

MODULAR DESIGN MAKES OUTDOOR LIVING EASY



Left: The focal point of this outdoor dining room is the fireplace that was built using four modular units: fireplace, chimney, and two wine rack walls. Ample patio space was allotted for additional gathering space and walking room. Incandescent lighting was added to the chimney to highlight the piece and provide additional exterior illumination.

“We wanted to provide contractors a portfolio from which to create entire packages for their clients,” said Belgard Vice President Ken O’Neill. “Offering a one-stop-shop scenario plus color palettes that all work together makes designing each project so much easier.”

In recent years, one of the fastest growing trends in the construction industry has been the increased popularity of designer outdoor living spaces. An outdoor kitchen or living room not only adds to the character, value, and functionality of a home, it increases the home’s useable square footage for considerably less cost than under-beam construction.

When the trend first began to take shape, homeowners were initially limited due to dependence on contractors and craftsmen with particular skill sets and industry knowledge. Large scale projects were also often out of reach due to cost and time constraints. However, recent innovations in prefabricated modular construction have eliminated some of those roadblocks and are paving the way for those looking to take advantage of this booming market.

One Plus One Equals Simplicity

Joint venture partnerships between supply manufacturers represent an emerging trend in outdoor living construction that has greatly improved the ease and overall cost benefits of outdoor living construction.

Belgard’s latest venture has taken this concept one step further by partnering with Harmony Outdoor Living to create prefabricated modules for outdoor kitchens and living rooms. These modules, or kits, are pre-assembled, combining fireplaces, fire pits, and fire tables with Belgard pavers and wall products to make outdoor room construction a snap. Kitchen modules can even be ordered with grills, sinks, and stainless cabinetry included. These modules come shipped on a palette and are easily set in place with a Bobcat.

“Certain installations that once took days or weeks can now be done in minutes or hours once the foundation is ready,” says Joe Raboine, President of Harmony Outdoor Living, Inc. Since their partnership began, the fast growing segments of their customer base are interior designers and pool contractors. “Many of these people always wanted to get into outdoor living construction, but were afraid to,” says Raboine. “But with the modular units, the process is so much simpler from design to installation.”

The use of prefabricated modules also greatly reduces the incidence of buyer’s remorse. “There’s often a disconnect between the homeowner’s vision and the finish product,” says O’Neill. “But with the prefab modules, what you see is what you get. And because the fabrication is done in a controlled environment, you get a higher quality product that’s more resistant to settling and is covered under a warranty.”

An additional benefit to homeowners is the ability to phase out their dream design by adding one prefabricated element at a time. A homeowner can start with a patio and later add a kitchen, then a fireplace, then a seat wall, and so on.

“In a phased prefab project scenario, the homeowner and the contractor develop a long term relationship that often results in additional projects and referrals,” says O’Neill. “The contractor’s overall bottom line benefits tremendously. Construction costs are stable, and variables like skill level, material shortages or overages, and weather delays are often eliminated. Plus, with the ease and speed of installation, jobs are turned faster.”

Where to Begin

For those ready to foray into the world of outdoor living construction, the experts offer the following advice regarding creating a modular outdoor living project.



Left: Kitchen modules can be ordered with or without the grill, sink, and cabinetry, and depending on placement can include a bar extension for additional seating. This particular kitchen was designed to flank the fireplace, define the dining space, and operate solely as a cooking and prep area. It includes three different patterns of wall and paving products to vary color and texture and coordinate with the patio pavers.



Left: A fire table with an elevated bar was placed adjacent to the dining area to provide an element of interest and additional seating. The table includes a beaded glass top, built in natural gas burner, and wood box. In the background, the fireplace wall continues to define the perimeter of the space and is capped with a pillar unit with additional lighting.

Know Your Codes

Nothing is more frustrating than a design that cannot be implemented due to setback restrictions or a compromised foundation. Design elements like a kitchen bar or a fireplace often require additional foundation work, such as a thicker layer of gravel, or cement pads or footings. Knowing these details before you begin your design will save you a lot of time, headaches, and ultimately, money.


Choose Wisely

Develop a relationship with a reputable supply dealer that offers a knowledgeable staff, quick turnaround on product, and a well-stocked inventory. Don't lose out on a bid because you can't start the project in a timely manner. And, never underestimate the power of a well-designed display. Many homeowners do not have the creative ability to envision what a photograph will look like at full scale. But, let them take one step onto a full-scale display or a spec site, and the envy factor often kicks in. Another key element to success is a well stocked pool of reliable subcontractors. One of the primary benefits of creating outdoor living spaces with modular units is the quick turn-around time. If your subs don't show, that defeats the purpose.

Get Creative

Just because you're designing with modular units doesn't mean each project needs to be a cookie cutter of the next. Don't be afraid to vary your designs with texture, color, and dimension. Mix complementary elements, hues, curves and lines that work in harmony with the home's environment. Create focal points and use paver variations and design elements to create lines that lead to them. Consider using retaining walls or seat walls to define different areas and provide additional seating. Remember that modular designing gives you the flexibility of phasing the project out, so these elements can be planned in the design, but added later. Also remember to consider what the purpose and future usage of each space will be and to leave adequate room for walking, gathering, and furniture.

Phasing it Out

If a homeowner doesn't have the budget to create their dream now, discuss the option of building the project in phases. If planned correctly, the client can add an element at a time until the dream is complete. Once the site is excavated and leveled, go ahead and run lines for future plumbing and electrical. Most modular units are designed so that these elements can be added after the fact, but preplanned buried lines are much more aesthetically pleasing. And if you know ahead of time where the heavier elements will be, you can properly prepare the foundation to prevent sag. 



Above: Opposite the fireplace and flanking the rear of the home is a fire pit living area designed to create a separate cozy conversation area, yet still coordinate with the colors and textures of the other units and the exterior of the home.

Building Blocks

130: Percent. Outdoor kitchens can add as much as an estimated 130 percent of their cost to the purchase price. But the initial cost of outdoor kitchens varies from \$3,000 on the low end to \$100,000 or more, depending on the layout, design, quality and type of improvements. Source: National Association of Home Builders

1: Request. "In a recent national survey, the No. 1 request for an outdoor room is the outdoor kitchen," said landscape designer Michael Glassman. "The idea of dining under the stars is wonderful. Have you ever noticed how food just tastes better when you eat outside?" Source: Courtesy of HGTV.com

10,000: Dollars. For outdoor kitchen islands bear in mind that you will need to connect utilities such as water, electricity and gas to your new unit. You will need to budget for this as well as the cost of the unit. Depending on the model you select and the cost of connecting the utilities, the total cost of your investment can be well over \$10,000. Source: Courtesy of Outdoor Kitchen Concepts