

Ultra Affluent Design

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When it comes to ultra high-end kitchens, it appears that clients do not want to keep up with the Joneses anymore. In fact, perhaps the only reason they would want to know what their neighbors have is simply to avoid creating the same look in their own homes.

These are the sentiments shared by kitchen and bath designers interviewed by KBDN who note, somewhat surprisingly, that designing for the ultra affluent ultimately means replacing the “wow” factor with the “me” factor.

“Our clients want custom kitchens. They don’t have the same color and make of car as their neighbor, or the same dress or suit as their friends, so why should their kitchens look alike?” notes Melinda Earl, founder of San Diego, CA-based StoneImpressions.

Cheryl Hamilton-Gray, CKD, and president of Carlsbad, CA-based Hamilton-Gray Design, Inc. adds: “These clients are seeking uniqueness and personalization of their proposed new kitchens being that they are able to afford the luxury of customization. They are also seeking ultimate efficiency in performance of appliances and electronics.”



High-performance appliances, such as ventilation hoods, as well as metal countertops and artistic hand carvings (at left), are very popular choices among ultra-affluent clientele, says Cheryl Hamilton-Gray.

“It is definitely an individual thing – they simply want something different,” adds Jinny Plasse, design consultant for Norwich, CT-based David Hecht Kitchens. “They may come in with a crumbled piece of a magazine or they may see something in the showroom and quickly decide they want that product.”

“What all my clients are after is something they’ll never see anywhere else,” says Mary Kramer, owner of Mary Kramer Design Studio in Stony Point, NY.

Plasse notes that the inspiration for many of these designs comes from client travels.

“We’ll take their germ of an idea, match it to the house and have it [evolve]. Often they’ve traveled and want to incorporate a European element,” she says.

To capture these specific looks, many clients are asking kitchen designers to incorporate custom murals into a layout, Kramer adds.

She explains: “Ultra high-end design says it’s okay to sit in your kitchen in Illinois and look at a Tuscan sunset in stained glass, or to step into a garden retreat every time you look at the backsplash I designed from a photo you took in England.”

Doug Smith of Apex Wine Cellars and Saunas in Woodinville, WA, adds that wine cellars are also popular items for ultra affluent designs.

“Wine cellars are very often seen as part of or next to the kitchen. Inside the cellar we will use special lighting, display rows to highlight prized wine bottles, and arches with art or unique murals to accent the cellar design,” he says.

He adds that, often, the wine cellars feature large base and crown molding, and raised-panel doors with glass or iron inserts.



Clean lines mixed with exotic woods are other trademarks seen with ultra-high-end contemporary kitchens, Steier notes.



Kitchen ceilings and cabinetry can also be enhanced with subtle, custom artwork, such as flowers, fruits or vines, Capitanio points out.

Earl adds: “We have added clients’ names and even wedding dates to images of a wine bottle on stone, and we have used a fabric pattern to create a backsplash.”

But regardless of the design element, the key to designing for the ultra affluent is to fully understand the unique characteristics of these clients.

For one thing, it’s all about custom: custom cabinetry, custom decorative accents, custom window treatments and custom lighting plans with adjustable heads and dimmers, counter lights, cabinet interior lights and cove lighting.

Also popular are separate bar sinks, butler’s pantries, custom-designed islands and peninsulas and exotic stone countertops.

Customized Style

According to Keith Steier, president of Brooklyn, NY-based Knockout Renovation, and chief designer Jennifer Melis, these custom looks benefit both the client and designer.

“The challenge and benefit [of ultra high-end design] is a higher level of design utilizing custom materials and personalized layouts to achieve a greater variety of design goals,” he explains.

Plasse adds: “I believe it is actually split evenly between contemporary and traditional. If a traditional theme is chosen, it typically features deep browns with purple mixed in, as well as carrera marble. Traditional kitchens are typically dark, but remember that these are huge homes with lots of windows and lots of light.”

She continues: “They prefer something aesthetically unique, but function is also important because they entertain.”

“They seek a really functional space, but they want it to have their own signature style,” adds Laura Capitanio, owner of Los Angeles, CA-based Sorelle Fine Arts.

Those interviewed also relayed a strong interest in eco-friendly and green-based products among their ultra affluent clientele.

“Anything green is very much in demand,” says Capitanio. “They want something with a [great] look but that is environmentally friendly, too, such as bamboo.”

“The challenges most associated with these types of designs are finding the unique materials and products to customize the kitchens. Even more challenging is the labor it takes to execute the customizations flawlessly,” adds Hamilton-Gray.

She concludes: “The clients in this market have realistic expectations regarding what is possible and attainable in the space and are mostly concerned with maintaining the design integrity.”

Main Materials

Indeed, one of the key elements of these designs is the use of exotic materials, the designers agree.

“If their tastes are traditional, they’re seeking timeless, classic and luxurious finishes, like marble,” says Steier.

He also sees intricate applications included in traditional design themes, including custom woodwork and ornate moldings.

Plasse adds: “With the traditional designs, cherry is the leader. In fact, they won’t think of anything else.”

In contrast, contemporary design themes tend to include cutting-edge materials such as glass, stainless steel and exotic woods. Hamilton-Gray points out that exotic wood veneers, such as Macassar ebony, burls and unusually cut species are often used in high-end contemporary designs.

“Eclectic tastes melding these and other styles give more creative license to designs,” Steier says.

Plasse agrees: “They are doing some exotic veneers, as well as brushed granite, metal or glass tops, especially for contemporary themes. If they choose a Tuscan look, it often features deep brown with carrera marble.”

Earl adds: “Stainless steel remains very popular and there is a large upsurge in natural materials. For instance, we are seeing granite to make the kitchen a showplace, and then wood or solid surface for heavy-duty prep areas.”

Hamilton-Gray adds: “Metal countertops are also popular with [upscale clients]. A particularly interesting and under-utilized surface is zinc. This surface has a ‘living finish’ and is much softer looking in its ever-changing hues than stainless steel, which promotes its use in traditional settings.”

Brushed or polished nickel hardware, glass cabinet doors, mosaic tile backsplashes and floors, copper countertops and faux paint finishes also score big with designers catering to the affluent.

Appliances as Art

According to Capitanio, the selection and application of appliances for ultra high-end kitchen designs simply stems from clients seeing what is possible.

“They tend to get ideas when they choose the appliances and cabinetry after they get an idea of the style they want. Generally, we then give them our input and wind up coming up with something custom for them,” she says.

According to Hamilton-Gray, other functional elements frequently requested are high-performance appliances and labor-saving and practical gadgets.

Another trend, she notes, is that “Appliances are always mixed by brands to give the best performance for each task. Often, the integrated refrigerators are used giving the opportunity to disguise the appliance behind a creatively styled armoire, for instance. In contemporary designs, stainless steel finishes on appliances work perfectly.”

Specifically, she also notes effective ventilation and good lighting as being in high demand.

“Most of the function requests stem from having dealt with inadequacies in kitchens of the past,” she points out.

She adds: “A hood is an important design element that is customized to create a focal point. Hand carvings are also an artistic element [with] furniture and moldings.”

“They’ll also often put in induction cooktops – those are really ahead of the fashion curve,” says Plasse. “Whatever is top of the heap right now is what they want, but it changes constantly. It is very much a fashion thing.”

Capitanio adds that she has even added color to appliances and cabinetry to capture a specific look.

“We have painted over cabinetry. Sometimes the client wants us to paint something hanging from the doorknob or maybe a little detail somewhere. It might be faces or basket of fruits, for instance,” she concludes.

Personalized Projects

Steier relates two recent projects that personify some of these custom trends.

“For one client, we incorporated hand-made ceramic tile along with custom, textured glass cabinet inserts and exotic marble countertops with matching full-height marble backsplashes and a custom blended wood floor stain,” he explains.

He continues: “For another, we installed a custom kitchen peninsula on an angle for visual interest, as well as more kitchen floor space, along with a large breakfast counter and a stackable washer/dryer behind custom-frosted glass doors with a mosaic multi-colored glass tile backsplash.”

Plasse offers her own experiences: “With one woman, we put in dishdrawers – but the drawers had to be up close to her and at a higher level [to conform to her height].” She adds that interior fittings are also popular: “They love all the bells and whistles – especially anything that pulls out.”

She adds: “There is one that I am working on now that was well over \$100,000 and it took me 20 minutes to sell it. They were going with a Wood-Mode cabinet that is a deep brown cherry accented with a purple burl inset. It is a rich purple. Plus there is carrera marble with a multitude of high-end appliances. We finished it off with a brass rail so that the husband can sit at the island.”

Front to Back

Another interesting design element in ultra affluent kitchen designs is the integration of custom murals, Capitanio notes.

“In our designs, we like to incorporate something that belongs to the family. For instance, we might put the faces of the children in the mural or include symbolism such as a vase filled with flowers, or fruit, to symbolize prosperity,” she explains.

She continues: “We will also include subtle references to other elements in the room. For example, we often get inspiration for colors from fabrics that they choose in the design, or the color of the cabinet or the tile.”

Kramer agrees: “Custom artwork like this transcends the trends. These are not flavor-of-the-month designs. They are timeless.”

“There was one kitchen where we painted a ceiling and included scenes from Greece,” Capitanio notes. “The scenes continued on the backsplash behind the stove and the client really liked it, so we incorporated that into the design and created a feeling of harmony. Everything really came together.”

Kramer also shares a recent project in which the clients wanted a backsplash to include the image of a stone mill and waterwheel.

“I took my palette from samples of their cabinetry, countertop and wall color. The roof of the mill picked up the wall color while the stone work echoed the granite countertops and the waterwheel matched the cabinetry,” she describes.

“The preliminary sketch was refined to add weeping willow trees, which ended up being among the biggest challenges, such as cutting branches, leaves and the sky in between to achieve the lacy look of the willows.”

Capitanio concludes: “The benefit for the clients is having something very unique on their walls, but they [should remember that they] are paying for the tears of the artist as well as the artwork. That lasts forever.”

Mass Consumption

Despite the lavishness of many of these ultra affluent designs, they are not unattainable, the designers quickly point out. In fact, it is quite likely that these unique applications may eventually become mainstream.

“Often, trends that begin in the narrower, high-end market eventually flow down into the mass market as they become more popular and affordable,” Steier points out.

Plasse agrees: “Many of these people are breaking ground, so in five or 10 years we’ll likely see these styles featured in stock cabinets.”

“I believe that what we are doing, for instance, is very trendy, but it could translate to a wider audience in the future,” says Capitanio, who adds that hand-painted murals can also be transferred to ceramic tiles and backsplashes.

“Ultimately, these ultra high-end kitchen projects often involve very discerning clients who are accustomed to a very high level of service. The challenge that we have as kitchen designers is to meet the [loftiness] of their expectations in order to deliver a project to their complete satisfaction,” Melis concludes.

DPHA Focuses on Ultra-Luxury Goods at K/BIS

LAS VEGAS, NV— The ultra-luxury goods market presents a host of new opportunities for plumbing professionals. This was the topic of the Decorative Plumbing & Hardware Association’s (DPHA) member breakfast, held during last month’s Kitchen/Bath Industry Show in Las Vegas.

The event included a presentation by speaker Adele Cygelman, editor-in-chief of *Robb Report Luxury Homes* and *Robb Report Vacation Homes*, sister consumer publications whose readership surveys at the top 2% of the country in annual income.

Encouraging the audience of over 300 decorative plumbing and hardware industry professionals to think in creative ways to increase their presence in the luxury home goods market, Cygelman spoke about the state of the ultra-high-end market, and covered topics such as who's buying, what they're buying, and from where they are drawing their luxurious design inspirations.

Cygelman identified the current ultra-affluent trends, which include dual master baths, high-tech gadgetry in every area of the home – including the kitchen and bath – and ergonomic design. It is this segment of the buying community, says Cygelman, that is setting the bar for the buyers at income levels below theirs.

For these buyers, high-tech or prohibitively expensive home accoutrements, such as interactive and “smart” whole-home technology, have been standard fare, not only for their primary homes, but for their second or third homes, as well.