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Worktops

The worktop is the most important visual element in the kitchen. This large horizontal area is the first to meet the eye. It is also the place where all the preparation and serving of cooking takes place.

Worktops for kitchens should be hardwearing, heatproof, water resistant, not too hard to break crockery, but not too soft to be easily scored with a knife, light in colour – both to reflect light and to disguise food residues which tend to be light in colour (dark colours also show up scratches, dust and wear), and last but not least, good to look at.

A tough specification and some compromises will be inevitable when selecting a finish for a top.

Sheet materials are essential. Joints in tiles or mosaics are soft and quickly ingrained with dirt, so become a breeding ground for undesirable bacteria as well as looking unattractive.

There are no perfect surfaces, most will be marred by very hot pans, so trivets should always be to hand or stainless steel pan supports inserted near the hob.

All will be spoiled by heavy scoring, so chopping boards should always be used.

Fabricating worktops is a specialised and often expensive business. Where possible employ specialist contractors to measure and make templates on site, prefabricate, deliver, fix and finally clean/seal/polish on site.

Plastic laminate faced worktops

Plastic laminate is still one of the most practical and cheapest materials for facing kitchen worktops.

It is made up of several sheets of *kraft* (Swedish for strong) paper and a printed decorative sheet protected with a transparent melamine overlay. These are impregnated with thermosetting resins and fused together under heat and high pressure. Typical sheet size: 3660 × 1525 × 0.8 mm with some patterns available up to 4100 mm long.

The laminate is abrasion, scratch and impact resistant, also heat resistant up to 180°C for short periods. It is hygienic and can be kept clean with water and mild detergents and non-scratch liquids so it is an ideal, maintenance-free, decorative surface for domestic kitchen worktops.

Grades and finishes

Plastic laminates are available in several grades such as: general purpose, post forming and vertical surfaces.

These sheets are also available in various finishes most typically *velour* (satin), gloss and matt.

Surface textures can also vary between flat, granular and heavily textured.

The most suitable choice for kitchen worktops are light colours with small patterns. These show least scratches and abrasions. Avoid dark, heavily textured or gloss finished laminates.

Wood laminates

There are two types of wood laminates – those using real wood veneers and cheaper versions using photographic prints of real wood. The former consists of genuine wood veneers laminated to a phenolic core which, with a melamine overlay, has the same practicality of standard plastic laminates. Do not use wood laminates with polyurethane or wax finishes for kitchen worktops.

Metallics

These are laminates using real metal foils over a laminate core to produce lightweight laminates which weigh far less compared