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Showcase Spaces

Designers invest a disproportionate amount of imagination into two rooms: *the very public kitchen and the more private master bath.*

By Roger Grody

To update a condo at The Watergate, Washington, D.C.'s luxury residential complex, Case Design/Remodeling packed contemporary luxury into a mere 100 square feet. The enlarged shower is clad in unique, vertically grained marble tiles, and twin vanities reflect clean lines and contrasting dark wood.

COURTESY CASE DESIGN/REMODELING, INC.

Glickman Design Build gutted an existing suburban kitchen and dining room to create a unified entertainment space, one side for cooking, the other side dedicated to gathering around a bar. Dark cabinetry is contrasted with light granite, and open shelving reinforces the airy, contemporary concept.

COURTESY GLICKMAN DESIGN BUILD

Interior designers and plumbers share an obsession with kitchens and baths. Homeowners are demanding spaces, whether an entertainment hub of the house or a private sanctuary, in which to be nurtured and pampered — and worthy of showing off. Kitchens, and, to a lesser degree, bathrooms, are the rooms where innovative design is put to the test.

PUBLIC STATEMENTS

Kitchens are getting bigger, flashier and definitely more wide-open, according to Bill Millholland, executive vice president of Bethesda, Maryland's Case Design/Remodeling, who reports nearly all current kitchen projects entail tearing down walls to integrate the space with adjoining family rooms, dining rooms or patios. Homeowners no longer insist on matching the style of the kitchen to the home's architecture, says Millholland, who notes, "That trend has changed radically over the last three to four years, as kitchens have taken on a much more contemporary vibe."

Kevin J. Cozen, principal and founder of Classical Progression, a Santa Monica, California, design firm, reports two major trends in luxury kitchens. "One I'll call the über-industrial kitchen and the other the slick, modern-style kitchen," he says. The first, driven by clients seeking a restaurant-style kitchen, can lack warmth. "Here the challenge is integrating these cold, industrial-feeling appliances into a place where family and friends gather," says Cozen, who uses reclaimed, aged woods and vintage fixtures to soften the environment. "In the slick modern-style kitchen, appliances and fixtures almost vanish, integrating the appliances into or within the cabinetry, which is a continuous, clean-lined surface with limited details," explains the designer.

"Kitchens have become these jewels of projects," says Millholland, explaining the limited design options of stained wood cabinets and laminate countertops are long gone. "They've now exploded into precious projects where we worry about every detail," emphasizing a dramatic evolution in terms of sophistication. Concurring is Lanna Ali-Hassan, an interior designer with Glickman Design Build, another firm in Washington, D.C.'s Maryland suburbs, who states, "Clients now want more than a space that functions well — they want something that wows."

For countertops, granite's popularity is surprisingly enduring, even though it requires more maintenance than engineered quartz products like Caesarstone, which now offers finishes difficult to distinguish from genuine granite, marble or onyx. "They don't carry any of the heartache of natural stone," says Millholland. Ali-Hassan reports clients' strong preference for islands, with enormous adaptations doubling as dining tables for everyday meals.

Reinforcing Kevin Cozen's observations on

Glickman Design Build

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modern kitchens, the East Coast designers cite a trend of discretely hiding smaller appliances, such as microwave ovens and wine coolers, into drawers. Greater color contrast has gained favor: white cabinets paired with dark granite, or conversely, chocolate-stained cabinets juxtaposed with white marble. "Everybody used to be somewhere in the middle, now they've moved to the extremes," notes Millholland of current color preferences. Some ultra-modern kitchens, such as those from Italian manufacturer Snaidero, feature lacquered cabinets with the high-gloss colors and sexy curves of a Ferrari, a look more popular in luxury urban lofts.

With kitchens now measured in terms of their "wow" factor, the quality of all materials undergoes far more scrutiny than in the past. "People are much more aware and educated, and have a heightened sense of aesthetics," explains Millholland.

SPLURGING IN PRIVATE

When it comes to master bathrooms, it's all about splurging, albeit in a less public manner than kitchens. Showers have become more dominant than bathtubs, reports Millholland, noting frameless glass, rich stone sheathing and multiple showerheads are practically taken for granted. If space is at a premium, sacrificing the tub for a lavish shower is relatively common practice, but the tubs that remain are elevated to bona fide design elements.

"Tubs are likely to be freestanding, almost like a piece of sculpture," says Millholland, who reports they are often positioned for dramatic effect. Ali-Hassan agrees, adding that drama can be further enhanced by hanging a crystal chandelier over the tub. "Clients demand bathrooms with a spa-like atmosphere, a place to go and relax and unwind," she says. Both designers report homeowners' enduring love affair with Carrara marble, a material with a timeless sense of luxury. Other amenities that are becoming de rigueur are heated floors and towel racks, mirrors with built-in televisions, steam rooms or saunas — perhaps a fireplace. "A current luxury bath may also have outdoor access to a spa-like private patio, complete with outdoor shower, spa, lounging and even massage areas," says Cozen, spoken like a true Southern Californian.

In condos with limited square footage, Millholland suggests homeowners will trade any extra space, including an existing tub, for larger closets. For more generously proportioned homes, Ali-Hassan maintains his and hers walk-in closets with dressing rooms are becoming as essential as dual vanities, which aren't even negotiable. Cozen reports that entirely separate bathrooms, once popular in sprawling estates, are now passé, quipping, "It seems to us that couples who stay together want to bathe together!" Instead, privacy is achieved in a single spa-like suite by allocating each person their own toilet, walk-in closet and dressing room. UH

In a historic district in Washington, D.C., Case Design/Remodeling responded to the homeowners' eclectic tastes with a modern yet whimsical kitchen consistent with the spirit of the neighborhood. Inset crystal cabinets, a marble backsplash and vintage-inspired lighting fixtures contrast with ultra-modern stainless steel countertops evocative of a restaurant kitchen.

PHOTOS COURTESY CASE DESIGN/REMODELING, INC.