

KITCHEN CRAFT

The Artistry of
Indoor and Outdoor Dining



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When it comes to remodels and additions, few things are more important than the spaces where people cook, commune, and enjoy the bounty of quality meals. I talked to design-build masters Model Remodel and outdoor living space experts Urban Oasis to find out how they create spectacular culinary experiences—indoors and out.

PHOTO: JIMMY WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY

Model Remodel and the Heart of the Home

Model Remodel has a knack for great open-plan kitchens with style to spare. Established in 2002, the Seattle-based design-build company has twenty-plus years of experience in whole-house remodels and an impressive roster of accolades, including several REX/T-REX Awards.

To learn more about what goes into these culinary spaces and how they fit into the rest of the home, I interviewed Lead Designer Cat Schmidt and Designer Morgan Bishop. They had a lot to tell me about the work, but more importantly, the value kitchens and dining spaces bring to our lives.

Cat Schmidt starts off by giving me the lay of the land. “We rarely take on a kitchen remodel without additional work since most of our clients are looking for whole-house improvements. We work with 30 clients a year with different needs and project scopes. At least a quarter of these include a kitchen.”

Getting the kitchen right is a big part of making a house a home. As Cat explains, kitchens aren’t just about cooking; they’re about creating emotional connections.

“The kitchen is the heart of the home and a place of comfort. From one generation to the next, we spend time with our family and friends in these spaces. We make food together, learn from each other, swap recipes, tell secrets, and even plan our futures. It’s the one place that feels familiar to us in every home.”

With this in mind, Model Remodel guides their clients towards “features that are beautiful, functional, and stand the test of time.” Getting kitchens right is about more than simply having a space to cook. They need to be aesthetically appealing, so people want to spend time in them. And they need to actually work.

Designer Morgan Bishop says that a functional kitchen should keep visitors and children out of the cook’s way while packing plenty of counterspace.

“This means providing room and pathways for guests, ideally at eye level with the cook.” This lets the host engage with visitors while maintaining the sanctity of the cooking space, with guests naturally assembling in the open area.

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CAT SCHMIDT, Model Remodel





PHOTO: CINDY APPLE PHOTOGRAPHY

[Dining rooms] are no longer a separate room for family dinners but instead an extension of the kitchen and living spaces.

MORGAN BISHOP, Model Remodel



PHOTO: CINDY APPLE PHOTOGRAPHY

Left: This kitchen—part of a historic 1906 Portage Bay home remodel—creates a cozy café atmosphere with a leather banquette on raised platform.

Above: This open-concept kitchen remodel in Fremont plays with natural light and color and showcases a long kitchen island with a beautiful waterfall counter top.

Right: Also part of the Portage Bay remodel, this evocative dining room features a speakeasy-style bar with beverage center and luxe crystal lighting.

“If the client hosts parties, creating a nearby bar or seating area will help keep the kitchen clear.” In cases where there’s more than one cook, Model Remodel relocates appliances and fixtures to accommodate individual cooking styles and prevent traffic jams.

Made to Order

Right from the start, the client’s goals inform the design framework. Each individual has different styles and needs, so Model Remodel focuses on custom designs instead of imposing their own preferences.

“[The client’s] vision gives us the building blocks,” explains Cat, “while our experience enables us to create a plan that is both feasible to construct and fits the homeowner’s budget. Ultimately, our goal is a design that excites the client and is actually viable to build.”

For Morgan, this collaboration is the most rewarding part of design. “We love working with people with different personalities and tastes, filling each space with functional and aesthetic details that match their personality. The most fun is showing them their space [as a] 3D model, and then watching that model come to life.”

The most frequent kitchen requests are open-concept designs, more countertop space, and clever storage solutions like “compost drawers, fruit and vegetable pull-out baskets, spice organizers, Super Susans, and the tried-and-true garbage/recycling pull-out.”

As for dining rooms, “they are no longer a separate room for family dinners but instead an extension of the kitchen and living spaces. They’re a place for board games, homework, and arts and crafts. Some clients opt to eliminate their dining room altogether for more leisure space.”

Material World

When it comes to materials and optional features, Model Remodel brings a wealth of knowledge to educate their clients—but never dictates what they should or shouldn’t have.

“We give our clients the tools to make good choices for themselves and decide what best suits their lifestyle, because every person is different. A client with small children has different needs than a family without children. Older, multigenerational households have different needs than young professionals.”

That said, they try to guide their clients toward environmentally-friendly selections—energy-efficient, durable, sustainably manufactured, locally sourced—whenever possible. They also inform clients of the trade-offs. For example, natural materials can require more maintenance than fabricated ones.

Model Remodel works closely with clients to ensure that fixtures and

finishes match their wants, needs, and lifestyles. Cat says that the process is always flexible and can go in unexpected directions.

"Sometimes we feel dead set on a product, but once clients touch, feel, and see the product in person, we may leave the showroom with something completely different."

Style and Substance

It can be challenging to create modern kitchen and dining spaces in old Seattle homes. As Morgan put it, "Older homes can be difficult when it comes to transforming closed spaces into open-concept designs. Removing or opening walls adds both complexity and cost when bringing the space up to the current building code."

But it's worth it, because at the end of the day it's all about creating a space wherein preparing and serving meals is a rewarding social experience that everyone can join in. It's about so much more than simply cooking and consuming, says Cat.

"Learning to prepare a meal is a life skill that we take with us until our last days. Pouring our cooking skills into a meal to share with others is a way to show our love for one another."



A handsome appliance garage in the new Portage Bay kitchen.

PHOTO: CINDY APPLE PHOTOGRAPHY

The Outdoor Wonders of Urban Oasis

One of the Seattle area's biggest draws is the nature that surrounds it, the enveloping woodlands, expansive waterways, and dramatic mountain vistas. Even our dense urban areas are unusually lush with native flora, and many leafier neighborhoods feel more like parkland than conventional housing tracts.

It's only natural that homeowners would want to cook, eat, and entertain in their own backyards. Sunny summers are obviously popular, but our temperate climate means that residents can enjoy meals outside year-round with the right setup. That's where Urban Oasis Design and Construction comes in.

Founded in 2010 by landscape architect Carrie Culp and construction manager Trevor Daley, Urban Oasis creates beautiful and functional landscapes and outdoor spaces across the Seattle area. Outdoor dining is something of a specialty.

With just three designers/project managers and 12 installers, they're a lean but highly productive company, taking on 35–50 projects a year, depending on scope and permitting timelines. Month-long projects include hardscaping, carpentry, planting, and creating special features like outdoor fireplaces.

Urban Oasis built this structure above an existing garage in Bellevue. The property did not have a lot of extra space so this location off the living room made perfect sense.



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PHOTO: JIMMY WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY

This fan-favorite outdoor kitchen and dining area is flexible and spacious, adding several “rooms” for entertaining and a sizable kitchen with ample counterspace. A guiding principle was “never strand the cook.” Here, they’ll always have company.

Our main goal is to create seamlessly flowing spaces. We take cues in the home’s architecture and tie them into the design then work with the client on the personal details.

CARRIE CULP, Urban Oasis

The Great Outdoors

I recently spoke with Carrie to find out how outdoor kitchens and dining areas stand apart from their indoor cousins. What is it about them that’s so appealing? It’s actually pretty simple.

“Most clients want a permanent space to barbecue year-round. It creates an immediate party atmosphere, something outside one’s normal routine.” Not only that, but they can also cook more pungent foods like fish without stinking up the house.

Obviously, having a comfortable, covered space is also appealing for hosting. “People love to watch football and entertain outdoors in the fall.” But it’s not all parties and sports. “We’ve worked with one family whose tradition is to cook and watch holiday movies outside by the fireplace with blankets.

“We have another family who moved to Seattle from the South, where their front porch was the hub of activity all summer. They literally live in their outdoor room all summer with an outdoor kitchen as well equipped as the one indoors. We even set it up so they can plug in amplifiers for music sessions.”

Urban Oasis owes its existence to a moment of inspiration. With a master’s degree in landscape architecture from the University of Pennsylvania, much of Carrie’s early work consisted of environmentally focused outdoor restoration projects like wetland remediation.



PHOTO: JIMMY WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY

This engendered a love of working and living outdoors, she says, and “it still influences my work.” In fact, she initially pitched the idea of creating outdoor living spaces to “prolong the time she could spend outside her own home every year.” Obviously, her clients feel the same way.

Form and Function Junction

One of the top priorities of building outdoor spaces is matching them to the existing home. Carrie says that the most important strategy designers have for overcoming that hurdle is working with each client individually to get it right. There is no one-size-fits-all template, and everyone receives a unique space.

“Our main goal is to create seamlessly flowing spaces. We take cues in the home’s architecture and tie them into the design, then work with the client on the personal details. During our initial consultation we often sketch out three conceptual design options. This allows us to think through multiple ways to make these projects work.”

Usually, the final design combines ideas from two options and the client’s feedback. “Using Sketch Up software, we provide a virtual walkthrough of the final design for the client’s approval. The

designers then work closely with Trevor and the construction team to ensure that the design is translated into the build.”

There are as many possible features as there are clients, but what do they all want? “When it comes to outdoor cooking, there are two other main things: counterspace (and lots of it!) and storage space. It is great to have dedicated space for everything needed for grilling.” They also like integrated trash drawers to keep things tidy and keep out scavenging animals.

Outdoor Challenge

Integrating utilities and appliances can be tricky. One of the biggest challenges Urban Oasis faces, Carrie says, is extending indoor amenities outdoors—gas, electric, and water have to all be integrated into the build. “Keeping clients warm often means incorporating a fireplace or firepit and gas or electric heaters.”

They also have to keep spaces dry in the wet months. Every municipality has different—and increasingly strict—code requirements when it comes to building cover, and working with them can be surprisingly vexing. Rules governing setbacks and environmentally critical areas can also slow down outdoor projects.

When it comes to sustainability, hardscaping is challenging. “It often requires concrete, lumber, and/or composite decking,” says Carrie. “Not every client is interested in sustainable materials—they’re more

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expensive, and many ‘recycled’ decking materials contain PVCs. There’s a trade-off between the easy care and longevity of composite lumber and more maintenance-intensive sustainable hardwood.”

Planting an Urban Oasis

For Urban Oasis, creating these spaces isn’t just about watching the Big Game or sharing BBQ in the open air. They also plant natural vegetation, the secret sauce of making the outdoor environment feel welcoming to both humans and wildlife. These plants, especially the natives, thrive while adding aesthetic appeal.

But for Carrie, it goes beyond decoration; it’s about connecting people with the outdoors. “So many people turn their back on their own outdoor spaces when they offer the easiest everyday opportunity to enjoy time outside.” Not only that, but they can also provide habitat for urban wildlife like birds and pollinators.

“I have always thought that if we could unite all of the backyards with some common green space, we could create true wildlife corridors within our cities.” That’s not just added value. It’s a whole new way of utilizing, preserving, and enjoying the natural environment surrounding us. Food for thought. 📌

Built at the height of the pandemic, this outdoor living space was designed for working, cooking, and dining. Its proximity to the indoor kitchen enabled easy plumbing for a small sink. Carrie loves its ambiance—the feeling of “being up in a tree house.”