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THE EVOLVING KITCHEN

When it comes to designing kitchens, how do you balance timelessness with technology? Functionality with feeling? And practicality with personality? Hosting a talk at Decorex 2025, editor Georgina Townshend put these questions to a panel of guests – namely Wren Loucks, founder of Be-Kin, Cat Dal, founder of Cat Dal Interiors, Rebecca Hughes, founder of Rebecca Hughes Interiors, and Kate Aslangul, founder & creative director at Oakley Moore. Here, she looks back on their discussion...

The kitchen was once all about function – it was clean, sterile, practical. But now, it's so much more. It's where we can express ourselves in design, it's where memories are made: where we cook together, gather with friends, watch children play. And for a lot of us, it's where we work now, too. But what came first? Our shift in the way we live, or their design helping us in doing so? Perhaps both.

Back in October, I began the talk at Decorex (a high-end interior design trade show) introducing this very notion – and declared that what is clear is that, over the last decade, kitchen design has had a complete glow-up – the changes accelerating exponentially since Covid. “It fast-tracked something that was already happening,” explained Kate. “The kitchen was our ‘everywhere’ during this time. It had to be our bar, our office, our play station, our workstation, and it became the emotional centre of the home.” Yet, despite the fact that the now completely bizarre concept of lockdown took place nearly six years ago, the kitchen has retained these core principles.

We continued to explore what this meant, and why...

It's worth looking at how our lives have changed and asking if it's right that where we eat is also where we work. Instead of gaining something, perhaps we've lost our sense of boundaries. This is why many designers now aim to introduce balance to kitchens. “If homeowners have the space, I encourage separating work and dining,” said Wren. “They need a designated place for being off the grid, off their phones – somewhere you can be present on a human level. A screen-free, tech-free zone. The way you design a kitchen can encourage habits, and help you live healthier.”

Cat Dal, who designs a lot for families, looks to accommodate every member in her kitchen design. Yes, even pets and robots (think of plinths that can rise up as a little home for a robot vacuum). She discussed how it's the modern family's daily lifestyle that she wants to know about when it comes to creating layouts, fixtures, and fittings.

“The kitchen is the second biggest investment in your home – bar the property itself,” she explained. “So, you really need to make every square metre work for you. We always take a really in-depth client brief – we find out everything we can. Do they do yoga? Do they make cocktails? Do they like coffee – we really get into who they are and design accordingly.”

Adding personality

This brings us nicely to the personalisation of the kitchen – one of the core ways kitchen design has changed, in my opinion. Wren kicked us off, and said, “I ask clients to walk through their day, their weekend, what does a holiday look like, then imagine them throughout the space when designing. Then, we look at things like what their clothing is like, what they are naturally attracted to, and aspirational questions – how do they currently live? I also want to understand how they *want* to live. Finally, I ask them to think across the senses; how would you like it to smell, to feel – a kitchen is a multisensual space.”

Rebecca continued by talking about how using joiners, instead of going to kitchen companies, is key in gaining a personalised space. “You can have fun with finishes, not have to go for standard six-door styles or even colours. First and foremost, it's cost – you can save 30% in some cases by building a kitchen this way – and then the second is customisation.”

→





far left Georgina hosted a talk on The Evolving Kitchen at this year's Decorex, to a large crowd of designers and interiors enthusiasts.

clockwise from top left
A handmade, bespoke kitchen by *Be-Kin* showing the pantry detail made of beautiful tulip wood. *Photography Maud Craigie*

A mix of flooring and styles has created a unique space that is both beautiful and highly functional. Project by *Cat Dal Interiors*. *Photography Matt Davis*

The St Johns Wood Townhouse project by *Rebecca Hughes Interiors* shows how an island can have its own individual design and style. *Photography Astrid Templier*

But personalisation doesn't all have to be about the way your kitchen looks, either. Kate, for instance, had a client who was very auditive – so requested a dishwasher that didn't beep. (*I think we all need one of those.*)

Beware of the social media trends

I asked the panel why they think personalisation is such a rising requirement; why the sudden desire to have such uniquely styled kitchens? One major reason I can think of is social media. But how do you ensure you include something that you genuinely love, and aren't being influenced by something people are loving online?

Cat tackled this topic, and mused, "Social media is great at the beginning of a project, you can have many ideas at your fingertips – but then again, I think it's very easy [for it] to be too much and overwhelming. That's where a designer can step in and help; with concept boards and new ideas."

Tech, or no tech – that's the question

One of the other core things that has changed in the last decade, that can't be ignored, is smart technology – which often divides opinion. To one person, something might be genuinely useful, but to another it's a complete gimmick.

"It's brilliant if it's useful – boiling-water taps, hidden extractors, all-zone induction cooktops – fabulous," said Kate. "Fridges that can read barcodes? For me that's a step too far. Anything that needs an app or a software update – how much longevity is that going to have?" But what about things like coffee machines you can turn on from an app from your home office? "Does that count?" I asked. "I wouldn't like that personally; I like the ritual of opening up the coffee beans, grinding them, making it, smelling it – that time to slow down is important to me," continued Wren. "But what do you want? What's your relationship with tech? I have a client who develops apps – so tech is exciting for him, so of course we're going to design that in. But most of the homeowners I work with still want switches that actually flick up and down, no complicated settings. In fact, I think the shift now is that there is a pushback in regards to tech. People want things to be simpler."

"Surely, not all technological advances can be bad?" I asked them. "I would say that appliances are much more energy efficient – for instance, dishwashers that can use less water. So in that regard, they are getting better for the environment," said Wren.

Each zone can have its own style...

I wanted to steer my panelists to other aspects of the kitchen which have evolved astronomically. For me, there's no greater example than the island – a mini kitchen within the kitchen. Rebecca agreed with me, and mentioned that in her last five projects the island has been treated completely differently to the rest of the space. "We love to mix finishes, and having an island in a different finish to the main kitchen just adds a depth, I think. Also, a lot of my clients like the island to feel like a piece of furniture. You can have some fun – from special legs, a skirt on the top, to hiding appliances in it – I think people these days really do treat it as a separate entity. Recently, we had a project with a timber island with a pink marble on top, and

then the rest of the kitchen had pink and green joinery around the edge."

Even the humble walk-in larder can be a thing of beauty. As Cat said, "We love a pantry, just like we love a cloakroom; I think areas that are very small and you're not in them for very long should have an impact. From fabulous wallpaper to panelling, and nowadays people do their pantry layouts as a focal point – and then have internal glazing so you can really see all your beautifully organised items in their glass jars."

The time it takes...

With so much to consider, I asked how long it takes to design a kitchen these days; a week, a month? "I would be worried if it was a week," laughed Rebecca. "I think it evolves through asking questions, and that takes time." Cat agreed, and said, "A couple of months I'd say." Wren simply emphasised the need to make sure it's done right, and done once – as kitchens should last a lifetime.

I think what we can all take away from this is the fact that kitchen design is no longer 'just' about buying kitchen cabinetry and picking appliances. As mentioned right at the start of this feature, it's timelessness versus technology, functionality mixed with feeling, and practicality balanced with personality. So, if you're looking to design a new kitchen this year, I hope this feature has both entertained and enlightened you – providing you with ideas to steal and concepts to ponder. ☺

THE PANEL'S ONE PIECE OF ADVICE FOR DESIGNING KITCHENS TO SUPPORT YOUR LIFESTYLE:

Rebecca: Concentrate on worktops. There are so many good composites and porcelain work surfaces. Lots of my clients love marble, but it is porous and I would always veer against it if possible. Also, shop for appliances yourself, in person. Go to the showroom, because that's the most personal element.

Kate: Get everything out of your cupboards and measure – see what you've got to design a kitchen that works. Then design it how you want to live and be bold.

Cat: Declutter if you can. Everyone focuses on 'storage storage storage'. But have a look, and see what you have – do you need every single piece? – so you have space to breathe, perhaps introduce some beautiful art instead, and take a step back.

Wren: I encourage my clients to think about how they want to live in a kitchen, and not to get caught up by trends or what other people are doing. To come back to themselves, be aspirational. Write it down, create a vision board, but start from within rather than seeking external stimulation. Touch and see everything that's going in as well – the sampling process is so important.

**clockwise**

In the Chelsea Barracks Apartment project by *Rebecca Hughes Interiors*, neutral tones and bold textures create a warm and inviting space. *Photography Astrid Templier*

In this project by *Cat Dal Interiors*, the use of colour and pattern has created a space full of personality. *Photography Rachael Smith*

With a slim yellow island at its heart, this *Oakley Moore* kitchen boasts smart ergonomics, hidden storage, and a confident use of colour.