Photo: Joshua Colt Fisher

Not-so-basic Backsplashes

Designers discuss how they balance 'statement making' backsplashes with countertops to create cohesive kitchens.

BY KIM BERNDTSON

Kitchen backsplashes can be a great place to make a statement or to express a client's personality. Given the range of available options – everything from single slabs of natural stone to handmade tile to reclaimed materials and glass – they can accomplish those goals while also being the star of the show.

This month, *Kitchen & Bath Design News* asked designers to share how they balanced focal-point backsplashes with other surface selections, such as countertops, to create cohesive spaces.

JOYCE OWENS, FAIA, RIBA

Architecture Joyce Owens, Fort Myers/Sanibel, FL

Joyce Owens' client had always wanted a bold kitchen, but she never had quite enough courage to pull the trigger...until now. To accommodate her client's additional request for something simple and minimal, the architect and her team suggested a space where bold is defined by a glass backsplash backpainted with Sherwin Williams' Obstinate Orange set against a clean foundation of white cabinets.

Photos: White Ox Creative

Micah Hill kept the quartz countertops quiet in this kitchen, choosing a marble-esque pattern for the island and plain white for the perimeter, so the backsplash could be the star. That star, encaustic cement tile, imparts a Western vibe in black and white to mirror the colors of the cabinetry.

A bold backpainted glass backsplash steals the show in this kitchen designed by Joyce Owens. Its orange hue adds a punch of color, while its glossy finish adds interest by reflecting the home's beach view. Quieter quartz countertops, which mimic the color of the sand outside, don't compete with the glass, allowing it to shine.

"A backsplash is a great place for clients to express themselves," says Owens, noting that it is also a relatively easy element to change if a client ever tires of too much expression, or decides to sell the house. "In this home, it's a wall of color in a powerful little kitchen packed with punch!"

The glass' glossy finish adds interest as well since it reflects a view of the beach visible through the windows in the adjacent dining room into which the kitchen opens.

"The orange adds amazing color, but the backsplash also becomes a piece of art that's always changing based on the reflection," she says.

Owens created an open pantry on the back side of the cooking wall. To provide additional glimpses to the outside, she designed the backsplash with a vertical opening that starts at the ceiling and stops shy of the countertop at a floating walnut shelf. She continued the walnut as a strip of wood that becomes part of the backsplash before extending onto the countertop (to serve as a cutting board) and cabinet faces.

"As an architect in Florida, I'm all about breezes and getting light through a home from the front to the back," she says.

To carry color throughout the kitchen, Owens repeated the bold backsplash in the nearby coffee station. The kitchen and dining room stools and chairs also add pops of color via their orange seats, selected by interior designer Constance Davidson with whom Owens collaborated for the new construction home.

Owens chose to complement the backsplash and cabinetry with Caesarstone's Fresh Concrete quartz for the countertops.

"They don't compete with the glass," she says, adding that building up the edge gives them 'heft' and gravitas. "And their color is the same as the sand on the beach."

MICAH HILL, FOUNDING MEMBER/PRINCIPAL

Compendium Group, Indianapolis, IN

As an urban builder who focuses on new construction and restorations, including historic homes in downtown Indianapolis that haven't been touched for years, Micah Hill doesn't build many spec homes, such as this one that was supposed to be part of a home show that ended up being canceled due to COVID-19.

"Designing without a client gave us a bit of liberty with materials, lighting, etc.," he says.

With a lot of projects, including this one, the design team generally starts by selecting flooring, which many times is wood that runs throughout the entire first level of a home.

Photos: David Patterson

Many of the homes Sarah Tiedeken O'Brien designs are open concept spaces where kitchens can float in the middle of rooms, without primary walls against which backsplashes can be showcased. In this kitchen, the focal-point anchor/cooking wall serves as a unique backsplash of sorts with its white subway-tiled half-wall, floating hood and shelves, and colorful cabinetry.

"It is such a big part of our homes' aesthetics that we find it important to start here; then we let the other materials respond to it," he says.

In the case of this home, that response equates to custom cabinetry in contrasting white and black tones, where base cabinets are topped with quartz selections from MSI. The island features a marble-esque pattern with a hint of veining and movement to add interest, while the perimeter is a clean, sleek, plain white.

"We minimized the countertops, especially the back one, so the backsplash could be the star," Hill indicates.

That star, New West encaustic cement tile from clé, imparts a Western vibe in colorways that mirror the cabinetry.

"We considered many different options, but we wanted something bold and interesting with a 'wow' factor that would appeal to a lot of people," he says. "The backsplash definitely makes the biggest statement in this kitchen."

SARAH TIEDEKEN O'BRIEN, ARCHITECT

Vertical Arts Architecture, Denver, CO

Many of the homes Sarah Tiedeken O'Brien designs are open concept spaces with lots of windows that provide expansive views to their mountain settings. As such, kitchens can float in the middle of rooms, without primary walls against which backsplashes can be showcased.

"Backsplashes can end up being a smaller element because of how we architecturally integrate the kitchen into the house," she says.

However, that doesn't mean they need to be uninteresting or uninspiring. Case in point is this kitchen, where the focal-point anchor/cooking wall serves as a unique backsplash of sorts. A white subway-tiled half-wall, floating hood and shelves and colorful cabinetry are all positioned in front of a stairwell that leads to the lower level. Beyond, windows on the exterior wall add to the "backsplash" effect and offer views to the outside.

"The statement in this kitchen is the perforated wall," she says, noting a collaboration with JSM Builders. "The busyness of its elements informed the backsplash, as well as the countertop. It's about balancing the entirety of the kitchen and understanding how all of the components play into the overall look."

That equates to relative simplicity in regard to backsplash and countertop selections, where the former is white subway tile and the latter is marble-look quartz combined with maple.

"There's a lot going on in this kitchen, so the white subway tile offers a clean aesthetic with subtle texture," says O'Brien, noting that she capped the half wall with Silestone's Calacatta Gold quartz from Cosentino for easy cleaning. "The subway tile also creates a casual vibe for the family of five."

The designer repeated the quartz for the kitchen's perimeter. Functionally, it offers durability while aesthetically it offers light veining against a white background. To add warmth, she incorporated a raised maple bar top, fabricated by Twenty1Five, on the island.

"The maple's creamy honey color is warm and bright," she says. "Additionally, having wood as the bar top creates a nice surface for eating."

WILLIAM SUK, AIA/PRINCIPAL

Suk Design Group, New York, NY

When selecting backsplash and countertop materials, William Suk often begins with countertops, followed by the backsplash. However, in the case of this kitchen, those finish selections came simultaneously to support a contemporary design style where the same material, Pietra Gray Brown marble, is used throughout the space.

Along the cooking wall, the designer set the natural stone between two paneled refrigerators and beneath a canopy of glass cabinets and slab-door cabinets (by Ernesto Meda and distributed by Mass Beverly), both in complementary colorways that go hand-in-hand with the color of the marble.

"We designed a very symmetrical cabinet arrangement that frames the backsplash beautifully," he says, noting a collaboration with his team, including Libby Wetzler and Rachel Empensando as well as interior designer Bryan Eure.

To maintain a sleek design style that showcases the single slab without visual interruption of a ventilation hood, Suk selected a telescoping model that fits neatly and discreetly underneath an upper cabinet. The hood removes any odors, steam and grease created when using the induction cooktop below, which is virtually indiscernible within the countertop.

Suk repeated the marble as the backsplash on the perimeter wall where, like on the cooking wall, its delicate white veins are showcased against the darker background.

"We worked closely with the fabricator to cut the slabs in a way that highlights the veins prominently in both backsplashes," he says.

William Suk chose to use Pietra Gray Brown marble as both the backsplash and countertop in this kitchen. Along the cooking wall, the natural stone is framed between two paneled refrigerators and beneath a canopy of glass cabinets and slab-door cabinets. Suk repeated the marble as the backsplash on the perimeter wall where its delicate white veins are showcased against the darker background.

Photos: Charles Matter, Rise Media

Photos: Dino Tonn Photography

Sarah Sanders' clients fell in love with the idea of using reclaimed brick veneer in their kitchen, so she not only utilized it as a traditional backsplash, but also continued the material as the wall covering for the entire space. The designer paired it with Taj Mahal quartzite countertops, which offer depth, movement and a neutral tone that works with a myriad of colors.

To complete the look, Suk topped the island with matching marble. All slabs feature a honed finish to reduce glare.

"I love honed finishes," he says. "Lights from above can reflect off of polished surfaces, which can be distracting. With a matte finish, there is less light reflection, yet it is clear enough to allow the beauty of the stone to shine through."

SARAH SANDERS, PRINCIPAL DESIGNER

Sanders Design Studio, Scottsdale, AZ

Early on in the design process of their new home, Sarah Sanders' clients knew they wanted to showcase reclaimed brick veneer in their kitchen. When they considered the room, its 12'-tall ceilings and exposed ventilation hood gave them the perfect canvas for not only utilizing the material as a traditional backsplash, but also continuing it as the wall covering for the entire space.

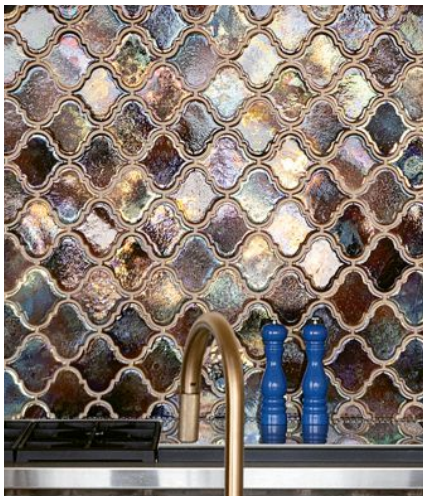
"They fell in love with the idea of having the brick line all the walls," says Sanders, who worked in collaboration with Matthew Thomas Architecture and True Custom Luxury Builder for the new construction home. "It makes such a huge impact in the room. It really is so much more than just a backsplash."

The brick's vibe also supports her clients' desire for a French Country design style, which is accented with tailored, Old World elements.

"The brick offers so much texture and beautiful warmth," she says. "And it feels like an original element you would find in an old home."

As the room's focal point, the reclaimed material from Telluride Stone Company also set the tone for additional

Photos: Spacecrafting



← ↓ The handmade tile backsplash is often one of the first things people notice in this kitchen designed by Suzanne Claiborne. The tile's deep coloration and highly-reflective finish make an impressive statement juxtaposed against a foundation of white cabinetry. However, the island's Blue River labradorite countertop offers an unexpected surprise as visitors draw near to it. Its color and pattern emulate the lake, which can be seen through the wall of windows on the back side of the house.

selections within the space, such as the polished Taj Mahal quartzite countertops, sourced from Arizona Tile.

"My clients wanted a natural stone, but something that was lower maintenance than marble," she says. "This quartzite is the perfect fit. It has a lot of depth and movement yet offers a neutral tone that works with a myriad of colors.

"The backsplash definitely steals the show and draws the eye into the kitchen," she continues. "Since I only like to let one element be 'the star' of the show, if there's a busy or detailed splash, then the countertops shouldn't compete with it; otherwise, the eye wouldn't know where to land. It's a balancing act between all aspects of the kitchen, so while the countertops are beautiful, they also complement all of the other selections."

SUZANNE CLAIBORNE, INTERIOR DESIGNER

Lecy Brothers Homes & Remodeling, Minnetonka, MN

The bold backsplash behind the range is often one of the first things people notice when they step into the kitchen in this home on the shores of Lake Minnetonka. Comprised of handmade, arabesque-shaped Spanish Eyes tile from Sonoma Tilemakers, the deep, rich coloration and highly reflective, metallic finish make an impressive statement juxtaposed against a foundation of clean, white cabinetry.

"The tile is colorful and shiny with an interesting shape," says Suzanne Claiborne, adding that she repeated the tile as the backsplash in the nearby bar area.

It also coordinates well with the bright pops of color, especially hues of orange and blue, that liven up the open-concept kitchen.

"The house is very colorful," she says. "Our clients are art collectors. The wife is from Columbia and they have a lot of artwork from South America."

The tile plays well with the island countertop as well. Fabricated from Blue River labradorite with a matte finish, it serves as an unexpected surprise as visitors draw near.

"From a distance, people don't always notice the countertop right away," she says. "But when they get close, they see its beauty. It looks like water and emulates the lake, which can be seen through the wall of windows on the back side of the house."

Claiborne likes to work with natural stones for countertop surfaces, in part because of their natural variations. Oftentimes, they even lead the finish selection process because of their inherent uniqueness.

"I consider them to be God's artwork," she says. "They can have a lot of color and pattern, so when we do projects that have a lot of color, such as this home, they can add so much interest."

To ensure focus in this kitchen is directed toward the island and backsplash, Claiborne used MSI's Q Quartz Blanca Statuarietto quartz as the perimeter countertop surface.

"I wanted something simple for the perimeter," she says. "This quartz looks like marble and has fine, light veining that serves as a blank backdrop." ■