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Making a Statement

Superficially, design focal points may be all about 'being seen.' However, digging deeper, they offer much more than just a pretty face.

BY KIM BERNDTSON

Designers typically agree that the foundation of any successful kitchen design focuses on function. Making sure the layout is efficient for food prep and cleanup, and ensuring there is enough space for appliances as well as utensils, dishes, pots and pans, dry goods, etc., is usually where the design process begins.

However, once functional needs are addressed, designers can shine the spotlight on aesthetics, and that usually starts with something dramatic or eye-catching to define the space.

"The most important thing is to make sure the space works, so it's definitely function first," says Jenn LaMariana, design director, Signature Interior Designs, in Brooklyn, NY. "But then we can build around it."

Rebecca Sutton, AKBD, Kitchen Design Concepts, in Dallas, TX, agrees. "Most of the time we're designing based on how a client will be using a space, making sure we have enough room for everything," she says. "Then aesthetics work in behind that to determine what materials and details we can add to create something special."

An indispensable component within the realm of aesthetics is the inclusion of focal points, those show-stopping elements that draw attention, turn heads and even generate conversation.

"They are the 'aha' moments," says Ronni Fryman, senior designer, Kitchen Places, in Ventura, CA.

Focal points can also be conversation starters, adds Sutton. "Usually they are what generate the most reactions from anyone who comes into the space," she explains, citing remarks guests often make, such as 'oh, that's beautiful,' or 'what is that material?'

However, a focal point is more than just a pretty face. It does, in fact, play an important role in a design.

"You always want something to bring the eye into the space, to tell it what to look at first," states Meredith Weiss, Merri Interiors, in Commack, NY.

Valerie Helgeson, Design Directions, in Oklahoma City, OK, agrees. "Focal points are important for anchoring a space," she says. "They can add interest, or even give a point of reference that might be the jumping off point for the rest of the design."

"A design needs something to speak the loudest, to shine above everything else," adds LaMariana. "Support pieces are important, too, for a balanced design. But you definitely need one thing to anchor the space and make it feel special."

Photos: Caleb Collins

Multiple focal point elements vie for attention in this kitchen designed by Valerie Helgeson, but the most prominent is the custom ventilation hood crafted from bookmatched and clear-coated walnut. She complemented it with additional walnut elements, including a custom hutch, a set of wall and base cabinets and floating shelves in the 'sports bar.'

The cooking niche – comprised of an architectural wood hood, limestone tile and cooktop – works with the adjacent window to create a stunning focal-point corner in this kitchen designed by Cheryl Daugvila. She also designed the island as a secondary focal point that shines when viewed from the family room.

Photos: Mike Kaskel

CLASSIC AND TRENDY

Designers indicate that virtually anything can be showcased as a focal point…"even a dramatic, well-lit piece of artwork," according to Helgeson.

"Or, cabinetry that offers a contrast of style or color [can work as a focal point]," adds Sutton.

However, oftentimes in a kitchen, statement pieces are found along a cooking wall. "Classics in this industry are the hood and cooking area," states Cheryl Daugvila, Cheryl D Kitchen Design, in La Grange, IL. "To me, it's related to the family room fireplace. It's the hearth feeling…that cozy warmth you feel when you think about food and fire."

As an example, Daugvila relates that a project slated for later this year will feature a cold rolled steel barrel hood. "It's incredible…very 'steam punk' with a deep gray, mottled coloration," she notes. "It's the dramatic element she was looking for."

However, Daugvila also finds that clients are leaning toward more minimalistic stainless hoods set against a beautiful backsplash. "Mantle hoods aren't dead," she stresses. "But I think people have seen them enough and they want something different."

"For a long time it was about the big wood hood…the shrine to the range," adds Fryman. "Now it seems to be more about tile, which often goes to the ceiling, as well as floating shelves."

Michelle Lecinski, project designer, Advance Design Studio, in Gilberts, IL, agrees. "Subway tile is still very hot, but the current trend is toward water jet mosaics with natural stone that is cut into unique shapes," she says, stressing the importance of beautiful backsplashes. "People are drawn to artistic materials, especially those that look old, aged and imperfect. They crave authenticity and character."

An accent behind a custom hood can also be a more cost-effective way to incorporate an expensive material into the design, adds LaMariana. "Because it's used in one specific place, such as the hood area, it's a great way to use something that can be a bit of a splurge."

Designers also find that sinks and islands make great focal-point statements. "Everyone seems to want an island," says Lecinski, who indicates that the inclusion of extensions, such as Pastore tables, is particularly popular right now. "They are becoming really unique and can be a great focal point."

Windows are another go-to element that can give designers the opportunity to showcase a beautiful view. "The increased popularity of an expanse of windows in today's kitchens makes the outdoors a popular focal point," notes Weiss.

Helgeson agrees, adding that focal points are, in the end, uniquely distinct. "A focal point is really dependent on each space," she maintains. "Often, it is a vent hood or piece of cabinetry, but there have been cases where I've made a statement window the focal point if the view beyond supports it. Ultimately, focal points are really very individual."

This month, *KBDN* asked these designers to share recent projects that highlight a variety of focal points.

Photos: Jenn LaMariana

Designers at Signature Interior Designs created this contemporary kitchen with interest from any viewing angle. The primary entrance is between the refrigerator and custom bar hutch, so the sink area becomes a focal point. It showcases a gorgeous view and includes dual sinks and sculpted Macassar ebony veneer base cabinet doors with a polished chrome surround.

The entire cooking wall becomes an attention grabber in this transitional kosher kitchen, where designers at Signature Interior Designs contrasted the non-directional stainless steel ventilation hood with mirrored backsplash tile. The hood's navy-colored surround matches the base cabinets, island, custom hutch and refrigerator panels, and is repeated in the interiors of the glass-front cabinets that frame the hood.

Photo: Joyd Jackson

'ART' MAKES THE KITCHEN

Multiple focal point elements vie for attention in this kitchen designed by Helgeson **(see photos, Pages 52-53)**, but the most prominent is the custom ventilation hood that stands front and center along the cooking wall. Its traditional shape is crafted from bookmatched and clear-coated walnut.

"I didn't want to do a full white kitchen, so being able to mix in that beautiful walnut was super exciting," she says. "The wood is art in itself! In part, it's what makes this kitchen."

Helgeson complemented the hood and cooking wall with secondary focal-point walnut elements, including a custom hutch that is balanced by a set of wall and base cabinets. She also carried the wood onto an adjacent wall, where she added floating shelves to the 'sports bar.'

Supporting elements within the space include brass hardware as well as plumbing and lighting fixtures, such as the dual chandeliers in the skylights. "I hand-painted the chandeliers to match the plumbing fixtures," she says, noting that the custom powder-coated stools also repeat the brass tones.

Namibia marble tops both islands as well as the perimeters. "It's a super standout material with its white undertones and creamy veins," the designer notes.

Dual islands achieve function and form, with the larger island serving as the workhorse area of the space by offering an abundance of storage as well serving as home to multiple appliances. The smaller island anchors the husband's sports bar.

REFLECTIVE FOCAL POINTS

The entire cooking wall solicits attention in this transitional kosher kitchen, where designer Minda Baez, v.p./design principal, Signature Interior Designs, juxtaposed the non-directional stainless steel Modern-Aire ventilation hood against mirrored backsplash tile **(see photos, above).**

Baez framed the hood with a navy-colored surround that matches the base cabinets, island, custom hutch and refrigerator panel, the latter of which is accented with antiqued mirrored glass inserts. She also repeated the dark hue in the

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Photos: Meredith Weiss

Meredith Weiss' client enjoys the hummingbirds that frequent the wooded area in her yard, so she complemented the windowed backsplash with a backless and frontless cabinet above the sink to provide nearly limitless visual access to the yard while creating shelves to display collectibles.

A secondary focal point features the range, which is in the direct line of vision from her client's dining room.

interiors of the taupe-colored, glass-front cabinets that frame the hood and help break up the expanse of doors.

Because the space is large and open, LaMariana notes that Baez wanted to ensure that it was balanced. "There is a lot going on in the hood area, which meant we could include interesting elements to the right and left, without competing with it," says LaMariana in reference to the furniture-style custom hutch and paneled refrigerators.

Designers at Signature Interior Designs also created a contemporary kitchen with interest from any viewing angle **(see photo, Page 54).** The primary entrance is between the refrigerator and custom bar hutch, so the sink area becomes a primary focal point. "Where you enter the space, you look out a window," says LaMariana. "It was important that you see something beautiful when you first walk into the kitchen."

As such, in addition to the gorgeous view, this area includes dual sinks and sculpted Macassar ebony veneer base cabinet doors with a polished chrome surround. "The kitchen was designed around the homeowner's need to have that veneer," she says, noting it was repeated on the paneled refrigerator.

A second focal point is the cooking wall, which is viewable when people enter from the dinette. Its metallic tile backsplash combines with chrome-plated pull-out cabinets and a custom chrome ventilation hood. "No matter where you stand, there is something special to anchor the eye," she says.

BEAUTY IN ANY DIRECTION

Daugvila also chose to include several focal points in a kitchen **(see photos, Page 53)** where the cooking niche – comprised of an architectural wood hood complemented with Daltile limestone tile and a Thermador cooktop – works with the adjacent oversized window that allows visual access to the homeowner's beautifully landscaped yard. A shelf above the window strengthens the entire corner's focal point status.

"We opened up the kitchen dramatically by removing a huge peninsula and tall breakfast bar with upper cabinets that

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served as a physical block," she says. "Now, as people come into the space, the whole impact of what they see draws them in. Any direction that someone comes into the room, they see the beautiful focal point in the corner."

The designer created a secondary focal point with the island. It features a contrasting dark hue, lit glass-front cabinet and Delicatus granite top, which is honed to bring out the sparkle of the mica chips.

"Focal points are typically taller and in your line of sight," she says. "But the family room is two steps down from the kitchen, which lowers that line of sight. When my clients sit on the couch, they can look over their shoulders and see the island, which is at eye level. The focal points in this kitchen shift depending on where my clients are, and what they are doing. "

LIMITLESS VISUAL ACCESS

Weiss' client enjoys the hummingbirds that frequent the wooded area in her yard, so it made perfect sense to create a focal point that draws attention to the view **(see photos, Page 56).**

As part of that goal, Weiss complemented the windowed backsplash with a backless and frontless cabinet above the sink to give her client nearly limitless visual access to her feathered friends while creating shelves to display collectibles. Painting the cabinet a green hue differentiates it from the creamy white cabinets.

Weiss further enhanced the focal point with a copper sink, set within a custom cabinet with details designed to draw attention.

The designer incorporated a secondary focal point with the Aga range, which is flanked by legs that match the sink base. "When she is in her dining room, her direct line of vision is the stove," she says, noting that the purposeful elimination of the appliance window minimizes distractions.

Even though the kitchen is relatively small, Weiss created a third focal point via a shelf above the refrigerator. "She has a lot of tchotchkes, so we needed another place for her to display them," she says. "This shelf serves that purpose but also draws the eye up, creating another focal point. No matter where she looks in her kitchen, there's something interesting to see."

Photos: Joe Nowak Photography

A confident and adventurous sense of color helped guide the selection of the bold, black enamel range and custom zinc and brass ventilation hood in this kitchen designed by Michelle Lecinski.

The coffee bar, a second focal point in the space, features reclaimed oak shelves that are distressed and stained to coordinate with the reclaimed wood countertop that is crafted from railcar flooring.

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Photos: Lance Selgo, Unique Exposure Photography

↑ Rebecca Sutton chose to go bold in this kitchen design, where red accents create high drama against a white backdrop.

← Rebecca Sutton searched with her client for just the right slab of natural stone to serve as the focal point for this kitchen. The Calacatta Avante Garde marble warms the space and coordinates perfectly with the neutral grays and satin brass hardware and faucets.

CONFIDENCE IN COLOR

From the moment Lecinski met her clients, she appreciated their confident and adventurous sense of color. "They have an artistic background and we were able to draw that out," she says.

Most notable is the bold LaCornue black enamel and brass range she paired with a custom zinc and brass ventilation hood crafted by Vogler Metalwork & Design **(see photos, Page 58).**

"It's like sculpture, a true work of art," she states.

The original layout included an island cooktop and a garage door where the hood is now located. "We moved the garage door to the mud room, which gave us the opportunity to move the range to the anchor wall to become a focal point, along with the hood," she says.

Both are showcased against highly textured, handmade subway tile accented with dark grout. "The darker grout creates a pattern and rhythm as a backdrop to the focal point," she notes.

Secondary to the cooking wall is the coffee bar, which features reclaimed oak shelves floating atop brass brackets finished in oil-rubbed bronze that match those next to the ventilation hood. The shelves are distressed and stained to coordinate with the reclaimed wood countertop that is crafted from railcar flooring. "You can still see the marks and bolts that were originally part of the floor," she points out.

DRAMATIC 'ART'

Although the focal-point backsplash was one of the last elements chosen in this kitchen designed by Sutton **(see photos, above and at left)**, it's the first thing people notice.

"We knew we wanted to do something dramatic…to utilize that wall as a piece of art," she says. "We just didn't choose the actual material right away."

Sutton searched with her clients, looking for just the right slab before settling on this Calacatta Avante Garde marble, which is bookmatched in the center and mitered around bump outs at each end of the cooking wall.

"My clients fell in love with the marble," she says. "It really works with the overall feel and look of the design. They wanted something contemporary, but not cold. This slab warms the space and coordinates perfectly with the neutral grays and satin brass hardware and faucets. It pulls everything together and creates a nice drama for the hood."

Sutton supported the focal point backsplash with a mix of light gray cabinets that contrast against the darker refrigerator surround and tall pantry. "The dark, blue-gray color draws the eye because of its deep hue," she explains. "But it also asymmetrically balances the entire wall because you are drawn to the marble."

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Photos: Upmarket Photo.com

Ronni Fryman transformed this California Craftsman kitchen with a new focal-point hood crafted in the mission style. A colorful tile backsplash adds visual drama.

Sutton also chose to go bold in another kitchen design, where red accents create high drama against a white backdrop. "Red is this client's favorite color," she says. "We knew we were going to use it somewhere in the space, we just needed to find the right place."

That right place ended up being a striking Apple Red Viking double oven and a vibrant backsplash comprised of Hirsch Glass Secret Garden Sun Goddess Rose mosaic from Hirsch Glass.

FROM BUILDER-GRADE TO CAPTIVATING

Fryman transformed this relatively petite California Craftsman kitchen from builder-grade – characterized with a nondescript and all-too-common white microwave hood – to captivating with a new focal-point hood crafted in the mission style and accented with a colorful tile backsplash **(see photo at left).** Both are highly visible via an arch that showcases the new view.

"We pulled the hood forward and added a little fancy crown moulding action," she says.

Fryman also transformed a standard-issue, all-white, U-shaped kitchen with a wall of tall appliances into a more functional space with a colorful focal-point island and wine bistro that better suits her clients **(see photos, below).**

"The focal point is most definitely the island because of its dramatic blue color," she says, noting that removing the appliance wall gave her access to an adjacent sitting area.

The designer added a second focal point based on her clients' love of wine.

"They love to entertain when they're both home, so while they requested a nice kitchen remodel, I also knew I had to make a wine bistro a focal point," she says. "It's now front and center when you enter the home. I even included a bar-height cabinet in the island that is perfect for receiving cases of wine that are part of their wine club membership." ■

Photos: Upmarket Photo.com

The kitchen became much more functional when Ronni Fryman removed a wall, making way for the dramatic blue focal-point island. The designer also made the wine bistro a secondary focal point that fulfills her clients' love of wine and entertaining.