

Ideas for *Smashing Splashes* & Counter Designs

By creating unique and exciting backsplash and countertop options, designers can showcase their talents and differentiate themselves in a competitive and price-sensitive market.

With the emerging interest in sleek, simple contemporary kitchens, as well as more tailored traditional ones, successful designers have realized they need to seek new ways to differentiate their proposed solutions from less

sophisticated, price-sensitive competitors.

A good product category to demonstrate your talent and expertise is surfacing – the products you select and specify for counter surfaces and backsplashes. Taking a fresh look at these hard-

working parts of a modern kitchen can allow you to showcase your expertise and provide a beautiful focal point in the room.

MATERIAL SELECTIONS

These days, there's a wide variety of carefully engineered,

functionally appropriate surfaces for counters and splashes. Most designers are very well-versed in using granite, marble and quartz surfaces. Some other possibilities include:

- Three-dimensional, high-definition laminate

surfaces fabricated with elegant edges offer a new take on the hard-working counter surface.

- Crisp and clean variations of white solid surfacing material are elegantly appropriate for contemporary spaces.

Photo: The LivingKitchen Fair, Cologne, Germany, Stormer Kuchen Exhibition



← An island counter surface can become a focal point; here's an example of a uniquely Asian-inspired kitchen featuring a beautifully detailed island that conveys a great sense of a table. ↑ The top surface of the island is as intriguing as the shape of the furniture piece itself. The working surface is one material, which is then surrounded by a wood surface.

Photo: Courtesy of the design team of Kitchen & Bath Concepts of Pittsburgh, LLC and QCCI Cabinetry



↑ The backsplash area can provide niche storage recessed into the splash. Alternatively, mechanized systems are available today that can drop down storage concealed behind traditional wall cabinets.

- New inkjet printing technology has extended the ceramic tile offering, so that we now have beautiful “stone” or “marble-like” porcelain materials that offer durability and cost efficiency advantages.
- Organic materials, such as concrete, properly finished woods and industrial metal materials are great as accent surfaces or as full countertop selections.
- Back-painted glass fabricated to provide a hard-working counter surface, as well as elegant enameled lava stone surfaces such as Pyrolave, should be on the designer’s list of possibilities for that client who is looking for something “different.”
- A wide selection of recycled materials that offer beautiful surfaces also provide counter and splash possibilities.

Some designers have a deep, experience-based level

of knowledge with all of these products. They may also be lucky enough to have worked with installation specialists for each category. Other designers may be experts in some of these materials, but may not have worked with others.

EXPAND YOUR SKILL SET

Because counters and splashes are an important part of the design aesthetic, as well as the functionality of the room, many designers are setting aside research time so they can increase their knowledge around materials not widely used in their marketplace. Here are some suggestions about how you can tackle such a process.

First, consider all of the surfacing and splash materials you have experience with, and divide them into categories, ranking their importance based on your targeted consumer’s design preferences. These might



Photo: The LivingKitchen Fair-Press Office, Cologne, Germany

include:

1. Known and cherished choices appropriate for all types of kitchens.
2. New choices that

↑ American designers tend to think of the splash as a static height: either 4" or full. Changing that dimension can add visual appeal as well as provide another level of storage. In this example, the splash (by the way, it’s glass) finishes midway between the wall and base cabinets, with a cap to match the cabinet material.



Photo: Courtesy of Jenn-Air and Ellen Cheever, CMKBD, ASID, CAPS, Ellen Cheever & Associates

↑ In more and more kitchens, these mid-height cabinets are being used as storage areas or built-in oven enclosures. A question arises regarding the counter surface: Does it match the cabinets...or the counter...or the appliances? In this case, the countertop is black quartz to match the appliances. → In this close-up view of the fit and finish between the pedestal oven cabinet and the ceramic tile splash behind the cooktop, notice how these three areas intersect with one another. This type of detailing needs to be decided before the project is presented to the consumer because this impacts the overall costing of the project. In this instance, the black quartz top is scribed against the wall, the cabinet panel and open shelf system then sit atop this countertop. The oversized 13"x36" textured Porcelanosa tile splash is capped with a decorative tile that is finished with a very thin aluminum strip. In more contemporary spaces, finishing tile with an aluminum edging (or one of another material – glass, wood, stone) eliminates the distracting joint connections of tile end caps or trim pieces.



Photo: Courtesy of Emily Miller, Kitchen & Bath Concepts of Pittsburgh, LLC



expand traditional and/or contemporary design options.

3. New "green" materials that are a good fit for your targeted consumer.

4. New unusual, colorful and textured materials that may offer a "surprise and delight" factor to the consumer searching for a personalized, "one-of-a-kind" design.

Once you've established a list, the goal is to thoroughly research these materials so you are familiar with their aesthetic and performance

characteristics, installation quirks and comparative costing factors. The goal is to be able to specify a new accent material or overall surface that convinces the consumer you are the best designer for the job, while protecting your profits and ensuring you will delight the client with the finished product.

To begin this research project, here are a couple suggestions:

1. Have an open mind. Don't automatically assume you know that something "works" or "doesn't work." Perhaps you used a wood top 10 years ago in a water area and it deteriorated. It may have resulted in a costly replacement solution. Today, wood countertops are finished with much more durable sealants. Additionally, there is a revolution going on in sink design that is moving the draining function, as well as a drip-drying function, off the countertop adjacent to the sink and into the boundaries of the sink itself. Therefore, if you have

long thought that wood is not a good countertop surface, rethink this stance.

2. Start a research project in a generic fashion; what can you find out on the Internet about the material? What is it made of? What type of durability does it provide?

3. Use social media to identify experiential knowledge that other designers may be able to share with you.

4. Identify (locally if possible) manufacturers, representatives or installation experts.

5. Complete a cost comparison. I like to work with one plan and one set of specifications so I am able to accurately compare prices between sources for one material category or between various material categories themselves.

By increasing your portfolio of design possibilities, you will extend your creativity – profitably.



← Even in an all-white kitchen, great design detail can be introduced by changing the thickness of the countertops or the edge treatment. In this kitchen, there is a rollover edge along

the hard-working L space, while a thicker square stone is used on the island. ↑ In the adjacent desk, a wood finish is used to cap the pedestal storage space to the right of the seated area. Note how well the fit and finish is between the raised cabinet and the wains paneling that encloses the desk area – a beautiful traditional solution.

Photo: Peter Leach Photography



← Adding more detail to a splash design might make a small kitchen spectacular. In this space, designed by Ellen Cheever, CMKBD, ASID, CAPS, Ellen Cheever & Associates and Pietro Giorgi, Sr., CMKBD, Giorgi Kitchens & Design, there was simply no room on each side of the hood or along the back wall for usable wall cabinets. A shaped quartz splash is much more interesting than a typical splash. ↓ Introducing the curved architectural shape in the quartz material specified and adding a small shelf adds visual space to the overall room.



Photo: Courtesy of Martha Kerr, CMKBD, Neil Kelly Company

← The fit and finish – the starting and stopping point of combining materials – is the biggest challenge for designers who are new to this concept of material mixing. In this example, a stainless steel top has a simple stainless steel splash that is tucked beneath the window for an attractive fit. A surprise awaits the viewer with the specification of a back-painted sheet of moss green glass that then stretches from the window to the end of the cabinetry behind the boxed hood above the cooking surface. Rather than more stainless steel – or more glass – a quartz material finishes the island top.

top for a more petite cook.

- In place of wall cabinets, open decorative shelves are being specified to enhance contemporary spaces. This design element changes the way we decide the termination details of the backsplash.
- Material mixing is king! An excellent way to make a simple kitchen far more interesting is to treat each counter surface, each snack counter and each splash area as separate design details. This adds to the complexity of layout plans. To avoid appearance misunderstandings or cost overruns, large-scaled detailed drawings on the floor plan or elevations need to be prepared

to make sure everything fits correctly.

- As mentioned above, there is a dramatic change taking place in the design of sinks that is impacting water damage or dripping concerns. Therefore, the depth of the countertop overhang and the durability of the countertop must be matched with the user's surface performance expectations.
- Pattern preferences seem to be very flexible: granites with beautiful movement are cherished for island specifications. On the other hand, the simplicity and monolithic form of quartz slabs is also valued. Intricately detailed tile splashes are valued

TRENDS IN SPLASHES AND COUNTERTOPS

Before we study some actual examples of interesting solutions, here are a few trends I see in the near future.

- The actual countertop area in kitchens is being reduced because mid-height or pantry cabinets are replacing traditional base wall cabinet configurations in many cases. This makes sense; once you've met the countertop work area criteria, tall storage is a better ergonomic choice as it offers easier access to the totally adjustable shelves within. The use of such tall cabinets means more attention

must be paid to the "fit and finish" between the end of a countertop and the adjacent tall cabinet that might be shallower, the same depth or deeper than the adjacent run of base cabinets.

- Backsplash wall space is being turned into interesting storage cavities. Hanging a rack on a wall is pretty simple; however, new backsplash storage systems change the accessibility of traditional wall cabinets. The user's reaching capabilities become an important part of the planning process. Kitchen planning standards allow any surface 16" or deeper to be considered a functional work area.

Therefore, a backsplash storage system can begin 16" to 18" back from the front edge of the counter-



area, the decorative mosaic tiles introduced in the hood area could be featured along the narrow splash area between worktop and snack counter. ↗ Backsplash storage rail systems have been available for some time. In this show floor exhibit, the rail system extended beyond the end of the base cabinet run – as did the backsplash material. The continued rail provided hanging space for longer items (such as aprons seen on the set). This could be a great place for a dog bed, dog bowls, highchair storage or other items.



← In addition to what's happening on full backsplash areas, designers can add a significant amount of detailing in smaller splash areas. By limiting the countertop quartz splash to 1-1/2" in the sink

Photo: The LivingKitchens Fair Press Office, Cologne, Germany

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↑ In this expansive kitchen designed by Joseph Giorgi, Jr., CKD, Giorgi Kitchens & Designs, a lovely tile is used on the perimeter walls, and a thinner slab of stone provides the splash for the island sink area. The continuity of material at the island supports the design detailing on either of the back walls.

in traditional spaces, but sleek, full slabs of glass or tile are considered more appropriate for contemporary rooms. These choices are best presented to the client with big product samples and/or accurately scaled elevation drawings or realistic renderings.

DESIGN DETAILING

After visiting The Living-Kitchen Fair in Cologne, Germany in January, as well as working on my new *Kitchen & Bath Design News* seminar, which focuses on design detailing in transitional and contemporary spaces, I have compiled some key design details for you to consider when specifying the finished room.

These examples demonstrate how seemingly small details in the shape or height of splash material, the edging of different materials or the combination of materials can dramatically impact the finished room.

Consumers are searching for a designer they can trust. They sometimes have a very hard time differentiating the value of a professional designer when considering several competitive overall solutions that look deceptively alike. This becomes even more difficult if it is a very simple shaker-style kitchen or a slab door contemporary one. By focusing on the edges, you may be able to "edge-out" the competition.

Consider some of the following tips:

- Take a fresh look at materials you are familiar with




Photo: Peter Leach Photography

↑ How countertops finish against tall or mid-height cabinets has always been a challenge. They also must be detailed before the cabinets are ordered. In this kitchen by Ellen Cheever, CMKBD, ASID, CAPS, Ellen Cheever & Associates and Pietro Giorgi, Sr., CMKBD, Giorgi Kitchens & Designs, a tall cabinet to the left of the sink on the back wall is shallower than the counter. An inset cabinet was specified so the countertop's return overhang could die into the frame of the cabinet. The oven cabinet (seen in the photograph foreground) is a standard depth so that the countertop extends beyond the oven cabinet. There is no right or wrong – it's the designer's choice.

– and identify those you are not.

- Set aside time to complete a thorough research project so you understand the details, costs, use, care and installation recommendations for new materials.
- Then, spend time at the computer or at your drafting board to create special finishing touches

to the project's surfacing specifications before you propose it to your prospective client.

That small countertop edge change or the back-splash details could very well be the difference between the client saying "yes," to you, rather than "I need to go home and think about it," or, "Your price is too high." 



↑ ↑ What a dramatic orange stripe in this innovative kitchen! At first glance, the overall back wall looks like a solid section and an open shelf space. ↑ In reality, a shade-type mechanically operated door system conceals shelves that extend down through the countertop. Cabinets can either be pulled forward to provide that minimum 16" - 18" of counter space to meet NKBA planning guidelines, or over-sized base cabinets can be used full-depth with extended drawer guide hardware.

Ellen Cheever, CMKBD, ASID, CAPS is a well-known author, designer, speaker and marketing specialist. A member of the NKBA Hall of Fame, Cheever gained prominence in the industry early on as the author of two design education textbooks. She manages an award-winning design firm, Ellen Cheever & Associates, and has been part of the management team of several major cabinet companies.

