

Kitchen Design For All Seasons And Budgets

By Judith C. White

Even in uncertain economic times, people need functional, attractive kitchens. Says Bob Ender, at DreamMaker Bath & Kitchen, “my customers may have scaled back on their remodeling budgets, but they haven’t scaled back on their tastes.” In his business, he has seen “a taper in growth but not a decline.”

Rochman Design-Build owner Gary Rochman says that some of his clients are tackling remodeling projects in phases spread out over time, from a few months to a few years. Many others are going ahead with big remodeling projects because they know they’re staying in the house, and “the sooner they have the work done, the sooner they enjoy the benefits and added value.”

Notes Bob Leffler of Valley Builders, “There’s been so much written about the decline in home values that many people are reluctant to put money in their homes. At the same time, we’re seeing pent-up demand for services and products as homes continue to age and deteriorate and wear out.”

All three building and remodeling experts welcome the challenge of providing homeowners with good design that won’t break the budget. In fact, these tough times can work to the advantage of homeowners who plan to stay in their homes for several years.

Use of Existing Materials

Customers who choose to enhance their existing space rather than invest in a major remodeling project may be pleasantly surprised to learn that some vendors have lowered prices on their products and services. With the wide range of price points now available, savvy homeowners often choose to go with budget-friendly products that feature 15-year warranties rather than lifetime guarantees.

Though the price difference between cabinet refacing and replacement in an average kitchen is not huge, says Ender, many homeowners prefer to use what they already have—always a good “green” option. Ender adds that some “do-it-yourselfers” are painting their cabinets, a most economical way to freshen up a tired kitchen space.

In addition to upgrades in drawer hardware, a refacing project may also involve the addition of cabinets, appliance garages, and roll-outs. All of these features add value and functionality to what may be the most lived-in space in most homes.

Trendy or Popular?

Ender has this advice for homeowners: “Trendy goes away; popular stays.”

Bold red appliances, for example, are often featured in high-end shelter magazines, and in the right setting, they can make a striking design “statement.” And as a matter of individual taste, bright custom colors may be an appropriate and worthwhile investment. (To help reign in the impulse to go with trendy colors, however, readers might want to

recall the “harvest gold” and “avocado green” appliance rage in the 1970s. We all know how that worked out.)

So, for those who plan to sell their homes in a few years, Ender suggests stainless steel or neutral appliances to appeal to more potential buyers. Similarly, dramatic, distressed cabinet finishes may be perfect for some homeowners, but for greater mass appeal, many are opting for more conservative glazed finishes, notes Ender. For enduring appeal, Rochman says that many of his clients are leaning more toward lighter colors in kitchen cabinetry and countertops. “To enliven the space, they often use a bolder paint color on one or two walls.”

What’s In...

Granite countertops remain very much in demand by homeowners, with quartz coming in at a close second. “Occasionally,” says Rochman, “we do laminates—they’re stylish, durable, and look fine, but most people want to upgrade. Choosing less expensive cabinetry is one way consumers can invest more in their countertops.”

Another modest improvement homeowners can make is to change out kitchen hardware; bin-pull handles, for example, are very much in style. Leffler also suggests modification of existing cabinetry to fit newer appliances rather than taking on a major remodeling project.

Among those with higher budgets, Leffler is seeing greater demand for Energy Star appliances; undermount sinks; under-counter refrigerators; split-drawer dishwashers that can do a half load; second sinks used as prep sinks; and dual-fuel ovens.

Ender, Rochman, and Leffler all say that open floor plans remain a solid choice among homeowners. Ender adds that at least 50 per cent of his clients require structural changes to achieve the desired layout. The major advantage, of

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Continued Page 6

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From Page 4

After (above) and before (below) of a kitchen transformation by DreamMaker Bath & Kitchen. (After photo by Cheri Smith Photography.)

course, is multifunctionality, with room use limited only by the imaginations of homeowners and kitchen designers. Today's kitchens commonly feature television and Internet access, office workspace, innovative family seating, and islands that include a built-in sink, cooktop, or both.

In addition, says Rochman, "People can't get enough cubbies to organize the barrage of cell phones, backpacks, and boots." As a result, mudrooms, usually located in close proximity to kitchens, are at the top of his "hot" list. "Some people never use their front entrance, so we have found that putting a small effort toward resolving mudroom issues offers great value and many benefits." He adds, "we like to get at the real needs of homeowners and try to find space within the boundaries of the house."



Kitchens (Continued Page 7)

From Page 6

Improving traffic patterns and mudroom organization, says Rochman, may even lead homeowners to the decision that installation of new kitchen appliances and countertops is sufficient.

In talking about kitchen design, it's not all about saving green; it's about being green. Contrary to popular opinion, remodeling with an eye toward eco-friendly options doesn't always come at a higher cost. Some green features, such as better insulation and more energy-efficient windows and appliances, for example, become less expensive over time. Such changes can greatly improve the comfort level in a home, too.

What's Out...

According to Leffler, soffits, ceramic countertops, ceramic floors, and trash compactors top the current "what's out" list for kitchen remodeling. Another trend that appears to be on the decline, says Rochman, is brand-name laminate flooring that looks like hardwood, something that his company has never installed and few customers ask for today.

The Southern California Construction & Design Company offers the following advice for homeowners looking to remodel:

Mix up finishes on base and wall cabinets; "matchy-matchy" is out. Think twice about installing glass upper-kitchen-cabinet doors. They may look great, but if you hate washing windows, having these in a greasy room like a kitchen means high maintenance.

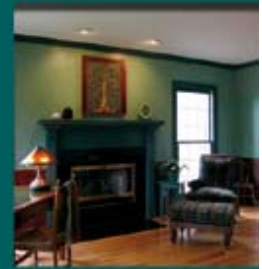
Go for nickels and pewters; antiqued and polished brass is out.

Dollars and Sense

Ann Arbor State Bank President and Chief Operating Officer Peter Schork says simply, "Things are much, much tougher this year." For people with sufficient kitchen equity who can show that a major remodel will add value to a home, it's possible to do a first-mortgage refinance. He adds that Ann Arbor State Bank is still doing equity lines, too, though many people are uncomfortable with the fact that this major source of funding is interest only with variable rates.

Everyone interviewed for this article agrees that it's a great time for a kitchen remodel. With some of the industry slowing down, projects can sometimes be done a little faster and at a slightly lower cost. And the longer homeowners stay in their homes, the longer they have to enjoy the benefits. To ensure homeowner satisfaction and protection, Leffler emphasizes the importance of working with a qualified, licensed, and insured remodeler. ■

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