

New Products: K&B for the '90s



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A FEW PRACTICAL INNOVATIONS COULD BE FOUND AMONG THE OPULENT BATHS AND FLASHY KITCHENS AT THIS YEAR'S K&B SHOW

By Patrick Galvin

It's a little ironic to see Spartan, low-flush toilets displayed next to showers with multiple heads and enormous tubs with high-volume faucets. Code officials in many states that are limiting toilets to less than 1.6 gallons per flush and showerhead flow to 2.75 gpm might balk at the wastefulness of these mega-tubs and showers. But the companies displaying their products at this year's Kitchen/Bath Industry Show in Chicago seem convinced that Americans still want opulent bathrooms, regardless of water shortages.

Environmental concerns also take a back seat in the kitchen. Appliance manufacturers have put a lot of effort into making their products more efficient in the past few years. But this year, the emphasis was on convenience and design. For instance, the professional-style ranges feature added heat zones and optional radiant or convection baking. The new halogen burners are becoming more popular, although they throw a lot of heat—a liability during the summer months. The magnetic induction coils are most efficient. But they are also most expensive.

Appearances have changed in both the kitchen and the bathroom. Appliances are sleek and clean in white or mirror-finish black. Bath and kitchen faucets have gone “decorator,” sporting inlaid gold, marble, and brass. The dominant trend in cabinets was all-white finishes or light woods.

Prices have risen, as they always

seem to. But costs aside, I wonder how many homeowners will want to invest the time and money to keep all the ornate fixtures, the giant tubs, and the white kitchens clean?

Fixtures Go With the Flow

As more states (including Georgia, Colorado, California, and Massachusetts) mandate low-flush toilets, manufacturers have responded with more models and styles. But what's gained there may be lost on the other side of the bathroom. For instance, high-volume waterfall faucets feature flows as wide as 18 inches, and Sterling Faucet has a fast-fill valve that delivers more than 20 gallons per minute.

The high-flow/low-flow conflict is exemplified in the Shower Pavilion by Hansgrohe (see lead photo). It has seven sprays: five individually adjustable massaging body sprays, an overhead spray with three modes, and a hand spray. They can be used individually or all at once. While some state codes restrict showerhead flow, multiple heads seem to have been overlooked.

There are plenty of new faucets available in a wide range of materials, many with fancy names and designer credentials.

On the more practical side, Grohe America introduced a new Grohmix thermostat/pressure balance valve that allows the user to select a water temperature for shower or bath that is accurate to within 1°F (see Figure 1). It can be

set between 60° and 100°, but a red override button permits water up to a scorching 140°.

For high-end customers, American Standard introduced "Smart Seat," a bidet attachment built into a toilet seat. Looking more like a rocket control panel than a toilet seat, "Smart Seat" has buttons to adjust the temperature and velocity of a warm water spray, as well as a warm air dryer. The seat may also be heated.

To accommodate the disabled customer, Technically Unique Bathing Systems (TUBS) showed its Aquanomics line of bathtubs that feature a door on the side (see Figure 2). No need to step over the tub wall and risk slipping. Just get in, sit down, close the door and turn on the water. Jets are optional. Filling the tub takes eight minutes, but one model has a water reservoir which will fill the tub in 100 seconds. This is for use in nursing homes where there might be several bathers in succession. Standard size is 60 inches long, 30 inches wide, and 36 inches deep.

Cabinets

Kitchen cabinets seem to go in and out of style faster than wide lapels and narrow ties. This year, cabinets have gone white again, as they were in the late 1940s and early 1950s when the look was white-on-steel. Even the finishes on wood cabinets are lighter. The ever-popular pickled look is still going strong.

The flush, or Euro-style, look is defi-

nately in, and remains as popular as it was a year ago (see Figure 3). Traditional American styling continues to be strong as well, although it is often on frameless cabinets of American or European origin.

Cabinet finishes are glossy and durable. Some are polyester, but most are lacquer, decorative laminate, or catalyzed varnish. Of these choices, polyester gives the smoothest, most durable finish and the highest gloss. It is also about 25% more expensive. (Polyester is thermosetting, which means that it hardens under heat. Lacquer is thermoplastic, meaning it will soften.)

This year's polyesters are a far cry from the "cheapie" coatings of a dozen years ago. The material is generally imported, usually from Italy. The finish requires a long, multi-step process that Italian companies are set up for.

Fashion aside, there are two trends in the cabinet business that builders should be aware of. The first is the astonishing growth of Masco Corp. in the kitchen and bath field. The company recently acquired KraftMaid Cabinetry, which joins Merillat Industries, Fieldstone, StarMark, and its subsidiary, Encore. Masco claims about \$400 million or 10% of the total cabinet market, but it is aiming to control 25% of the market. Masco seems good at hitting its targets.

The other trend is the expansion by stock cabinet firms into semi-custom cabinetry, which offers more variety in color, style, and interior fittings than

stock cabinetry. Custom cabinets allow the most creativity by letting the owner select virtually any wood species in any number of styles. Two of the major players, Merillat and American Woodmark, already have set up separate semi-custom divisions under different names (Ameria and Timberlake, respectively). StarMark, which makes custom cabinetry, now has a division, Premier, making semi-custom cabinetry. Its Encore division manufactures stock cabinetry.

The upshot of both trends may be more confusion for you and your customers. For example, a recent KraftMaid ad shows 39 different doors. Add to this the plethora of choices available through other Masco cabinet makers. Seems like too much of a good thing. Distribution might also get complex. My guess is that some choices will probably be eliminated. I just hope they aren't the ones you've already specced.

Masco's reach in the kitchen and bath field, incidentally, goes far beyond cabinets. The company also owns Thermador and Waste King appliances; Delta, Epic, and Peerless faucets; Sherle Wagner; Artistic Brass; Aqua Glass and Alsons Corp. (both makers of bath fixtures); Norris Plumbing Fixtures; Baldwin Hardware, and several other companies in the furniture and building products fields.

Handy Installation

Two new products have been introduced to ease wall cabinet installation. Gil-Lift (1605 N. River, Independence, MO 64050; 816/833-0611) is a four-wheeled dolly with a hoist to lift and hold a cabinet assembly in place while it is attached to the wall (see Figure 4). A similar tool is Lift-

Mate, by Clark Oja Tools (1501 Clinton St., Buffalo, NY 14206; 705/682-2574). The unit jacks the wall cabinet up from the base cabinet, levels it, and holds it in place for attachment. Both products are ideal for one-man cabinet installations.

Refrigerators

GE's white-on-white topmount features a "take-out counter," a sort of door within a door that drops down to give access to often-used items and provide a serving space for snacks (see Figure 5, next page). Through-the-door ice and water is above, in the freezer door.

Tappan's look is glossy black on black, what the company calls a "sophisticated Euro look." One model has a handy door-ajar alarm. Amana's "ebony" refrigerator features convenient controls mounted vertically on a strip on the outside of the refrigerator door, above and between the two handles.

Sub-Zero offers a side-by-side unit with the ice and water dispenser door on the refrigerator side. It feeds through a chute from the freezer when activated. Sub-Zero is a built-in designed to be covered with panels that blend with the cabinets.

Ranges

Thermador's new cooktops have a black surface made from patterned Ceran, a European-made ceramic. The material, which looks like glass, helps conceal any scratches and is easy to clean. Thermador also has a range with halogen burners, the hottest thing in cooktops. The burners heat up instantly, a real convenience for cooks in a hurry.

Blanco, being a European company, doesn't have to strive for a Euro look

Figure 1. Grohe America's new Grohmix thermostatic valve allows the user to select a water temperature for shower or bath that is accurate to within 1°F. It can be set between 60° and 100°, but a red override button permits water up to a scorching 140°.



Figure 2. Technically Unique Bathing Systems (TUBS) showed its Aquanomics line of bathtubs for the disabled. With this tub, there's no need to step over the tub wall and risk slipping; just get in, sit down, close the door, and turn on the water.



Figure 3. The flush, or Euro-style, look remains a very popular kitchen fashion. These UltraCraft Sussex II cabinets, by Alsie, are a classic example of the style.



Figure 4. Gil-Lift is a four-wheeled dolly that can jack a wall cabinet up, level it, and hold it in place for attachment. Hoists like these are ideal for one-man cabinet installations.

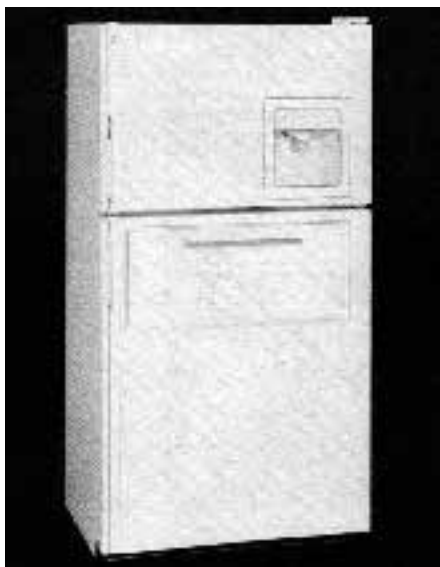


Figure 5. GE's solid white topmount features a "take-out counter," a sort of door within a door that drops down to give access to often-used items and provide a serving space for snacks. The ice and water dispenser is above in the freezer door.



Figure 6. Blanco's new Gourmet cooktop has two halogen heat zones in the front and two warmers in the back with an extended burner zone. Halogens heat up fast but throw off a lot of waste heat.



Figure 7. Jenn-Air's Dual-Fuel has gas burners and an electric oven. The oven can be set for radiant or convection cooking with a dial turn.

(see Figure 6). Its new Gourmet cooktop has two halogen heat zones in the front, two warmers in the back and a central double-coil heat zone that extends the burner zones.

Jenn-Air offers new versatility with its Dual-Fuel set up (see Figure 7). The burners use gas, a favorite for most cooks. But the oven uses electricity and can be set for radiant or convection cooking with a dial turn. Jenn-Air also has a new electric grill, the first to be U.L.-approved for outdoor use. It is aimed at the high-rise balcony and pool-side trades.

For lovers of commercial-style cooking, the new Russell Range comes in an optional 36-inch width, allowing room for six burners. The unit is 24 inches deep so it fits flush with standard base cabinets. It's also AGA-certified for zero clearance.

Downdraft ventilation for cooktops, a technology tied up for decades by Jenn-Air patents, became more accessible this year. Broan's Eclipse, available in 30-inch or 36-inch widths, plugs into the back of most types of cooktops. Thermador displayed its Cook 'N' Vent unit that, like the Eclipse, works with most cooktops. The unit may be covered with top plates that come in various colors, available from Thermador, to make it match different cooktops.

New and Neat

Delamination is an all too common problem with some surfaces. But Wilsonart's new formed structural laminate features a decorative surface fused to a phenolic substrate, making delamination virtually impossible. Thicknesses are 1/8 inch, 1/4 inch, 3/8 inch, and 1/2 inch. Widths are 4 feet or 5 feet, with 8- and 10-foot lengths. The material works well without a substrate on structural items, like vanities, seating, counters, toilet partitions, furniture and various built-ins.

New from VTI Industries are EuroCurv panels, high-pressure laminated panels with a tight 180° edge wrap. The panels may be handy for making custom cabinet doors and drawer fronts as well as counters, built-ins, desks, table tops, and furniture.

Despite some innovative new products, many of the items displayed represented trends that have dominated the kitchen and bath industry for the past decade. In the kitchen, convenience is top priority. In the bath, luxury and comfort predominate. In both rooms, customers will need plenty of money to get the design and the look they want. ■

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