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Surface Value

Consumers play it safe and practical when choosing kitchen countertops

If you had to sum up current kitchen countertop trends in a few phrases, you might use the following: durability, generational preferences, clean and simple and ice cream sundaes. When taken together, they reflect prevailing consumer attitudes about kitchen remodels (and perhaps home improvement projects in general): Sure, they're renovating for themselves but hey, let's not get too crazy.

PRACTICAL MATTERS

This sentiment may explain why many of the trends may seem familiar and why performance remains a key concern in purchasing decisions, even as aesthetics have assumed more of a leadership role. "The recession has changed people's attitudes about experimentation," said Kelly Morisseau, CMKBD, CID, a Walnut Creek, CA-based designer and author of popular industry blog Kitchen Sync. "I see quartz countertops going as strong as ever but less demand for materials like concrete and stainless steel." In Ambler, PA, David Stimmel, of Stimmel Design Group, still uses concrete countertops in much of his work but agrees engineered stone is king, its popularity no doubt buoyed by its ease of maintenance and durability.

But all is not engineered stone. White marbles, such as Carrara and Calcutta Gold, continue to have their admirers, and thanks to a flood of lower-cost varieties from overseas, granite has not completely gone away, noted Chad Seiders, executive director of Artisan Group. A softer, warmer alternative, solid surfacing has also regained its footing, especially among those with a taste for the sleek, contemporary and even monolithic. "It's a better-performing material in that you can do more with it," said Thomas Perich, North American marketing manager for surfaces at DuPont, citing advantages such as a lack of seams and the ability to create coved backsplashes, integral sinks and thick edges. "You just have a lot of flexibility."

SAFETY IN COLORS

As to color, the selections are vast and many, yet consumer preferences still tend toward the conservative. "A lot of clients want to go for the bold colors, but in the end, they never really do," Stimmel said. Most play it safe with earth tones, such as creams and caramels, or what Morisseau calls "ice cream sundae colors." Summer Kath, senior director of business development and strategic partnership at Cambria USA, also sees interest in grays, browns, black and, of course, white. Not surprisingly, a recent best seller for Cosentino North America, noted Lorenzo Marquez, the company's VP of marketing, resembles white marble.

In fact, Marquez said, "We're finding that homeowners and designers are seeking options that offer the aesthetic of, say, a marble or granite," a trend borne out by the latest quartz offerings from Cosentino and Cambria. Nature-inspired, the designs are rich in veining and dramatic in movement—a look favored by the older Boomer set whose kitchens are more traditional, said Morisseau. The younger, contemporary-inclined are apt to choose calmer options with smaller particulate or, if they live in cosmopolitan areas, solids, which are emerging in Europe, said Perich.





MIXING AND EDGING

Where self-expression lets loose is in the mixing of materials and colors—although that, too, can depend on geography—and the varying of countertop thicknesses, which can range from 1/2 in. to 1 1/2 in. to 3 in. Most industry experts agree simple edges and mitered corners are in, but some still field requests for ornate, classic treatments. Also being specified are chiseled edges on engineered and natural stone, as well as wood tops with “a naked or bark edge” that appear as if just sliced from a tree, Stimmel said. Perich has also noticed that in Europe and, to a lesser degree, on these shores, contemporary kitchens are moving toward ultra-thin countertops with virtually no edge.

Developments to watch for? Maybe. Much depends on factors beyond the realm of kitchens and baths—politics, economics, culture—and their impact on consumers’ mood. There will always be curiosity and demand for the next big thing, but if the present is any indication, form and function still go hand in hand. ■

—Alice Liao

Opposite page:

Once a high-end surface, granite has become nearly ubiquitous, thanks to the availability of budget-friendly varieties, such as those in the **Artisan Group’s** Modesto Collection. The line was recently expanded with three new colors: El Dorado, Mendola and Petra (shown), which features gray and black flecks on a white background. All three are offered with a lifetime warranty. Pricing begins at \$35 per sq. ft. **Circle No. 200**

With some contemporary kitchens moving toward thinner countertops, **TheSize’s** Neolith’s arrival on these shores seems timely. Available in 1/8-in., 3/16-in. and 3/8-in. thicknesses, the porcelain slabs come mesh backed and laminated in five formats ranging from 12 in. x 24 in. to 145 in. x 49 in. Suitable for use in a variety of applications, including walls, floors, cabinet doors and, of course, countertops, Neolith is offered in four collections: Colorfeel, Fusion, Textil and Iron (shown). **Circle No. 201**

Even as consumers are opting for more conservative countertop colors, manufacturers are finding ways to jazz up safe bets such as earth tones, black, white and gray. The newest additions to **Samsung Radianz Quartz’** Noble Collection include Gold Canyon Gray and Imperial Gray (shown), both of which incorporate gold flecks that reflect light; Midnight Sapphire is a deep blue with iridescent chips. All three are inspired by jewelry. **Circle No. 202**

This page:

Cambria USA’s Waterstone Collection takes its cues from marble and granite and is rich in movement and depth. The company has expanded the line with two new designs, Berkeley (shown) and Rosslyn, both of which are named after locations in England or Wales. The former features sandy tones mixed with hints of bronze and copper, while the latter incorporates gold flecks into a background of taupe and tan. Both come in 2-cm and 3-cm thicknesses for countertops. **Circle No. 203**

ThinkGlass has introduced glass side panels that, when combined with the company’s glass countertops, create the look of a waterfall treatment, which has been showing up in many a modern kitchen. The panels are textured to scatter light and can be specified in thicknesses of 2 in. and more. A variety of edge designs and LED lighting are available. **Circle No. 204**

While polished finishes still have their fans, some industry experts are seeing a move toward more honed looks. **Silestone by Cosentino’s** newest is Suede-leather, which offers a matte, velvet-like alternative to the glossy finish that may be on the wane. It will be available in 2013 on the company’s 12 most popular designs, including White Zeus, Tau and the Nebula series. **Circle No. 205**

What's Hot in Tubs

VibrAcoustic is now available on all nine of **Kohler's** acrylic Underscore baths. Through the technology, bathers can relax to the sounds and vibrations of music streamed through the tub from a mobile device via a hardwired connection or a Bluetooth receiver. Ranging in size from 48 in. x 48 in. to 72 in. x 42 in., the tubs come with chromatherapy, which can be synchronized with the music; a touch-screen control panel; and four original compositions that combine sound and colored lighting effects.

Circle No. 206

For the neo-classically minded, the President from **Devon & Devon** boasts a stately monoblock design and side and end panels articulated with stepped detailing. The 72-in. x 23-in. x 22-in. tub is formed of White Tec, a composite material exclusive to the company, and comes in right-corner, left-corner and center-wall models. It is offered in white or cream and can be specified with a variety of decorative marble elements. **Circle No. 207**



Laufen's new Palomba Collection includes a 72-in.-long freestanding tub with a soft, curvy shape and a modern attitude. Constructed from a white solid surfacing material, it features a 35-in.-high back and a 37-in.-wide bathing well contoured for ergonomic comfort.

Circle No. 209



Available in two sizes—60 in. x 32½ in. x 20½ in. and 66 in. x 32 in. x 22 in.—**MTI's** Maddux is made from the company's Engineered Solid Surface material, has a monolithic appearance and includes an integrated overflow slot and Toe-Tap drain. Its flat exterior panels allow the smaller model, Maddux 1, to fit into an alcove setting. **Circle No. 210**



The Cabrits Bath from **Victoria + Albert** takes its curves from nature and its name from a peninsula on the Caribbean island Dominica. At 68 in. long, 29⅜ in. wide and 22⅛ in. deep, it requires just 46½ gallons of water to envelop a bather in a soothing soak and is made from Englishcast, a white composite material consisting of volcanic limestone, and hand-polished to a glossy finish. **Circle No. 208**

What's Cool Everywhere Else



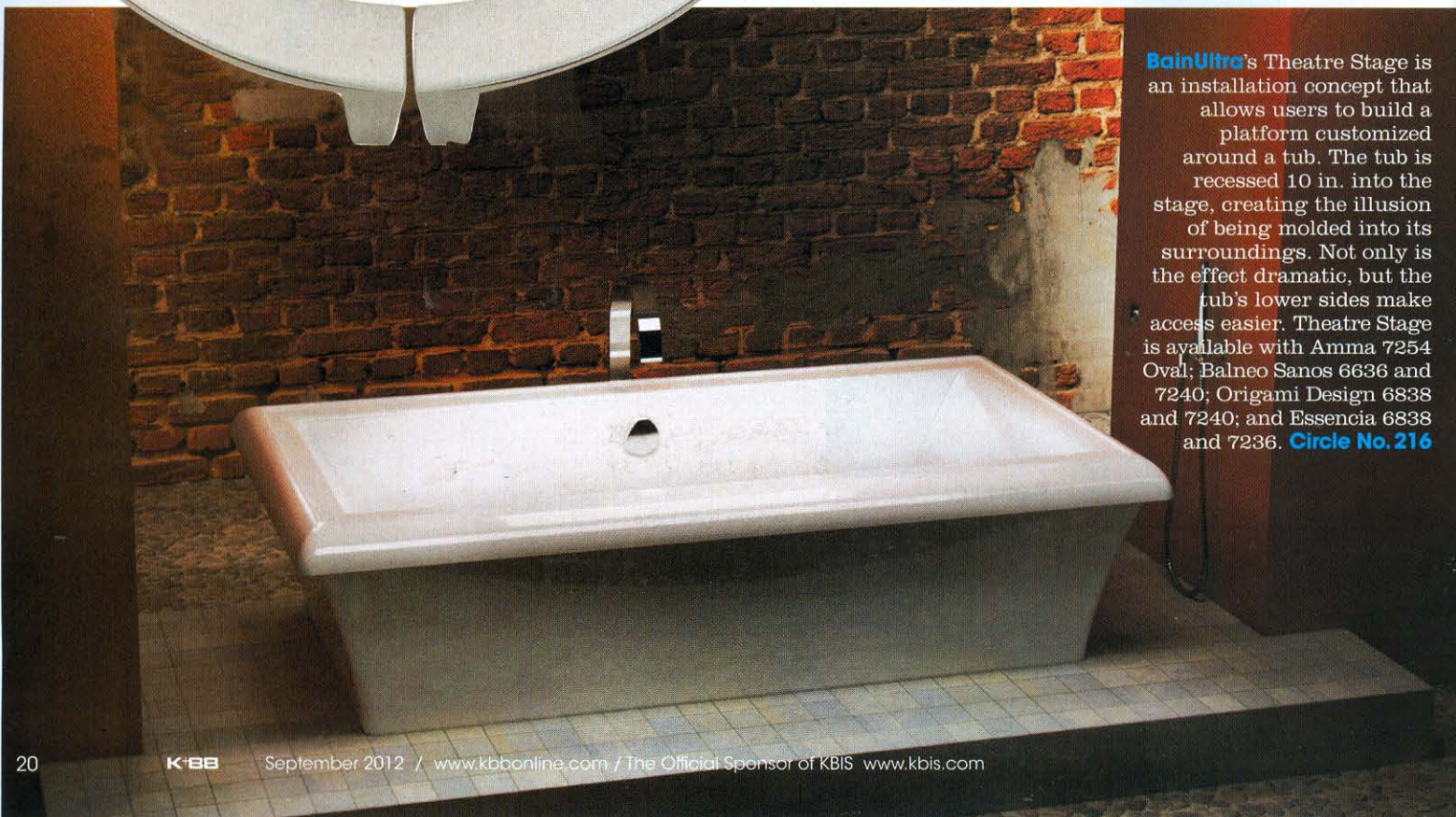
**Atlas
Homewares'**

Roundabout Pulls boast a sleekly curved geometric design available in three sizes: 1 1/4 in., 3 in. and 5 in. center to center. All three are offered in black, brushed nickel, modern bronze and polished chrome finishes.

Circle No. 214



Rejuvenation's Mid-Century Modern collection has added four new lighting fixtures inspired by original designs made between 1953 and the early 1960s. Meteor (shown) and Gamma are pendants with crystal-sphere-tipped rays, and Luna and Foton are semi-flush fixtures. Available in polished chrome or lacquered brass, all four have a glass outer dome with a screen-printed spirograph pattern and an inner dome in etched glass or metal, depending on the model. **Circle No. 215**



BainUltra's Theatre Stage is an installation concept that allows users to build a platform customized around a tub. The tub is recessed 10 in. into the stage, creating the illusion of being molded into its surroundings. Not only is the effect dramatic, but the tub's lower sides make access easier. Theatre Stage is available with Amma 7254 Oval; Balneo Sanos 6636 and 7240; Origami Design 6838 and 7240; and Essencia 6838 and 7236. **Circle No. 216**