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# kitchen & bath DESIGN NEWS<sup>®</sup>

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**KBDN'S TOP 50  
INNOVATORS**





# THE INNOVATORS

KBDN highlights **50** top innovators whose work, creative talents, business acumen and professionalism are currently leading the way for the industry and elevating the kitchen and bath trade. — BY KBDN STAFF







It's often said that the only constant in life is change. And, in a fast-paced industry driven by trends, technology, new products and ever-evolving human needs, it's no surprise that innovation is an essential part of what makes the kitchen and bath industry thrive.

But innovation isn't just about products, technology or trends. Rather, innovation comes from the people who bring great designs to life: the designers, dealers and industry pros who conceive new ideas, solve difficult problems, forge new business models, find creative ways of helping homeowners experience and embrace their most personal spaces, share their knowledge by speaking, blogging, mentoring and serving their industry, and inculcate design into their communities at large.

Of course everyone knows that the kitchen and bath industry loves to celebrate great design – and great design has always been at the heart of what this industry is all about. But *Kitchen & Bath Design News* has long held that it's equally important to celebrate the great designers, dealers and industry leaders who innovate every day, in myriad ways, both large and small, in order to raise the bar for the kitchen and bath industry as a whole.

For that reason, *KBDN* is proud to present its second annual Top 50 Innovators list, honoring industry professionals who have made a name for themselves through their creative efforts, leadership talents, business acumen and professionalism.

Nominated by their peers and then reviewed by the *KBDN* nominating committee, the 2018 Innovators reflect the best and the brightest industry talents – those shining stars who are lighting the way for future generations to come and redefining a multifaceted industry that reshapes lives even as it redesigns homes.

These are the artists who never stop seeking inspiration, the teachers who have never stopped learning, the technology gurus who are always ahead of the curve, the business professionals who understand that innovation is what drives success and profitability, the marketing talents who understand how to re-imagine the very channels of communication – and, most of all, the human beings whose passion drives them to always strive to be better – and in doing so, to make the industry better as well.

Some are long-time industry veterans, while others are young talents still forging their paths; some have showrooms, while others work as independent designers. Many are active in leadership roles, whether through association involvement, educational efforts or community programs. Several focus on a particular market segment or design specialty, where others have found their niche in catering to a broader-based audience, showcasing their innovation in the way they do business, interact with customers, forge ties with their communities or solve tough problems.

What they all share is an ability to think, work and create outside the box; a fearlessness in advancing their dreams and goals; a gift for leadership; the ability to change and evolve to keep pace with a rapidly changing market, and an extraordinary commitment to their firms, their clients and the kitchen and bath industry as a whole.

On this and the following 12 pages, *KBDN* spotlights the 2018 Innovators – 50 outstanding kitchen and bath professionals who are changing the industry right now. ■

*Know someone who's a true innovator in the kitchen and bath industry? KBDN will begin accepting nominations for next year's Innovators on January 1, 2019. Visit [KitchenBathDesign.com](http://KitchenBathDesign.com) for further details.*



## Michele Alfano

*Designer uses architecture background to craft thoughtful spaces.*

With formal architecture training and experience, Michele Alfano brings a distinctive bold, modern flair to her designs. The founder and creative director of Hudson Valley-based Michele Alfano Design holds a Master's of Architecture from the University at

Buffalo School of Architecture and is known for her architectural approach to kitchen and bath design.

Alfano refers to her (livable modern design) style as "a tailored emotional intelligence" – thoughtfully designed spaces that are eye-catching, highly functional and inspire well-being. According to Alfano, her design process begins with a program of listening to her clients and understanding the context of the problem before developing a solution. Her disciplined detailing brings spaces to life by inviting people to feel and to touch, and challenging them to think.

Alfano has received plenty of attention from brands, publications and media for her work. She was selected for the DXV Design Panel 2017, received accolades from the 2017 BLANCO by Design contest and was a speaker on design panels at KBIS and Wanted Design.

In addition to being a sought-after designer, Alfano is also a strong voice in the design blogosphere. In her design blog MOD Design Guru, she explores new innovations in the industry and investigates how lifestyles evolve alongside design trends. MOD Design Guru has been recognized by the JDR Industry Awards and the Modenus Top 100 Interior Design Blogs, and Alfano has been invited to travel and write for brands such as Tile of Spain, Miele, Mr. Steam, Brizo, Zephyr, DXV, Du Verre, the NKBA, Modenus and Axor.



## Michael Ampuja

*Designer crafts inventive solutions for challenging spaces*

Coming from a family of architects and builders, Mike Ampuja knew that he wanted to be a designer from an early age. After attending a technical high school for building design and studying architectural engineering in college, Ampuja went on to become

an NKBA-certified designer with the North Smithfield, RI firm Closettec.

Ampuja previously received a nod in *KBDN*'s August 2018 issue for his mobile showroom design, a solution born out of a need to work around customers' demanding work schedules. In designing the showroom, Ampuja had to deal with many unique concerns, including weight distribution, lighting the displays and incorporating a mobile power source. According to Ampuja, the showroom puts clients in need of custom storage solutions for tricky spaces at ease. He hopes to have additional mobile showrooms on the road in the near future.

Much like the mobile showroom, Ampuja's designs are perfectly tailored to clients' specific needs in order to maximize the utility of available space. One recent project in Boston, for example, a custom movie theater bar, boasts custom storage for 3-D glasses, remotes and candy. When considering customers' needs, Ampuja emphasizes the need to create timeless designs that will grow with clients and their families.





## Julia Buckingham

*Mix of vintage and modern styles has carved a multi-faceted design path*

"Modernique" is a design term coined by Julia Buckingham to describe her design style – a distinctive blend of modern and antique. Her mix of signature vintage and modern style is reflected in her designs, licensed products, her new book and a new boutique.

The principal of Buckingham Interiors + Design Ltd., a Chicago-based design studio she opened in 2007, Buckingham is a fixture in the design industry, enjoying leading roles in major projects and collaborations. She is a Trendspotter for Silestone by Cosentino and an inaugural member of the Authentic Luxury Guild with ROHL. She also partnered with Kohler, Cosentino and Benjamin Moore to create a designer kitchen and a vignette in New York for DIFFA Dining by Design.

Buckingham contributes to *Traditional Home* magazine's Color Master Classes, and is a founding contributor to the design blog *Material Girls*. Her designs have appeared on the pages of *Elle Décor*, *Interior Design*, *Traditional Home*, *House Beautiful* and *Luxe*, to name a few.

Her design style is also captured in her new book, *Modernique, Inspiring Interiors - Mixing Modern and Vintage Style*, and will be on display in her new Modernique boutique in Upper Phoenix. The boutique will feature a collection of her designed furniture and accessories, alongside lighting, textiles, antiques and artifacts. The space will showcase Buckingham's distinctive style – mixing and matching different genres and eras for a warm, classic look.



## Marie Cairns

*Designer creates spaces for people of all ages, abilities*

Marie Cairns of the San Diego, CA-based CairnsCraft Design & Remodel has spent nearly 30 years creating functional and beautiful living spaces for her California clientele. Her award-winning design build firm specializes in kitchens, baths, home additions and full home remodels, offering design services, project development, management and construction,

along with a specialized knowledge of all things Universal Design.

Indeed, as a Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist, she sees it as her mission to remodel homes to be functional and usable by anyone, regardless of age or ability.

A creative talent with a strong head for business, Cairns designed and built a one-of-a-kind kitchen and bath mobile showroom that allows her to display cabinetry, lighting, countertops, backsplashes, appliances, fixtures and built-ins to bring to her clients to provide a vast selection of choices for their remodel.

She established CairnsCraft Design & Remodel in 1990 in conjunction with Charles Cairns, and has been creating highly personalized designs ever since. She believes trust is essential to her success, and she places high value on customer service and attention to detail, which is evident in her Better Business Bureau A+ rating.

Her work has been published in *Coastal Magazine* and *Home & Garden Magazine*, and she has also served as v.p. of Academic Relations for the NKBA San Diego Chapter.



## Denise Butchko

*Marketing savvy storage pro and educator shares expertise*

Denise Butchko is a born marketer, one of the first to embrace online marketing, e-newsletters, webinars and social media – areas in which she continues to excel.

But while her expertise is impressive, her desire to share that knowledge

is what has made the certified closet designer and author a well-known presence in the kitchen and bath field. One of the first 10 people to be invited to participate in NKBA's Chapter Education Program, Butchko is a regular presenter on storage-related topics, and will again be speaking at KBIS 2019.

A member of the inaugural class of Registered Storage Designers in 2010, the owner of the Chicago-based Butchko and Company has now achieved Master Level certification and is one of only three people to achieve this level. An active member of the NKBA, she works with chapters across the country teaching closet design and sales, and also teaches an on-demand class for industry pros looking to get more involved in designing closets.

Her work has been featured in *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Chicago Sun-Times* and *Fortune Small Business*, among others, and she is a respected blogger, as well as a judge and former winner of the closet industry's "Top Shelf Design Awards" competition.



## Jonas Carnemark

*Sweden-born remodeler in step with Scandinavian design trend*

Jonas Carnemark spent much of his childhood in Sweden. Scandinavian design is literally his heritage. For the past 30 years, the principles of this newly popular style have infused his award-winning design and build work.

According to Carnemark, who also owns the KONST SieMatic showroom near his Bethesda, MD firm, the Scandinavian style is not just "whitewashed walls, wood floors and blue accents," rather it's about beautiful spaces that are highly functional. It is about minimalism, expert craftsmanship, a respect for the environment, affordability and the use of natural materials, he says.

Today the Scandinavian look and style is found in the concept of "hygge" or "lagom" as they say in Sweden, which have recently re-entered the design lexicon. "These are the design principles I grew up around," says Carnemark. "My parents, my grandparents, my family summers in Sweden...I don't adhere to everyday function and minimalism intentionally. These concepts are in my blood."

Carnemark's reputation for award-winning design goes back many years. Today he is a frequent speaker on the topic of balancing luxury and budget in kitchen and bathroom design, green design and aging in place.