

# Designer Specializes in Collaboration

BY KIM BERNDTSON

Teaming with other trade professionals to create and deliver designs that balance style and function while focusing on specialties gives designer her edge.

**NORTHBROOK, IL** — There is nothing accidental about the name Nancy Jacobson chose for her company, Kitchen Design Partners, when she opened the Northbrook, IL-based business in 2006. While ‘kitchen’ and ‘design’ are apparent, ‘partners’ highlights the emphasis she places on the partnerships that are essential to every project.

“From day one, we set out to have a business model where we specialize in certain areas where we have definite expertise,” she says, noting hers is in cabinetry, countertops – especially quartz – and design. “Then we partner with other trades and professionals in the industry. And, of course, we partner with homeowners.”

Jacobson describes a perfect scenario as when a homeowner hires Kitchen Design Partners as well as an interior designer, general contractor and architect, if needed. “We can supply the nitty-gritty of kitchen and bath design,” she says. “It involves a lot of math and geometry...knowing if there is enough space for appliances, or if a design requires a filler in the corner. An interior designer may



Photo: Mike Kaske, Kaske Photography

▮ An adjacent porch was used to expand this kitchen. Wrapping the cabinets and countertops around the corner and into the new space transforms the kitchen, breakfast room and family room.



Photo: Dennis Jourdan Photo and Video, Inc.

▮ Nancy Jacobson designed the bar cabinetry in this kitchen at a shallower depth to allow enough space for the all-important island within the space’s long, narrow footprint.

be happy to offload that task to someone who they can count on and trust so they can focus on what they enjoy, which tends to be colors, fabrics, texture and scale...making sure all the selections work together and look spectacular. If they select a pretty backsplash tile, they can count on us to do right by it. We each have a different approach, and we think of things the others might not because we’re coming at the project from different angles.”

This approach, she believes, is more personal and gives clients the ability to assemble their own team of professionals. “Most kitchen and bath dealers do the design and supply the materials, and most of them also want to do the construction,” she says. “But once a homeowner selects a dealer, they are tied in to everything they do, in most cases. I felt that process was not as personal as what a lot of homeowners wanted. With my approach, we are part of a team, collaborating with the homeowner and other experts the homeowner has hired. It works best for people who really want to take the time and put the attention to detail into making their kitchen or bath really customized for them.”

That means that Jacobson routinely works with new professionals for each project. But she has perfected the potentially challenging

consequence, noting a few key tips to developing effective relationships with others. “I first reach out and introduce myself and the company,” she says. “I’ll invite them to the showroom and show examples of documentation, including a job site binder with information they can use. I also ask about their processes, expectations and what they need from us, and when they need it.”

“Another key to successful collaboration is never blaming others when mistakes happen,” she continues. “I’m unemotional about it. When there is a problem, we all get together as a team to fix it. It’s important for others to know we have their backs. Over the years, we have worked with many different companies. Since we’re always doing it, we’ve gotten pretty good at.”

#### FINDING FOCUS

From the beginning, Jacobson focused on keeping costs as low as possible. “It helped us weather the storm,” she says, noting her early years coincided with the Great Recession. “Most of our work was with a custom home builder doing tear downs. They had a pipeline of committed projects, but homeowners were terrified. Many downsized their selections. It was a challenge, but we got through it. Over time, we were able to develop other relationships so revenue was coming from different businesses.”

Those relationships have grown enough that about 60% of Kitchen Design Partner jobs are referrals from other partners. The remaining 40% comes from people who find the company, oftentimes via clients’ friends, the internet – on sites like Houzz – or the showroom, which Jacobson keeps small to provide clients better value in a low-pressure environment where they aren’t rushed to make decisions. There is no limit on the number of visits, or the number of changes clients can make to their design.

“It’s a boutique-style showroom, open by appointment,” she says. “It’s designed to be high-touch with personalized service. It’s private. It isn’t noisy and distracting

with people walking in and out all the time. I compare it to buying a wedding dress at a department store versus a boutique where every detail is attended to.”

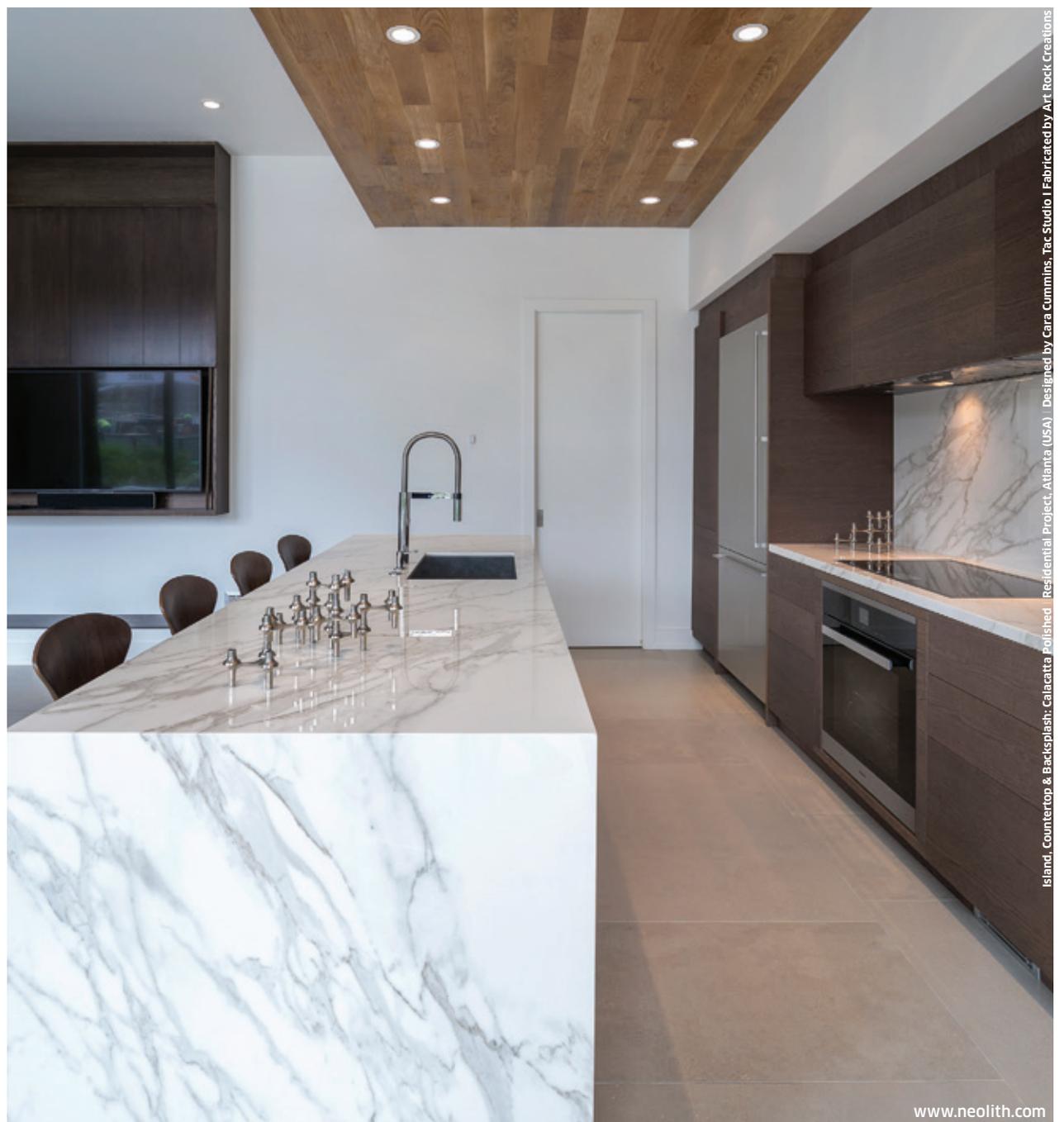
As such, the 950-sq.-ft. space showcases the company’s core strength – cabinetry. Jacobson

displays inset, full overlay and frameless styles, giving clients a visual ‘cabinetry 101’ in regard to construction. “We show all three styles as part of a strategy to show expertise,” she says.

Front and center is a kitchen display from the company’s custom cabinet line,

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Photo: Dennis Jourdan Photo and Video, Inc.

▣ Nancy Jacobson collaborated with Amy Kartheiser Design to transform this clients' master bathroom, designing the expansive vanity with furniture-style features that are currently trending with many of her clients.

Featherstone Cabinetry and Design. It's complete with an island for meeting with clients and a large screen TV for giving presentations. "We've worked with them since the day we opened," she says, adding that the company is her go-to recommendation for clients who want something no one else has.

A second room showcases Holiday Kitchens and Dura Supreme Cabinetry. It features two kitchen vignettes and a vanity while a third room has a vanity display. "Both companies are oriented to the fact that this is a fashion business," she explains. "They're always coming out with new offerings, with new finishes and door styles. They understand what people are looking for. We carry both lines because their offerings are different enough that sometimes one meets the need better and vice versa."

Jacobson has been steadfast about representing only American-made cabinetry since the beginning. "It has been one of our core values since we opened," she says. "I feel it's important to support American manufacturing."

Since the company also focuses on quartz countertops, Jacobson proudly carries Cambria, Caesarstone, Silestone and Vicostone. For clients looking for backsplash tiles, she also carries Virginia Tile and Daltile.

Jacobson purposely avoids appliances, although she does attend training offered by Sub-Zero/Wolf, Thermador and GE. "Those sessions are great and they do help us offer some advice to clients," she says. "But we're 10 minutes away from the largest, single-location appliance company in the U.S. We have relationships with some of their designers so we send clients to their showroom. They have great insights. It's part of our philosophy

of specialization and going to subject matter experts.

"It's the same with plumbing," she continues. "We have fabulous showrooms in the area where people can touch, feel and try. We don't try to duplicate that. They are the experts who can help people make decisions."

#### EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

To complement her core philosophies, Jacobson has completed CAPS (Certified Aging-In-Place Specialist) and CLIPP (Certified Living-in-Place Professional) training. She is also a member of the SEN Design Group, PowerHouse SMART, her local chamber of commerce and is part of a peer group in ASID.

"Being a member of the SEN Design Group gives us some buying power," she says. "But it's also a consulting group that focuses on helping kitchen and bath dealers be more successful. We are a small 'mom and pop' shop, so being part of the organization gives us access to a lot of manufacturers. I couldn't possibly travel to all of them on my own, but through the organization, I am able to meet with vendors directly, learn about their offerings and develop relationships."

As an invitation-only organization with members in construction, architecture, design and various specialty, financial and real estate services, PowerHouse SMART is a great resource for networking, according to Jacobson.

"Networking is an important part of how I establish relationships," she says. "I've been involved in more organizations, but in certain years I've found I have spread myself too thin and I wasn't doing any of them well. It's always a challenge. There's so much to do...and what I commit to, I want to do well." ■

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