

NKBA[®]

FALL 2010

THE BUSINESS ISSUE

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magazine

NKBA.org

Designed to Inspire

SHOWROOM PROFILE:

Earl Lawson



PLUS: The Importance of Competitive Digital Imagery



Designed to Inspire

Innovative design and high functionality
incorporated into an elegant showroom space.

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It could be argued that the existence of the showroom featured in this issue of *NKBA Magazine* was in doubt at one point. It wasn't that the key designer lacked inspiration or drive, but more because he hadn't planned to be a part of the industry at all. "The industry found me basically," recalls Earl Lawson, owner of V6B Design Group. "I was looking into starting a career in a different industry when I was approached by an acquaintance to manage a showroom. I had a business background. I didn't know anything about managing a showroom, but I decided to give it a shot."

That first step on the way to getting him to where he is today took place nearly three decades ago in 1983. That first industry job was in Calgary, in the Province of Alberta, Canada and Lawson spent a few years there before transferring to Vancouver to manage another of the company's stores. He proved to be a quick-study and his passion for the industry was evident. Neither quality was lost on his employers. "A few years after moving to the management position in Vancouver, I was given the opportunity to buy the operations from the company I had been working for over those years. I decided to take that leap, but I also decided that I wanted to take the business from mid-range to high-end offerings," he says. "I eventually opened up a high-end showroom in Vancouver and ran Showcase Kitchens from 1989 until 2005 when it morphed into the V6B Design Group.

The industry stays interesting

"It's an interesting combination of creativity, customer interaction and business," says Lawson, commenting on what's held his interest for all these years. "It's not just design. There's a tangible end to the business where you're interacting with the client to really deliver on what they're expecting. At the high-end there's actually not more work than you might encounter doing a mid-range project. You do have better materials available, but you still have a client to interact with, scheduling, orders to process, service calls, invoicing – that's all still there. With the profit margin larger,

you have more flexibility in finding ways to deliver customer satisfaction, but it also starts out as a better experience. You also get to spend more time getting to know your clients."

Lawson's showroom offers a prime example of a "getting to know" experience. Except in this case, the customer is getting to know the company and getting a taste of the quality, creativity and craftsmanship that Lawson's team puts into their work. That level of professionalism is understandable if one were to look at the experience contained under the umbrella of V6b Design Group. The employees for the company have collectively been in the industry for decades. "I hired one of the senior people in 1986," Lawson says.

The showroom design also gives customers a preview of the high-end products they can expect if they enlist the services of V6B. That's an important part of getting a job started on the right foot. "When you deliver high-end, the product starts out very nice. When you're delivering a mid or low-end product, there's often that initial letdown when it's first taken out of the box since it doesn't look quite as nice to start," Lawson says. "You can ultimately deliver a very nice design with those products, but you are starting from a disadvantage."

The design's the thing

A nice product doesn't determine design according to Lawson and in his estimation, it's just the opposite. "We really have a focus on design here. Design first, product ►►

design profile

KITCHEN

second. We don't start with a particular manufacturer's line, we work with the client to determine the design and then find the products to match. We have a very experienced team and a very wide-ranging supply of products. With a larger product selection, we have the luxury of being able to do creative work at a variety of price points."

While the showroom display may have put design first, it certainly wasn't lacking in high-end product. But it's worth taking a step back for a moment to understand how Lawson and his team tackled the design of their show piece. "We treat our showroom designs as if we're working on a design for an actual paying client. To do this, we actually create a family profile and a client needs list," says Lawson.

The family profile will present a background for the fictitious family, taking into account any special needs due to disabilities, physical requirements; for instance, a very short or tall chef, any additional requirements of the space (workspace, entertaining guests) and finally, any aesthetic requests.

"When the project is finished, it's a complete kitchen—all the cabinetry and appliances are finished. That way, a client can come in and see a full kitchen and get an idea of what we can deliver."

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Now, on with the showroom!

Visitors to this showroom picturing the family cooking up bangers and mash or fish and chips or any other number of British dishes might be on track since the design is "British Colonial." Of course, since the family's background was imagined by Lawson and his team, there could be any number of reasons to go with this style – maybe the family had a penchant for watching BBC programs. Or maybe, just maybe, Lawson's decades in the industry have given him a good concept of what makes for a striking design display.

The kitchen was designed as a formal space that would also provide for many comforts an on-the-go family would appreciate. Clean, crisp lines accompany elegant and intricate detail. The woodwork details of the cabinets and vent hood are matched with the marble countertops of the kitchen island and the white quartz countertops located in the prep area.

By utilizing classic white as the color of the cabinetry, further attention can be called to some of the striking design elements that manage to be bold while still maintaining their class. Displays of vases are housed above the prep areas and viewable through the glass cabinet doors. The silver/sage backsplash introduces a slightly different, but pleasing color addition.

As Lawson explained in his design statement, the kitchen is not only a fully-functioning space; it's a room of custom-built furniture as well. Form, function and design flow through every nook and cranny of the area, with some of those nooks and crannies offering high-end hideaways.

Chef's secret

Nearly every aspect of this showroom kitchen offers extensive storage solutions without actually calling undo attention to that fact.

The entry cabinet offers a hiding place for something that might not have been in demand in colonial times, but can certainly be appreciated today – a recharging station is hidden there ready to service phone, iPod



and Blackberry requirements. Meanwhile, additional smart touches include a place to hang keys, a shelf for mail, a catch-all drawer, and a dropdown door that stands-in perfectly as a desktop.

The storage doesn't stop there. Behind retractable bi-fold pocket doors lucky chefs can find their dishes or turn on the flat screen television to cook along with their favorite show. Unless they just need to check a recipe online or order groceries ... then, they may just use the computer that's coupled with the television.

On either side of the pocket doors is storage of a different sort. Concealed behind the cabinetry woodwork are two 700 series Sub-Zero refrigerators. A wine rack to the right of the wall holding the refrigerators keeps red wines in close proximity to the glasses stored in the cabinet.

Meanwhile, Lawson's design has more secrets to reveal. An appliance garage situated just below the wine rack conceals a microwave and walnut cabinetry on the island also acts as a front to hide the

dishwasher. With the exception of the of the 48" Wolf range and the elegant chandelier illuminating through electric rather than candlelight, what's openly displayed in this design arena could very well have been housed in very high-end kitchens from generations past.

But does it work?

The short answer is, "yes." The more descriptive answer offers the reasons why. This design works because it's providing the needed space along with carefully considered workflow planning. The prep areas on either side of the range give space for a cook and company to prepare the evening's meals and the shelves next to the range keep spices at-the-ready. Utensils can be found in pullouts along with an integrated warming drawer with cutting board storage above it. The dishwasher is just a turn around and a few steps away to take care of the pots, pans and utensils when their work is complete.

The island's location with respect to the TV increases the likelihood of a teenager spending time with a parent preparing a meal or as a less formal eat-in kitchen spot.

But does it sell?

At the end of the day, even though it's a wonderful design, fictitious clients don't help to pay the design company's real expenses... or do they? It seems like many of Lawson's clients readily relate to family X's sensibilities. "About every other customer that walks into our showplace has responded with, "I want this!" Lawson says. "Even if they don't actually have the room to house a kitchen like this, the 'wow' factor really helps to inspire them. "

Favorite aspect and one last family member's requirement

When Lawson thinks about what his favorite part of the kitchen is, the back wall with the Sub-Zero refrigerator comes to mind. Upon further contemplation though, he changes his vote. "I like the little entry cabinet with the doggy door below it."

It's the fine details like that ensuring every design has its day. **■**

Sean Ruck spent seven years at the NKBA where he was the Editorial and PR manager. He has continued to write for the association, but in his full-time capacities, serves as the Editor-in-Chief for a medical news organization in New York. His time at the NKBA has been incredibly helpful with some of the design tips encountered over the years serve him well as he renovates the house he and his wife purchased last year.

