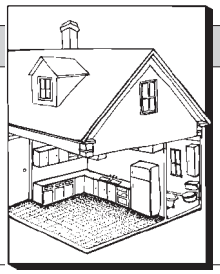

For a Better '87, Evaluate '86

by Patrick J. Galvin

During this decade of the '80s, better builders have been discovering what they *thought* they knew: that attractive kitchens and baths sell new homes faster, and at better prices. It's a discovery that translates into more money in the pocket and less in the bank loan. And it has proved true in all regions.

Although we often talk about kitchen and bath remodeling in this column, now that another year is passing into history, it's a good time to evaluate those two important rooms.

The evaluating process demands specific questions builders should ask themselves. And it demands real nitty-gritty answers.

1. Who allocates the kitchen and bathroom space in each house?

In many cases, it is the architect. In others, it might be a designer or even an accountant. But whoever is responsible, it has resulted in hundreds of consumer complaints in shelter magazines about "tiny" baths, and kitchens with too little counter or storage space.

This often is complicated by cost-compounding decisions at the job site. A foreman might consider it trivial if a framing member is shifted an inch to make room for a soil stack. But the loss of an inch in the placement of a kitchen door—putting it 23 inches from the wall instead of 24 inches—can deny the wall a run of base cabinets, or force a special order that wasn't budgeted.

All trends should be questioned. Many publications say there is a big rush to Euro-style cabinets. Don't fall for that in New England.

The first point is this: Both kitchen and bath are *living* spaces. Comfortable space in them should not be sacrificed for larger spaces elsewhere, especially when those spaces do not take fitted equipment.

The second point is that once space is allocated, it must be *kept* allocated during construction.

The space allocator should have a knowledge of kitchen and bath products and their dimensions so that standard-size products will always fit. Even luxury products come in standard sizes.

2. Who designs your kitchens and bathrooms?

The buying public is growing more sophisticated, and so are the products. The design job should no longer be something to do "in addition to your other duties."

The designer should be aware of trends, but not subservient to them. (Trendy kitchens sell only to trendy customers, and then only if their trendiness coincides.)

Any reader of consumer magazines, for example, knows that the trend is toward open kitchens. It is easy for some non-designer to say: "Let's eliminate that wall and open the kitchen to the family room." But many home buyers hate the open trend. It means a lifetime of television or stereo noise, and conversation at times when they might prefer silence. (Compromises are possible, of course. Pocket or regular doors can be used to open or close the space, be it a wall or only a pass-through.)

All trends should be questioned. Many publications say there is a big rush to Euro-style cabinets. Don't fall for that in New England. If in doubt, give the home buyers a choice. The cabinets are the last thing to go into a house, and an either-or deal can be worked out with a cabinet distributor for close to the same price.

Also important to home-buyer satisfaction is good layout in kitchen and bath. These rooms must be functional, efficient, and attractive, with enough cabinetry for storage and enough counter surface for the jobs that have to be done.

The person who does the designing should be knowledgeable in design and layout principles, and know how to make them work.

3. Who decides which products to buy?

It's fine to have an accountant or bookkeeper involved in the decision, but it can be deadly if that person is the sole authority.

Price will always be a consideration, but it should not be primary. The buyer would do better to think of value for the money rather than lowest bid.

Low bids can invite problems. For example, a cabinet manufacturer might be discontinuing a line and, when that happens, the distributor's bid could make your eyes light up. But manufacturers abort a line only when it stops selling. Suddenly you've bought a dinosaur. Worse, the cabinets cannot be matched at a later date, so the home owner can't replace a door that six-year-old Jimmy just used as a hatchet repository.

Most builders have gotten this call from an installer: 'The kitchen is nearly in but I have two cabinets that don't fit.'

Such incidents can result in a loss of referrals—and that's something no builder can afford.

The decision maker should be one who attends trade shows to see what products are available and how they are changing, one who knows European from Euro-style, or porcelain-enameled cast iron from acrylic, and who appreciates the differences.

4. Do your installers know what to do and how to do it?

Most builders have gotten the following call from an installer in a new home: "The kitchen is nearly in, but I have two cabinets that are the wrong size and don't fit."

You call the distributor and chew him out. He sends someone out who finds that one cabinet was put in the wrong place and threw the whole job out.

Installers may know that kitchens are designed from the sink out to the corners. What they might not know is that they are installed from the *corners,* in sequence, and with blueprints or drawings. It makes sense, therefore, to hold a few classes now and then for the people who put the products in place.

The installer must know how to install, must have drawings, and must check those drawings before installing any cabinet. Many find it a good idea to draw the cabinets on the wall first, then to check to make sure that what they have corresponds with the drawings.

If any of you have been having these kinds of problems, it might pay to give some thought to these four questions—for a better and more profitable 1987. ■

Patrick J. Galvin is the author of Kitchen Planning Guide for Builders, Designers and Architects *and the former editor and publisher of* Kitchen & Bath Business.