

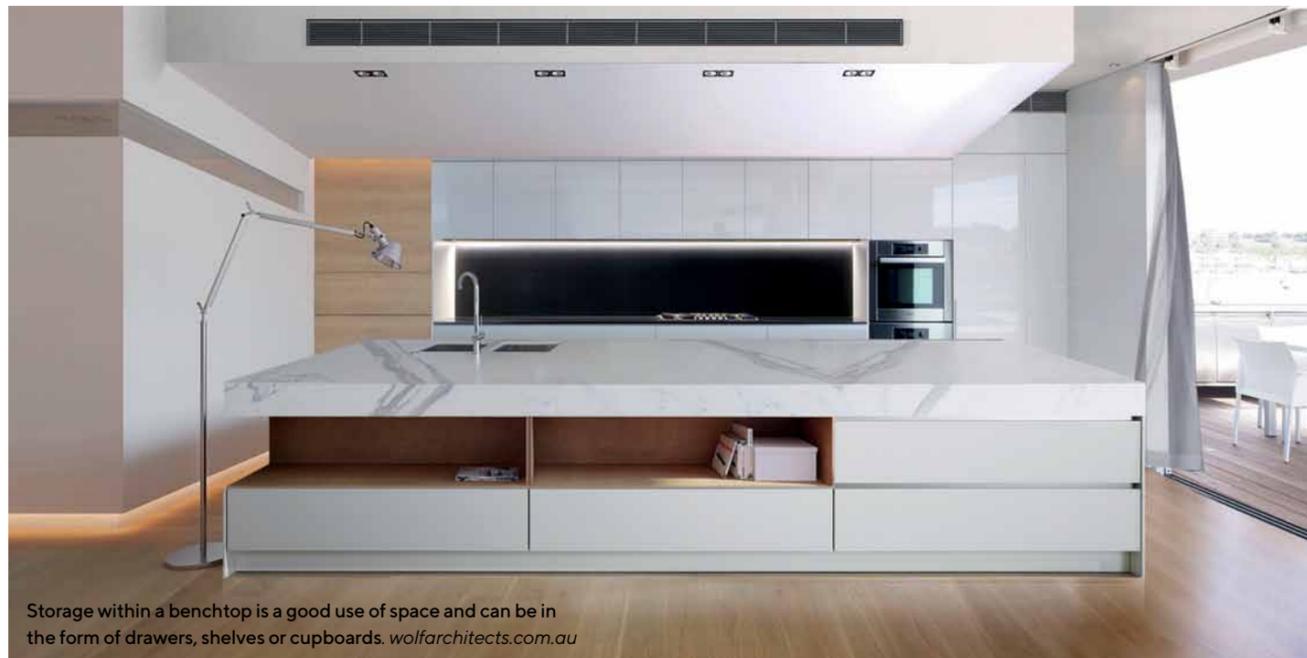


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SCRATCH THE **surface**

A kitchen benchtop must look the goods
but also be tough enough to withstand
constant heavy use from day to day

WORDS CARROL BAKER



Storage within a benchtop is a good use of space and can be in the form of drawers, shelves or cupboards. wolfarchitects.com.au



The elegant Aurea Stone 'Helix' is exclusive to Zenstone. zenstone.com.au



Rich natural tones in Cosentino's Dekton Chromica in Feroe. cosentino.com/en-au/

as a hub for friends and family to gather around, as well as somewhere to comfortably prepare meals and cook, a kitchen benchtop needs to be a functional and aesthetically pleasing space.

Architect Elaine Richardson says getting the right design — one that balances functionality and aesthetics — is key. “Fundamentally, the kitchen is the heart of the home, so benchtops need to be practical and they also need to look good,” she says.

When planning and designing kitchen bench space, Elaine says individual projects can vary wildly because they're tailored to a client's specific needs. “We start with discussions about aesthetics, a client's lifestyle, and their long-term goals for the kitchen so we can design where the benchtops will be positioned and what they'll contain.”

A kitchen is far more than the sum of all its parts, and while the benchtops within it are an obvious necessity, that doesn't mean they can't look extraordinary, according to Taras Wolf from Wolf Architects. “Benchtops can be a piece of art, a sculptural piece that you can touch and use. It's far more than just a flat surface to put things on,” he says.

Taras adds that in the average medium to large family-style kitchen, there are usually two benchtops that serve different functions. “You have the working benchtop, which is the functional benchtop space, and the island bench is the social space,” he says. As for bench height, a standard kitchen bench is 900mm high. Elaine says that's regarded as a comfortable ergonomic height. “However, it can be higher or even lower depending on the homeowners' requirements,” she says.

Then the depth of the bench needs to be considered. Benchtops are usually 600mm deep as a standard minimum; however, Taras suggests deeper benches are a good option. “For example, when you have a cooktop on a bench at 600mm,

saucepan handles can knock into a wall,” he says. “With a deeper benchtop you can also push appliances back to the wall and still have working space in front, and it will be more comfortable sitting at an island bench that your knees aren't knocking against.”

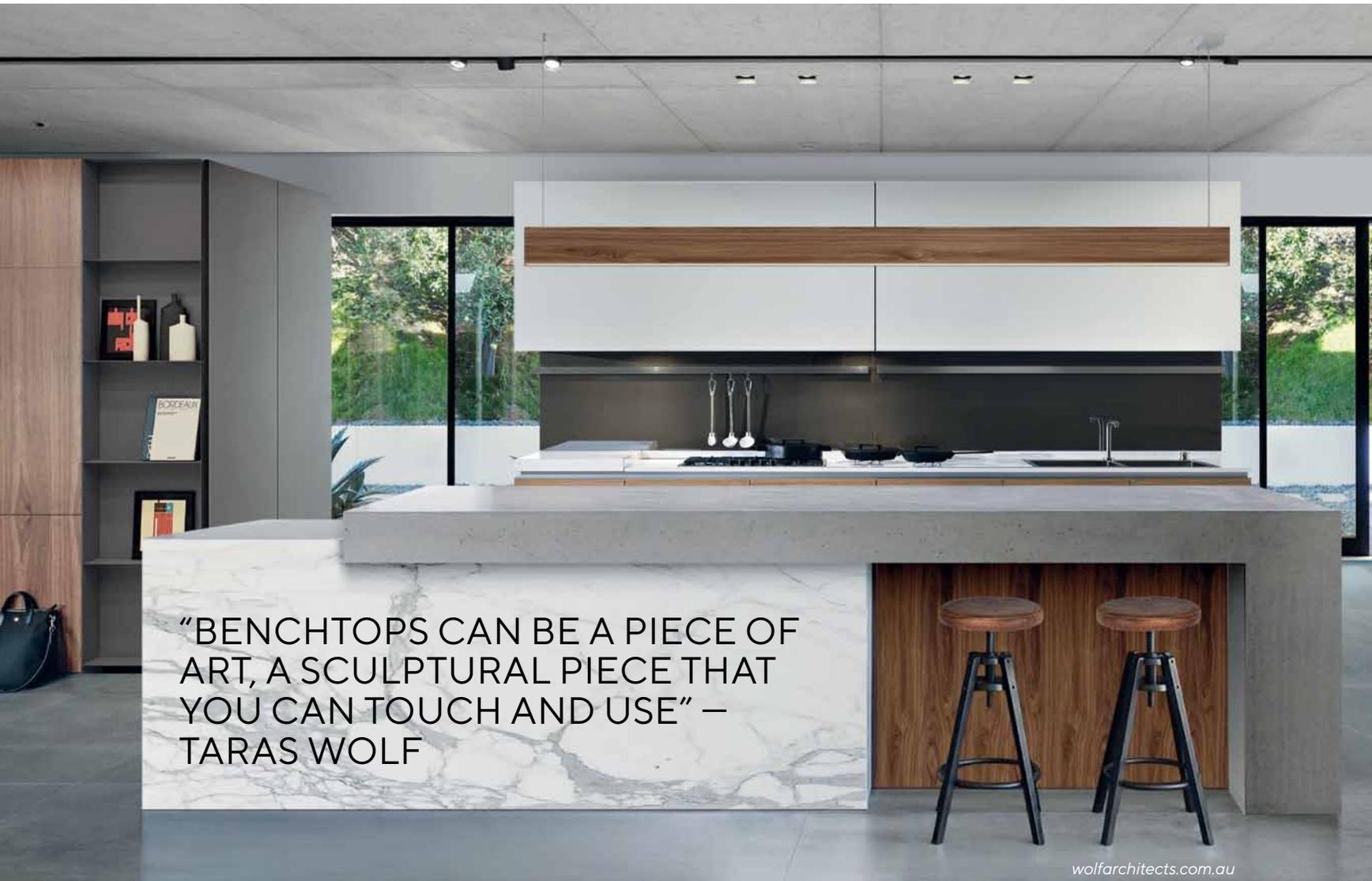
Getting the dimensions right for kitchen bench space really is critical so you'll have a functional space that you'll want to spend time in. Taras says good design dictates that the bench space in a kitchen should ideally be as large as is practically possible. “But it also needs to be proportionate in scale to other things around it, such as ceiling heights and windows,” he says.

He adds that planning movement around the kitchen is also key to designing where benchtops will go. “Knowing how people move around — the sequential elements — from fridge to preparation to cooktop to clean up, all affect decision making when deciding on benchtop placement,” he says.

Not all kitchens are large and when designing compact kitchens there's no room for error. Elaine says with a smaller kitchen, getting the benchtop configuration right becomes even more important. “We do a lot of work in the inner city and in small terraces, and ideally there should be room for two to move around comfortably without bumping into each other,” she says.



Continuity with colour is pleasing to the eye. caesarstone.com.au



“BENCHTOPS CAN BE A PIECE OF ART, A SCULPTURAL PIECE THAT YOU CAN TOUCH AND USE” – TARAS WOLF

wolfarchitects.com.au

Then, of course, there's the positioning of drawers. Taras says the most commonly used drawer is the one holding the knives and forks. "If it's positioned where people are preparing their daily lunches in the morning, you'll have to constantly move out of the way," he points out.

The shape of the bench, whether curved or angular, for example, also needs to be decided. Taras says after that, the finer details and materials need to be assessed and selected. "In some cases, certain shapes and materials won't work well together," he explains. "For example, heavy organic materials like concrete can be moulded to curvy shapes, but steel suits more angular shapes."

These days, most households have a diverse array of kitchen appliances to store — from blenders to coffee makers, toasters, food processors, slow cookers and more. Plus, of course, there are the pots and pans, crockery, casserole dishes, platters and those never-ending mountains of plastic containers.



Contrasting colours and materials. Photography
Barton Taylor. aahardwoods.com.au



ABOVE & BELOW Placement of facilities within benchtops can ensure socialising continues during chores.
Photography Florian Grohen. erarchitect.com.au



Photography Tania Niwa. mwarchitects.net.au



The kitchen island in Cross Stitch House is a perfect lesson in lines, shapes and materials.
Photography Peter Bennetts. fmdarchitects.com.au



Degabriele Kitchens designer Jacqui Carroll says available storage depends on three elements: “The thickness of the benchtop, height from the floor, and the kickboard height. A lot of people like drawers under benchtops rather than cupboards; drawers increase storage space by around 30 per cent, but those items tucked away right at the back of cupboards will rarely see daylight.”

Another popular option in contemporary kitchen benches is handle-less drawers. Jacqui says some people prefer the more streamlined look these offer. “Many consider handles a chunky, unnecessary accessory that can also be difficult to clean,” she says.

THE ULTIMATE MULTITASKER

Contemporary kitchens play so many roles — they’re where the cook and the rest of the gang linger over dessert, where friends gather for impromptu get-togethers and busy families grab a quick bite to eat and chat before racing out the door. Kitchen benchtops often serve double duty as a place to sit in the kitchen. Islands will typically have stools, bench seats or high-backed chairs.

Modern kitchen bench designs may also have a table integrated with a benchtop, which is a great option for more compact kitchens as the kitchen can also morph into the dining room when needed.

Technology is evolving at breakneck speed as global tech companies continue to push the boundaries of what’s possible. According to the report *Global Kitchen: the home kitchen in the era of globalisation*, there’s lots in store for kitchens: “The worktops will be able to cook, make calls, broadcast TV or provide access to the internet. They will be height-adjustable, contain recipe databases where chefs will guide the user through the method, as well as offer ingredient information and the ability to weigh food.” The possibilities are endless.

But it’s not here yet. Taras says they’re still fine-tuning the technology. “As yet they haven’t been able to make the screens super durable or flexible enough, but when they do, it will change the way we live.”

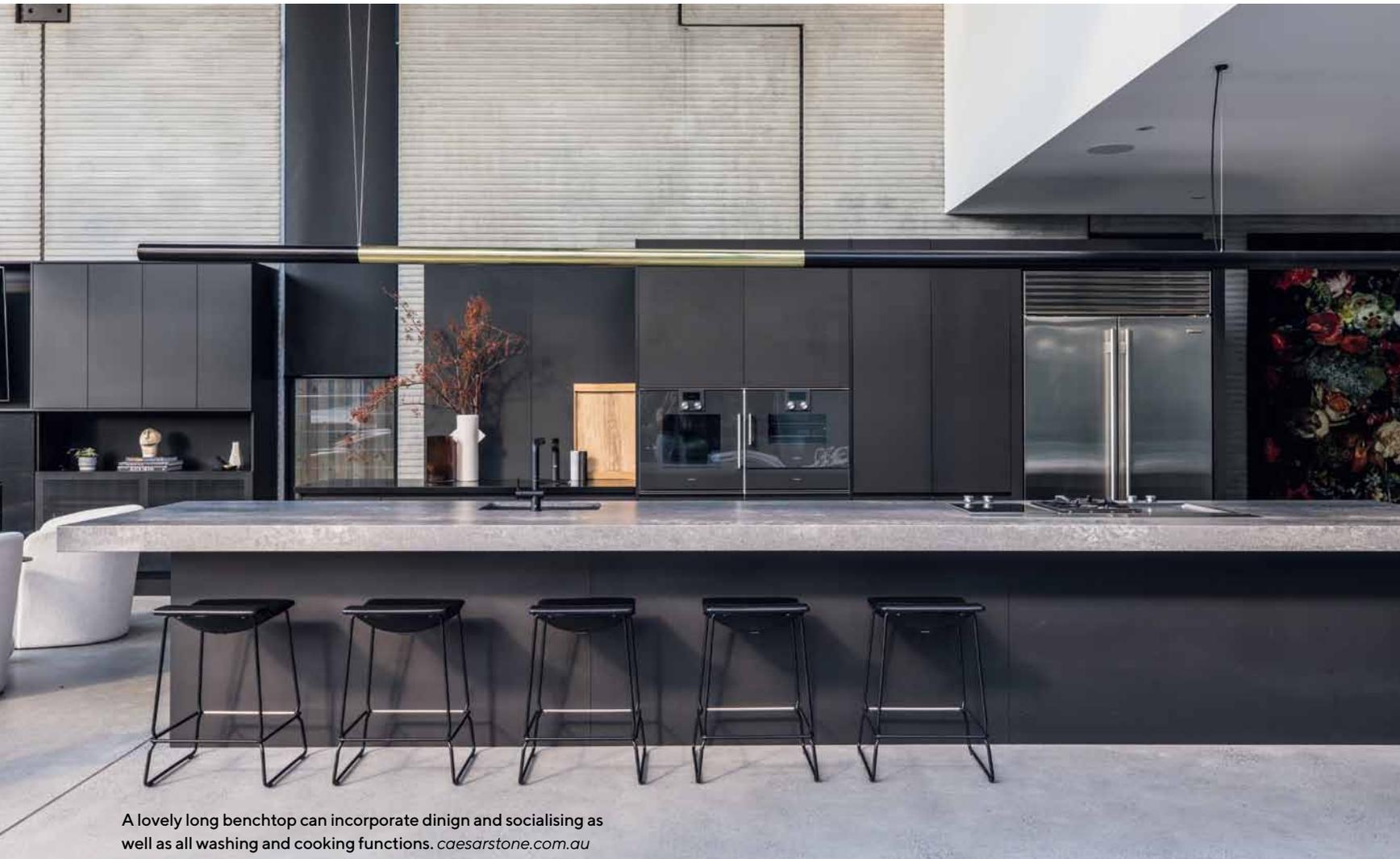
When it’s time to design your new kitchen bench space, it’s important to put yourself in the hands of design professionals. Jacqui says they’ll take out the guesswork and use their knowledge and expertise to get it right. “A good designer will be able to work with the elements that you resonate with,” she says. And that means designing a workable kitchen to suit your individual needs.

“Kitchens are a personal space — of all the rooms in your house it gets the biggest workout. If you make it an expression of what you like, and what speaks to you, your kitchen will not only come together in a balanced way, it will look beautiful for many years to come.”

BELOW Matching splashback and kickboard can soften tougher materials.

Design by Michelle Walker Architects. Photography Tania Niwa. mwarchitects.net.au





A lovely long benchtop can incorporate dining and socialising as well as all washing and cooking functions. caesarstone.com.au

TYPES OF BENCHTOPS

Engineered stone: This has the look of natural stone, without the price tag. It's made up of about 90 per cent quartz, polymer resins and pigments for enhanced strength and durability. It's also available in a vast array of colours and patterns that will suit any style of home. Its versatility and durability have made it one of the most popular options in benchtops.

Natural stone: The warmth and luxurious feel of marble, and strength and durability of granite, is popular in many homes. Every piece is bespoke, but some natural stone can be porous, so watch for staining. Use a protective sealer and opt for a darker colour if you have happy little helpers in the kitchen who are accident prone.

Porcelain: This relatively new product is made from a ceramic slab that's elegant as well as heat- and scratch-resistant. Porcelain can be manufactured in long lengths, so it's good for long island benches. Depending on the length, joins might not be required.

Laminate: For a budget kitchen benchtop, laminate remains a popular option. It's constructed from plastic laminate adhered to engineered wood. Laminate benchtops offer a lot of flexibility — they can emulate the look of timber or natural stone, for example. Laminate doesn't require ongoing maintenance like timber does, but it is susceptible to heat as well as scratching.

Timber: Long slabs of timber in kitchen benchtops have lasting appeal and lend themselves to both coastal or rustic looks. A timber benchtop can be stained or oiled. It's durable but it's important to remember it's not a cutting board. However, if timber is nicked or marked over time, it can be sanded back to look as good as new.

Concrete: From concrete footings to cooktops, concrete has come a long way and is making its mark in kitchen benchtops. Concrete is porous, so it definitely needs to be polished and sealed to avoid staining. Polished concrete has an



edgy industrial look, but it also works well in contemporary-style homes.

Stainless steel: Once only found in commercial kitchens, stainless-steel benchtops are finding their way into more and more homes. It's a hygienic, stain-resistant product that looks fab in homes with an industrial or brutalist look. 🏠