



Design By the Numbers

Designers discuss the correlation between age and design preferences, looking at how design priorities shift based on clients' life stages.

BY KIM BERNDTSON

Just by walking into someone's home, you can usually learn a lot about their personality and design style. In some cases, the design elements, materials and products they select can also reveal some insights into someone's age.

This month, *KBDN* asked designers to share projects that reflect the needs of different generations, as well as their thoughts about how age influences design...and what surprises them when trying to correlate design trends to age.

THE 30s

While it may seem that people in their 30s are just starting out, Tatiana Machado-Rosas indicates that many of her young clients come to her with definitive ideas about how they want to live in their homes.

"They do a lot of research online, especially about style and technology," says the senior interior designer and department head, CKBD, Allied ASID, CAPS, CGP at Jackson Design & Remodeling, in San Diego, CA. "They are very educated, so when they come to a designer, they have a pretty good vision for their space."

This age group's style preferences are often trendy and casual/comfortable with a focus on high design, she notes, adding that they are heavily influenced by what they see on Houzz and Pinterest. They are equally impacted by their surroundings and they want to incorporate things that remind them of spaces where they feel good, such as a local restaurant, coffee shop or even showroom. Another big influence is San Diego's architecture.

◀ ▶ Tatiana Machado-Rosas' younger clients aren't afraid to go bold with their product and material selections. In this renovation, the designers at Jackson Design & Remodeling used teal-colored tile contrasted with white tile as a backsplash in the kitchen and vibrant tile in several of the bathrooms.

▼ Creating a unique personal space is an overriding consideration for many of Machado-Rosas' young clients. In this bath renovated by Jackson Design & Remodeling, the homeowners chose black hexagon mosaic tile accented with white tile for the floor, combined with glossy black subway tile and wallpaper featuring a turquoise base with colorful butterflies for the walls.



Photos: Jackson Design & Remodeling

“We have a lot of historical homes, in all different design styles,” she says. “Younger clients are sensitive to the architecture and they like to tie it in with the interior design.”

They also like to include “wow” elements that impress family and friends, such as high-end, industrial-style appliances. And they aren't afraid to use color, as shown in a recent remodel where designers at JDR used teal-colored tile in multiple hues contrasted with white tile as the counter-to-ceiling backsplash in the kitchen. In the bathrooms, colorful and graphic tile sheathes the walls and floors in dramatic fashion.

Even historic homes get vibrant updates, as illustrated in a bathroom remodel where the young homeowners chose black hexagon mosaic tile accented with white tile for the floor,

combined with glossy black subway tile and wallpaper featuring a turquoise base with colorful butterflies for the walls.

Entertaining is important as well, and given the Southern California climate, young homeowners often extend the indoor living space to the outdoors.

Clients in this age group are also all about technology, and they want to find ways to incorporate it into their homes. “If they can control something from their phones, that's ideal,” she says, noting that they want to manage everything from audio and visual to security and lighting to HVAC and appliances.

While 30-somethings are just beginning their life journey, Machado-Rosas indicates they do surprise her with their long-term awareness.



When Kitchen & Bath Cottage took on the design and construction of two custom homes for a 40-something client and her 60-something parents, built simultaneously in collaboration with Ben Patterson (architect) and Terry M. Elston (builder), the daughter's kitchen incorporated a few surprise elements, like the oval mullions included on the ends of one of the islands and in the mirrored refrigerator panels. Inspiration for the oval motifs came from some antique doors the client wanted to use as the entry to her walk-in pantry. Designer Katie Stanfield also included more contemporary material choices, such as geometric backsplash tile with gold metal inlay in the butler's pantry.



"These clients are in a stage of their lives where they're buying their first or second home," she says. "They are planning for their kids and maybe a home office. But they are also looking at adding a guest room or ADU (accessory dwelling unit) that can accommodate aging parents who may need assistance or that can provide additional income as a rental."

THE 40s

Like 30-somethings, people in their 40s tend to be influenced by TV, social media and design sites such as Houzz, notes Katie Stanfield, designer, Kitchen & Bath Cottage, in Shreveport, LA.

"They are driven by trends and what look is current," she says. These days, that means a lot of transitional design, often showcasing white, Shaker-style cabinetry. However, Stanfield indicates that clients in this age group can also surprise her when they decide to branch out from what is deemed "normal" by these influences. "That's always refreshing and exciting," she says.

Such was the case with a recent new-construction home that combines traditional design with hints of modern touches. "She didn't want a completely traditional home, so she incorporated some sleek elements and décor to create a balance," she notes, adding that, overall, it proved to be an interesting project because the client's parents, who are in their 60s,

simultaneously built a new home next door that ultimately illustrated differences – and similarities – between generations.

In the kitchen, the 40-something client and her design team at Kitchen & Bath Cottage grounded the space with relatively traditional white cabinetry that she accented with an on-trend charcoal gray island. A few surprises are sprinkled throughout, such as oval mullions that are used on the ends of the outer island cabinetry and on the refrigerator panels, the latter of which are accented with a mirrored background.

The inspiration for the oval motifs came from some antique doors the client wanted to use as entry to her walk-in pantry, the designer notes. "Our client provided several sets of antique doors that she wanted to use throughout her home," she says, adding that antique doors are also used as entry to her master closet, accessed from her bathroom. "She stepped out of the box a bit when her interior designer [Kori Shurley of KS Design] came up with the concept to mimic the oval motif on the island and refrigerator. It's refreshing."

Stanfield also indicates that clients in their 40s can be a bit more adventurous compared to more mature clients because they aren't necessarily thinking as long term, and their current projects likely aren't their last. "They are less afraid to go bold with a backsplash tile or colored cabinetry...something that will make a statement," she states.

Photo: Sarah Baker

Photo: Eric Elbersson



☑ ☒ ☒ Many of Natalie Venalainen's 50-something clients have waited for a time in their lives when they have the opportunity to focus on themselves, such as these homeowners who renovated their kitchen as well as multiple bathrooms. Investing in quality items, such as high-end appliances and natural stone, often takes precedence. Although not necessarily trendy, this demographic does like to be current, with design elements such as the brass fixtures seen here.

For instance, Kitchen & Bath Cottage designers are currently working on a project slated for an upcoming Parade of Homes event, where a client's prep kitchen will feature dark green cabinetry. "She has a lot of great ideas...and she wants to incorporate them all," notes Stanfield. "She wants something unique and cutting edge."

THE 50s

By the time people are in their 50s, many may have waited for a time in their lives when they have the opportunity to focus on themselves, indicates Natalie Venalainen, designer, Men At Work Design Build, in Toronto, Canada.

"I recently worked on two renovations where the couples were at a point in their lives where their kids were grown," she says. "Portions of their homes had been overlooked because they had different priorities. But now they are ready for the next stages of their lives. Retirement is on the horizon and they want their homes to be places where they will live for the foreseeable future."

As they consider design elements, materials and products, they give precedence to quality. "They aren't necessarily looking for the cheapest options," she says. "They want quality and they are willing to pay for it. This is their gift to themselves."

In the kitchen, appliances are an indulgence. "Half the time they're spending the same on appliances as they are on cabinetry...or more," she states, noting a penchant for high-end, built-in models.

Countertop preferences fall about equally into two camps, she says. While some clients don't want the maintenance associated with natural materials, others will splurge for unique stone. "They appreciate its natural beauty and they are willing to accept periodic maintenance for that beauty," she explains, adding that selecting the perfect slab is often a highlight of a renovation.

If the opportunity presents itself, clients in this demographic often opt for barrier-free showers in the bathroom to assist as they age in place. Benches, either built-in or free-standing, are also popular, as are saunas. "They aren't always huge, but as clients think about health and wellness, they appreciate the benefits of a sauna," she notes.



Photos: Valerie Wilcox



When Kitchen & Bath Cottage became involved in the design of two neighboring custom homes for a 40-something client and her 60-something parents, built simultaneously in collaboration with Ben Patterson (architect) and Terry M. Elston (builder), the parents' home was designed with somewhat more traditional sensibilities. This couple's master bathroom also illustrates a common sentiment for many people in their 60s, who generally have a good sense of what works for them and the way they live, according to designer Barbara Mitchell. In this case, the mother loved the master bathroom from her previous home, so she essentially replicated it in her new home.

Her 50-something clients may not be super trendy, but they do want to be current, says Venalainen. "They aren't stuck in the past. They are knowledgeable about trends and they embrace trends, but I wouldn't say they make selections that date a design. They do tend toward timeless elements.

"For example, matte black, which they love, and brass, which isn't your grandmother's tarnished metal, have been huge...and they still carry on," she continues. "Both have been sprinkled everywhere throughout home renovations for people in this demographic."

THE 60s

Clients in their 60s are often shaped by their life events and encounters, says Barbara Mitchell, ASID, NCIDQ, LEED, Kitchen & Bath Cottage, in Shreveport, LA. "They are typically empty nesters who have grandchildren," she notes. "They also travel quite a bit and are influenced by those world experiences, and by their friends. Frequently they tell me they saw something at a hotel, or at a friend's house in, say, Colorado."

Projects that these clients take on may be their last renovation or new home, she adds. "They're looking for products and materials that will last a long time because they probably won't be renovating again," she explains. "For instance, depending on their economic situation, older clients will go for more expensive brands of appliances because they don't want to replace them."

By the time people are in their 60s, they also have a good sense of what works for them and the way they live. "Younger clients will be doing a kitchen or bathroom again, so they are more willing to try different things," Mitchell believes. "But by the time people are in their 60s, they have done this and tried that. They have learned over time, and from experiences, what works for them...and they know what they love."

This scenario played out with a recent client who replicated her previous master bathroom in her new home. "She knew



Photos: Eric Elbersson



Part way through the design of this kitchen, Nancy Knickerbocker's client had knee surgery that left her with some mobility issues. To ensure maneuverability and promote safety for this 70-something client, the designer made sure there was plenty of space between the island and perimeter cabinets. Knickerbocker also added a microwave drawer beneath the wall oven, which she says is safer than the more traditional location above a range. Pullouts and drawers also provide easy access to cabinet contents.



Photos: Reico Kitchen & Bath / Felicia Evans Photography

exactly what she wanted...and it was her old bathroom," she says. "She loved it so much that she replicated it. Through a lifetime of experiences, she knew what she wanted."

While there may be some predictability, Mitchell indicates that clients in this age group still take her by surprise. "We have a widowed client who is building a new home that's going to be an all-girls' house," she says. "She picked the frilliest backsplash she could possibly find. And if it's hot pink, she's including it. She's doing what she has always wanted to do and she's having a lot of fun."

"It's hard to pigeon-hole any age group," Mitchell continues. "There are people who are retired and in their 60s and almost 70s who love super clean, super contemporary design, which might not be your first thought. Maybe they've always had a traditional home and made due with it, but when they have a chance to do their dream kitchen, they're going full-bore with contemporary."

THE 70s-PLUS

Safety in the home is a major influence for mature clients, says Nancy Knickerbocker, CAPS, who has recently finished several kitchen and bath projects for older clients, including those in their 70s, and even 80s.

"People want to feel secure in their homes," states the kitchen/bath designer at Reico Kitchen & Bath, with locations in Virginia, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Delaware and Maryland. "I am also finding that they want to stay in their homes longer. Even if they are downsizing, they want to live in a single-family home...and they are willing to invest to accomplish that."

Design and product selections that promote safety, as well as maneuverability, were brought to the forefront in one recent kitchen where the homeowner had knee surgery part way through the renovation. "She ended up with mobility issues, so we had to change a few things from the original plan to accommodate her," she notes.

For one, they had to ensure she could freely move through the space. "If someone is in a wheelchair or needs a walker, we need to make sure they have enough room to maneuver," she explains. "Clearances in thoroughfares, such as between cabinets and islands and between cabinets and walls, should be at least 42"."

The designer also added a microwave drawer beneath her wall oven. "More often, we are moving the microwave from above a range," she says, noting a preference for drawers. "It's dangerous, for anyone, to be pulling down hot food in

hot plates or bowls over a potentially hot surface below. Every chance I get, I move the microwave to somewhere below the countertop.”

Comfort for arthritic joints can also be a consideration when selecting flooring materials, she adds. “Sometimes [ceramic or porcelain] tile can be hard and uncomfortable for older clients to stand on,” says the designer. “Wood can be softer, but it can require more maintenance...and it doesn’t agree with water, so in a bathroom I recently designed for a couple in their 70s, I used vinyl tile that looks like wood. It’s a beautiful option that helps solve several concerns.”



Photos: Reico Kitchen & Bath / BTW Images LLC

↑ Comfort for arthritic joints can be a consideration when selecting flooring materials for older clients, so for these 70-something clients, Nancy Knickerbocker chose vinyl flooring that looks like wood. She also included grab bars in the tub and shower. Placement can also go a long way toward minimizing the institutional look, she says, adding that she often locates them on a shower’s half wall so they can be somewhat hidden yet accessible.

GENERATIONAL SIMILARITIES

While there are certainly identifying characteristics associated with each age demographic, there are similarities as well, designers agree.

“The last couple of bathrooms I have designed have been for clients in their 70s and 80s,” Knickerbocker notes. “But in many regards, they aren’t a lot different from bathrooms I have designed for clients in their 30s, 40s and 50s.”

That is, in part, due to the concept of Universal Design, Knickerbocker continues. “There are certain selections and design features that apply to all age groups,” she says. “As we address concerns for older clients, much of what we include also makes sense for everyone as universal, smart design.”

Of note are materials that offer non-slip properties, such as floor tile, as well as grab bars that are increasingly standard in many older clients’ bathrooms yet make sense for clients of any age. “There are several on the market that don’t look institutional and are offered in suites that blend with faucets and towel bars,” she says.

Designers also draw attention to other similarities that cross age groups. Many of Machado-Rosas’ clients, regardless of age, are placing a greater emphasis on their pets. “We are creating spaces – such as cubbies within an island, or even entire rooms for eating, sleeping and bathing – to accommodate our clients’ pets,” she says.

Creating a unique personal space is an overriding consideration as well. “Clients aren’t necessarily going for neutral, in-case-I-want-to-sell-my-home colors,” she points out. “They’re more interested in making their homes their own so they can feel proud of them.”

Part of that pride also comes from keeping their homes clutter-free via a focus on storage. “People want a place for everything,” she says. “Clutter is a definite no-no.”

Venalainen agrees: “Unless it’s a powder room, storage in a bathroom is a consideration for everyone. Whether it’s a medicine cabinet, closed storage beneath a vanity or a separate tower, everyone needs a place to hide their day-to-day items.”

That importance extends to the kitchen as well, although how that happens does tend to be a bit more age-specific. “Clients in an older demographic are more minimal about open shelves and glass cupboards,” she states. “They want storage to be more functional rather than having to worry about styling stored items.”

“People don’t like clutter,” adds Mitchell. “Homeowners generally want to maximize their kitchen counter space. For example, they will store appliances in a garage or under a counter on roll-out shelves. They want their spaces to be tidy, with items easily accessible.”

Stanfield adds, “My goal is that when a client moves into their new space, they know exactly where everything is supposed to go because we have designed it with storage in mind. Everything is intentional and there is no wasted space.”

Proper lighting is another design element that clients of all ages appreciate.

“Lighting makes it so much easier to maneuver within a space,” Stanfield notes. “And it goes beyond just undercounter lighting in the kitchen. I have one client who has specified lights in every single drawer and every single cabinet in her kitchen.”

“There is no reason to have any dead corners, where someone needs a flashlight to find that Christmas cookie jar way in the back of the cupboard,” adds Mitchell.

Motion-activated lights in a bathroom are also valued by clients of all ages. “The older we get, the more we appreciate something like toe-kick lighting that automatically comes on when we enter the room,” Mitchell continues. “However, this feature is great for anyone who doesn’t want to fumble around trying to find the sink.” ■