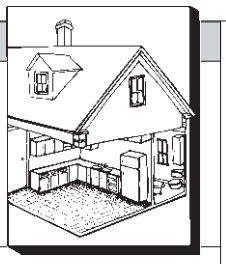

# Variety in Sink Design

by Lynn Comeskey

Kitchen sinks and bathroom lavs are a passive lot—they don't really have working parts and don't even get much code attention. But we expect a great deal of them: They have to hold water on command, beat up under a surprising amount of weight and physical abuse, withstand minor chemical and stain attacks, scrub easily, and still gleam like new for many years.

There are many sinks for your customers to choose from, and the choices are not getting any easier. The traditional sinks come in more shapes and colors than ever before, and there are some new materials on the block as well.

Sinks and bathroom lavs can be divided into three general categories by finish: metal, china/stoneware/ceramic, and composite (man-made) materials. Here's a review that should help the next time a client asks for your advice in finding the right sink for their situation.

## Metal

Stainless-steel sinks offer the greatest variety. Elkay, the largest American supplier, produces a broad selection of shapes and sizes in three different price levels. There are several other American manufacturers (Kohler has just joined the fray with nearly two dozen models), and some well-advertised import brands as well.

Stainless-steel sinks are usually limited to the kitchen and are typically top set (using the self-rimming edge) on top of almost any finish counter material. However, this rim also can be "tiled-in" with quarter-round tiles as shown in Figure 1.

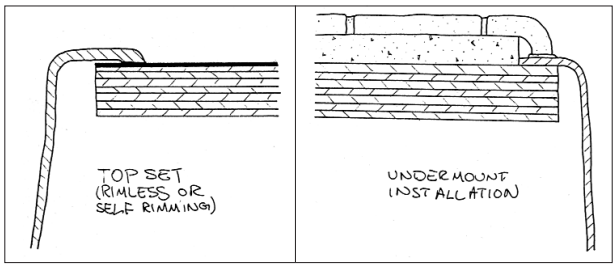


Figure 1. *Stainless-steel sinks are typically top-set onto most countertop materials (left). On tile counters, however, consider tiling in the rim with quarter-round tiles (right).*

In the thinner material (20 gauge), these sinks are relatively inexpensive. But with the heavier gauge (18) and better polished finish, they can cost as much as a cast-iron sink. Stainless-steel sinks have the advantage of being light and relatively easy to work with (unlike most other types, they can be drilled/punched on the job site).

Stainless steel also has the advantage of being neutral, so it can be used with most other colors. However, it shows hard water spotting and soap residue easily. Because the metal is relatively thin, it's important that the sink have an undercoating to dampen the noise of water hitting the sink bottom and the vibration of the garbage disposal. But stainless sinks do take abuse reasonably well. Although a heavy, pointed object can dent the surface, many stainless-steel sinks still look good 10 and even 20 years after installation.

The biggest news in stainless sinks in the past few years has been shapes and finishes. Because of European influence in kitchen design and the great use of "second sinks," you are no longer limited to a choice between singles and doubles. Prep sinks, bar sinks, and triples are now common in a wide variety of depths, shapes, and configurations.

Brass and copper sinks are popular in kitchens, bar, and baths, but high cost and high maintenance hold them to less than five percent of the market. They are beautiful, though, and easy to install. Brass basins can be used in many designs because of the popularity of this finish for fixtures and hardware; copper takes more careful color coordination. Both are light, but durability is an issue because of how easily they dent (faceted or peened finishes will help hide some sins here). But the biggest negative is that they require continuous maintenance to keep their unlaquered interiors gleaming.

## Ceramics

Enameled cast-iron sinks can be used almost anywhere and come in a huge variety of styles, sizes, shapes, and colors. They are manufactured in top-mounted or under-mounted versions, and in a square-rim design made for years by Eljer that butts the counter tile for a flush installation (see Figure 2). This look seems to have caught on, with Kohler and American Standard recently introducing new square edge sinks. Top-mounted sinks, on the other hand, seem to be declining in popularity. Colored "hudee" rims are also available for plastic laminate installations, but their powder finishes are easily scratched (see Figure 3).

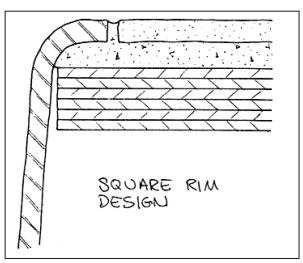


Figure 2. *An increasingly popular design in enameled cast-iron sinks has a square-rim that butts the counter tile for a flush installation.*

Cast-iron sinks are more expensive than their poorer cousins, enameled-steel basins. But they run about the same price as upper-end stainless-steel models. Kohler, American Standard, Eljer, and Commercial Enameling (a little-known but innovative southern California company) offer a wide selection of regular and decorator colors. We have used Kohler a great deal in the past, but sometimes find that the surfaces tend to be slightly wavy instead of completely smooth. This is most noticeable in dark colors.

Enameled cast-iron sinks are very quiet. But their weight can be a disadvantage during installation (they can't be drilled on site, either). And your customer will find that pots and pans leave a black mark, which can be removed only with an abrasive cleanser. This cleaning process will lead to the early deterioration of the surface; it loses its shine or luster. Enameled cast-iron also scratches easily, and can chip if something heavy is dropped on it. However, the surface can be repaired.

Enameled-steel sinks generally are used in inexpensive production homes; they run about half the cost of a cast-iron version. They are easy to work with and have wide color availability (although not as broad ass cast-iron). Some imported enameled-steel sinks are available, but they don't seem to be catching on due to the poor image of the domestic product. Enameled-steel sinks seem to have most of the disadvantages of stainless-steel and cast-iron sinks, and few of the advantages. They are easily chipped, but are not easily repaired.

Vitreous china sinks are formed of highly refined porcelain clay and fired with a vast assortment of colored glazes to provide a smooth and hard surface. The very smooth finish doesn't scratch easily, and is the under-mounted. They also can be cast as wall hung or pedestal lavs. They are a little more expensive than cast-iron lavs. Most are designed with holes for faucets. But there are a few with no lip or ledge so the faucet must be mounted in the counter. This requires some planning and at least an extra hour of labor with a tiled surface.

This same problem comes up with hand-thrown "pottery" basins. The local supplier I use, Trent Pottery of Los Gatos, Calif., produces custom sinks of vitrified stoneware with very distinctive glazes they've developed themselves. No two sinks are alike (and understandably, their sinks cost more than factory-made basins).

The company also produces tile sets that match the glaze and the circumference of the sink so they can be fitted easily, saving several hours of the tile setter's time. The faucet holes are formed in the tile.

Porcher has come out with a product made of "fire clay," a form of vitreous china glazed at a higher-than-normal temperature. The finish is more attractive than the vitreous china or enameled cast-iron and reportedly more durable. These sinks cost approximately $150 more than cast-iron sinks.

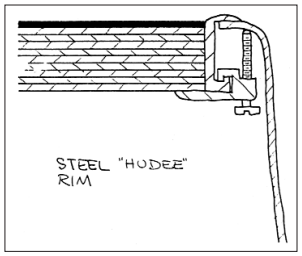


Figure 3. *Colored, steel "hudee" rims are available for fitting a sink to plastic laminate counters. However, their powder finishes are easily scratched.*

## Composite Materials

Fiberglass is a man-made material that's appropriate for bar and laundry sinks; Kohler is one of a number of manufacturers. Fiberglass sinks are available in many colors and are relatively inexpensive (about half the cost of cast-iron). But they scratch easily. They are top-mounted typically, and are easy to install.

Dupont's Corian is another composite material (in this case, acrylic with a ground mineral filler) that is cast into sinks and lavs. Dupont recently decided to promote their sinks as a separate item. They can be installed with counter tops of any material—not just Corian. Accordingly, they are offering five new kitchen sinks including some with built-in drain boards. It will be interesting to see how these are accepted. Although the colors they offer tend to be bland, I think Corian is a tough product to beat, easiest to clean of all the sink materials (it's the first choice where sanitation is a priority). China is subject to shattering if a heavy object hits a flaw point.

Vitreous china sinks generally are used in bathrooms, and depending on the edge design, can be top-set or Cultured marble, which is available in solids and "agate" and "marble" versions, is used frequently in the bath (it isn't appropriate for kitchen sinks) in cast vanity tops and lavs. It has the advantage of being relatively inexpensive, both as a material and in the labor saved with an "integral" top. But the most interesting new development in composite materials comes from Europe. Franke, Blanco, and Luwa offer quartz sinks literally made of crushed quartz and bonded together with colored resin. These sinks have been in use in Europe for the past five years. They are substantially more expensive than cast-iron, but are extremely resistant to staining and scratching. "Quartz" sinks come in a wide variety of colors and shapes; their top and bottom surfaces are a matt finish and inside walls are smooth and shiny. ■

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