

Photo courtesy of Granite Transformations



Today's homeowners are leaning towards "clean, crisp and white" when selecting tile products for their kitchen and bath designs, according to Kathy Stoffer, who handles sales and marketing at EcoSpec Tile in Covina, CA.

## Trend Report: Kitchen and Bath Design

With budget in the forefront of everyone's mind these days, homeowners are searching for value and a more reserved look when it comes to designing their kitchens and bathrooms

**BY JENNIFER ADAMS**

When it comes to residential design, most would agree that kitchens and bathrooms are considered high priority. And while function is a necessity, many homeowners have come to desire much more for the design of these spaces. Aesthetics play a primary role, and homeowners are turning to the assortment of textures,

patterns and sizes found in the limitless tile collections now available to create their dream kitchen and bath.

Once thought of as just a room for cooking and cleaning dishes, the role of the kitchen in a home has expanded tremendously. Nowadays, kitchens are a gathering space for entertaining. Often they spill into an open living space --

making it easy for hosts to socialize with their guests. Moreover, bathrooms have become a retreat. They are a place where homeowners can relax and soothe themselves after a long day. Taking these factors into consideration, it is only natural that homeowners are taking the designs of these rooms more seriously -- particularly when it comes to product selection.

Photo courtesy of FAP Ceramiche



It is the consensus among industry experts that people are favoring more subdued material palettes for their kitchen and bath design due to the rough financial times. "As a continuation of what has happened before in recessionary times, people tend to pick colors that are more muted," said Jonathan Zanger, President of Walker Zanger in Sun Valley, CA. "They are choosing the flashy products less. It's not less expensive, just less in your face."

### Cautious spending

But given the current financial situation, it is understandable that the down economy has affected the way people are spending money. While they still seek high-quality designs for their kitchens and baths, they are proceeding with caution, and in many cases, minimizing their look.

"The time of investing in your kitchen and bath because it provides the greatest return on investment in your home has unfortunately passed," said Josh Levinson, President of the Wholesale Division at Artistic Tile. "Too many homeowners have taken losses on the value of their home. Now, you have to sell clients based upon a lifestyle choice and the fact that they love the product. If the client does not perceive value in the product or if they do not love what you have designed for them, they will choose something else, or perhaps even choose to spend their money on a completely different purchase."

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Photo courtesy of The Iberti Group



"Basics" is a new tile line that Astor Tileworks manufactured for a new U.S. distributor, Oogle Tile Co. in San Antonio, TX. "Since glazed wall tiles are used primarily for backsplashes, showers and tub surrounds, and Carrara and Calacatta are two of the most popular stones for counters in these rooms, we felt a safe palette would be the two whites with the addition of a light gray and anthracite gray," said Walter Iberti of The Iberti Group.

Echoing Levinson's words, Anna Marie Fanelli, Co-owner/Designer of Floor & Decor in Tenafly, NJ, also believes that homeowners are in search of value. "The industry is unpredictable right now," she said. "It is uncharted

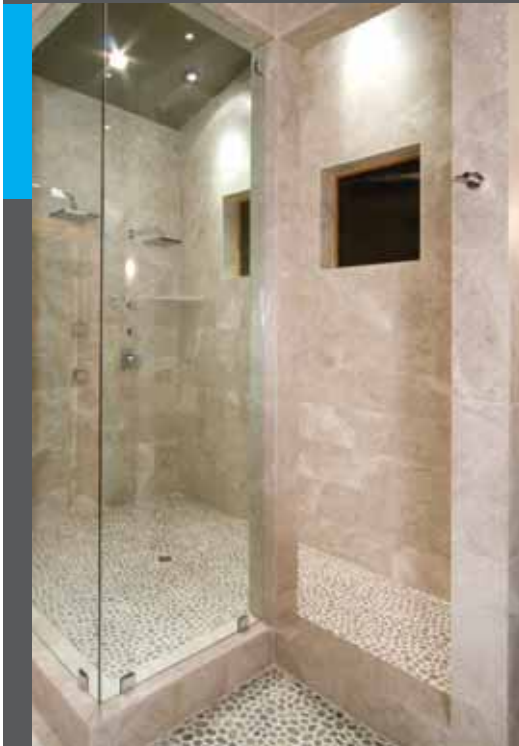
waters. There is a very small pocket of people spending money. I call it the 'group of privilege.'

"It's chic to be cheap," Fanelli went on to say. "You'd be surprised that even those with money are looking at the numbers. It is a different world today. I think that talent sets you apart from the [typical] showroom. If it is just product, I don't think you have that exclusivity. At the end of the day, product is product."

With this economy, people are still looking for high quality, but they want to make sure that they are not overspending. "Everyone is spending less and [they are] very value conscious," said Jonathan Zanger, President of Walker Zanger. "They want to know that they are spending well -- even the wealthiest. It doesn't mean that they are buying cheap. They want options."

Zanger also has observed that there is a shift towards multi-family housing in the New York area. "With the

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Photo courtesy of Roca



*The use of porcelain tile for kitchen and bath designs has been steadily on the rise. "The material is so sophisticated today, and maintenance free" said Anna Marie Fanelli, Co-owner/Designer of Floor & Décor in Tenafly, NJ. "You can do full walls of tile." The Green City Collection by Tile of Spain-branded manufacturer (pictured) is not only beautiful and durable, but it contains up to 80% recycled content.*

economy, new building is moving in the direction of multi-family lofts," he said. "Some of the products that fit in that aesthetic have continued to be popular, including the long rectangular format."

## Modest designs

Homeowners are also using stone and tile within designs that are less ostentatious.

"As a continuation of what has happened before in recessionary times, people tend to pick colors that are more muted," Zanger went on to explain. "They are choosing the flashy products less. It's not less expensive, just less in your face."

The consensus among many leading industry members is that homeowners are now seeking a clean look for their kitchen and bath designs. "I feel that since the times are turbulent, people want things simplified," said Fanelli. "They want a transitional contemporary design. New Jersey

is a very traditional market. New York is very clean lines -- not overdone. Designs are much simpler when it comes to using mosaic sheets and borders."

Kathy Stoffer, who handles sales and marketing at EcoSpec Tile in Covina, CA, agrees that the trend in kitchens and baths today leans towards "clean, crisp and white." "Regionally, it seems to be the same; white, white and more white," she said.

Walter Iberti, a long-time veteran of the industry who has moved into the manufacturing business for the past 11 years, also sees a strong trend towards white. "A new distribution company recently asked our factory to help create its very first line," he explained. "They wanted a core product that would sell every day. Our research, and the factory's historical data, identified that product as white and off-white. Since glazed wall tiles are used primarily for backsplashes, showers and tub surrounds, and Carrara and Calacatta are two of the most popular stones for counters in these rooms, we felt a safe palette would be the two whites with the addition of a light gray and anthracite gray. This four-color offering provides solid stand-alone colors that also coordinate with the two most popular stones nationwide. On top of this, we kept the focus on rectangles, which for walls seem to outstrip the demand for squares. This line offers a 3- x 6-inch classic subway tile, as well as a 6- x 12- and 1- x 3-inch mosaics in stacked and running bond patterns."

## Sophisticated porcelain

It also is apparent that customers are gravitating towards porcelain tile for their kitchen and bath designs. "The interest in porcelain is growing," said Zanger. "Porcelain tile has traditionally been commercially oriented, but it is now making its way into upscale residences -- not mid-market but the upper market because of its design and technology."

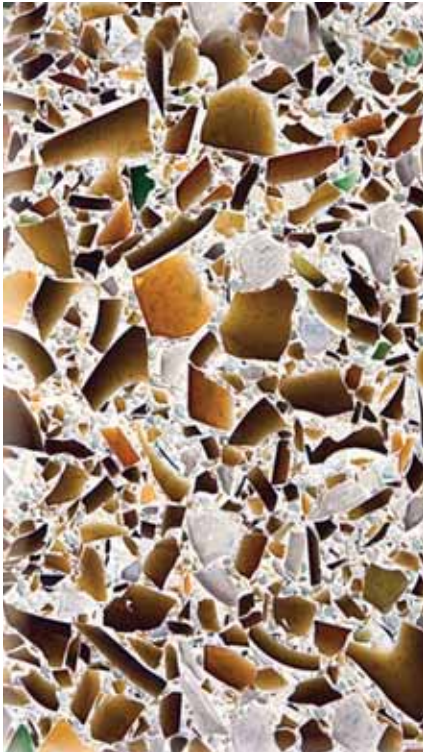
Fanelli agrees that porcelain has taken a back seat in years past, but not in today's market. "The material is so sophisticated today, and maintenance free" she said. "There are large 36- x 16-inch formats. You can do full walls of tile. It's very clean, and you don't need wallpaper or paint. Porcelain was really a rock star last year.

"I recently did a 40,000-square-foot home with about nine or 10 bathrooms," Fanelli went on to say. "All of the bathrooms were the same. The owner just wanted to keep it very simple. We chose 18- x 18-inch Statuary White marble and large-format porcelain wall tiles. That was in Florida. They wanted it very couture, but they didn't want maintenance because it was a second home. I feel like porcelain will be on the forefront for a very long time."

## Sustainable design

With the green building movement as an ever-growing component in the trade, many more tile manufacturers are investing their research and development on products that are considered green -- whether they contain recycled content or are produced with environmentally friendly manufacturing processes. In the commercial sector, it is

Photo Courtesy of Artistic Tile



With the Green Building movement on the rise, products such as Vetrazzo recycled glass surfacing offer homeowners aesthetics as well as sustainability.

evident that sustainability has become a prime objective, but there seems to be wavering thoughts on if it has caught on in the residential market yet.

“We do have people that are specifically interested in green products, but not as much for residential work as commercial work where it is sometimes mandated,” said Zanger. “But, we certainly have clients that are interested in it, and sometimes it is the tipping point. If all things being equal, they might choose the product with recycled content.

“People buy for emotional reasons,” Zanger went on to explain. “That is one of them. They are happy that what they are purchasing is something that is sustainable. Some people are looking to do their homes or offices sustainable and ask us to show them the products with recycled content. Others are happy to find out when something they like is. Interest in sustainability and green products is certainly growing, but it is not the main focus.”

Sharing Zanger’s thoughts, Fanelli also believes that consumers have not totally embraced the green movement. “I am an advocate of going green, but I don’t think the mass audience is yet,” she said. “I think there is an interest, but there has to be a hook. Green needs to be stylish. It has to have something that entices people to say, ‘Yes, I have to have that.’”

“I will pull something out and say this is environmentally friendly, and at the end of the day, it goes back to the specifier,” Fanelli continued. “There needs to be consumer awareness. It is there, and there is some awareness, but we still need a push.”

Stoffer, who is in the process of working on her own tile line, also believes there needs to be more consumer awareness. “My new designs are available in recycled and non-recycled, and I can tell you that only one out of 10 will buy the tile because of the recycled [content],” she said. “They seem to be drawn to the

collection because of the way it looks. Government, schools and some high-profile companies are where recycled is the more commonly requested and purchased.”

On a more positive note, Levinson is seeing growing requests for green products among Artistic Tile’s clientele. “When the green building movement began, clients inquired about green products, but were not willing to pay the up-charge to carry through on their ideas in many cases,” he said. “Now, with an increased awareness of green products, and price competitiveness between green and non-green products, many more consumers are following through on the purchase of green products. In addition to products with recycled content in our inventory, including Vetrazzo recycled glass surfacing, we have also increased our inventory of domestically manufactured tile and stone as well as thin porcelains.” **TILE**

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