

DESIGN & DECORATING

By RACHEL WOLFE

ERROR, ERROR ON THE WALL

When Kitchen Décor Tanks

Remedies for the most common mistakes in the heart of the home, plus the silliest flubs designers have seen

ALL-WHITE kitchens that look like operating theaters aren't all that inspiring or even practical. But the overcooked alternatives—kitchens featuring grease-accumulating ceramic roosters or cabinetry festooned with grape-leaf swags—can seem depressingly cluttered. "It's a place for creating meals, not Versailles," said New York architect Kevin Lichten.

Homeowners should view their kitchens first as machines for preparing food, he advised. "Then slowly add luxury to make it sensually appealing"—and ideally inject personality of the right kind. We asked design pros like Mr. Lichten to share their biggest kitchen-decorating pet peeves, from oversize islands to mixed-material counters, and to recommend chic, functional fixes.

Scattered Appliances

Countertop gear—coffee maker, toaster, blender, air fryer—might be essential to getting your three squares, conceded Los Angeles designer Amy Sklar, "but honestly, they don't look so hot spread out over every usable surface."

Instead Gather your gadget diaspora behind an accordion-doored "appliance garage" (think: a built-in bread box for your blender and such). This allows easy access to contraptions while hiding them. To ensure your juicer stays juiced, plan around an electrical outlet. Pullout drawers in lower cabinets, too, can be hide-holes for lesser-used appliances.

Unintelligent Counters

Along with other dumb 1970s ideas like water beds, renounce tiled work surfaces. New York designer Alan Tanksley calls out their uneven surfaces and unsanitary grout lines. Even perfectly flat tiles installed tightly can pose a challenge, Mr. Tanksley noted. Any individual tile is more susceptible to chips and cracks than unified slabs of natural stone. That said, porous natural stone can add anxiety to food prep, too. One big stone no-no: mixing natural marble with engineered-quartz marble. "Two different but veined materials in the room force the eye to choose a favorite," said Nashville designer Lori Paranjape, "and Mother Nature wins every time."

Instead When Mary Maydan's clients want a worry-free marbled look, the Palo Alto, Calif., architect



POOR SENSE OF SCALE Architect Mary Maydan came across a kitchen island that doubled as a fish tank.

MAOMI CLARKE (ILLUSTRATIONS)

recommends porcelain faux-marble slabs, which she says have "come a long way in recent years." She also favors Corian countertops as an alternative to natural stone, especially paired with integrated sinks to "create a very sleek and seamless look." Ms. Paranjape sticks to solid quartz for prep surfaces and applies natural stone only to walls, "where it can be seen but not damaged."

Truncated Backsplashes

A stovetop backsplash that ends mid-wall at the bottom of the vent hood or in line with the bottom of the upper cabinets looks to Houston designer Benjamin Johnston "like you ran out of money for the project and couldn't finish the job properly." Another common head-scratcher: countertop material that extends 4 inches up the wall. It reminds Seattle designer Charlie Hellstern of a doctor's office and presumes that food doesn't splatter any higher.

Instead Mr. Johnston recommends extending the backsplash behind the stove to the ceiling. "It's a perfect opportunity for a wow moment," he said. To avoid the "doctor's office" look, Ms. Hellstern continues countertop material all the way up the

KITCHEN NIGHTMARES / PROS RECALL THE MOST EGREGIOUS DESIGN DECISIONS THEY'VE WITNESSED

I have seen a few kitchen island ideas that are striking but come at a price of very little functionality. For example, islands where the entire [structure] is a fish tank and others that look like a sculpture and provide no storage and little or no seating."

—Mary Maydan, architect, Palo Alto, Calif.

A model car collection on top of the wine display." —Scott Dresner, designer, Chicago

We rented a house when I was growing up that had a faux shingle-roof

detail in the space between the top of the cabinets and the ceiling, and the same kitchen was carpeted." —Amy Sklar, designer, Los Angeles

We came across a kitchen with plate-glass mirror for a backsplash, even behind the range.

Can you imagine trying to keep that clean?" —Erin Gates, designer, Newton Centre, Mass.

A collection of empty bottles of fancy booze displayed around the kitchen." —Jenna Kincaid, art director, Lulu and Georgia.



wall. For a less costly backsplash in general, fix a piece of glass over the painted wall, she said.

Island Takeovers

Ms. Sklar once came across a kitchen island so enormous "the homeowner had to climb on top of it to clean the center." Another sign your island is too massive, according to Amanda Mole, an architect in Kiawah Island, S.C.: You can't circulate around it freely anytime an appliance is open. And don't even think about putting a cooktop in the island. A vent hood hanging mid-ceiling looks like an industrial exhaust that's escaped the factory.

Instead Ms. Mole suggests that in lieu of an island, expand work surfaces or seating by extending the countertop to form an L shape. If storage is the goal, a caddie at the end of a counter can hold silverware and dishes.

Unconnected Cabinets

The no man's land above upper cabinets that don't reach the ceiling is a source of frustration for Michelle Lisac, a designer in Scotts Valley, Calif. The break creates an unwelcome horizontal line and the gap collects dust and grease. "Why not just go that extra foot!" she said. The trend of mismatched up-

per and lower cabinets strikes Santa Monica designer Christine Markatos Lowe as similarly disjointed: "They should visually act as a single unit in a single color," she said.

Instead If new cabinets aren't in the budget, Ms. Lisac suggests filling the breach with a flat panel and crown molding to create the illusion of ceiling-high cabinets. For people who like the look of two tones in the kitchen, Ms. Markatos Lowe recommends painting the island in an accent color and keeping all woodwork attached to the walls the same hue.

MEDIATOR

Can Odd Pieces Become an Office?

THE CONFLICT As the Covid lockdown upended our home lives, many people found themselves trying to make a WFH space out of random, disparate ingredients. Three designers suggest décor that will pull these two elements together.



Jason Miller for De La Espada Elliot Desk, from \$5,395, thefutureperfect.com

1960s Mid Century Modern Gerald Thurston Lightolier Lamp, \$1,800, chairish.com

SOLUTION 1

Lay a rug that features curves.

Los Angeles designer Kimberly Biehl chose a vintage carpet whose pattern softens the zigzag lines of the midcentury lamp's Devo-hat shade and nods to its quatrefoil curves. "I really love that swirl!" she said of the rug's calligraphic detail. Ms. Biehl also noted that its subtle, blue linear element connects to the painted drawer fronts of the desk: "That little line of blue really got me." Vintage Art Deco Deep Maroon, White and Blue Wool Rug, \$9,500, dorisleslieblau.com



SOLUTION 2

Pull up a shapely wood seat. The chair that San Francisco designer Noz Nozawa suggested, with its unusual bulbous woodwork, could keep up with the "sculptural impact" of the graphic lamp,

she said. The chair's sensually swollen front legs read like an inverse of the diamond-and-ball geometry in the lamp base. At the same time, the chair's "solid walnut frame reflects the desk's natural wood." Sara Bond Chair, Enea Fiber by Agrippa in Oiled Walnut, \$3,085 coupdetats.com



SOLUTION 3

Add a less 'rational' piece of art. To New York designer Anthony Dunning's eyes, these two pieces are rather

hard-edge and would benefit from the addition of an expressive but unifying third party—namely this "emotional," painterly watercolor with conciliatory hues. "The colors of the desk and lamp are present in the painting, helping to marry the two pieces," he said. Malene Barnett "Makeda" original watercolor, 22 inches by 25 inches, \$2,500; Prints, from \$158. malenebarnett.com —Courtney Lichterman

