

A photograph of two men standing in front of a red wall and a window. The man on the left is older, with short grey hair, wearing a dark jacket over a grey turtleneck. The man on the right has a beard and longer hair, wearing a grey tweed jacket over a dark shirt. They are both looking towards the camera.

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split decision

by separating her kitchen's storage and working areas,
an atlanta architect maximizes elbow room and efficiency.

by rick vitullo, aia

In the fall of 1995, a hurricane swept through Atlanta and destroyed architect Merrill Elam's house. It was the perfect opportunity, she decided, to give herself the kitchen she'd always wanted—one that was clean, spare, and spacious-feeling.

She was weary of typical kitchen layouts with 2-foot-deep base cabinets, 2-foot-deep counters, and hung cabinets. Elam considered these standard storage units too big and too deep for practical purposes; as far as she was concerned, they incubated clutter and made finding things a chore.

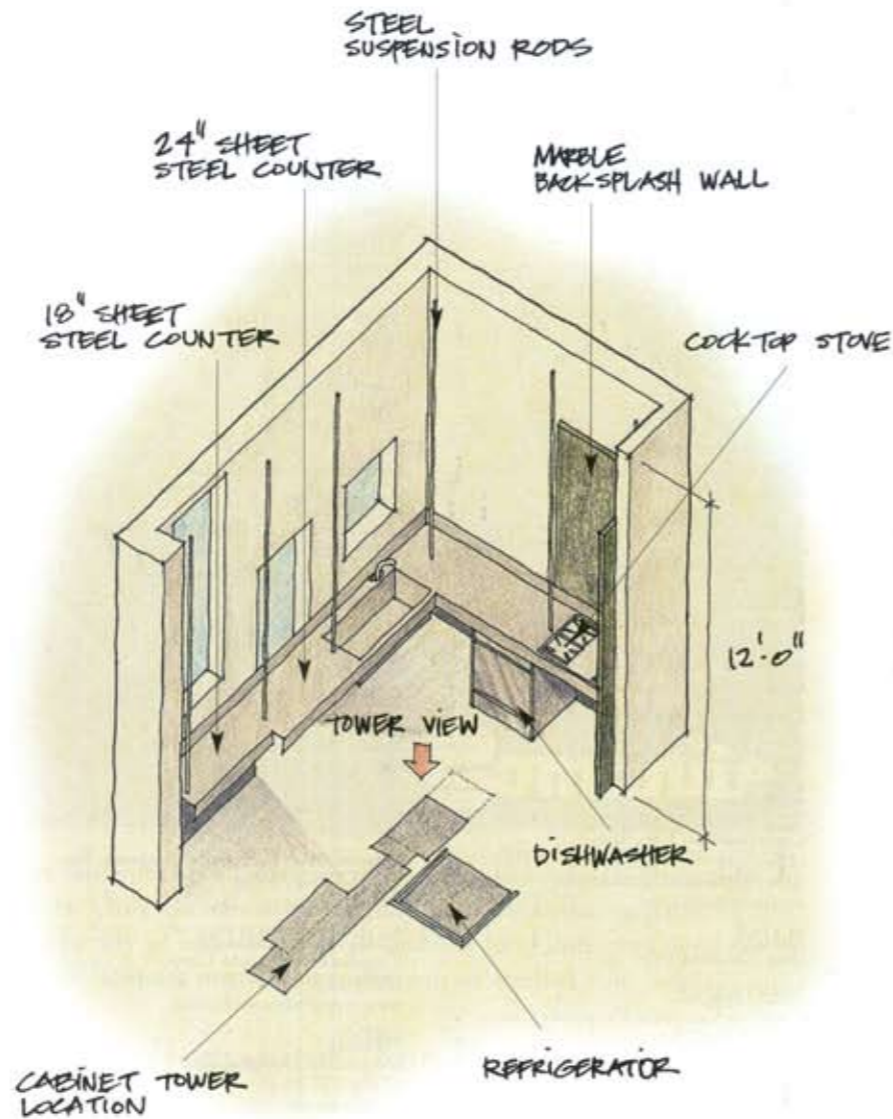
So, for her new kitchen, she resolved to split the storage function (the cabinetry) from the working area (the counters). In true Modernist fashion, she would allow each function to dictate its own form.

That approach led to two novel elements in her new kitchen: a dramatic suspended counter and an island storage tower.

Elam set the 2-foot-deep steel counter—which looks like a very large piece of folded construction paper—against the 9-by-13-foot kitchen's two walls. Made from $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch-thick black steel sheets bent to create a backsplash in the rear and an apron in front, the counter hangs from five $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-diameter steel rods attached to the ceiling. Steel angles support it from beneath. A $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch spacer nudges the counter from the wall, emphasizing its "floating" quality.

Elam welded an 18-by-42-inch

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Illustrations: Rick Vitullo

Efficiency and organization drive the kitchen's clean lines. The suspended counter is composed of different-size sheets of black steel, which were shop-bent, and butt-jointed and assembled in the field. (See page 98 for tower view.)

stainless steel sink into one side of the L-shaped counter and installed a cooktop in the other. A 9-foot-tall green marble "backsplash" protects the wall behind the stove and wraps around one side of it. Visually, the suspension rods and the marble wall provide a vertical counterpoint to the counter's horizontality.

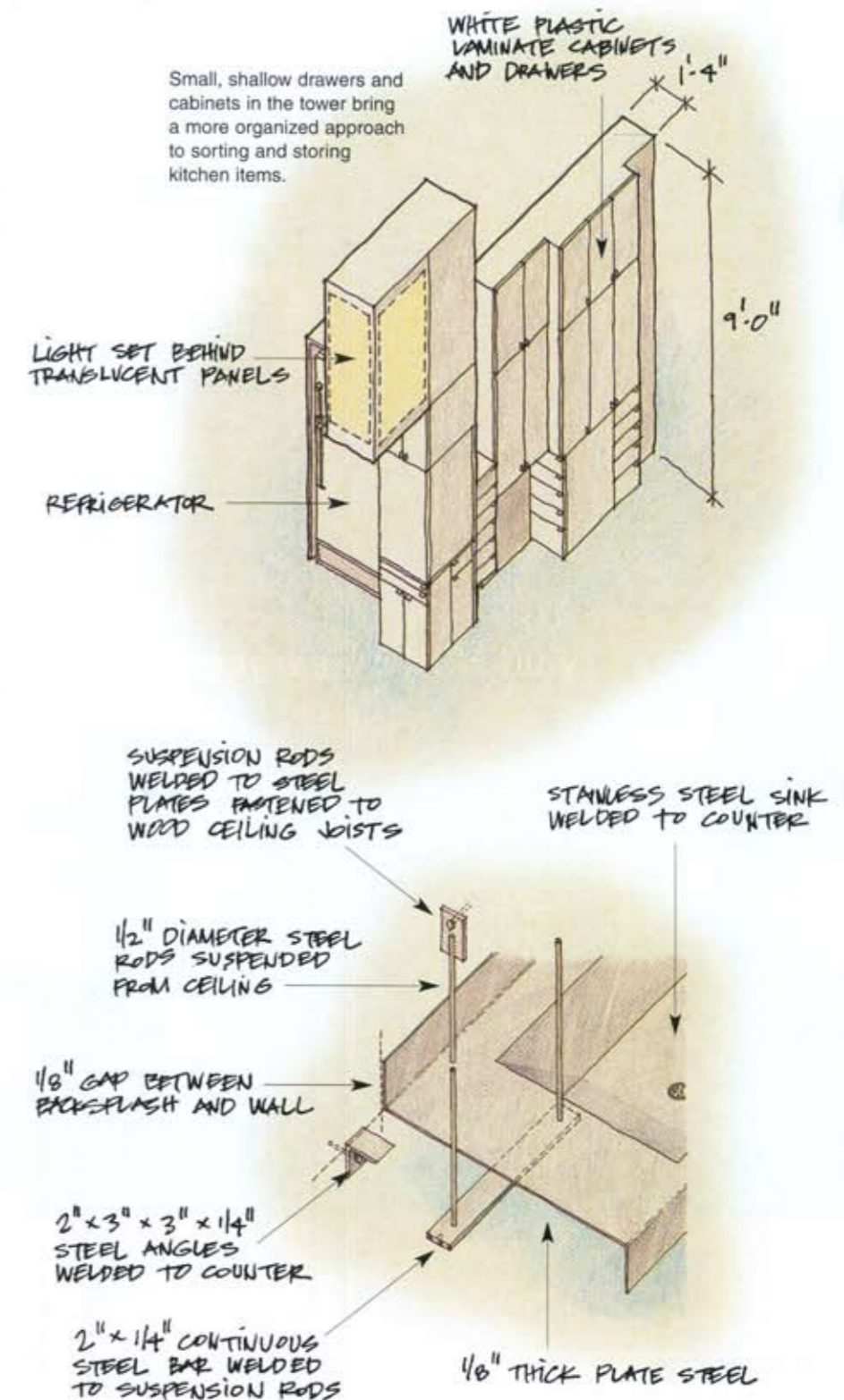
By suspending the counter, and leaving the space above and below it mostly open—a dishwasher occupies below-counter space near the stove—Elam made her small kitchen feel much larger than it is. Three windows, one of which extends from floor to ceiling and is bisected by the counter, reinforce that feeling of expansiveness.

For storage, Elam conceived the 9-foot-high island tower, an assemblage of many small, shallow drawers and cabinets that satisfied her desire for efficiency and convenience. A standard refrigerator tucks behind the tower. In addition to providing storage, the tower divides the kitchen from the rest of the house. **ra**

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Despite its floating appearance, the counter is well-supported. Steel suspension rods are welded at one end to a 2-by- $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch continuous steel bar underneath the counter and at the other end to plates anchored to the ceiling joists. In addition, four 3-by-3-inch angles welded to the underside of the counter are fastened to the wall.