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Where the Heart Is



KITCHENS HAVE BECOME THE HOME'S SOCIAL HUB, COMBINING FUNCTION WITH AESTHETICS.

By Barbara Liston

Is there any room in the home more inviting than the kitchen? We're irresistibly drawn to this sanctuary of warmth and sustenance in an almost primeval way, as our ancestors were drawn to campfires.

It's no wonder that today's kitchens are designed to be more than just convenient places to prepare meals. Indeed, today's kitchens are often the social hub of the home, where families and friends can comfortably gather.

"The aesthetic has caught up with the prac-

Kitchens and family rooms now seamlessly blend together with the help of cabinetry that looks like fine furniture. In fact, some kitchens are now being designed with some of the same features you'd find in well-appointed dens. Architect: Jim Ross, Ross Design Group; Kitchen designer: Busby Cabinet Company.

tical functions of the kitchen," says Jim Lucia, vice president of the Winter Park-based home design firm Lucia Kassik & Monday.

For example, kitchens of the past had countertops, cabinets and appliances that were

functional but rarely beautiful. Today, countertops and floors are often made of stone. Cabinets are crafted from furniture-quality wood. And appliances, when they aren't discretely hidden, are sleek works of industrial art.

A GATHERING PLACE

"Everything becomes more important in the kitchen, because it's now the showpiece of your home, a place where you entertain," says Beth Dover, marketing director for Mystic Granite & Marble of Orlando, a large distributor of natural stone.

"The kitchen has become integrated into the living space of the home now," agrees Philip Johnson, owner of Kornerstone Kitchen & Bath. "It's

not a space that's off to the side, where one cook is relegated to working and coming out to say hi to the guests."

While the kitchen-great room combination has been around for years, the latest trend in home remodeling, as well as in new construction, is to make the kitchen and living area even more like one big room.

Remodelers are not just knocking out walls between kitchens and living areas, they're also tearing out 42-inch-tall bars that once separated kitchens from family rooms.

"If you have a party of 15 to 20 people, instead of half gathering in the kitchen and the other half in another room, now the whole party is in the combined family room and kitchen,"

says Rick Caccavello, president of Central Kitchen & Bath.

That combined room doesn't necessarily look much like a kitchen.

"A lot of our customers are looking for kitchens that don't look like kitchens," says Lucia. "They look more like well-appointed dens."

For example, Lucia says, he's designing kitchens with fewer upper cabinets, leaving more wall space for nicely lit displays of art.

Even the refrigerator, the tallest

Some homeowners are choosing to put their kitchen technology on display. That means modern, stainless-steel appliances are front and center in even the most traditional kitchens. Kitchen designer and builder: PSG Construction.





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Natural stone countertops, backsplashes and floors are common in today's kitchens, as are lower cabinets with specialized storage space, meaning more pots, bowls and dishes can be stashed beneath counters and islands. Kitchen designer: Karen Kassik, Lucia, Kassik & Monday; builder: Farina & Sons.

appliance, is disappearing into drawers hidden behind cabinet fronts. So are dishwashers and microwaves. Drawers are now common in storage cabinets and pantries, making it easy to retrieve items even from the back.

To help make up for the loss of traditional cabinets, designers are creating large, hidden pantries. Sometimes pantry doors are so well disguised behind cabinet fronts that casual visitors won't even know they're there.

Kitchen cabinetry that resembles fine furniture is also part of the trend toward blending kitchens with living areas.

Many homeowners are embellishing the basic wall of cabinets with

legs and feet and architectural details such as fluting, three-piece molding and wainscoting.

"This transforms cabinetry from just a box into furniture—in look and cost as well," says Johnson, who recently created a \$210,000 set of kitchen cabinets for a client.

Mismatched finishes are also common on both cabinets and countertops. Some cabinets may be painted while others retain a natural wood finish.

Countertops around a sink may be granite, while an island may be topped by wood. Black granite might anchor a cook-top while multicolored granite is used elsewhere.

THE STONE AGE

Stone, once seen only in expensive custom homes, isn't just for the wealthy anymore. In recent years, granite countertops have begun to appear in even moderately priced homes.

Designers say that the price of some granite is now comparable to the price of high-end manmade counter materials, such as Corian. That means more production builders are able to include genuine stone in their models.

"It's the stone age," says Darlene Spezzi, founder of Mystic Granite & Marble. "Everyone wants stone. It's like buying a piece of artwork."

But if materials are important, how they're used is even more crucial. Countertop design has become an industry in itself, as homeowners work with fabricators to create what is often the room's focal point.

At her Orlando warehouse, Spezzi displays hundreds of slabs of granite and marble from around the world, gathered from quarries in Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Africa, Brazil and India.

"You can come out to the yard and actually select your slab," says Spezzi. "All the homeowners love that, because they're going to actually feel it and touch it and clean it every day."

Homeowners' stone choices often influence the rest of the kitchen design, notes Spezzi. "People are now first selecting their granite, and then choosing their cabinet colors and appliances," she says.

As the popularity of natural stone continues to rise, demand for other exotic countertop materials has also increased.

For example, some countertops are made of granite embedded with semi-precious stones, or cross-sections of chambered nautilus shells or even petrified wood.

"It's so unique, so customized," says Spezzi. "It's picking out something very special for your house, a piece of nature, a thing of beauty for your home."

AN URBAN FLAIR

As for appliances, not all homebuyers want to hide them behind fine cabinetry. Those with more contemporary tastes often opt for a look that's almost commercial, where the technology is proudly on display.

Stainless steel appliances are popular with M/I Homes buyers, says Sam McKee, the builder's design center manager.

McKee's clients are making the cook-top a kitchen focal point by choosing large, stainless steel chimney hoods. Those same buyers often opt for glass tile and tile with the look of metal on backsplashes, she says.

Caccavello says he's also experiencing a surge in demand for contemporary kitchen styling, likely influenced by media coverage of the many new condominium towers rising in downtown Orlando.

"The luxury condos are pretty much all going contemporary, giving them that urban flair," Caccavello says. "I think that Orlando, which is historically a traditional town, is starting to get it—that contemporary would fit around here."

In the kitchen, contemporary means streamlined cabinetry instead of ornate, dramatic moldings and hardware.

Caccavello says clients are foregoing upper cabinets altogether and concentrating all storage under the counters and islands.

To compensate for lost storage above, lower cabinets are equipped with spe-

cialized pullout racks for pots, dishes and spices. Gone are the utilitarian white plastic racks, which now come in stylish stainless steel and chrome or richly molded wood.

"All the bells and whistles are now going inside the cabinetry rather than outside," says Caccavello. "People are starting to realize that the interiors of their cabinets are just as important as the exteriors when it comes to beauty. The function is starting to get beautiful." ♣

Contemporary-style kitchens, with sleek appliances, shiny surfaces and simple hardware, are catching on in Central Florida. Some local experts say the trend is partially a result of media attention given to the urban-chic condominiums now under way in downtown Orlando. Kitchen designer and builder: PSG Construction.

