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3 of 12

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Welcome to Fantasy Island

Busy Families Get a Command Center With Ever More Gadgets and Features

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By ANNE MARIE CHAKER



Felicia Perretti for The Wall Street Journal

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The kitchen island—it's where everybody wants to be.

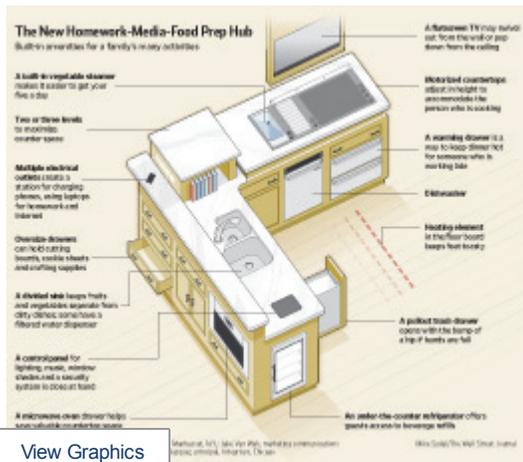
Designers are equipping islands with under-the-counter appliances, electronic controls and stylish design, turning what had been a humble seating annex into a command-and-control center for the home.

Kitchen islands are getting more tricked out and turning into household command-and-control centers. WSJ's Anne-Marie Chaker and Joseph Tralongo of Leeds Custom Designs join Lunch Break to discuss. Photo: Felicia Perretti for The Wall Street Journal.



Felicia Perretti for The Wall Street Journal

See how the kitchen island evolves.



View Graphics

People are demanding more seating, more electrical outlets and more custom storage, so islands can function as entertaining hubs, homework centers and charging stations. Foodies want gear like a flip-down cutting board or a manual lift to bring heavy mixers and blenders up to waist level. Families want a flatscreen TV mounted to a wall, to swivel in and out of view. Some companies are locating the control panel for window-shade and lighting systems in the island.

"The island has become the most sought-after element in every kitchen," says John Starck, Jr., president of Showcase Kitchens, based in Manhasset, N.Y. "People are moving walls, taking space from garages—just to get an island in."

Once-concealed preliminaries to a formal dinner, food prep and cooking are now the main event. It's part of the fun for guests to mingle around the hostess-chef and help out. In this context, the island becomes "a stage where you perform cooking in front of your friends," says Elizabeth C. Cromley, author of "The Food Axis: Cooking, Eating and the Architecture of American Houses."

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"I call it the lighthouse," says Joseph Tralongo, lead designer at Leeds Custom Design, in West Palm Beach, Fla. "When someone walks into the kitchen, they

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It's like a law of nature." And the island is a design element that helps balance interior space—especially in a big, open home. "It keeps everything in scale," Mr. Tralongo says.



Enlarge Image

Felicia Perretti for The Wall Street Journal

Two-year-old Wyatt pulling out the built in stool.

During the recent redesign of their 1907 yellow-stucco home in Philadelphia, Katy Friedland, a 35-year-old mother of two boys, ages 5 and 2, felt a kitchen island was a must. "The way the kitchen was laid out—it was so long and linear—it visually called for an island," she says. "I also could tell it was the room in the house where we would hang out the most."

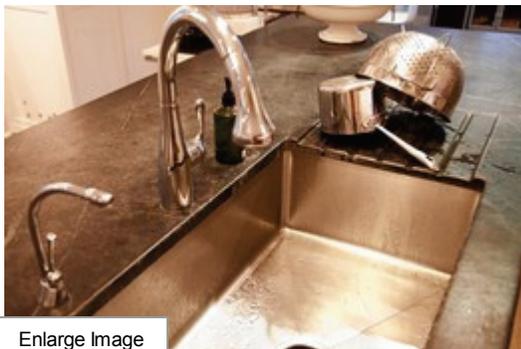


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A mixer's private elevator.

The new island, 10-feet long by 3-feet wide, is the prominent element in a kitchen that also features a walk-in butler's pantry and a breakfast room. A heavy mixer and a food processor are kept behind cabinet doors on manual lifts that elevate the appliances to counter height with the pull of a lever. Total cost for the island, including gray Brazilian soapstone countertop, appliances and installation, was \$15,000.



Enlarge Image

Felicia Perretti for The Wall Street Journal

The oversize sink has a hot-water faucet and built-in drain.

"It's like my captain's chair," says Ms. Friedland, a manager at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. "I can keep everyone close by, but still get stuff done." Five-year-old Julien is typically on a stool at the island, working with his Lego towers safely out of reach of 2-year-old Wyatt, who is typically drawing with crayons at a table nearby. A box of chew toys for Che, the miniature poodle, sits in a corner at the base of the island.

A slim drawer in front of the sink is a place for a half-dozen sponges to



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Showcase Kitchens

Dick and Betty Conway, of Long Beach, N.Y., have a V-shaped island with arm's-reach appliances for entertaining grandchildren.

(Franke "Little Butler," \$300) filters and dispenses water at tea-kettle temperature for quick cups of hot cocoa or tea. A drawer near the floor hides a step stool that 5-year-old Julien can pull out and climb to get to counter level, helping Mom.

The Friedlands had a compelling reason for going all out on their island. Without it, storage would have been scarce: Windows and a big arched doorway dominate an entire wall of the

kitchen. "There wasn't a place there to create a bank of cabinets," says Philadelphia-based designer Mona Ross Berman, who designed the kitchen and the island.

The coolest thing about the island, though, is its evening transformation, Ms. Friedland says. On many weekends, it becomes "our little hipster bar," she says, a place to entertain, display appetizers and chat with friends. For a recent "latkes and vodkas" party for 50 guests, the island held a smörgasbord of traditional Hanukkah fare—potato pancakes, brisket, pastrami, kugel—along with various flavored vodkas.

Audio

Anne Marie Chaker stopped by The Wall Street Journal This Morning.



Shared work spaces were common in 19th century farm and commercial kitchens. But freestanding islands weren't common in residential design until the post-War construction boom, says Sandy Isenstadt, University of Delaware professor of architectural

history. As the divide between kitchen and dining room disappeared, he says, "you were losing a wall. Cabinets migrated to the island," as did some appliances.

Big islands bring challenges. Some are so vast that the center is a countertop "dead zone," a hard-to-reach place for spills to puddle. "I typically suggest an island 5-feet wide by 8-feet long," says Lane Brooks, creative director for Christopher Peacock Home, a Greenwich, Conn., design firm. "You don't want it to look like an aircraft carrier," he adds. "You don't want to have to walk around the island to wipe it down."

Dick and Betty Conway recently remodeled the kitchen in their condo overlooking the ocean in Long Beach, N.Y. They needed a bigger kitchen to accommodate their

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years, and some of them are almost always visiting. "They'd take food, go into the living room and all over the sofas," says Mr. Conway, a retired sales executive. "We didn't have a real surface for play dough and drawing."

Mr. Conway decided on a V-shaped island with seating for six, making it easy for one or more adults to reach over and serve young guests. Among the under-the-counter features: a glass-front refrigerator (Marvel "Beverage Center" \$1,500) and a pull-drawer microwave oven (Sharp "Insight Pro," \$750). A 52-inch Samsung flatscreen TV mounted to the wall swings out for viewing "The Backyardigans" and "Wonder Pets" from the island. The beige-granite counter is a hard surface for craft projects, and a cupboard holds paints and crayons.

The island emboldened the Conways to put light-green carpeting down in other parts of their home, something they had been resigned to living without while their grandchildren were young. The island's total cost: \$20,000, with design by Mr. Conway and Showcase Kitchens.

Princeton, N.J., architect T. Jeffery Clarke recently put in a kitchen island with a built-in steamer (15-inch Wolf steamer, \$2,000), a pullout butcher-block cutting board and self-closing drawers that shut with a light push. Mr. Clarke chose a two-level design that clearly separates the 42-inch-high dining surface from the 36-inch-high food-prep surface.

Every year, Mr. Clarke and his wife, Barbara, host a Valentine's dinner party, starting off with an appetizer spread and a Champagne toast. Next year, they say, they will put out the spread on their island. "It becomes the gravitational center of the group anyway," Mr. Clarke says.

Write to Anne Marie Chaker at anne-marie.chaker@wsj.com

A version of this article appeared February 20, 2013, on page D1 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Welcome to Fantasy Island.

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