

## COMMENTARY: KITCHEN AND BATH TRENDS FOR HOUSING

Kenneth R. Tremblay, Jr., and Mira Ahn

Kenneth R. Tremblay, Jr., is Professor and Extension Housing Specialist, Department of Design and Merchandising, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO; and Mira Ahn is Assistant Professor, Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Tennessee at Martin, Martin, TN.

A call for papers for a special issue of *Housing and Society* on issues and opportunities in kitchen and bath design is contained in this journal. To help readers develop papers we thought it would be useful to present some of the trends in kitchen and bath design that were showcased at K/BIS 2007 (Kitchen and Bath Industry Show and Conference) held at the Las Vegas Convention Center in May. It is most likely the best source for the latest trends and newest products in the kitchen and bath industry. We attended the show along with several other HERA members, including a large Virginia Tech contingent.

K/BIS was attended by over 44,000 kitchen and bath professionals and educators during the four day event, according to K/BIS owner the National Kitchen and Bath Association (NKBA). The event featured professional development courses, roundtable discussions, keynote speakers, and special events in approximately 610,000 square feet of exhibit space. There were more than 900 exhibitors. Trend spotting was an issue of considerable interest. Robyn Waters, author of *The Hummer and the Mini: Navigating the Contradictions of the New Trend Landscape*, gave a presentation on trends and countertrends. She suggested that for every trend there is a countertrend, and often they are both valid. This was certainly apparent at K/BIS. There were energy- and water-efficient products (good for green design) but in many cases they were so large they would require an extremely big kitchen and bath (bad for green design).

*Green design* was one of the hot trends showcased at K/BIS. Manufacturers and designers are clearly recognizing that there exists a growing movement among consumers who want to help the environment without sacrificing great design. There were numerous eco-friendly products ranging from energy-efficient appliances, countertops and surfacing made from recycled and sustainable

materials, products whose parts are almost all recyclable, induction cooktops, low-VOC cabinetry, flooring offered in sustainable materials such as bamboo and cork, plumbing fixtures such as low-flow toilets and water-saving showerheads, lighting products that use LED (light emitting diode) technology, and longer-lasting and color-corrected fluorescent bulbs.

*Health and wellness* was another major trend that we identified. Products reflecting this trend included a variety of air purification systems, advanced water filtration and purification systems, steam ovens, hands-free faucets that create a cleaner environment, built-in refrigerators that feature pure water and air, hygienic stainless steel appliances and sinks, and countertops with eco-friendly and sterile sealants. There were also showerheads and systems that featured aromatherapy and chromatherapy, and walk-in whirlpool baths that featured therapeutic hydrotherapy. Designing the bathroom as a mini-spa creates a feeling of wellness and peacefulness for the homeowner.

*Universal design* remains a key issue. Many products were exhibited that make design more accessible than ever. Universal design is becoming more prevalent as the kitchen and bath industry recognizes that baby boomers and their families and friends who visit are getting older and are demanding products that do not remind them of that fact. It is suggested that following universal design principles can improve the functionality and viability of kitchens and baths. Some ideas for the kitchen are rounding off corners on all countertops, using contrasting colors on counter edges, suspending a mirror above the cooking area to allow vision into pots for a seated person, and pull-out shelving or accessible counter space near ovens and microwaves to allow for transfer of hot items. For the bathroom, ideas are a curbless shower, an integral or folding seat in the shower, and a hand-held showerhead with adjustable height capabilities. As seen at K/BIS, products that have a place in universal design are more attractive and come in more selections than in the past.

There were also *high-tech appliances* that turned the kitchen into the digital control center of the home such as the Digital Entertainment Kitchen presented in the NKBA Industry Trends Marketplace. In an effort to show what the home of the future would look like and how it would be run, this year's NextGen Demonstration Home was equipped with remote and touch panels that powered a home automation system called Life|ware 2.0. This digital entertainment and automation solution controlled everything from the appliances and the lighting to the home's security, demonstrating a new level of digital living into the kitchen, the bath, and throughout the home. Other high-tech touches the NextGen Home showcased included a one-touch refreshment dispenser in the kitchen and a mirror that also served as a nightlight in both baths.

In terms of *aesthetics*, there is growing demand for more transitional product designs that reflect contemporary and the Asian-inspired (Zen décor). There is

an increasing amount of nature-inspired colors in both saturated and muted tones that are finding their way into everything from faucet finishes to glass-paneled appliances. Treating the ceiling as a fifth wall is becoming more common, for example a sculptured ceiling reflecting the floor design with built-in lighting and a sound system. We are seeing the return of claw footed and freestanding tubs, essentially creating a bath island. Increasingly furniture is finding its way into the kitchen and bathrooms.

Other trends noted by NKBA based on their annual design competition entries were: exotic veneers on table tops, countertops, and cabinetry (such as jade wood), freestanding vent hoods in glass or stainless steel, curvilinear shapes that offer softness and visual appeal, painted finishes and techniques applied to cabinetry, stainless steel hardware, vessel and shaped sinks that combine art with function, dark wood (such as mahogany and deep cherry), and integral flooring of slate, wood, or ceramic tile.

There are, of course, other issues and opportunities in kitchen and bath design such as teaching methods and techniques, best practices, and college-industry partnerships. We are looking at a \$265 billion industry. NKBA has 39,000 members. Kitchens and baths are crucial for our well-being. If you have an idea, consider submitting a paper for the special issue of *Housing and Society*.