

words *Joanne Friedrich*

WOW

Kitchens are considered the heart of the home. Rarely, however, is the kitchen thought of as the setting where visual inspiration resides. Art is usually saved for those special places like soaring foyers, expansive living room walls and cozy dens, where it can be appreciated and pondered. But in at least two Maine kitchens, some out-of-the-box “art” installations—one living and one transient—make these spaces as visually stimulating as galleries and points of extreme pride for the architects who designed them.

ART IN MOTION

The beauty and tranquility of the live aquatic environment that is this kitchen’s focal point belies the engineering feats needed to create it.

At first glance, all people see are the amazing starfish, urchins, shrimp, goby and blenny fish, filefish, tang, sea cucumber, live coral and other saltwater sea life thriving within the five-foot by three-foot by 2½-foot glass tank, but Elaine Murdoch, CMKBD, CAPS, at the Knickerbocker Group, Boothbay, knows full well the behind-the-scenes work required for this undersea spectacle.

From strengthening the floor to carry the approximately one-ton weight of the 275-gallon tank, its stand and all that water; to constructing cabinetry to hide the systems that keep the tank functioning and allow access for feeding the sea life; to designing removable paneling to cover the glass to prevent the water surface from showing, thus enhancing the aesthetic quality of the presentation; to adding special sweeps to the cabinet doors so the LED lighting over the tank wouldn’t bleed through, Murdoch reveled in the details as she redesigned this kitchen.



Photo: Rob Karosis

The decision was made from the beginning that the tank—the wish of the homeowner’s husband—be part of the plan in making over the 1990s-era kitchen in this home built in 1912. While the homeowner registered some skepticism about it initially, she concedes that its presence has been a game changer for the family.

“We weren’t a family that spent time in the kitchen prior to this,” she says. “But the tank has made it more pleasant, more fun to host people, and we’re educating people,

especially children, about it. We ended up loving it because it brings life, color and vibrancy into the room. A lot of people have TVs in their kitchens—this is a peaceful alternative.”

The tank, which was installed by and is maintained through New England Aquarium Services in Biddeford, is sited in front of the pantry and replaced an antique wood-burning stove. Because the fish tank is where the focus is, the rest of the design was kept simple, using

custom white millwork to blend the tank cabinetry with the rest of the room and a reconfiguration of the pantry space to set off the aquarium.

“Appliances usually drive everything,” says Murdoch of modern kitchen design, but not in this instance. The tank, which features lighting that mimics the changing hues of the day under the ocean, morphing through pinks and blues and deep purples, “is mesmerizing,” she says. “It is what catches your attention.”