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All Lit Up

With lighting becoming such a key element in today's kitchens, designers discuss its role and how it can affect not only how the space functions, but how it feels.

BY KIM BERNDTSON

When querying designers about lighting, it becomes evident rather quickly that it's a bit of a challenge for them to contain their excitement for the given topic of discussion.

Rebecca Sutton, CKBD, Kitchen Design Concepts in Dallas, TX, enthusiastically begins the conversation with, "I love lighting!"

Further into the conversation, she expounds on some reasons why. "Good lighting is a requirement to being able to use your kitchen in an effective manner," she says candidly. "As it relates to function, it's really pretty basic. It also adds an extra layer to the room's aesthetics. W\ithout light, you aren't able to see or perceive the elements of the design that you're building around."

For Tracy Morris, the importance of lighting is relatively simple, too. "It makes or breaks a kitchen," says the interior designer and owner/principal of Tracy Morris Design in McLean, VA. "It changes the color of cabinets, as well as how you feel in a space."

Dane Austin, owner/principal of Dane Austin Design in Boston, MA and Washington DC, momentarily redirects his attention during a discussion as Mother Nature's late afternoon glow streams into his space. "I love this time of day...the golden

Part of Tracy Morris' lighting plan for this kitchen that she designed in collaboration with Thompson Cooke Architects and Horizon Houseworks includes 2700K undercabinet lights and dual pendants that hover above the island.

In this kitchen, Cheryl Kees Clendenon combined dual pendants with recessed can lights and undercabinet lighting to meet functional and aesthetic needs.

Rebecca Sutton included toekick lighting and chose recessed can lights to illuminate the peninsula since pendants would have blocked the view of the TV.

Rebecca Sutton often uses accent lighting as a way to build an aesthetic. For example, in this kitchen, the designer included accent lighting in the transom cabinets.

Photo: Lance Selgo, Unique Exposure Photography

Photo: Greg Riegler

hour," he reveals. "It's interesting how much time we designers spend discussing light and lighting…how it cuts through a window…how it casts shadows and creates patterns. It's so beautiful…and fleeting. It's never the same…always changing."

Adding to the excitement is the availability of more lighting products and advancements in technology that make their use easier and more interesting.

"There is so much more fun stuff out there with lighting," notes Jenny Murphy, owner/designer of J. Reiko Design + Co. in Fort Collins, CO. "That availability makes it so much more enjoyable for designers."

Cheryl Kees Clendenon, president and creative director of In Detail Interiors in Pensacola, FL, concurs. "Manufacturers are really going to town with lighting options," she says. "It is fabulous to see so many varied options. I love the direction lighting is going today."

Jodi Swartz, principal designer at KitchenVisions in Natick, MA, adds, "There are so many more players in the LED market right now. And people are getting much more sophisticated about different ways to hang lights in cabinets, both vertically and horizontally. Everything has become so thin, and transparent, for the most part. Housings and canopies are quite small and there aren't any heavy cords. Integrated LED lights are also more popular since they can be placed anywhere, not only between joists."

Photo: Lance Selgo, Unique Exposure Photography

Photo: Sierra Ann Photography

Homeowners have also been paying more attention. While interest in lighting had been trending before the COVID pandemic started, in the two years since, the importance and attention placed on lighting in the home has grown significantly.

Morris explains that interest succinctly. “People are home,” she says.

Austin agrees. “We’ve spent so much time in our homes and we’ve realized how much of a difference it makes to have the mood created by the lighting around us,” he says. “There’s no greater way to affect a space than with lighting. It sets the tone, literally.”

Swartz adds that many of those people who are spending more time at home are working and using portable technology such as smart phones, tablets and laptops in the kitchen.

“We’ve given up the desk space and we’re doing more work on islands and peninsulas,” she says. “Whether it’s children doing homework or people looking up recipes, we’re all looking for more lighting in areas where we’re cooking, reading or working.”

BUILDING LAYERS OF LIGHT

Designers often talk about effective lighting plans being created in layers via multiple light sources made up, largely, of a combination of general, task and accent lights.

Photo: Stacy Zarin Goldberg

Photo: Greg Riegler

(top left) In this historic home, natural light floods into the kitchen and adjacent areas via multiple windows. Jenny Murphy complemented it with recessed can lights and sconces, which flank the range.

Cheryl Kees Clendenon is partial to using pendants or chandeliers as a way to make a design statement, such as in this kitchen, where dual pendants above the peninsula offer an explosion of quartz crystal buds.

Dane Austin often foregoes recessed can lights in favor of ceiling-mounted or flush-mounted fixtures because they are more decorative and directional.

Photos: Michael Lefebvre

Jodi Swartz accented the island in this kitchen with an LED fixture that allows for a sculptural and continuous 'ribbon' of light.

This kitchen wasn't wide enough to include an island, so to give it a modern design vibe, Jodi Swartz used a flush-mounted fixture to illuminate the ceiling and recessed cans with a square aperture.

"I like the idea of layering light with multiple sources that work together across a room," says Sutton. "For example, if you only use overhead recessed can lights, you will cast shadows onto the work surface. Adding pendants or wall sconces creates a second layer of light that bounces more light around the room, which means fewer shadows. Also, in general, the more you layer light, the homier a space feels."

Austin indicates that layering played an important role in the renovation of his own kitchen, where he used six different light sources including ceiling-mount fixtures, undercabinet lights, range hood lights, art lights, sconces and pendants.

"That sounds like a lot," he acknowledges, "but they provide multi-level layering of light at varying heights and intensities. When we cook, we use the range lights and undercabinet lights. When we entertain, we'll turn off those lights and turn on the sconces and art lights, so they aren't all on at the same time."

Paying attention to layers also gives designers the ability to add interest to the space via a variety of light sources.

"When you focus on getting good general lighting and task lighting, you have functionality aspects taken care of," notes Murphy. "That gives you the freedom to have fun with accent lighting and funky fixtures."

Although not always the most glamorous, designers indicate that successful lighting plans are built on a foundation of the first layer of light: general lighting, which also takes into consideration the inclusion of natural light.

For Murphy, natural light is her favorite light. "I'm a huge proponent of natural light because of its importance to our circadian rhythm and mood," she says. "Natural light will always be my favorite light. I always prioritize it with windows, skylights and solar tubes…however you can get it into the space."

Austin is a natural light advocate as well, and is always cognizant of finding ways to bring in as much as possible, while intensifying it once it's within the space. In addition to obvious avenues such as windows, the designer likes to heighten natural light's presence with reflective tile and mirrors, both of which were included in the renovation of his own 1905 Edwardian Period home.

"There are lots of quirks and oddities in the space," he indicates, "and the kitchen is in a location that doesn't receive a lot of light. When we renovated, we added tile from floor to ceiling on all the walls. We also painted the ceiling with a lacquered high-gloss paint to bounce more light around the room, especially during the day. After relocating a wall, we were able to create a pantry where we added an antique mirror that reflects the window on the opposite side."

Ceiling lighting falls into the general lighting category as well, with recessed cans quickly coming to mind for many designers.

Swartz updates their look with square apertures and Murphy likes to evenly space them and use Kelvin ratings of 2700K. Sutton also mentions the importance of Kelvin ratings

Photo: Lance Selgo, Unique Exposure Photography

The trio of pendants above the island in this kitchen designed by Rebecca Sutton feature a two-toned finish – pewter to match the plumbing fixtures and cabinetry hardware and a gilded gold to match the corner banquette table light in the adjacent room.

With the return of brass to the kitchen, Tracy Morris included two large pendant lights with brass interiors above the island in this kitchen she designed in collaboration with Lobkovich Kitchen Designs and Artisan Builders. Mixing it with a cream-colored exterior highlights another trend she is seeing.

and 'warm' and 'cold' light temperatures, noting that although daylight is rated at 5000 to 6000K, that's often too bright when achieved artificially indoors.

"It washes everything out," she says. "That's why it's important to consider and understand layers of light and balance to select the right temperature for the task and room."

With regard to ceiling lighting, several designers have noticed a move towards the use of flush-mount fixtures instead of recessed cans.

"They can make a space feel more modern," indicates Swartz, who also adds that they can be a great choice in kitchens without islands.

"We're taking can lights out of the kitchen and are replacing them with beautiful flush-mounts," Morris adds. "They increase the aesthetic of the fifth wall, the ceiling, by giving it a bit of a kick. They also diffuse the light a little more to eliminate the harsh lighting situation that can come from using recessed cans, especially with bright 3500K or 4500K bulbs."

Austin often forgoes recessed cans as well, noting that ceiling-mounted fixtures provide a variety of illumination avenues, such as through glass, linen or silk.

"Recessed lighting is very standard and not very thoughtful," he says. "Instead, I prefer to use ceiling-mounted fixtures because you don't see the source and they can be far more decorative and directional while adding an extra layer of light overhead."

Second layers of light include task lighting sources, such as undercabinet lights, pendants, sconces, etc.

"Task lighting is huge, especially in a kitchen, because it's related so closely to function," says Sutton. "You need good, bright light if you're trying to read instructions for cooking your first Thanksgiving turkey. Or, if you're using a knife, you want to see what you are cutting. If you are measuring ingredients, you want to see the difference between one-half and one-third of a cup."

Morris concurs, adding, "Without proper lighting, injuries and accidents can happen. It also definitely makes a difference

Photo: Greg Powers

when you are cooking on the stove because if you don't have the right lighting, you can burn food more easily, or, you may not see when it's cooked to the right temperature."

When talking about task lighting, undercabinet lights – in particular 2700K tape lights – are often Morris' go-to lighting product that she includes in her designs.

"I'm a huge fan of undercabinet LED lights because they stay cool and they can be used 24 hours a day, without utilizing much energy," she says. "They are perfect for using as a night-light to either raid the refrigerator or get a glass of water."

Morris also likes the idea of adding a diffuser to eliminate the resultant pinpoints of light that can be reflected onto a countertop surface. "With a diffuser, it's just one clean light," she explains.

With general and task lighting taken into consideration, designers can focus on accent lighting, which is often most influential on a room's aesthetics.

"Lighting is a way to create moods, as well as serve the interests of making sure the cooking turns out correct," says Clendenon. "So, we use lighting not only for the functional purposes it serves, but also to make a design statement and set the tone for a space that considers balance of scale. Lighting is a vastly overlooked aspect of good design. We want to balance the functional needs and aesthetic desires to make a space feel thoughtful, beautiful and well balanced."

As such, she often uses accent lighting as a way to define a space and build 'architecture' into a room with four walls. "This works well for the kitchen, too, to segregate a space for dining, for example," she says. "We don't like to put too much 'pressure' on decorative lighting to perform all the needs and believe in layers of lighting for optimum performance."

Sutton also sees accent lighting as a way to build an aesthetic, for example with toe kick lighting that can serve as a night light for late-night snacking or uplights that highlight the recessed panels in a coffered ceiling.

"Accent lighting can be very personalized and unique to each client," she says. "It isn't bound by any kind of standards, so it can get really fun."

GAINING CONTROL

Regardless of the light layer or source, designers stress the importance of putting everything on dimmers so users can control the level of light intensity.

"First and foremost is to have everything on a dimmer," says Austin, in reference to his favorite lighting tip. "I also encourage clients to use multiple light sources, including candles."

Clendenon agrees, noting that utilizing dimmer switches is one of her three 'rules' for lighting. "No. 1, light it well," she begins. "Secondly, switch it differently for tasks and moods. No. 3…put everything on dimmers."

"I want everything on dimmers," says Swartz. "They make so much sense. They have also gotten much more sophisticated. It used to be that, when you dimmed the lights, you weren't quite sure what color they were because they would get a little warm, then a little cold. And, they would also buzz. But now they are better, and it's been fun to watch the advances in the past 10 to 15 years. More and more companies, even mainstream companies, are adding lights to their cabinets. It's pretty cool."

"Dimmers are your best friend," adds Sutton. "Then you're able to determine the amount of light you're getting in each area at a point in time."

THE LATEST IN LIGHTING

Lighting can be a fun way to play with trends because it can be a reasonably less expensive, and to some extent, easy, way to make changes.

"Brass has made a huge comeback and I tell clients that if they like brass but are a bit afraid, lighting is a good place to start," says Murphy. "It's relatively easy and somewhat inexpensive, depending on the fixture, to change it down the road."

Photo: Sierra Ann Photography

Jenny Murphy stresses the importance of placement and material choice when selecting lighting for over the island. She included clear glass globe pendants in this kitchen so when her client uses the sink, she doesn't have a solid fixture in her direct line of sight.

Brass, in general, is making a return, indicate several designers, who also note that clients aren't afraid to mix it with other metals.

"Mixed metals are far more sophisticated than having everything match," says Austin. "In our kitchen, we have a red lacquered lamp over the sink, oil rubbed bronze sconces and chrome milk-glass ceiling fixtures. It's all varied and nothing is overly matched. There are two different schools of thought. Some people like a collected look over time while others prefer a super clean, minimal and crisp aesthetic. I'm definitely in the first camp!"

Sutton also likes the idea of mixing metals, which she indicates is also prevalent in plumbing fixtures and hardware. "The industry is at a really fun place right now and people aren't shying away from mixing metals," she says. "I've been seeing more two-toned designs, such as black and gold, or

Photo: Greg Premru

Swing-arm sconces are a favorite light source for Dane Austin, who included one over the sink in this waterfront home's kitchen.

A family kitchen need not be boring, as illustrated in this space designed by Cheryl Kees Clendenon, where colorful cabinetry combines with deep blue grass cloth walls to provide a perfect backdrop for the funky pendants, which offer a fresh take on the lantern style.

Photo: Greg Riegler

polished nickel and brushed gold, or brushed brass and chrome. It looks really cool mixing two, maybe three, metals inside a single fixture…whether it's a piece of hardware, a lighting fixture or a faucet."

Morris is noticing that the brass is often unlacquered, and is being joined by rose gold, both of which will patina over time. Painted color finishes are trending as well.

"Maybe the top of the canopy is color-matched to the cabinetry or wallpaper inside a glass cabinet," she says. "As far as colors, we're seeing a lot of cream rather than white…think Benjamin Moore's White Dove. Mixing it with gold is beautiful. We've also been seeing a lot of emerald green and soft blacks, similar to graphite. Mixed with silver, it's beautiful."

Sutton also sees a bigger push towards the use of natural elements, such as rattan and wood rather than pure metal. "Also, natural colors like green, warmer taupes and blues are coming in more because of the desire to bring the outdoors in," she continues. "We're also starting to see more natural and asymmetrical shapes, even in metal, that are more curvaceous and feminine."

Clendenon has noticed a return to classic mid-century styles, which she notes work well for today's designs. "We're also noticing more organic shapes that can be used in a variety of applications," she adds.

While in-cabinet lighting isn't necessarily new, Swartz sees it being used more easily thanks to advancements in technology. "We used to have to always do glass shelves," she explains. "We don't need to do that anymore because there are ways to route lights into a shelf so each one is illuminated."

Austin sees ceiling-mount or semi-flush fixtures being popular in his designs, as well as swing-arm sconces near a workstation and sconce lights above display cabinets and shelves to showcase decorative dishes.

Murphy, too, likes to use sconces as a way to add character to the kitchen. "As far as adding character and being able to control the tonality of a space, I really love the recent influx of using sconces," she says. "Using them over floating shelves can be super fun."

Several designers also note that size matters, which currently translates to an increased use of singular, oversized pendants over islands or peninsulas.

"A lot of small pendants actually make the space feel smaller," explains Morris, "so I like to use one larger pendant… something that is a bit more open or linear in shape to provide the right light, but not take over."

Murphy agrees, adding, "I've seen a lot of oversized pendants trending, either two large or one extra-large fixture… similar to what might be used over a dining table. That play on scale can really make a space feel more modern and updated, even with a traditional fixture."

However, she points out that it's important to be aware of size and placement. "You don't want to stand at an island and look straight into a light fixture," she says. "Instead, consider a fixture that is open or see through, like a lantern or glass globe…something that isn't a solid mass. Then be cognizant of the height so it's at a comfortable level."

Sutton also loves the look of extra-large pendants, in particular elongated pendants and linear shapes. "They emit a lot of light," she says. "And they can make a bold statement, holding the room and serving as a focal point."

Swartz's clients are drawn to linear shapes, as well, in addition to open cages and clear glass. "People are looking for cool, fun, handblown fixtures," she says. "I think they want things that are a little bit more bespoke. I'm still working with the industrial look, but it's a little more refined now. We're having a lot more fun with fixtures." ■