

***"The Fun's Where the Food Is. Today's Kitchen is Yesterday's Living Room"***

***– Charlene Arsenault***

(In October of 2006, our designer was interviewed by Boston Globe writer Charlene Arsenault. Their discussion follows.)

***This article is about family friendly kitchens, so the questions apply to that topic.***

***What aspects of the process do you deal with?***

All of it. I am what's known as a "Design and Build" firm, so I am a "one-stop shopping" solution. I'm with my client from conception to final paint touch-up.

Specifically, I work with clients to design their kitchen on the computer using a 3D modeling program, so that we can visualize the proposed design. Once I have some preliminary ideas I bring my laptop to their home and we can design together at their kitchen table. I also help them select fixtures, appliances, cabinetry, countertop, lights, flooring, etc. and I can add simulations of these to the computer model.

I am also a licensed and insured general contractor. The fact that I can "do more than just a kitchen upgrade" allows me to move walls, windows or doors, if that will help the design. Once we agree on a design and a price, I bring in all the subcontractors and vendors and manage the implementation of the design. The great thing about this approach is that I get the subs to analyze the situation up-front, so there are minimal unpleasant surprises later. And the client gets a *price* rather than an estimate before we start. The only way the price changes is if we find a concealed condition (e.g., a bad water line in the wall) or if the clients want something additional that we hadn't planned.

***Do people come to you with no ideas sometimes, or do most have a general concept of what they want and you spin it into action?***

I find that my clients have a lot of ideas that they've gleaned from magazines, TV and the internet. This is really helpful as it gives me an idea of their style and taste. On the other hand, many of these sources show glamorous kitchens with high ceilings and huge windows. Most of my clients' homes are "typical New England" styles with standard ceiling heights -- I have to gently bring the clients' expectations down to earth (or more specifically, down to ceiling height). On the other hand, there are ways to improve the "airiness" of even a traditional New England home, so I will try to introduce those ideas to address that interest.

Also, it's difficult for people to "think out of the box" in a home they've occupied for years -- they don't usually consider the possibility of moving a wall, or a door or a window -- they think that the shell is immutable. Using the computer I can open their eyes to the possibility of changing the space to improve the design.

But...to directly answer your question...I guess I'd have to say that they do not truly know what they want -- that's where I come in. I think it's human nature that we are better at articulating what we do *not* like rather than what we *do* like, and that's where I start.

I spend a lot of time interviewing clients to understand their lifestyle before I begin a design. I ask them first to tell me what they like and dislike about the current kitchen. (Again, I hear a lot more "dislike" than "like"). And it's common that one partner will have a different opinion than the other, so I need to initiate that discussion between them. I then move on to a detailed questionnaire to get a laundry list of their wants and needs as well as the relative priorities of these features.

*What do you think today's families are looking for when they wish to redesign/remodel their kitchen? Are you seeing particular trends?*

Both form and function. Let's face it, a kitchen remodel is a very expensive and disruptive undertaking. For the average family to consider such a project, they have to be seriously unhappy with the current situation and seriously interested in improving both the functionality and the aesthetics.

Specifically I see five general trends:

1. Eat-at counters. Almost every kitchen I design has a counter area where the kids and parents can comfortably sit and eat a snack or a meal, or where guests can "hang out" with the cook during a party.
2. Lighting. Almost every new client complains about the lack of light in their kitchen. I use a lot of recessed and under-cabinet lights in my designs as well as multiple switches and dimmers to give folks control over both task and ambient light. Since I typically gut and rebuild the space, this is not that expensive a thing to do while the ceilings and walls are open. I also add decorative lighting -- usually pendants over the eat-at counter. It's a nice look.  
  
I also try to introduce natural light if it is lacking. Sometimes it's by adding a window or replacing a solid door with one with glass; sometimes by moving a wall that is blocking natural light; sometimes by adding a skylight or a light tube on the roof.
3. Larger room size and better traffic flow. Almost every new client has a complaint about the size and/or traffic flow of the kitchen and its relationship to other rooms. I often open walls to improve the communication of the kitchen to adjacent spaces or to expand the kitchen. The new layout is oftentimes different from the old as well, to accommodate better traffic flow.
4. More storage and counter space. This demand is on everyone's list. It probably reflects a need for more space to hold all the modern kitchen gadgetry and small appliances that we all accumulate.
5. Beauty. My clients want the kitchen to reflect their style and taste. They definitely want the "Ooh and Aahh's" of friends and family.

***Has there been a shift in the function of a kitchen beyond what it used to be, and if so, why do you think this occurred?***

Oh, absolutely. I am working in houses that are a minimum of 20 years old. These houses were designed around the model of the stay-at-home mom with kids playing in the backyard. The assumption was that mom worked in the kitchen alone and gathered the family at the kitchen table or the dining room for meals. Those days are gone -- June, Ward and The Beav have been replaced by The Osbornes.

Most of my clients are dual career couples. Even the few stay-at-home moms I meet are extremely mobile, shuttling their children from one organized activity to another. Children have appointments and schedules. Husbands and children are in and out of the kitchen fixing quick snacks or even meals. The dining room is now perceived as wasted space -- it is rarely used for dining, except at holidays. Even the kitchen table is at risk of obsolescence -- families are less and less often all together for meals.

The kitchen is now a hub of activity by all members of the household. And to the extent that it seems cramped, dark and unfriendly it becomes a source of dissatisfaction in daily life. That's when my phone rings.

***Why do you think the kitchen has become such a centerpiece of the household?***

I think that the kitchen has always been an important gathering place, but perhaps under appreciated in its role. Think about it, at every party you attend, where do people congregate? It's the kitchen, regardless of how small or unattractive. It's where the food and drink are; it's where the host or hostess may be; it's where people feel most relaxed and comfortable.

I think people are now relaxed enough to acknowledge the kitchen's central role in their life as explained in the answer to the previous question. They feel less compelled to have a formal dining room as a little-used showpiece.

***Are they getting more elaborate? Please give me some examples of ways people are redesigning their kitchens? What are the hot trends, etc?***

Yes, they are getting bigger and more functional, as well as more attractive. They are now places where people feel comfortable "hanging out" rather than just "stopping by".

Cabinetry now approximates furniture aesthetically, and includes convenience features such as rollout shelves and bins. Appliance garages hide countertop small appliances. Built-in trash and recycling bins are common.

Countertops are often granite or one of the granite-like man-made quartz products. I almost always include an overhang for counter-seating.

Flooring tastes vary widely. In the last two years I've installed hardwood, ceramic tile, laminate and vinyl tile in otherwise similar grade kitchens.

Appliances are sometimes covered with the cabinetry panels, but lately more and more people are opting for stainless steel fronts. For a long while "satin nickel" was the preferred finish, but now I'm starting to hear requests for rubbed bronze.

There seems to be increasing interest in commercial grade gas cooktops and in convection and dual microwave/convection oven technology. Also popular are counter-depth and French Door (refrigerator compartment is side-by-side at top and the freezer is in the bottom) refrigerators.

***What types of things can be done to make a kitchen more warm and inviting?***

Controllable lighting can make a big difference. Bright task lighting is important, but you don't want to have it shining in your face as you sit at the counter. Pendant lights with frosted or alabaster globes add a lot of ambiance. Use of natural products such as granite, tile and warm wood tones is important. And, of course a pleasing color palette for the walls, floors and ceilings is vital. Incorporating attractive patterns and colors in window treatments and chair covers also helps.

It also helps for the kitchen to be physically warm. I can't tell you how many times I've found kitchens under-heated. It's easy enough to add a heater in the toe kick of a cabinet. I've also installed gas-fired fireplaces off of the kitchen -- a very nice feature.

***Are there particular concerns depending on the age of the children in the household? Are there particular style cabinets that can be used, or radiant heat, out of reach storage areas, child safe ovens, etc. that people are becoming more aware of when designing a kitchen with younger children in the house?***

Occasionally someone will opt for the kind of induction cooktop that is cool to the touch out of concern for the children's safety, but usually parents take the approach that very small children should simply be kept out of the kitchen rather than planned around. I've introduced the concept of a step-out stool area in the cabinetry for the children, but have yet to have any takers. I think that the parents feel that the children will only be height-challenged for a short while and they do not want to plan the kitchen around a temporary problem.

Parents definitely think about the accessibility, practicality and safety of the kitchen for adolescents and teenagers. Eat-at counters make a lot of sense for these kids as they grab a quick snack or meal between their organized activities. Microwave ovens are a must. Sometimes an extra refrigerator is considered to hold the teenager's stash of energy drinks, etc.

***How much are people spending on their kitchens? What is the range of things that can be done?***

My kitchens range from \$50,000 to \$110,000, depending upon the size of the space and grade of cabinetry, countertop, fixtures and appliances. These jobs include gutting and rebuilding the walls ceilings and floors, and upgrading the plumbing and electrical connections as needed. And they almost always entail moving a wall or changing one or more windows or doors.

It certainly is possible to give a kitchen a facelift for much less, i.e., keep the footprint essentially the same and change out some or all of the appliances, cabinetry and countertop, but that's not the business I am in.

It's very common that people contact me after they've already received a kitchen design from a kitchen store or the kitchen department of a home improvement store. These places do a fine job

with the footprint they're given, but they are not in the business of moving walls, windows, doors, plumbing, etc. My prospective client then realizes that the proposed design will just make their less-than-ideal kitchen prettier and not address their dissatisfaction with size, traffic and functionality. As one client told me, "They gave me a design that was exactly what I asked for...but I wanted more. I don't know what, but more." I give them "more".