

Kitchens focal point of home activity

Kitchens are taking on a renewed importance in the '90s as they return to being the focal points of home activity, say members of the Toronto Home Builders' Association (THBA).

Morrie Wolfman, president of Paris Kitchens, said kitchens are becoming more family room-oriented as the old-fashioned, open-kitchen concept — where the kitchen, dining and living rooms essentially form one Great Room — enjoys renewed popularity.

"There is also a trend to entertain at home rather than going out to restaurants; not just because of economics, but because it's more fun and personal. People today, including a lot of men, love to prepare food at home. It's a great couple activity," he said.

Regarding design, Mr. Wolfman said many new kitchens feature lighter, brighter cabinet finishes, so that they are airy-looking and cheerful to work in.

In addition, there is a strong move toward a "furniture look" in cabinets, such as the use of solid oak or oak veneers. And "the use of mouldings to create an eye-pleasing look is very much in vogue," he said.

"Kitchen design as it relates to function is very important," said Mr. Wolfman. "A good kitchen is complemented by all its parts, including counters, tiles, appliances, lighting and flooring."

Functionally, "there is a growing number of convenience-oriented cabinets on the market today, such as cabinets with built-in garbage cans and tray sections for quick and easy storage of utensils," he said.

Klaus Bogner, general manager for Normac Kitchens Ltd., said convenience extras can also include pot and pan drawers, and roll-out units. "More and more people are also asking for a slide-out garbage container from Europe that features separate recyclable/non-recyclable waste compartments," he said.

"The emphasis today is to make kitchens as usable as possible. Consumers are much more time-conscious now than in the past and therefore are willing to pay for convenience. In fact, many of them, particularly empty-nesters, insist on having convenience features," said Mr. Bogner.

In terms of design, Mr. Bogner said the clean, European look, which can include

frameless cabinets with concealed hinges and obscured handles, and built-in, compact appliances, is in demand.

Bill Greer, sales manager for Raywal Ltd., concurs. He said the growing number of working couples in recent years has resulted in a greater demand for kitchens that offer "simplicity, convenience and easy maintenance."

In new homes particularly, Greer said kitchens are growing in size relative to other rooms because people are spending more time in them. "Kitchens have, in a sense, become family room extensions, in which husbands and even children are more involved than ever before," he said.

Cal McMathie, contracts sales manager for Canac Kitchens Ltd., agrees that kitchens in new and renovated homes are generally bigger than in the past. "Many kitchens today feature large windows, high ceilings and walkouts to the backyard," he said.

Mr. McMathie added that the colour white is currently "very, very popular" in new kitchen cabinets and appliances. "We're also seeing more glass cabinets. And centre islands are popular in larger kitchens," he said.

The necessity of many European households to use available space and energy resources as efficiently as possible is having a major influence on the design and operation of kitchen appliances in the '90s.

Geoffrey Hedges, vice-president and general manager of Miele Appliances Ltd., said his company markets high-tech, German-made kitchen appliances, including ovens, fridges and dishwashers, that consume less than half the water and/or energy of standard North American units.

Advances in operation that are making their way into today's kitchens include "convection ovens which use fans to circulate heat, so that food cooks quicker, more evenly and more energy efficiently," said Mr. Hedges.

Regarding design, Mr. Hedges said demand is rising for "integrated" kitchen appliances that complement and fit right into cabinetry, including appliances that have the same depth as adjacent counter-tops.

"Ceramic cooktops, where the heating elements are hidden underneath, are also growing in popularity," he said.

Heating Tips

Air Leakage: Excess air leakage can account for up to 40 per cent of your heat loss. Make your own draft tester with a feather and toothpick or a light plastic vegetable bag and flutter test the potential leak points. Check inside edges of windows and doors, the electrical outlets and baseboards. Caulking and weatherstripping will stop escaping energy dollars and cut drafts.

Basement: The basement can be responsible for up to one quarter of your heating costs. Check for air leaks along the sill plate and around plumbing and electrical service entrances. Are the headers well insulated, with a sealed vapor barrier on the warm side? When finishing the basement, insulate properly.

Attic: You might have increased the level of insulation in the attic, but did you check for a good air-vapor barrier on the warm side of the insulation? Warm, household air can escape into the attic through penetrations around ceiling light fixtures, exhaust fans, the plumbing stack, tops of partition walls and a poorly weatherstripped attic hatch.

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