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Design time

The interior design business remains strong as consumers opt to renovate



Kitchens tend to be the first room clients renovate since they're used for entertaining. This Wisner Lake kitchen was designed by Biermann Design.

By Amanda Baltazar

There's a pendulum that often swings in business, which means that while one industry suffers, another does much better.

Given the dire straits that the real estate business has found itself in for the past year-plus, it's no surprise that the people who are doing better are those in the interior design business, as consumers opt to upgrade what they already have instead of picking up and moving.

And when homeowners chose improvements, it's usually the bathroom and kitchen that are updated, according to interior designers in Skagit and Whatcom counties.

Kitchen, bath and value

The kitchen tends to come first, said Jacqueline Scott, owner of Legacy Kitchen & Bath in Lynden. "It's the entertainment space and where people gather," she explained.

Baths come second, but also popular is a concept called "universal design," whereby people create a home that they can live in no matter what happens, be it simply getting older or becoming handicapped through a progressive disease.



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This is leading people to create areas in their kitchens where they can chop vegetables sitting down, for example, or to put microwaves in drawers where they can be easily reached.

It can also mean relocating a master bedroom to the main floor of a house (which can be used in the interim as a guest bedroom or an office), wider hallways and doorways to accommodate wheelchairs, or installing elevators. In fact, said Scott, if two identical homes were put up for sale and one had an elevator, it would sell first.

"It's thinking beyond today and how we live right now," she explained. "Our homes are our biggest investment and we want to use them long term, so that if we have a change in life, we don't have to move."

Scott works by appointment only and focuses on higher-end homes so finds herself covering a broad area from Lynden to Bellevue and Anacortes.

Despite working with people with the bigger homes, she said that due to the recession, people are spending less, opting for a GE refrigerator instead of a Sub-Zero, for example, or selecting alder instead of cherry wood. She works closely with her clients to help them trim costs without sacrificing any looks and ensuring they use quality materials.

Jody Biermann launched her company, Biermann Design, in 2001, and started to notice work drop off "pretty significantly" late last year. She stressed that she hasn't lost work, but has shifted it. "We're maintaining now," she explained, "but then we are coming off such a high from the previous years."

Much of her work before this year was for developers and investors such as Suncadia Resort in Cle Elum, but now she's doing more public work such as the East Whatcom Regional Recreational Center in Kendall, Whatcom Hospice House and two projects for Western Washington University. She's also working on renovations for three private residences – two master bathroom remodels and a bathroom and kitchen remodel.

She agreed with Scott that these two rooms tend to be residential customers' focus.

People are doing kitchens and bathrooms now because they're not going to be able to sell their homes or get the price they want [so they're staying there]; and secondly, they can get great bids on renovation work – get more for their money, she said. Contractors are also more readily available.

Now, Biermann deals with both commercial and residential projects with an emphasis on the former, and for both leans towards more contemporary designs. The big trend, she said, is focusing on a greater use of space, and making it more efficient, such as increasing the use of built-in storage and cabinetry and making use of areas under stairs, ends of halls and awkward spaces in rooms.

Ready to sell

Julie Connor began her career with homes around 10 years ago when she was flipping houses, but realized the huge potential in home staging so went back to school. She's now been in business for four years with her company, Mount Vernon-based Staged for Success.

Connor's work is mostly in residences and small businesses such as Alfy's Pizza in Bellingham and Computer Source in Burlington. She helps with everything from furniture to window treatments and color schemes – mostly with the whole house in mind but sometimes just certain rooms.

People primarily come to Staged for Success for help with interior design and with staging their homes to sell them. "Huge mistakes can be made," Connor pointed out, "and I help provide [customers] with peace of mind and confidence." These mistakes include having too much furniture, having furniture that doesn't mesh, or simple color clashes.

"Our eyes like cohesiveness," she said. "Without a good knowledge for design you can easily select just those items that are appealing to you but not realizing that once they are in the home they have nothing in common."

Mistakes like these can cost a home seller a sale or cause the potential buyer to



Interior designers are finding most home redesigns are for bathrooms and kitchens.

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reduce the asking price significantly, she pointed out.

Connor loves the one-on-one time with her clients. “During the process you get to know them really well and learn what their vision is. It excites me to help them develop what they want,” she said.

And while she’s taken a hit in her business in the past year or so, in the last three or four months, she’s seeing a renewed confidence among customers, and this is making her optimistic. “I don’t doubt that the housing industry will bounce back,” she said, “and I think we’re already starting to see a turnaround.”

Trend toward casual

Judy Kesselring has owned Kesselring Design & Interiors in Mount Vernon for 26 years, but knew when she was a little girl that she was interested in design since she sewed her own clothes and loved picking out fabrics and buttons.

Most of her clients are remodeling their home or business – often a second home – and they’re typically looking to make them more casual, she said.

Her clients range from middle aged to retirement aged, but there’s also a younger contingent that’s looking for interior design help with their home or their business. One example is a car dealership that wanted help with wall and floor coverings to make the business more welcoming.

During her years in business, Kesselring’s seen changes. Now, people are shopping ahead of time and buying more online, “which is unfortunate because I’m a touchy-feely person,” she said.

And she has noticed that younger people no longer buy for quality, but want furniture and furnishings they can switch out in five years or so. Young people also don’t want to take the time to shop, so do it on the Internet and then come to Kesselring for styling and color advice; older clients want buying help.

Field requires continuing education

All four of these women have been in either the design or real estate business for many years, and have seen many changes in that time.

Scott began her career in real estate and became a certified designer with the National Kitchen and Bath Association this past June. Eight years ago she set up her own company, Legacy Kitchen & Bath, and over those few years has seen a lot of change.

“I’ve seen what small things can make a big difference in daily life,” she pointed out. These small things can be as simple as someone not being able to fully open their refrigerator door because they didn’t allow enough space. “It doesn’t take a lot to fix these things,” she explained, “but it needs somebody with the training to look for it.”

Scott keeps on top of industry changes and improvements by doing ongoing coursework about every eight months, some put on by suppliers, others by the National Kitchen and Bath Association. These can range from afternoon courses to two-day affairs in Seattle and cover everything from universal design to green design.

Biermann majored in the interior design program at Western Washington University, graduating from this four-year course in 1988, after working for 16 years for Bellingham-based Stewart & King Architects. She is now working to get licensed, which, she said, “is a designation that allows customers to know there’s a level of training.”

Education for Connor took the form of a two-year online degree in interior design from the International Institute of Design and Technology. She continues to update her knowledge with continuing education credits about four times a year, just to keep updated with the industry, she said.

Kesselring was hooked when she took an architecture course in high school, which she followed up with a bachelor degree in interior design at Western Washington University, graduating in 1978. Between then and setting up her business in 1983 she gained a lot of experience with different areas of the field, from a floor-covering showroom to working for other interior designers.

She continues to update her skills and knowledge with courses and classes from suppliers, such as window covering companies, taking around four of these each year.

Focus on marketing

While none of these businesses has been as hard hit by the recession as those in the home-selling world, they have felt some effects and are starting to think more about marketing.

Scott's business remains strong, despite the challenging economic environment. "I feel that's a result of good customer service," she pointed out. "I work one-on-one with people who've made an appointment, which means they don't have to wait. I walk through the whole process with them and don't leave them to fend for themselves."

She spends a lot of time getting to know her customers, and said that's what she loves the most about her business – that, and helping people get what they want for their home.

Scott is lucky in that she does not have to market her company heavily; most work comes to her through word of mouth. She does do some magazine advertising, however, and supports the Building Industry Association of Whatcom County. Biermann admitted that she's not done a whole lot of marketing up until this point because her company's been too busy, so she let her Web site take care of it. However, now things have calmed down, she's redesigning her Web site to show the variety of work she undertakes.

To market her business, Connor does a lot of networking. She's a member of Mount Vernon chapter of Business Networking International, which meets weekly and serves as a great referral source; she also belongs to her town's chamber of commerce and the North Puget Sound Association of Realtors. About 50 percent of her business comes from networking and referrals from past clients, she said.

Another source of business is hosting and providing a lunch for new real estate agents at their training with the North Puget Sound Association of Realtors, she added. "So basically, I do next to no advertising, just getting to know people and networking."

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