



The Trend Is Transitional

Top designers define and share tips for the most popular style in kitchens today

BY ASA CHRISTIANA

If you watch home-design shows on TV, or read shelter magazines, or use Pinterest or Instagram, you've seen transitional-style kitchens. Think neutral colors, clean lines, and modern appliances, warmed up with a few traditional details and natural materials, and possibly embellished with a funky touch or two. The popularity of transitional kitchens is a shift away from the more ostentatious kitchens of a decade ago. "When the economy tanked, homeowners

had to reevaluate every purchase," says Portland, Ore., designer Amy Troute. "Budgets were smaller and needed to be used smarter. The move to stylish simplicity—the transitional style—was born from that need."

Transitional is something of a catch-all term that refers to a mix of contemporary and traditional elements. The style is versatile and adapts well to different regions, as well as to both old and new houses. According to polls by the National Kitchen and Bath Associa-

tion, transitional has been the most popular style in kitchen design for a few years. Every kitchen designer I spoke to across the country said the same. They love it, and their clients do, too.

A few designers echoed the experience of Chicago designer Chad Esslinger: "My own style is eclectic—combining aesthetics—it's not quite modern, not quite traditional, so it pleases everyone when couples are trying to put their styles together in one room."

RUSTIC MEETS MODERN



For Crown Point Cabinetry, the transitional style means reassembling historic details in a new and creative way. The contrasting lower and upper cabinets in this kitchen are clean and modern while still evoking historical charm, and the gray subway-tile backsplash connects the colors with another fresh take on the traditional. Flat-panel doors and brushed-nickel hardware are characteristic of the transitional style. The strong use of wood—in the beams, trim, island, and floor—shows how transitional can be made rustic and inviting without losing its quiet, neutral appeal. Finally, a wash of natural light brightens this big open space.

DESIGNER Deb Foster, Crown Point Cabinetry

BUILDER Presby Construction

LOCATION Sugar Hill, N.H.

PHOTOS courtesy of Crown Point Cabinetry

While transitional can morph, it's not amorphous. At the center are clean lines and neutral colors, providing a sense of serenity and calm that has widespread appeal. Gone is the ornate showpiece kitchen that draws attention to itself. "A transitional kitchen is a backdrop to life, art, and food—it doesn't compete with it," says Nicole Starnes Taylor, who runs Seattle's Make Design Studio.

One of the main goals of transitional is to avoid an identifiable style, one that will

seem dated in a few years. That sits well with homeowners, who are both value oriented and more design savvy than ever, thanks to TV and the internet.

"People can spend up to \$60,000 on a new kitchen, and they don't want to have to do it again," Esslinger says. "With a transitional kitchen, they can change out a few elements in 10 years—such as the backsplash or the lights—but the bones of the kitchen remain the same."

This quality is popular in markets where resale is top of mind. "We are tasked with creating a space that isn't too specific to the client's style—one that will be timeless instead of trendy, while still addressing their desires for style, color, and function," Troute says. "A transitional kitchen should be a gift to whoever owns it in 15 years."

The clean lines and smooth surfaces combine well with today's larger, high-tech appliances, creating a generally contemporary



1920s STYLE FOR TODAY'S LIFESTYLE



The dining room in this 1922 home has original wainscoting, oak floors, and box-beam ceilings, and the transitional style let the designer carry all of those elements into the new kitchen. The Shaker-style cabinets, open shelves, and traditional hardware recall the simplicity of the era. The veined marble countertops add a natural, classic touch that works well with a white palette. The exterior doors and windows are painted black for contrast and to focus attention outside. The island is a focal point, with a pop of green to match the plants outside and to complement vintage pendant lights above.

DESIGNER Nicole Starnes Taylor, Make Design Studio

BUILDER Nicole Dumas, Dumas Build

CABINETMAKER Scott Freeman, Major Minor Built

LOCATION Seattle

PHOTOS Aaron Leitz



Quick guide to lasting style

Today's kitchen is the center of the home, and the transitional style provides a clean, bright backdrop for all of the activities that happen there. It pairs well with today's stainless-steel appliances but includes natural materials and classic references that "pay homage to a simpler time," says Seattle designer Nicole Starnes Taylor. For today's budget- and resale-conscious homeowners, the goal is lasting style. While some of the latest flourishes—sliding barn doors, for example—may prove to be trends, the fundamental formula is designed to be durable. Conversations with nearly a dozen designers and architects yielded a few clear principles.

NEUTRAL COLORS AND CLEAN LINES White rules in many transitional kitchens, with grays and blacks providing neutral contrast. Lines and textures are neutral, too. This means that fancy traditional moldings and door designs are out, while square corners and flat door panels are in.

NATURAL MATERIALS The trick here is making the transitional kitchen warmer and more welcoming than a pure contemporary style without tying it to a traditional aesthetic. Wood floors are organic yet still neutral, and they connect the kitchen to adjacent spaces within an open floor plan. Popular countertop materials are classic white marble with subtle veining, and quartz, which is more durable and comes in a wider variety of shades.

CLASSIC REFERENCES Natural materials hark back to simpler times, and so do other traditional yet clean-looking touches. Subway tile and the white farm sink are perfect examples of classic elements that reference tradition without pegging the kitchen to an era. Chrome or brushed-nickel hardware also works well, and open shelving is reminiscent of the pantries of old—classic yet clean and functional.

UNIQUE FLOURISHES The neutral colors, clean lines, and natural materials form a calm backdrop for life and for a few well-chosen details. This is where the homeowners incorporate their own style and make a transitional kitchen personal. Anything from art to reclaimed furniture or an unusual light fixture can add zest to the room. A backsplash can be colorful or unique. Later, these attention-grabbing details might be changed out to give the kitchen new life, while the neutral flooring, cabinets, and countertops can be left in place.

look. But for many people, contemporary on its own feels cold and lifeless. "The kitchen is the heart of today's home—a gathering place—especially for a family," says Ana Rottkamp, designer and project manager at Knockout Renovations in New York City. "People want it to be warm and comfortable and inviting."

The real fun for designers and homeowners comes in selecting finishes that add warmth to a transitional design. This is where traditional references and organic materials come in. Natural elements such as quartz or marble countertops, wood floors, and glass backsplash tiles add natural texture and color without disturbing the tranquility.

Open shelving was also cited by many as a way to add texture and personality. "In contemporary kitchens, everything is closed and streamlined," Rottkamp says. "Open shelving isn't so closed and perfect. The dishes are there, plus wine and other organic elements."

Unique or personal touches can push the design further. Vintage, industrial, or playful hardware and lighting become focal points, as do reclaimed furniture and wood. "The challenge is to find what clients like or what they have and want to use—a chandelier or a cupboard—and make it work with the new design," Rottkamp says.

Taylor has incorporated keepsake art pieces into her kitchens, added a mural to a wall,

and used both blackboards and whiteboards to create room for personal messages and changing decorations.

While adding older elements can bring a transitional kitchen to life, transitional also means putting a contemporary twist on the traditional. For example, Jason Urrutia, who runs a renovation firm in San Francisco, points to frame-and-panel doors and marble countertops with square edges instead of the usual molded profiles. He offers this tip for backsplashes: "Subway tile is about as classic a kitchen design element as there is, especially when using a 3-in. by 6-in. tile in a running-bond pattern. By simply switching the tile size to 2 in. by 8 in., you've presented

CONTEMPORARY COTTAGE

This light-filled kitchen is the new heart of a 1940s house in a suburb of Minneapolis, with the island, table, and window seat providing plenty of space for kids and friends to hang out. The transitional style let the designers connect the kitchen to the rest of the home—with a white palette, brushed-nickel hardware, and V-groove details in the cabinets, walls, and ceiling that evoke the cottage style—while the pendant lights and brushed-metal finishes match the feel of the appliances and push the kitchen further toward modern than the other kitchens featured here. Characteristic of transitional style, the neutral background lets one beautiful detail—the gray mosaic-tile backsplash—take center stage. The stone material and geometric pattern are a marriage of classic and contemporary.

DESIGNERS Jean Rehkamp Larson, AIA, and Angela Taffe, Rehkamp Larson Architects

BUILDER Joel Johnson, JS Johnson & Associates

LOCATION St. Louis Park, Minn.

PHOTOS Andrea Rugg



the client with something classic and familiar yet a little bit more elongated to give you that hint of contemporary style.”

Ashley Steinkohl, chief designer at Knock-out Renovation, likes to use “modern materials in a traditional format,” such as a vintage Edison lamp in a chrome finish, or a brick-patterned backsplash done in stainless steel, making the metal at once old and new.

Another advantage to the transitional approach is that it works in new and older homes. “People are knocking down walls so the cook is no longer isolated in the kitchen,” Rottkamp says. “Therefore, the kitchen needs to fit with the other spaces in the home.”

The neutral background colors can be harmonized from room to room, hardwood floors can be continuous, and a distinctive

kitchen island can reflect the established style of the rest of the house.

“We often renovate older homes and carry the detail and trim into the kitchen,” says Thomas Ahmann, who runs a full-service architecture firm outside Washington, D.C. “People bought those old homes for the detail, and we don’t want to throw it away. I think of transitional as a contemporary feel but with an element of context.”

A transitional kitchen is a balancing act between classic and personal, modern and traditional—between living for now and planning for resale. The balance is different for every homeowner, but getting it right always takes thought. And you can be too risk averse. “Clients want to stay safe in the happy resale zone,” Steinkohl says. “We

want them to realize they won’t be as happy with a cookie-cutter kitchen as they will with something they love to walk into every day.”

Many designers mentioned lighting, hardware, backsplashes, and kitchen islands as safe places for adding style. “The island can be more unique because it isn’t so much real estate,” Esslinger says. “You can also get a really unique look based on the kind of pendant lights you choose.”

Esslinger continues: “White cabinets with subway-tile backsplashes and stainless-steel appliances is a very popular look. Instead of white subway tile, I do it in glass with color—maybe a blue or green—and use a different color for the island.”

On the other hand, more-permanent items such as cabinets, floors, and countertops need



to be well thought out. Esslinger likes to keep those items neutral but advises the use of contrast. “Try not to have a monotone feel, so the kitchen doesn’t become a big blob,” he suggests. “Contrast the areas that are near each other. If the floor is dark, I make the cabinets light and the countertops dark. With darker cabinets, I go with a lighter floor.”

On the flip side of safe and monotone is overly detailed and ornate. “What doesn’t work is cabinetry that has a lot of detail in the moldings, or raised-panel doors,” Rottkamp warns. “They begin to identify the space. Too consistently modern is a bad road, too. It makes the kitchen fully contemporary.” □

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