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Variations on a Theme
By Andrea Girolamo

Staying true to a thematic design creates unique opportunities, often requiring designers to research and reach out to their clients in innovative ways to make their projects successful.

Ask most people about theme design, and they'll likely envision overdone spaces that are excessively trendy at best, and downright obscure at worst. Or perhaps they'll imagine rooms that cater to children's flights of fancy, with limited appeal elsewhere: the little boy's room with the race car-shaped bed, the little girl's princess-bedecked nursery, or the child's bathroom replete with animal-shaped fixtures and fittings.

In reality, however, theme design is neither hopelessly trendy nor only for the out-there folks looking for something quirky. In fact, much of what today's kitchen and bath designers are turning out fits neatly into this category, and beyond, into subcategories that border on specialty, such as culturally sensitive or adapted design. These spaces are designed to withstand the shifting of trends to blend seamlessly into the homes for which they were designed.

Setting the Tone

Kathleen Donohue, CMKBD, a senior designer at Oregon-based Neil Kelly Company, literally wrote the book on theme design for the National Kitchen & Bath Association. Her book, *Kitchen & Bath Theme Design: An Architectural Styling Guide*, published by McGraw-Hill, grew out of a series of eight-hour classes Donohue taught for the NKBA on the topic. Donohue's start in theme design came through her efforts to design a line of cabinetry for Neil Kelly Cabinets that the company felt would be architecturally appropriate for the style of the homes in the northwest region in which it served.

"We found that many of the homes were late Victorian and Craftsman-era bungalows," she says, adding that since then, designing for an architecturally appropriate theme comprises most of what she does in this category.

"I think [theme design is] about the design being coherent, the style meeting the client's expectations and the whole design remaining timeless. You're not going to see any fads, and these aren't going to be kitchens that will look dated in five years," Donohue adds. "The kitchen or bath will fit the rest of the house for years to come."

Janice Stone Thomas, ASID, CKD, of Sacramento, CA-based StoneWood Design, Inc., agrees that the overall house design often inspires the kitchen's structure, but says that other themes can work just as well as those that keep strictly in line with existing period architecture.

"I think the feeling of the home is what inspires the design the most, and a lot of these more exotic styles can work in ways that go beyond the traditional. We have a lot of Victorians and

1920s bungalows here in Sacramento, and I've found a variety of minimalist or contemporary styles work extremely well, as long as they flow with the overall look of the home," Stone Thomas says.

Melissa Galt of Atlanta, GA-based Melissa Galt Interiors and Six Figure Interior Design Professionals says that successful themes can be as pedestrian or adventuresome as the client demands.

"The word 'theme' means different things to different people. For some, it's as simple as going with contemporary styling or a look that's a little more elaborate," she says. "Others are looking for something that might have a historical theme. It could be Moroccan, it could be geographically bound, it could be from travel they've taken, it could even be a time period. Others border on what I call a fantasy kitchen."

Don't start thinking race car beds and turtle-shaped sinks just yet, though. Kelly Lloyd Stewart, senior designer and director of sales development for Stamford, CT-based Kitchens by Deane identifies an art-themed kitchen as one of her most memorable projects, a project that borders on Galt's "fantasy" kitchen.

"I had a client a number of years ago who wanted to do the kitchen based on the work of Piet Mondrian, the Dutch painter of the De Stijl movement," says Stewart. The use of a grid-like pattern and the three primary colors were hallmarks of Mondrian's work. "We had to actually send off the red from a Marlboro cigarette carton, because it was the most true red we could find. Every red sample we could find had a little bit of yellow or blue in it and it was the most pure red we could locate as a color sample. It was very much a triad color scheme in very much that patchwork fashion that's reminiscent of Mondrian's artwork."

The more personal the theme, the more interesting the project, notes Stone Thomas.

"Recently, my clients requested a design for their home based on a layered story of how the couple blended their lives and the different perspectives that they come from. They wanted it to be very personal, and personalized. They wanted their home to be a story of their history together. I thought that was very interesting, and quite a challenge."

Culturally Adapted

Whether you call it a melting pot or a mixed bag of nuts, the U.S. has always embodied the spirit of people from many backgrounds sharing a country, forming a common heritage. It's no surprise, then, that the current trends in traditional and contemporary kitchen designs in the U.S. are, as Kathleen Donohue puts it, "more often eclectic, rather than any one particular style."

One such example comes from **Eric Balstad**, CKD, of Boulder, CO-based **Parrish Construction**, who was charged with creating a comfortable, culturally sensitive addition for a Boulder-area Japanese-American family.

"This design was all about functionality for the mother; her comfort was the most important thing, and because she was used to certain things about Japanese life, that very much dictated the design," says **Balstad**.

The client's mother had moved from Japan to the U.S. and was missing many of the traditional Japanese amenities in her son's Americanized home.

"The family now has three multicultural generations under one roof – a Japanese-American father and American mother, their daughter, and the grandmother, newly arrived in this country," says Loraine Masterton, director of marketing and community relations for **Parrish**.

No doorways could face north, as it is bad luck in Japanese culture. A wealth of natural light was critical, as was the preservation of the client's mother's privacy. A separate bath was designed so that she could age in place, while using traditional materials, products and designs that would be familiar to her.

Balstad also recalls a project he did several years ago for a German couple who had emigrated to the U.S. "They had wanted to redo their home to reflect their culture and had asked us to include a number of things that we had never done before. One of them was to include a stacked tile hearth with seating around it." Called a kachelöfen, the communal hearth is a place in traditional German homes, and elsewhere in central Europe, to warm up after coming in from the cold, a place of familial togetherness. "It's the only one I've ever seen," says **Balstad**.

Product Placement

The designers queried by *KBDN* all agree that oftentimes, clients request designs be done around personal collections, or mementos.

"I had a client who had an espresso cup collection and we springboarded the rest of the kitchen off of it," says Galt.

Donohue recalls a pair of corbels shaped like the heads of elephants that inspired an island theme.

"That was a new one for me," she laughingly adds.

"I've done themes where we've created specialized hood designs to fit. In Chicago, many years ago, I did a kitchen where we made a hood out of the bell of a tuba," adds Stewart.

All the designers surveyed, to varying degrees, agreed on the importance of understanding and interpreting what it is their clients really want, versus what they say they want.

"More than once, I have had clients who claimed to want Tuscan when what they wanted was actually French Country," says Donohue. "You've absolutely got to listen, and not just assume. That's a designer's best quality in these situations – the ability to interpret, and shift the design accordingly."

Ultimately product selection is key, but oftentimes thematic considerations change the selection process.

"Architectural accuracy keeps you pretty limited, but so few clients really care, as long as they like the look," says Galt.

If architectural accuracy is important, though, Stewart notes that there are companies that specialize in products that fulfill just such a need.

"Some of the companies we've worked with have developed complete styling themed products that they have done slavish researching of the period, to be able to accurately recreate the products. They've done authentic finish blending and matching to historic pieces. They've given us molding selections. They've done top to bottom the entire package of design element pieces. They've got the proper turnings, brackets, clips, crowns, hardware and everything that you need to dress the entire piece properly and not have to compromise or make it a patchwork of different pieces," she says. "The companies are out there, it just takes a little work to find them."

Galt concludes that the opportunity to work on a theme kitchen is one that is rich with artistic opportunities. "You have to be able to get outside the box sometimes to grow as a designer. This is an opportunity to stretch your skill set as a design professional and really deliver a unique, one-of-a-kind, never-to-be-duplicated product and experience."

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