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Elevating Design

Renovating kitchens in multi-story residences requires a unique approach to creating dream spaces.

BY KIM BERNDTSON

Regardless of whether it is located in a multi-story residence or a single-family structure, any renovation or new build project has its own individual challenges and solutions. However, when designing and working in buildings where multiple families live, there are often added constraints, such as, to name just a few, shared walls, elevators and building management.

Yet, these restrictions often inspire stronger, more intentional designs with maximized storage that uses every square inch of space, integrated kitchens that blend seamlessly into open-concept living areas, and balanced functionality and aesthetics.

This month, *Kitchen & Bath Design News* asked designers to share how they work through the special challenges associated with working in high-rise buildings to create beautiful and functional kitchens.

PART OF A BIGGER PICTURE

Working in a shared building with strict rules, limited access and fixed conditions are all challenges that Trevor Fulmer faces when working in condominiums and other high-rise residential structures. Additionally, plumbing locations are often locked in, venting is restricted and electrical capacity can be a factor.

"You also have to coordinate with building management, work within approved hours and plan around elevators, loading docks and neighboring units," says the principal/founder of Trevor Fulmer Design in Boston, MA. "Every decision needs to be thought through in advance because changes on site are harder to implement. That said, these constraints can lead to stronger design. You are forced to be precise, and every inch matters."



White oak and high-gloss cabinetry became the backdrop in this kitchen designed by Trevor Fulmer, onto which he added richer walnut tones as accents. White Vermont Danby marble tops the base cabinets, including the island where Fulmer positioned the sink so his clients can enjoy the view.



As well, kitchens are often visible from the living and dining areas, so Fulmer treats them as part of the larger living space rather than as an individual room.

“I often approach kitchens more like furniture compositions,” he relates. “Clean lines, strong silhouettes and materials need to relate to adjacent spaces, and cabinetry, appliances and lighting should feel integrated into the overall design of the home. When done right, the kitchen becomes part of the condo’s architecture.”

Such was the case with this condo, where he created a consistent palette for the kitchen, entry, and dining and living rooms. White oak and high-gloss cabinetry became the backdrop, onto which he added richer walnut tones as accents. White Vermont Danby marble tops the base cabinets, including the island where Fulmer positioned the sink so his clients could enjoy the view.

“The view is a major highlight of the condo,” he indicates. “In many single-family homes, the kitchen is positioned next to a window. But in condos, that isn’t always the case, including in this condo where the kitchen sits across the room from the windows, with the living and dining areas in between. By positioning the sink on the interior side of the island, our clients can look outward toward the windows and the city.”

As well, windows are a major component of the lighting strategy.

“Lighting will make or break an interior,” he remarks. “It determines how the space is experienced. In high rises, you are often working with incredible natural light, and artificial lighting needs to support it. In this condo, we reworked the lighting plan and introduced fixtures that bring more presence, such as the linear pendant light above the island. Its shape references the hull of a sailboat, which resonates with the client’s connection to Cape Cod.”

Condo living also requires efficiency, so Fulmer included a tall pantry cabinet that improves access to everyday items and keeps the kitchen organized. Additionally, his clients wanted wine storage and a bar.

“The kitchen was big, but not quite big enough to accommodate a bar, so we positioned it between the kitchen and living room,” he explains. “Because of its location, it needs to serve multiple roles. It functions as a working bar for cocktail making while also acting as a display area for the living room.”

BLENDING DIFFERENT STYLES EFFORTLESSLY

Elevators don’t typically come up in discussions related to single-family home renovations. However, they are uniquely top of mind when it comes to multi-family, high-rise buildings.

“Logistics, and production, can both be overlooked when considering high-rise renovations,” stresses Jacob Dixon, project designer at ReVision Design & Remodel in Charlotte, NC. “You have to be mindful of what actually fits in the elevator!”

“Beyond that, hidden costs can add up because trades often charge a premium for the extra time it takes to haul materials upstairs,” he continues. “You also have to plan for things as simple as where you’re going to cut tile. In a single-family home, you just set up in the garage or driveway. In a high-rise, you have to be much more calculated about your staging and workspace.”

One commonality between a high-rise and single-family residence is a consideration of the structure’s exterior.

“I always strive to make the interior and exterior work together,” he notes. “When you walk into a space, you want it to transport you, but it should also feel like the best version of the building it’s housed in. I like to take the vibe of the



Photos: Katy Perry

In this condo kitchen, Jacob Dixon leaned into a transitional aesthetic that blends modern and traditional design styles via a freestanding island with furniture-style legs and a quartz peninsula countertop that features a waterfall edge. He repeated the quartz in the hood alcove, which includes mitered niches and a slab-style backsplash.

architecture into account so the renovation feels like a natural extension of the building rather than something that totally clashes with the exterior.”

In the case of this condo, Dixon leaned into a transitional aesthetic that blends modern and traditional design styles effortlessly.

“Our client and I share a mutual love for Jean Stoffer’s aesthetic,” he says in reference to the renowned Michigan designer.

In that effort, he – along with the company’s carpenters and lead designer – paired a freestanding island with furniture-style legs and darker wood tones against cabinetry painted a neutral green. To bring in modern touches, the quartz peninsula countertop features a waterfall edge and

the ventilation hood alcove includes mitered quartz niches and a slab-style backsplash.

“The custom island and hood alcove make the design stand out,” Dixon indicates. “While alcoves are a classic design element, the way we executed this one as a primary focal point really elevates the room. And the island is a completely custom piece that bridges the gap between a workspace and a fine furniture element.”

The team was also tasked with creating a more functional, more spacious kitchen with better flow and movement. They accomplished that goal by removing a dividing wall to bridge the kitchen with the open floor plan.

“The original kitchen’s pain point was scale,” he relates. “It

Barbara Schwenk opened up this kitchen by removing a wall and replacing it with a long island with plenty of seating and storage. It is ‘capped’ on one end by a pipe chase that couldn’t be relocated, so she clad it with white oak to match the cabinetry. On the living room side of it, she mounted a black iron wine rack and partnered it with a pair of black floating shelves on the kitchen side.



Photo: Amber Fredericksen Photography



To maximize space in this condominium, Amy Guess reconfigured the kitchen island by downsizing and streamlining its original t-shape to a more suitably sized rectangle. She also maintained seating with a space-saving overhang. Adding new cabinetry hardware, plumbing fixtures, island pendants and marble countertops further enhanced the aesthetic.

was a one-person space that felt incredibly cramped. By taking down the wall, we reclaimed square footage to create a much larger, more functional layout that now includes comfortable seating. By expanding the footprint, we were also able to add a significant amount of cabinetry, which features specialized storage like an appliance garage, spice drawers, rollouts and some glass-front cabinets for display.”

APPRECIATING THE RESTRICTIONS

Barbara Schwenk appreciates the challenges associated with designing within the four relatively strict walls – six if you count floors and ceilings – of condominiums.

“Sometimes, when the world is your oyster and you have every option available to you, you can get inundated with too many ideas,” offers the interior designer for Jinx McDonald Interior Designs in Naples, FL. “In a condo, compared to a single-family home, you have more parameters you have to stay within. There are more restrictions for moving light and plumbing fixtures, and you can’t cut into floors or ceilings because there are tension wires and other hazards.

“Also, you don’t have crawl spaces, and there are usually fewer closets, so storage is always a concern,” she continues. “Utilizing every square inch and every cabinet becomes more important. But I find that it’s fun to be challenged and reimagine a space that I know is a bit restricted.”

Challenges associated with this condo centered around the compartmentalization of its galley-style kitchen and the inability to relocate a pipe chase embedded into the interior wall.

“The kitchen was closed off completely by a wall and two doors,” she relates. “It felt like a long, narrow tunnel. The client enjoys having her grown kids visit, but they couldn’t easily enjoy each other’s company in the closed-off original layout.”

To open it up to the adjacent living room, Schwenk removed

the wall, replacing it with a 12’-long island with plenty of seating and storage. It is ‘capped’ on one end by the pipe chase, which she cleverly clad with white oak to match the cabinetry. On the living room side, she mounted a black iron wine rack where her clients can display some of their favorite vintages. She partnered it with a pair of black floating shelves on the kitchen side for storing wine glasses and related bar accessories.

“We turned it into a beautiful feature for the room, rather than just having an awkward column at the end of the island,” Schwenk notes.

To promote consistency, she repeated black accents throughout the kitchen, including additional floating shelves for plates and dishes her clients use every day. Black hardware adorns the cabinetry and black quartzite serves as the perimeter countertop, which contrasts the lighter quartzite island top.

Black and glass pendants hover above the island and join recessed can lights, decorative and task lighting and natural light to illuminate the condo.

“We stayed pretty simple and clean with lighting,” Schwenk explains. “We updated the cans to LEDs, but we were careful to make sure it didn’t feel like a runway, which can be a problem in condos where we don’t have the ability to play much with ceilings.”

RETHINKING THE SPACE

Maximizing space is an important design consideration for any residence, so when Amy Guess’ clients approached her about renovating their condominium, removing a spiral staircase and reconfiguring the t-shaped kitchen island became top of mind.

“Renovating any space is often about rethinking that space,” says the principal designer/Allied ASID of BGI Design in Carrollton, TX. “Don’t take it for what it necessarily is at the time. And, you may need to change directions to figure out