



Classicism and the Kitchen

The principles of Classicism applied to the 21st-century kitchen.

By Sarah Blank

The evolution of the kitchen over the centuries began with the fire pit, which later became the hearth, which evolved into the central area where friends and family would gather for food and warmth. As the kitchen became more defined in the 18th century, it was relocated from the central living area to a remote area on the property or placed on a lower level. Later, in the early-20th century, more and more kitchens were located on the same level as the main living quarters; they were often small and part of a back service area. The “back of the house,” as it is known today, had many rooms to support the kitchen – service pantries, storage closets, silver storage and, of course, the butler’s pantry, which continues to be the staging and main support area for the dining room.

After World War II, advertisements began to portray the kitchen as a fashionable part of the home where the woman of the house would plan and execute the daily meals. The kitchen gained more importance as technologies advanced, and as the years went on, families spent more and more time there. Sometime around the 1970s, the back of the house began to be replaced with large kitchen/family rooms where family members would gather. As a result, supporting rooms and the hierarchy of the house were lost.

construction management I have been in the kitchen design business for 30 years. At some point during that period I began to realize that these so-called “great rooms,” often too large and impractical, were not giving homeowners what they needed. Kitchens also began to take on a life of their own – rarely was the designer taking the age or style of the home into consideration, and there was no order to what was being designed.

The Classical Approach

Integrating Classicism into kitchen design means learning and applying the principles of Classical architecture. Once the rules are understood, their application to contemporary design becomes clear. Maybe author, Notre Dame architecture professor, Rome Studies Program director and Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America fellow emeritus Steven W. Semes explains it best. The following is excerpted from his book *The Architecture of the Classical Interior* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2004):

We are all children of the modern world; if we want to understand the older, underlying tradition we must step outside the framework of the modern and see the world through classical eyes. ...Classical architecture, no less than classical literature, painting, sculpture, or music, is a continuing encounter between the achievements of the past and the concerns of the present.

Once we understand the principles of Classical architecture we can apply these rules to designing a kitchen, or any room in a house. The parts make up the whole, and compositional arrangement organizes the process – an entire room can be composed based on the principles of Classical architecture. Semes, in *The Architecture of the Classical Interior*, writes, “The patterns that govern the process of subdivision in classical composition are not mysterious...”:

Trystan Edwards [*Architectural Style*, Faber and Gower, 1926] identifies the three most essential patterns as the canon of number, the canon of punctuation, and the canon of inflection. Applying these principles to the interior, the canon of number concerns the avoidance of unresolved duality or undifferentiated equality. Two adjacent and equal parts – or any even number of equal parts – are perceived as unstable. ...The canon of punctuation concerns the use of bordering and framing devices as transitions between parts. Objects are not simply juxtaposed, but are set off from one another by transitional frames, moldings, and ornaments designed to separate and unify adjacent elements. ...Finally, the canon of inflection concerns the mutual adjustment of the parts to avoid monotony. A succession of undifferentiated equal parts, as in the orthogonal grid, is visually dead.





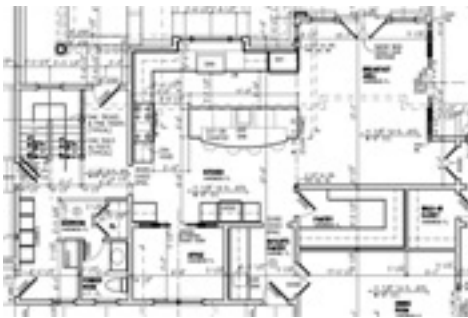
In terms of kitchen design, the canon of numbers applies, for example, to arranging an elevation of cabinetry so the center axis falls on an important subject or focal point, rather than in between. The canon of punctuation means breaking down elements; the more the parts are broken down, the more the adjacent elements are separated and framed. The canon of inflection means, for example, not paneling the remaining walls of a kitchen or pantry by dividing them in half, but breaking the panels into thirds; wall cabinets are not double stacked so they are of equal size, creating differentiation rather than duality.

Today's Kitchen

Today, the back of house – storage closets, mudroom, butler's pantry, sport closet – is as important as it was in the past, and possibly more. We are spending much more time in our kitchens today than in the past, thus the kitchen's presence is as important as the other living quarters.



There are certain criteria we must accept when designing a kitchen, including backsplash height and countertop height, which can be adjusted to some degree depending on the appliances that are being used. A solid knowledge of current appliances and their limitations is important. Once we gather information on the home – its age, style and history – we can decide which of the Classical orders we should follow.



Being situated in New England, I usually don't have the liberty of working from scratch, so most of our firm's work is renovation. First we will look at the back of house to see if the supporting rooms have been eliminated or integrated into the space. The arrangement as well as the scale of the rooms is where we like to start. How the kitchen has been set up to work with the supporting rooms and traffic flow in and around the work space are also important factors.

Proportional devices are essential guidelines. We follow the rules of a particular order when establishing the punctuation of a room; the ratio selected can vary, depending on the style (we use the Doric order quite a bit). This allows us to set up the entablature, as well as the "shaft" height – the wall cabinet height. Backsplash height can fluctuate, allowing us to maintain our proportions as closely as possible.



We then begin to work in the frame or elevation of each wall. The dado line unfortunately must be governed by the countertop height. As mentioned previously we are able to reduce the countertop height if the appliances selected can be lowered. We use selected orders to govern the division of the different spaces – the entablature, shaft and pedestal (the base cabinets). The moldings of the entablature and the base follow the same patterns of punctuation and differentiation throughout the entire elevation, as well as all the stiles and rails of the millwork. For example, the entablature is made up of the cornice, the frieze and the architrave. All of the parts will make up the whole. When refining the architectural millwork in the room we will also use punctuation. The style of the home will also influence our decision to use a 1:5 or 1:7 ratio. We must also keep in mind the personal aesthetic of the particular homeowner.



To recap, we begin by reviewing the "back of the house" layout; next we review the elevations and break up the parts based on the order that has been selected; third, we select a ratio to be used, and, not deviating from that ratio, break up each part.

I use these guidelines every day – and the more I apply them, the more I understand. By taking the time to learn and understand the rules – I continue to study at the Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America – we will only improve the interiors, as well as the exteriors, of our future buildings. ■