

Kitchen islands now the centre of attention

Kitchen islands are growing in size as they become centres of attention in the room and multifunctional hubs of activity beyond cooking

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As kitchen islands become entertainment and work zones, home designers are experimenting with different layouts and materials to ensure a seamless surface. Photo: Robert Hidey Architects

Countertops equipped with embedded elements that charge phones and tablets on one side, and feature a yakitori grill on the other, are among innovations taking place in kitchen islands. Designers are being asked to create these stand-alone fixtures as focal points and communal hubs. And, generally, the bigger, the better.

"An island could truly be 6 metres long if the overall space allowed for it," said Joe Human, a designer in New York and founder of Designs by Human.

Human said most functional islands ran about 0.9 metre wide and between 1.8 and 2.4 metres long for a good rectangular proportion. And because there should be at least four feet of space between the island and any other counters, a kitchen would need to be at least 18 square metres in size to hold an island at all.

In any event, the notion that kitchen islands could be gathering points for dining, drinking and socialising was crossing over from West to East, said Andrew Bell, a designer who works in Hong Kong and Bangkok.



Photo: Son Sriwannaanwit for Andrew Bel

"In the West ... islands are often described as the control deck of the family home," he said, "whereas in Hong Kong, with a preference among locals to confine cooking fumes to a closed kitchen, it is taking a lot longer to catch on. But as the preparation of a meal becomes more a part of guest entertainment and family life, it is now more common to demand an open kitchen."

They are also becoming increasingly multifunctional. Karl Champley, a Los Angeles-based home improvement expert and television host, and author of *Same Place, More Space*, has designed electrical outlets and cables into benchtops to accommodate televisions and computers. "I think of maximising every bit of space," he said.

That includes creating islands that connect to the main counters in the kitchen through retractable surfaces. "Countertops can slide out, doubling the work surface area. That's something we're seeing a lot of now," Champley said.

On both sides of the pond, designers are being asked to pay special attention to the layout and length of islands. At Robert Hidey Architects, an Irvine, California-based firm that works on large-scale luxury residential projects in the US and China, designers have incorporated substantial islands in Lambert Ranch, Irvine, a deluxe development coveted by Chinese buyers. Some stretch to 4.5 metres.



Photo: Lian Eoyang of VIF Studio

Residential projects in China are seeing the same sort of island treatment. Colin Liu, the international studio director for Robert Hidey Associates, takes social and cultural dictates into consideration for China developments, which include Rose Garden in Qinshan Lake, Hangzhou, where villas have two kitchens. One is where all the cooking takes place, with commercial-grade vents for smoke, the other a "show" kitchen, with an island, where no actual cooking happens.

Margaret Spicka, a project director at Robert Hidey Associates, said that even if there were no restrictions on space, there were some rules to keep in mind. "If you can't reach the centre of that island, then it's too big," she said.

And materials have to be considered. Some clients, Spicka said, preferred a seamless surface, and that would affect the size. Granite is a traditional island counter material, but the stone typically comes in 1.2 to 1.8-metre by 2.4 to 2.7-metre slabs.

Human recently worked with wood on a project, specifically timber from a tree felled in a client's garden. "We left the edges a little jagged and had it professionally sealed," he said, adding, however, that the more porous quality of wood meant that it could not be used, as granite could, for food preparation involving chopping and the like. "Stainless steel is another great option - it has a clean, modern feel and is so durable that you can hit it all day with pots and pans and nothing will hurt it."

Designers are also increasingly looking towards silestone as an alternative to granite. Made up of 94 per cent natural quartz, silestone, which has been popular in Europe for a while, is now gaining momentum in the US and Asia.

Champley said he preferred it to granite because it was among the most seamless of options. He can make an island counter up to 6 metres long with no visible joint in the surface.

"You can't stain it to save your life," he said. "And while it is thin, it is also hard and durable, so you can drop a cast iron pot on it and can't chip it. It's virtually maintenance-free."