



Virtually Perfect

Homeowners Julie and Erin Davis were surprised at how interior designer Ruthie Staalsen's use of counter-to-ceiling Terra Nova Picket Mesh tile opened up the kitchen by amplifying the light. Both the honed marble backsplash and oversize Fusion floor tile were sourced from Arizona Tile. Pendants are from Lamps Plus.

JULIE AND ERIN DAVIS had been living abroad for a couple of years when, in the summer of 2020, they began anticipating a job-inspired move to Texas from Norfolk County, England. They wanted to buy a home near Fort Worth but, as the scope of the pandemic broadened, travel became increasingly difficult. Julie tapped her sister — smartphone in hand — to join an area real estate agent in facilitating virtual scouting visits to houses on the market. The innovative approach quickly allowed the Davises to focus on a 3,000-square-foot dormered-Colonial in Aledo. They began to imagine arriving at their new residence by Christmas, just over six months away. There was only one hitch: The '90s interiors were sorely in need of updating.

Julie loved the country feel of the traditional family home, but after living

**Interior designer
Ruthie Staalsen
orchestrates an Aledo
kitchen remodel for
clients an ocean away.**

By Babs Rodriguez
Photos by Aaron Dougherty



Beams frame the new opening between kitchen and family room; the wood was beaten with chains to create a timeworn look. Sherwin-Williams Kale Green kitchen cabinets said English cottage to the interior designer. The custom vent hood is painted Sherwin-Williams Alabaster to match the upper cabinets.

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in a charming but tiny cottage with three young daughters, she and Erin wanted to open up the cramped floor plan of the kitchen and family room. To find a designer for the interior's transformation, Julie began searching the Houzz website's links to trade professionals. When she found projects

by Southlake interior designer Ruthie Staalsen, Julie moved quickly to book her services. "Julie liked that I had an international background, that I was used to traveling and working with people who had lived abroad. She knew she wanted something that had a British flair to it, and I seemed

a likely candidate," says Staalsen. In fact, the designer impressed the Davises so much that the job was immediately expanded. "I originally called Ruthie just to choose some tile for the upstairs bathrooms," Julie says, "but threw her a total curveball when we decided to completely remove the kitchen. We were

thankful that she was willing to take on the bigger scope of the project while working with us from a distance." The client's first meeting with the designer was via FaceTime. "It was me talking to the whole family — Julie, husband Erin and all three young girls in one room of their little cottage,"

Staalsen says. "What we were looking for in regard to the kitchen was a family gathering space that was also practical, because I spend a lot of time cooking," Julie says. **STAALSEN'S FIRST STEP** was to visit the Aledo property. Upon arrival, she

contacted the Davises via FaceTime again, sharing her thoughts from the home they'd only seen on screens. It was determined that the first phase of the remodel would focus on the kitchen, the home's entry and revamping the lighting throughout the first floor of the house. A second phase would involve

FIRST MEETING VIA FACETIME

"Actually, it was me talking to the whole family — Julie, husband Erin and all three young girls. They were all gathered in one room of their little cottage." — **Ruthie Staalsen**



Open shelving will be filled with the homeowners' collection of pottery and teapots. Along with the glass-front cabinets, the display space contributes to the familial feeling Julie Davis wanted. Golden Champagne cup drawer pulls from Amerock have a modern farmhouse vibe.



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Open shelving with metal pipe frames keeps the kitchen from being overly feminine, in answer to a request from Erin Davis.

updating baths. Staalsen lined up a contractor and began pulling together a design plan and palette.

“My initial thoughts involved addressing what was a tight, dark kitchen that wasn’t open to the adjacent space and not at all family-friendly. Julie wanted a sense of cozy but, at the same time, she wanted to have an island. We couldn’t do that without taking out a wall.”

STAALSEN PRESENTED HER PLAN using sketches and swatches and — with a little back-and-forth via FaceTime and

WhatsApp — the Davises concurred with her vision. “Interior design is not my strong point,” Julie says. My husband and I are both engineers, so we pretty much trusted Ruthie in most things.”

“They told me to go for it and keep them in the loop on any changes,” Staalsen says. To that end, the clients had cameras installed that allowed them to view progress. “They’d check in the day after things were done because — due to the time change — while we were working, they were sleeping.” The designer delivered a weekly recap, too, sometimes talking to the camera

on-site, pointing out progress and offering insights.

QUESTIONS EARLY ON involved what would stay and what would go. Staalsen was aware of the need to be creative in reusing some of the existing cabinets, so as to respect the family’s budget. When the wall was removed to open the kitchen to the family room, a pantry and cabinets were repurposed in the laundry. “There was no waste; that was part of my goal.”

Other details discussed related to storage solutions, including new pullouts and spice racks. The biggest challenge involved Julie’s desire for a gas stove. She wanted to splurge on a professional Monogram stovetop and oven. But because the house was built as an all-electric home, Staalsen was tasked with figuring out how to install a propane gas tank (including having a concrete slab poured) and camouflaging it in an attractive way to match the house. Check and check.

When the kitchen wall was opened, Julie had the elbow room she’d dreamed

MORE COMMUNICATION

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of, as well as space for the kids to gather around while she prepared meals. White 12-by-24-inch porcelain floor tiles and quartz countertops also brightened the space. To visually expand the kitchen further, the designer surprised the couple by pushing to install backsplash tile all the way to the ceiling. “I knew that was going to make a world of difference in creating an open feeling in the room by amping up the light from the nice window already in the space. Julie trusted me, but even the tile guy was questioning me at first. The result was a big wow for everyone.”

As for aesthetics, Staalsen says that her interpretation of an English country kitchen only gave the Davises pause when she proposed Sherwin-Williams Kale Green paint for the lower cabinets. “They were a little hesitant, but I felt strongly that it was the right choice. Julie admitted it was out of her comfort zone, but once she saw it painted on a

sample cabinet, she got excited about it.”

Additional shelving was requested by the couple for housing the family’s pottery and teapot collection, but Staalsen’s decision to go with a slightly industrial look surprised the Davises. “The shelving was in answer to Erin’s request to ensure the room wasn’t too feminine. They were surprised at how the metal piping and open shelving really married the wood floors and the beams of the adjacent living space to the kitchen.”

THE ONLY UNEXPECTED COMPLICATION involved the project’s timeline: It turned out the family was scheduled to arrive in Texas a little sooner than expected. “We began working around the clock, tweaking things the week before they arrived.”

Because of international flight schedules and a middle-of-the-night arrival, Staalsen knew she wouldn’t be at the house for the real-time reveal, so the day before, she reached out via FaceTime to share a few teasers.

“Julie called me the morning after they’d flown in — she and Erin were both on the phone — and they were so excited to be in the space,” Staalsen says. Julie concurs, recounting her memory of the family’s arrival: “When we got to the home, completely jet lagged, we were floored. We had no idea the ceilings were so tall — we could never tell in the pictures. The kitchen looked so much grander than I’d anticipated. My first thought was thank goodness we had a great designer to trust with this. We never could have coordinated the remodel from overseas. The final result isn’t what I originally had in mind, but I think it’s even better.” 📺

CAMERAS INSTALLED

“They’d check in the day after things were done because — due to the time change — while we were working, they were sleeping.” — **Ruthie Staalsen**



The beadboard wall behind the buffet alcove in the family room has the look of wood planks. The smooth curve of the raw edges of the custom shelves makes them less rustic than the ones over the kitchen sink and more compatible with the sophisticated hardware on the built-in cabinet. Less glossy wood floors are to come in phase two of the remodel.

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