

# A Bolder Backsplash



BY ANATOLE BURKIN

**F**or a sleek, contemporary look in kitchens and bathrooms, back-painted glass has become a popular alternative to tile or synthetic solid-surface materials. The appeal is easy to understand: Back-painted glass is available in practically any color, is easy to clean, is durable, and can cover large surfaces without seams or grout lines. Best of all, its subtle, reflective surface brings a dramatic splash to any room.

Back-painted glass costs more than midrange ceramic tile but is on par with upper-end materials once all costs are figured. The biggest downside is availability: Not all small glass companies handle it. You'll likely have to find a large glass company, and you'll have more companies to choose from in larger metropolitan areas. Additionally, the substrate, usually drywall, must be absolutely flat in order for the glass to be installed securely.

## What is back-painted glass?

The process of painting glass goes back to the 1950s, but it was less than 10 years ago that the material became popular in residential and commercial design, primarily for backsplashes and walls but also for countertops and even tabletops.

The glass used has to have a low iron content and so have only a minimal green tint. The paint, unique for this application, is typically applied in two layers, with an additional sealer coat applied to the back side of the glass at a special facility. Then the glass is baked to harden the coatings.

The glass used may be regular (polished surface), matte, sandblasted, or etched with a pattern. Size limits depend on the vendor you are working with, but standard sheets measuring 84 in. by

***A clean, modern look.** This lavender backsplash provides a pop of color and an easy-to-clean surface behind the cooktop. Larger glass shops can supply and install back-painted glass.*

Back-painted glass offers a colorful, durable option for kitchen and bathroom walls



**Tangerine dream.** This kitchen island and backsplash highlight the jaw-dropping colors available on back-painted glass. Available in panels up to 84 in. by 130 in., the huge expanses of glass provide an uncluttered, seamless surface that's easy to clean.

130 in. are common. That makes it possible to do an average bath surround with just three pieces of glass.

Back-painted glass, which is typically tempered, is available in thicknesses ranging from 1/8 in. to 1 in. Thickness varies by application, but 1/4 in. is typical for backsplashes. The glass can be drilled, notched, or even bent to suit many architectural situations. Pricing varies based on thickness, cutouts, and other factors, but figure on about \$60 per sq. ft. for 1/4-in.-thick tempered glass. While that may seem high, the installation, assuming a flat wall, takes very little time compared to tile, which requires lots of cutting, setting, and grouting.

### Where can you use it?

Kitchens and bathrooms are the most common places to install back-painted glass, but that's just a start. Architect Liesl Geiger-Kincade, who operates Studio Geiger Architecture in New York City, has used back-painted glass for 10 years for kitchen backsplashes, as tub surrounds in bathrooms, and even on the doors of an armoire cabinet. She loves how the material transforms a room. "Back-painted glass adds an ephemeral layer of light to a room," she says. "It is a continuously changing surface. Sometimes the surface is color, sometimes glowing light, sometimes reflection."

Geiger-Kincade has a suggestion for working with back-painted glass: "To get the color you'd like, be sure to ask for some samples. You need to specify the exact type and brand of glass you will use in order to control the color of the final installation. Typically, we ask for samples on regular glass and low-iron glass such as Starphire. Regular glass has green in it, and Starphire is more clear, but it can also have a blue edge."

Designer Yana Mlynash of Mountain View, Calif., started using back-painted glass in 2009. "It's a reflective surface, which is great when you want to bring extra light into a room," she says. "The endless choice of colors is another benefit. You can do white cabinets and go bold on the glass color, allowing you to safely step away from the sterile, all-white look. And glass is very easy to keep clean."

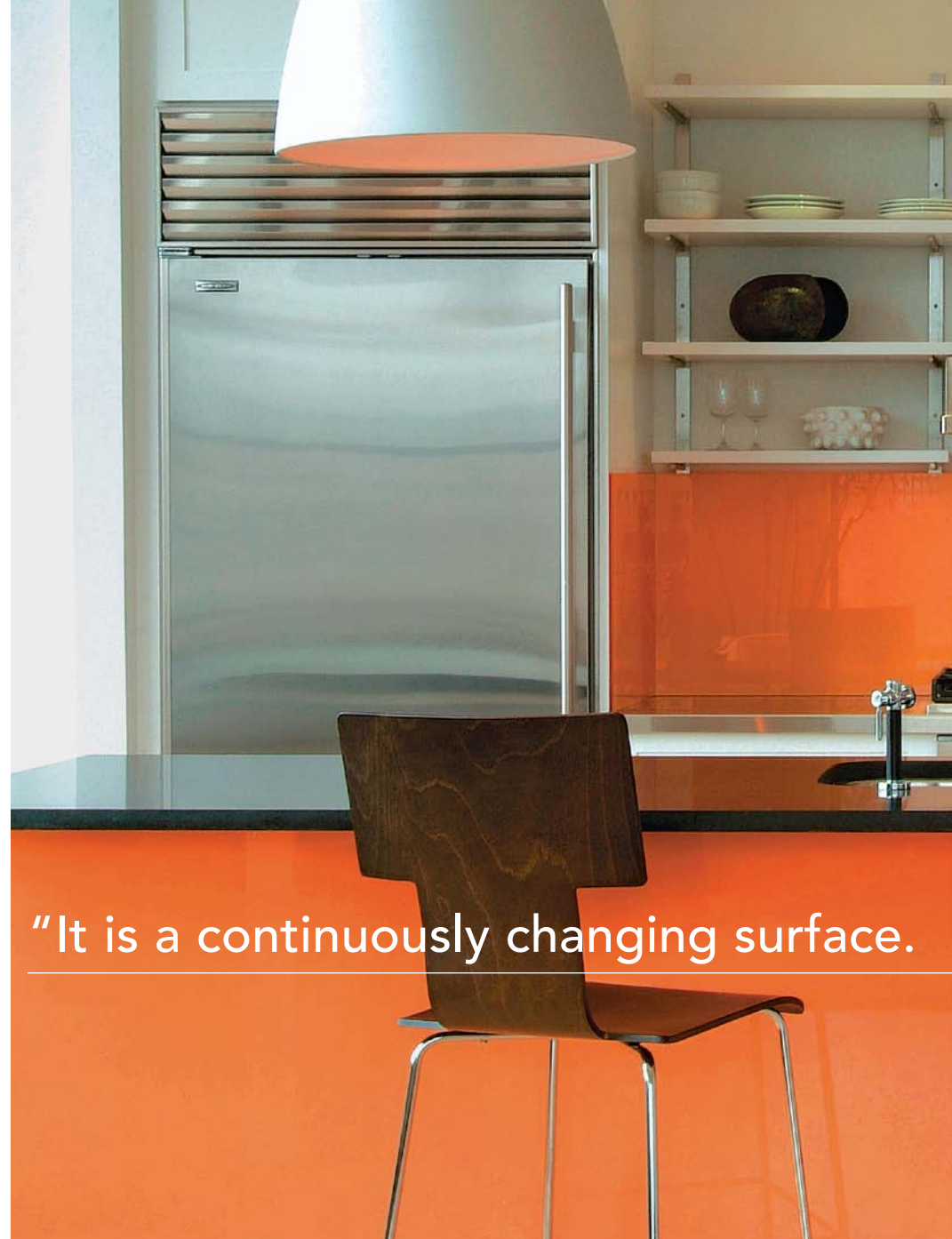
### Surface requirements

A flat wall is imperative for installing back-painted glass, says Mark Manning, president of Farallon Construction in the San Francisco Bay Area. Manning prepares a wall of 1/2-in. or 5/8-in. drywall with

a standard water-based primer. He checks the wall for flatness with a straightedge or a stringline, and if a stud is proud, he cuts away a section of drywall and planes down the hump. He also checks for drywall screws and nails left proud of the finished surface, which could scratch the paint on the back side of the glass.

### Installation

Once fixtures, counters, and cabinets are placed, accurate measurements can be taken for glass backsplashes and walls. Robert Olson of Golden West Glass in Sonoma, Calif., has installed custom back-painted glass features in California's wine country for years. "Measurements are critical," he says. "We use lasers and levels to measure for flatness, check the substrate, and determine how we're controlling our shear and tip, the two ways glass can fall." Outlets and other obstacles should be in their final locations, or at least laid out accurately. In the case of a backsplash or wall, the glass rests on a counter



"It is a continuously changing surface."



**Grout free.** This white shower and adjacent wall show off the ultrasmooth surface achievable with back-painted glass. The seams where panels join are sealed with neutral-cure clear silicone, which doesn't attack the paint on the back side.

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sometimes glowing light,  
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ARCHITECT LIESL GEIGER-KINCADE

**Light up a space.** The reflective quality of back-painted glass makes it useful for drawing light into otherwise dark spaces. This kitchen's painted-glass north wall reflects light coming from windows on the opposite side of the room.

or floor, what's called "going down hard." A 1/32-in.-thick sliver of clear plastic, called a block, is laid as a buffer along the bottom edge. The glass is attached directly to the wall using neutral-cure clear silicone, which doesn't react with the paint. J-channel provides extra holding capacity if that's necessary.

When a glass project requires multiple pieces, adjoining sheets are butt joined with a gap of 1/32 in. This allows for some wall movement without risking glass edges rubbing against and chipping each other. Joints are left alone in dry locations; in wet installations, the gap is sealed with neutral-cure clear silicone. The same is true of corner joints. Regarding maintenance, Olson says that soap and water are best. Glass cleaners containing ammonia can damage the painted surface by seeping through unsealed joints. □

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