken the kitchen renovation, the removal of the wall, in itself a very small component of the project, proved to be the key move.

We looked at alternative changes like demolishing the wall between the living and dining rooms. However, while this would have resulted in a larger space, it would have made furnishing the living room a major problem and would still have left the kitchen the darkest room

in the house — isolated and light deprived even when renovated.

So, down came the kitchen wall. Even before the kitchen was renovated, the change in the apartment could be felt and appreciated. The apartment no longer looked chopped up, and had a whole new modern feel. The interconnected kitchen and dining room each contributed to the feeling of space for the other room. Opportunities for informal eating in the kitchen were now possible. The kitchen was brighter by sharing window light filtering through the dining room window. The impact was enormous and added to the value, way out of proportion to the required investment (including the beams and posts required for installation all the way to the footings).

It is important to consider these kinds of small interventions when planning renovations, especially for low budget, small projects. The key is to take a critical view of a space before any renovation and look beyond the existing structural elements to see any unrealized potential layout improvements. This can be the removal of a wall, as in this example,

or elimination of a ceiling in a bungalow to give a greater feeling of space, or any other intervention which affects the perception of space. Any resulting structural requirements for supporting elements must, of course be completely respected.

It is easier when there is a large renovation budget. Careful space planning and strategic analysis of options are always critical to the performance of a house or office. At the same time it is one thing to have a blank pallet to work with after completely gutting a space, while quite another matter when you have a limited budget, and you need design finesse to figure out how to still make a major improvement with only a small investment.

Success in this type of exercise will bring an unexpected smile to the face of your clients and a real sense of achievement for you.

