

# Chicago HOME + GARDEN



## Contractor Confidential

A nuts-and-bolts guy talks about design trends he likes—and a few he could live without—in kitchens and baths

BY BRADLEY LINCOLN



In a sleek penthouse kitchen with custom ebony-veener cabinetry, Goldberg cleverly concealed rarely used appliances.

**M**agazine-ready kitchens and bathrooms don't spring fully formed from an interior designer's imagination. Or from an architect's vision, no matter how inspired. It's a team effort, with a good general contractor as one of the most valuable players.

Having worked on high-end homes with high-profile architectural firms such as Brininstool + Lynch, Wheeler Kearns, and Vinci/Hamp for more than 21 years, contractor **Jake Goldberg** and his team (*Goldberg General Contracting*, [ggcinc.net](http://ggcinc.net)) have all kinds of experience under their belts (and accolades in their files). Goldberg, who grew up with an architect father and a designer mother, understands the symbiotic relationship necessary between the three professions.

"A great home starts with a contractor who can embrace the language of the architect and interior designer," he says. "This shared vision, paired with skilled craftsmen, allows for unlimited possibilities."

First and foremost, Goldberg recommends bringing the general contractor in as a consultant early in the design process. "We'll make sure that the designs are in line with the client's expectations and budget," he says. "It's money well spent if your contractor has experience and design knowledge. An architect or designer can think up things in a certain way and not

realize that it's a particularly expensive approach to something that has a more practical, often less expensive alternative."

**Here are some of the tips Goldberg has picked up in his years of installing kitchens and baths:**

**Island Opinion** "When you consider the dollars spent on a home renovation, typically a large portion goes into the kitchen, for good reason. This is where people spend the most time every day, with family at dinner or at parties, and they always congregate around the island. That's why I don't recommend putting cooktops or sinks in them unless you have to, for space reasons. It's nicer to have those elements against the wall, and use the island surface for food prep and presentation."



Be careful with island cooktops, advises contractor Jake Goldberg.

**Counter Intelligence** The trend for kitchen counters is to get away from highly polished granite that embodies the flashiness of the 1980s. Honed surfaces are in vogue today—they have a nice rich texture, a matte feel, and are understated and sophisticated. There's a lot of interest in concrete, but I'm not really a fan of it for counters. It's usually more expensive than natural stone, and it's less predictable. The little samples your designer shows you don't reflect the end results, because so much depends on tinting, mixing, and pouring. You get fissures that you wouldn't get with stone, and you have to be concerned that it's properly protected from staining.



(right) A slab of granite flips open to expose the stovetop. The cooking area should be as far away as possible from where people might congregate (left, in this Gold Coast kitchen designed by Michael Richman).

"A countertop is judged by its porosity and given an NSF [National Sanitation Foundation] rating based on how antiseptic it can be kept. I like some of the manmade quartz materials like Silestone and CaesarStone, which have higher NSF ratings than granite. It's real, ground-up stone mixed with resin, and if anyone is looking for a predictable, homogenous product for a big kitchen, manmade is the way to go, definitely.

"With natural stone countertops, the ideal situation is to go with the designer and client to pick out the specific piece of material at the warehouse. It's fun to go to these huge buildings, where you pick through racks of every stone imaginable, and cranes lift out the slabs one by one. Then we'll tape out exactly what section to use for the counter—the beautiful thing about that, for a contractor, is that we won't get blamed for disappointing the client with a piece of stone they don't like."

For a bachelor client who rarely cooked but frequently entertained, architects at Vinci/Hamp and Goldberg came up with a canny counter treatment. "We wanted to hide all the appliances and give the space a gallery feeling. The stove is under a flush section of honed black granite, three centimeters thick, which is counter-weighted into the wall. It flips open with one finger, and has hydraulic pistons inside like the trunk of a car, so it closes slowly and smoothly." Instead of unnecessary cabinets, there are hand-rubbed Macassar ebony- veneer shelves, perfect for displaying the client's pottery collection.

**Clearing the Air** "In my mind, there is no such thing as a good downdraft system. There are plenty of companies making and selling them, but it's just illogical to think that is an effective way of catching the grease and cooking smells. Hot air rises, so obviously it is better to catch fumes above the cooktop by using a ventilating hood or exhaust fan, rather than try to suck them down and out through the floor. Some clients and designers want sleekness and not to have to look at a hood, but unless you only use the stove a handful of times a year, don't install a downdraft. Even with properly routed duct work and filters, it is a mediocre approach with limitations."



GOLDBERG ON:

**Dishwashers with Drawers**

- + They save space and run smaller loads.
- They produce more steam than regular dishwashers, which may warp adjacent millwork.



GOLDBERG ON:

**Vessel Sinks**

- + Their architectural appeal can give a bathroom a dramatic look.
- Installation tends to be tricky when the faucet has to come out of the wall.

Another kitchen trend that Goldberg isn't sold on is those sleek, drawer-style dishwashers. "They take up less space, and you can run smaller loads, but a lot of my clients are disappointed with them. They are overly complicated to use, don't do such a terrific job of cleaning, and produce more steam than a regular washer, which is going to warp any millwork around them.

**Pressure Points** "Make sure your faucets are pressure-balanced, which means they have safety features that prevent you from being scalded when someone flushes a toilet and there's a drop in cold water pressure. Most faucets sold in the city are pressure-balanced, but not all states [that export fixtures] have standardized this concept. You can also use faucets with thermostatic valves, which are considerably more expensive but are calibrated to constantly adjust the hot and cold water, maintaining a preset temperature."

**Looking Radiant** "Install radiant mats under bathroom floors as a nice form of supplemental heat. It's a nylon mesh netting with wires attached that comes in a roll, and it's not all that expensive—enough for a small bathroom is less than \$1,000. You send a drawing to the manufacturer (Goldberg has worked with Warmly Yours in Buffalo Grove; [warmlyyours.com](http://warmlyyours.com)) and they send you a schematic showing how to cut the fabric. It gets laid into the thinset mortar before you lay the tiles, and an electrician opens a box and drops a hard pipe to the floor. Make sure that the mat extends under the entire floor, even the area behind the toilet, because the constant expanding and contracting can crack stone tile if it isn't uniformly distributed. If used conscientiously, they will save energy—use a thermostat that also functions as a timer, and don't leave it on all the time."

**Bowled Over** "People are allured by things that are new and different, but my advice is to go with products that are timeless and classic. Vessel sinks are popular, and they do have a dramatic architectural appeal, but I caution against using them. Installation tends to be tricky because the faucet has to come out of the wall, and they aren't as practical as undermounted sinks, which allow for more access and usability from the countertop. A vessel sink is harder to clean, it will splash, and with such a strong aesthetic, how are you going to feel about it three years down the road? If you must, put them in guest rooms or somewhere that's not used every day."



Consider the complexity of installation when choosing tile. Inexpensive subway-style tiles (these are from Daltile) create much the same effect as pricier brands.

**Wasteful Thinking** "Rain showers are very popular, but people don't realize that they use an incredible amount of water, especially when they have those very large heads. We need to be environmentally conscious—water requires energy to purify, which requires burning fossil fuels. These fixtures also require the appropriate amount of water pressure, a large water heater, and larger piping to perform well. It's disappointing for people to pick out a beautiful showerhead, install it expecting a rain forest, then have the water just dribble out, or only come out of one side."

**Tiling for Dollars** "Subway tiles are very popular today, and while you can buy them at Ann Sacks or Waterworks, you can save a lot of money by going with comparable versions by Daltile or American Olean. Spend more on the fixtures, faucets, and accessory pieces, and let the tile be the background that allows

those items to shine. Small tiles and mosaic work are much more time-consuming to install properly, and designers might not necessarily appreciate that if they are going for a certain aesthetic. But realize that as the tile format gets bigger, you'll get much more economies of speed, and lower labor cost. We do all tile work in-house, because it's difficult to find subcontractors that work to our level of standards. When the same team that puts up the tile backer board and does the wall prep is also laying the tiles, there is no finger-pointing if a surface turns out uneven and has to be redone.

"A good rule of thumb is to order about 10 to 15 percent more tile than you think is necessary, depending on how confident you are in the future availability of the product, the layout, and the nature of the material. Make sure there's a generous amount of this 'attic stock,' because this is a smaller relative investment than the labor cost would be to replace a wall or entire bathroom of tile. Natural materials are more fragile, and there will be considerably more waste because of variations in the stone. Some clients are happy with the randomness of Mother Nature; others may be particular about veins, inclusions, or movement. There will be blotches here and there that they may not want to use, and no manufacturer will allow you to cull through boxes and pick and choose certain tiles. An experienced installer will blend all of the boxes before beginning to lay the tile."

PHOTOGRAPHY: (JACK GOLDBERG) JEFF SCIORTINO; (ISLAND) TERRY DAVID DREW; (STOVETOP AND PENTHOUSE KITCHEN) DOUG FOGELSON

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