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Kitchen Design's New Basics

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*A 'classic contemporary' kitchen
by Texas Construction Co.*

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Kitchen Design's New Basics

Seeking a more understated aesthetic, clients stay focused on quality and value

By Patrick L. O'Toole

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Photo Credit: coles hairston



SAMPLE

UNDERSTATED AND SLEEK: Kitchen designers and remodelers are seeing more projects like this classic-contemporary style remodel. It was designed by Keni Neff of Kitchens for Cooks and Margaret McEver of Mali Design. Construction and managed by Royce Flournoy of Texas Construction Co.

With bright white subway-tile-covered walls, and an ebony-stained limestone countertop to match similarly stained oak flooring, the newly expanded kitchen designed by Keni Neff of Kitchens for Cooks and built by Royce Flournoy and team at the Texas Construction Co. is a model for the “classic contemporary” style.

No single element stands out for its particular beauty or its uniqueness. Instead, the whole space — bathed in an abundance of natural light — conveys an understated luxury and quality that leading contractors, remodelers and kitchen designers say is becoming more common in these slower economic times.

The kitchen, part of a \$700,000 whole-house remodel completed in February, is certainly like others that have been seen often in recent years. The style speaks directly to the *Real Simple* magazine tastes of many in their 30s, 40s and 50s. But where the classic contemporary style was once employed by a minority of remodeling clients, it seems to have achieved majority status and is called for more frequently than the heavily adorned, ornamented, and formally classic looks it now supersedes.

“The days of over-the-top crown moldings, very traditional heavy moldings and heavy ornamentation with lots of finishes is definitely becoming the 20 percent as opposed to the 80 percent,” says Judith A. Neary, CMKBD, an NKBA design education



Judith A. Neary

instructor who works for cabinetmaker Pacific Crest Industries of Sumner, Wash. “What we saw for many years was moldings, trim, accessories, fluted pillars, fluted columns, beaded moldings, beaded doors, distressed finishes, multiglazes, etc. Now we are seeing cleaner and less fussy, simpler designs. I would call it the classic contemporary.”



Barbara Barton

And, as Flournoy can attest with his whole-house remodel, clients with money are spending it to get what they want despite the shift toward understatement. In Flournoy's

kitchen, pictured on the cover of this magazine, his Gen X clients chose to incur the substantial added expense of putting a steel girder in place under their new kitchen as a means to support a desired monolithic, single-piece, 2-in. thick slab of limestone as a countertop for their center island. They were unwilling to accept anything but limestone's unbroken, seamless perfection. Flournoy says it took 15 people to carry the limestone into the house and place it on the island.

"They didn't like the veining found in granite and they did not like the cracking that happens with concrete," explains Flournoy. "So the limestone, once it was stained, gave the look of concrete without the imperfections."

When asked why he thought his clients would be willing to incur this type of expense, Flournoy touched on a theme echoed by many contractors, remodelers and kitchen designers whom *QR* contacted — an overriding interest in value. Something as pricey as a huge piece of limestone can be seen as a value if one considers its importance to the rest of the kitchen design and its durability.

"They were extremely value based in all of their selections," Flournoy said of his clients that chose the massive limestone countertop.



Jeffrey Holloway

Picking designers and making selections

It would be easy to conclude that kitchen design and the kitchen remodeling business is altering in step with the economy — that the

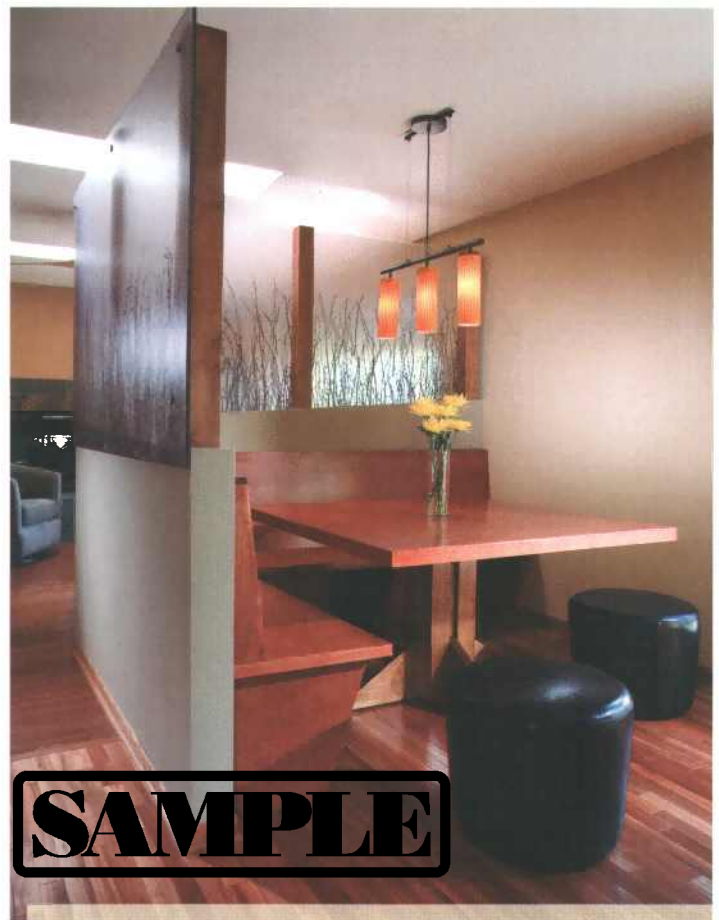
gilded age of the mid-2000s has given way to a leaner and cleaner aesthetic in all parts of the country and across all groups of clients. But that is not the case. Kitchen remodeling, like most other businesses, has been impacted by the global economic decline of the past few months, but designers, remodelers and architects are feeling it differently depending upon the individual buying characteristics of their clients as well as local economic conditions.

There are those designers for whom the number of jobs have stayed the same but whose average ticket has fallen. There are also those for whom business has completely stopped, leading them to surmise their clients have decided that if they cannot have the best in kitchen design, they would sooner forego the exercise of redoing their home until such time as it is deemed safe to spend money again. Then there are those with clients who initially paused but quickly resumed spending on quality but in a different way. Likewise, Barbara Barton, CMKBD, a Highlands Ranch, Colo., consultant sees a broad impact on how designers interface with their customers. Clients, she says, are taking more time to get to know their designer before getting onboard.

"The focus is less on design and more on the designer," says Barton relating the recent experience of designers in her home state of Colorado. "The buyers are shopping, par excellence," she says. "They are speaking with at least five dealerships before deciding whom to go with. The clients are buying creativity and a willingness to listen and give the client the kitchen of their vision. I have heard this over and over recently. Designers are using and gaining more skills in the listening arena."

But once a designer is selected, the impacts are then being felt across all of the major selection areas — from cooktops and hoods to cabinets and countertops.

"People are looking to save money," says Jeffrey Holloway,



SAMPLE

Rich wood colors and custom designed art glass are emblematic of the new kitchen design basics. Designed and built by Otogawa-Anschel, Minneapolis, this project won an honorable mention award in *QR's* Master Design Awards in 2008 — www.qualifiedremodeler.com/awards

CKD, CBD, of Holloway Home Improvement Center, Marmora, N.J. "When it comes to purchasing any product, there are still people who have money, but they are doing a lot more shopping. So with regard to the selection of kitchen products, people are looking for deals. And, obviously, there are some vendors and remodelers who are willing to deal in this environment."

When it comes to appliances, Holloway is seeing a greater willingness to forego ultra-high-end built-in refrigerator units, opting instead to cut their investment in half in favor of a free-standing unit. "We are seeing people choose stainless steel and — believe it or not — in our last two remodels, white appliances," says Holloway.

Across the country in the Pacific Northwest, where the housing market only recently began to see price

declines, Judith Neary is seeing cost-consciousness but less so as it relates to the desire to upgrade to an appliance with a professional look and feel.

Years ago, "it used to be about the double-bowl sink, the dishwasher, the free-standing range, a microwave and a refrigerator. Now people have, for lack of a better phrase, 'hemi-ed up' their kitchens with appliances," says Neary, using an automotive reference for powerful engines as an analogy for professional grade kitchen appliances, sinks and faucets. "We now have the 48-in. double-door refrigerator combined with a freezer. We have a 60-in. cooktop. We have a double oven with a warming drawer. We have a dishwasher if not two. And we have two or three sinks in the kitchen, depending on size. These things, oddly enough, are not going away in this economy. They are not willing to give up the performance or the pro look."



Photo Credit: James Haefner Photography



Architectural Resource and Meadowlark Builders, both of Ann Arbor, Mich. collaborated to win a silver in *QR's* Master Design Awards in 2008 for kitchens under \$50,000. It is rich, cozy, clean and simple, all at the same time.



Susan Jacobs

Susan Jacobs, CKD, CBD, CAPS, of Pumco Interiors Kitchen and Bath in Petoskey, Mich., is among those that can verify the lack of willingness to sacrifice the professional or high-design look. But in her

well-heeled, vacation-home corner of northern Michigan, the cost savings are often found in trading down from high-end, designer brands to a much less expensive, but quality brand, with the same look and feel.

"I recently did a kitchen where I really wanted the client to go with a Franke sink and a Grohe faucet," says Jacobs. "But we ended up getting the same look with an Elkay sink and a Delta faucet — similar design, but costwise, considerably less. Right now, up here, it's all about the price."

Cabinets and countertops

The widespread desire for granite and quartz countertops is not likely to go away anytime soon. Nor are people willing to forego high-quality cabinets, but across the country there

seems to be a common trend to find cost-savings in these two major areas. Jeff Holloway says he is showing a fuller spectrum of granite qualities to his customers. On a scale of 1 to 10, in terms of granite quality, he may start people off with a No. 5 and move up to a 10. If that is too expensive, there is a much greater interest in exploring solid surface options, he says.

"We are seeing more willingness to look at solid-surface solutions as opposed to a granite or quartz product," explains Holloway. "We have been able to provide considerable savings — up to 35 percent — with just a change in the surface selection. So people are seeing solid surfaces as a solution for granite, and we've always seen that as a great solution anyway."

Susan Jacobs is seeing the same thing trend in northern Michigan. "I have been in this industry for 20 years, especially in this area, and I would say that 99.9 percent of my clients have been selecting granite countertops. And now all of a sudden, there is a big interest in Corian and some of the other solid surface products, rather than going into the

granites. However, they are not realizing that some of those products are in a similar price range."

The great strides by cabinetmakers to bring good and better products with somewhat comparable levels of features and benefits as those offered by the best brands of cabinets is cited as a the main reason that cost-savings are being realized in cabinet selections. It also stands to reason that many of the options and upgrades for cabinets are being left on the showroom table.

"A year and a half ago, a typical client we were working with — a wealthy, two-income family — would have come in and said, 'We'd like the very best of everything,'" says Jeffrey Holloway. "Now those same people, even though they have the same amount of money, are re-evaluating the equity they have in their homes and are saying we'd like to have \$40,000 worth of cabinetry in our home, but what can you do for \$20,000? And we are explaining more and more about the differences between a stock product and a semi-stock vs. a custom product. People, when they understand they are pur-

chasing fewer choices but not less quality, are willing to look at a semicustom cabinet over a custom. For instance, we might explain to them: "You can have a cherry product, but the manufacturer of that product might be using a No. 2 vs. a select grade of cherry." People are willing to say "a couple more mineral streaks, a couple more worm holes, it will just add a little more character."

"With cabinets there used to be some construction differences. There were hardware differences. There were interior storage solutions that were not available in the semistock. And that is not the case anymore. It is getting hard to convince even a very affluent individual — and this is just from my perspective in my region — to specify a very high-end product. That does not mean that we are not specifying a high-quality product. You are seeing a lot less walnut and a lot more maple walking out the door," Holloway says.

Judith Neary, who works for a cabinetmaker, agrees.

"I have been in the industry a long time, and what I used to see as upgrades are now standard," recalls Neary. "If you came into my showroom years ago, I may have showed you six different options on cabinet construction, including a basic drawer box to a premium drawer box. What has happened over time is that there was once a 'cheap' option — which was a production-builder box — and then you moved up to 'good', 'better' and 'best' options. What has happened is that the 'good' and 'better' have stepped up so that the standards are 'best'. As cabinet manufacturers it makes sense for us to build a 'better' box and buy one or two 'better/best' quality drawer glides so 'best' becomes the standard. That has happened across the board with the industry at large."

"The compromise being made today is not on quality," explains Neary. "They still want a better quality or what I would call a premium





Photo Credit: Mark Scheyer

The Jane Page Design Group, Houston, Texas, won a Bronze award in 2008.

quality where they may give up on roll-out trays. But they are not going to compromise on the quality of the cabinet construction and materials in their kitchens.”

Less is more

One trend that is also having an impact is a growing desire on the part of consumers to remodel in a smaller, often greener, more sustainable way.

If costs are to be saved, the first thing to go is the overall scope of the project, say many of the remodelers, architects and designers who commented for this article. Eighteen months ago, it was commonplace for kitchen remodels to include some sort of alteration

to the exterior footprint of a home. Those expensive changes have gone by the boards and it is somewhat tied to the desire to spend more efficiently, says Lisa Loushin, CKD, president of Haute Kitchens in Savage, Minn.

“More than ever, I see more clients wanting to ‘recycle’ their existing appliances with plans of replacing them as they break down,” explains Loushin. “They want to put ‘sweat equity’ into their home and hire my company for design and consultation. They are doing more ‘face-lifts’ where they are wanting to reuse their existing cabinets and either clean and touch them up or enamel them, install backsplash, add a few interior cabinet storage components, new hardware, a new light fixture or two, new countertops and call it a day. Lastly, they also



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Arlinea and RFW Design and Renovations, both of San Diego, won gold with this sleek, yet rich design.

want to do projects in phases, meaning doing one room at a time when a few years ago, they would have remodeled several rooms all at once.”

In general, the economic slowdown has forced remodelers,

designers and architects to adjust on many levels. They must find a way to be profitable on smaller jobs. They must be willing to work harder to win clients in a competitive market and they must adjust to a younger cohort of clients who

have been less psychologically affected by losses in the stock market, theorizes Jeffrey Holloway.

“The biggest trend — and this is not in material selection — is that the Baby Boomers are done right now. They recognize they will

be working into their 70s. They are not touching any of their money,” explains Holloway. “The people walking through the door are Gen Xers and they want a high-quality product. They want an interesting solution. They want it to be an expression of who they are.

“I’ve got two young boys and several employees, so I need to be profitable. But I can be profitable selling three \$20,000 kitchens as opposed to one \$80,000 kitchen. And how I mean that is just cabinets alone. So for us, the quality is there. Before you were challenged to provide quality at a lower price point; now if you don’t, you are not going to be in business because consumers have changed.” | QR

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