

Rooms to Grow

AS THE HOUSING MARKET RECOVERS, HOMEOWNERS LOOK TO ADD VALUE AND FUNCTION TO TWO VITAL AREAS—KITCHENS AND BATHS. *by Laura Hampton*

Industry insiders are fuzzy about when the design and construction recovery hit the First Coast. Some felt rumblings in the latter part of 2011; some noticed signs of a turnaround in 2012. One thing is abundantly clear, though. When the market really took off in 2013, kitchens and baths were the clear winners.

"In the last 12 months, we've seen a 200 percent increase in people wanting remodels on

kitchens and baths," says Shawn Budd, owner and president of Corner Lot Custom Homes.

Though some are undertaking remodeling projects to prepare for a sale, a majority of owners are updating to add more value and function to their existing home.

"People have put off some much-needed home improvements over the last four to five years, and they're finally at a point where they feel comfortable

enough with the fiscal environment and that now is the time," says Budd.

Shawn Starr, owner and president of Dreambuilder Custom Homes, agrees. A builder who typically works on a handful of projects each year, Starr has received requests for two large kitchen remodels and a bathroom remodel in the last two months, which is significant after a long period of no remodeling work at all.

AGNES LOPEZ

KITCHENS

The most requested kitchen remodeling project for both of these builders? "Tear down that wall."

In the 1960s and '70s, kitchens were the heart of the home. Nowadays, they are the headquarters of the home. "People seem to congregate in the kitchen. I think that's why it has become more and more integrated into the living space," Starr says.

The trend toward a "great room" where living area, dining room and kitchen are all one big, open space has been developing over the last 20 years, and it's not going away anytime soon. Moreover, homeowners are requesting space in this area for new activities such as desks where small children can get on the computer and do their homework, and drop zones where the family can re-charge tablets, cell phones and other electronic devices.

In place of walls, California islands are an especially hot trend in kitchen design right now. Whereas kitchen islands in the past were two-level, bar-top height, the islands of today are single level, counter height and as large as you can make them, which is generally 4 feet by 8 feet, or the size of one countertop slab. More and more, the islands are made to look like furniture pieces with legs, baseboards and other elements added to resemble a heavy piece of furniture. Islands help the transition from cooking space to living space.

"People want something that says, 'we're not only here to cook; we're here to look good,'" Starr says.

The complete remodel of a kitchen includes new cabinets, countertops, lighting and appliances. While builders are reporting more requests for complete remodels, increased sales in related businesses indicate that some homeowners are

opting for partial remodels.

If a complete remodel is not an option, experts agree the best way to update your kitchen to a more modern look is to get new cabinets and countertops.

Casual is the look of today. Simple, sleek flat-panel cabinets are now favored over imported and heavily embellished products.

"We carry imported cabinets, and that used to be a big deal," says Janet Jacks, owner and interior designer at Corbella Kitchen & Bath. "Now, people don't really care. They just want decent cabinets that don't have particle board in them."

Solid-surface countertops are the most popular choice, but not just granite anymore. Stone and quartz countertops have become popular new products for homeowners.

In cabinetry, white is a top seller, as is white against dark. Today's dark is a medium brown such as walnut or espresso, and not the cherry or mahogany of yesterday, which is seen as too formal.

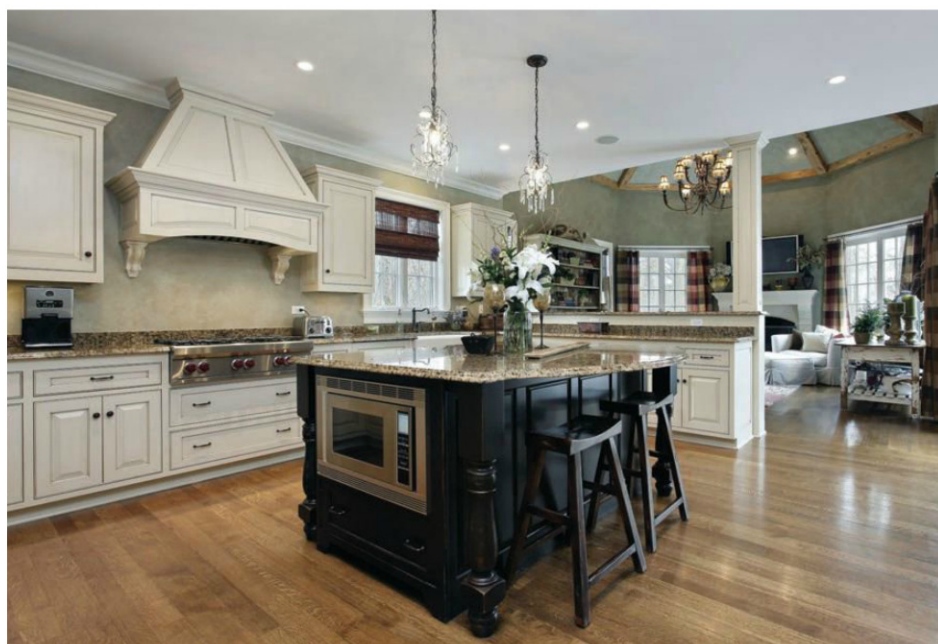
In Mandarin, where buyers tend

to be more traditional, Jacks has noticed an increase in homeowners refinishing their cabinets as opposed to replacing them. "It's interesting. During the recession it was 1/3 new, 1/3 re-facing and 1/3 refinishing," she says. "Now, refinishing is our No. 1 product."

As for appliances, stainless steel is still the leader of the pack, and induction cooking has become a hot trend in stoves. One-bowl sinks are now preferable to the two-bowl application since dishwashers have become more effective and efficient in the last ten to fifteen years.

Though green products are not as popular on the East Coast as they are in the West, sensor faucets are gaining in popularity among homeowners in Jacksonville, perhaps as much for their functionality as for their ability to save water.

"If you have flour or grease on your hands, you can just swipe your hand in front of the faucet and it turns on and off," says Heidi Campbell, showroom manager at Ferguson Bath, Kitchen and Lighting Gallery.





Homeowners are not requesting an increased number of bathrooms, but they do want to increase the size as much as space allows.

"The trend of creating a master bath as a small retreat atmosphere continues," Starr says. "People want a bathroom that's comfortable and serene."

Bathroom design is trending toward sleek, clean, modern and peaceful. Campbell has noticed an increased demand for wall-hung

toilets, sinks and cabinetry. A style that has been popular in Europe for many years, wall-hung fixtures help achieve a modern look. As an added bonus, they save space and are easy to clean around.

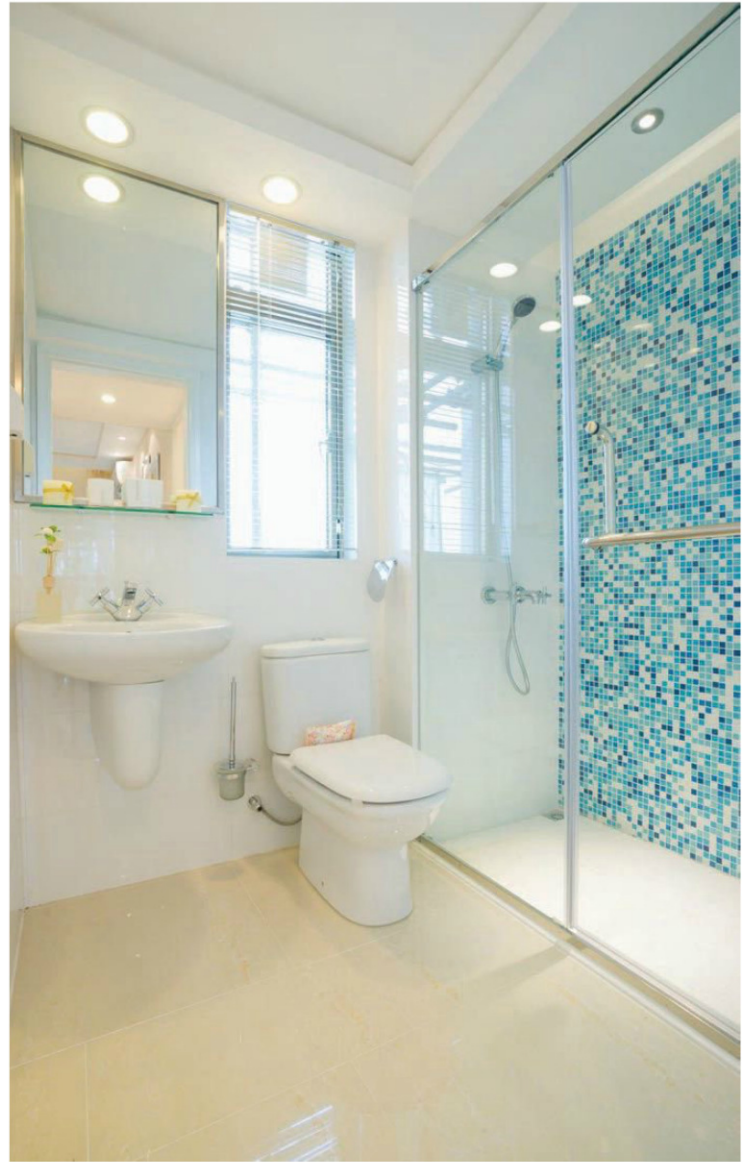
"When a toilet is hung in the wall, it saves about a foot of space in the bathroom because the tank is built into a carrier in the wall," says Campbell.

Some are going all out when it comes to design. "We've done a few

fireplaces in bathrooms, coffee pots, TVs... you name it," says Steve Johnson, of Steve Johnson Builders. "Some people are even requesting his-and-hers commodes and high-end elaborate medicine cabinets that can cost upwards of \$500."

The most common remodel for a bathroom, however, is replacing outdated materials for a cleaner, sleeker look. For less than \$500, a homeowner can replace mirrors, fixtures, lights and a toilet.

BATHS



WHY KITCHENS & BATHS?

Though about 60 percent of homeowners are updating for their own use, 40 percent are remodeling in order to sell. Realtor Krista Fracke says there is good reason for that. "Kitchens and baths are huge to buyers."

While banks are making it easier to get a loan now than in recent

years, they require more money down. With buyers needing more cash up front, funds to repair, replace and remodel after the sale are limited.

"There are more people out there looking for updated features than there are people who are willing to do the updating."

Fracke recently worked with a client who spent \$13,000 to completely remodel their kitchen and baths. Without the remodel, the house would have listed at \$330,000. Post-remodel, it sold for \$392,000. That's a nice return on investment.

"It is completely worth it," says Fracke. ✨