

# Innovation Plus Inspiration

**A**FTER NEARLY TWO DECADES IN A CALGARY, ALTA., SHOWROOM, Empire Kitchen & Bath relocated to an older industrial building that offered the opportunity to own rather than lease the property. The move motivated the company to repurpose its showroom, redesign the displays and offer a wholly different presentation.

“Our last showroom was beautiful, but this is definitely a significant improvement over that,” said Kevin Mullen, president of the Canadian-based Empire Group of Companies.

With 18,000 square feet of showroom and office space and approximately 20,000 additional square feet comprising a warehouse and manufacturing facility for Empire’s custom cabinets, the new showroom is nearly double the size of the previous space. Displays are more detailed, kitchens are larger, and seven new appliance brands were added.

## NEW SPACE, NEW IDEAS

Because Mullen already owned the building that houses the new showroom – and it had been gutted to be sold – the project took just six months from the start of construction to move-in day.

As required for commercial projects in Calgary, Empire brought in an architect for the conceptual aspect of the space, but Empire’s staff took the reins with the design.

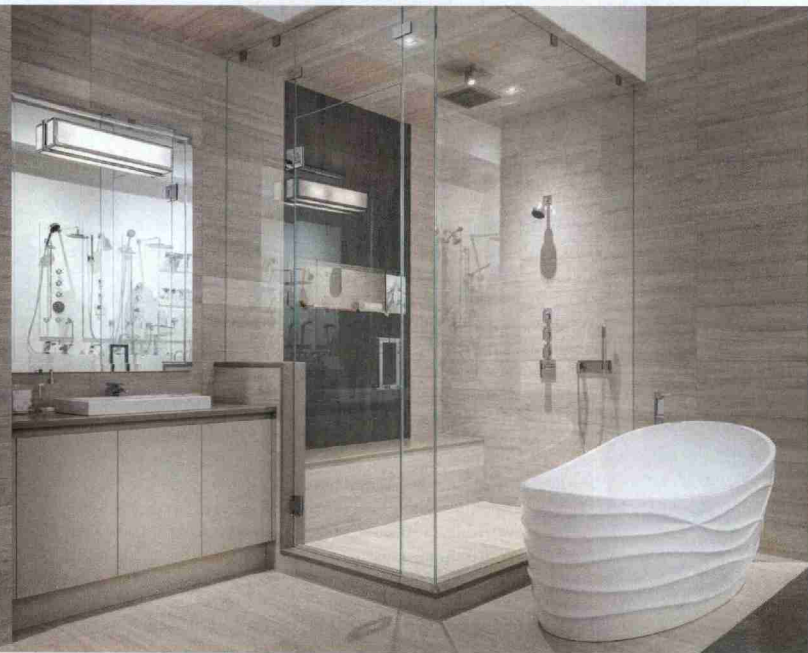
“We did all the detailing internally,” said Mullen, explaining that the project necessitated coordination among the full team of designers working at Empire. “I would have never gotten it done without them.”

The goal with the showroom was to move beyond standard applications and highlight new approaches. The design evolved naturally through the process as the team strove to ensure variety, creativity and complexity.

“[We were] trying to show clients that it doesn’t have to look like their neighbor’s house,” said Mullen. “Our vision was always to ensure that the customer walking into our new showroom would have an exceptional experience.”

## A DEPARTMENT STORE AESTHETIC

Visible from the expansive reception area located seven steps above the main space, the showroom welcomes visitors to explore products, materials and finishes arranged in a department store-like setting. Because the space is configured into product sections, Empire’s clientele of designers, architects, builders and consumers can easily navigate the floor and find what they are looking for or simply meander in the name of inspiration.



---

**Empire Kitchen & Bath’s  
new Canada showroom  
earns top honors**

**By Carrie Whitney**

---

---

**FACING PAGE** The Visual Corridor lighting display includes traditional, transitional and contemporary styles.

---

**ABOVE** A contemporary bathroom vignette shows features that would go into a standard luxury home, like a shower steam unit, glass shower enclosure and fully tiled walls.

---

"It's a very immersive experience when you first start in," said Mullen.

Behind the reception desk with a seating area, the space below opens into the main showroom, which is arranged into quadrants. The far left features plumbing and vanities, next is tile with hundreds of organized samples, followed by a dedicated Waterworks area and finally, cabinetry and appliances. The back of the showroom features more appliances, lighting and a massive closet to showcase the custom cabinetry. Behind the closet, visitors can get a view into the shop where the cabinets are crafted. Throughout the showroom, concrete flooring with a wax coating unifies the walking areas, but where vignettes are installed, flooring complements the style of the scene.

"Whenever there's a display, it has an individual floor that works with the overall design of that display," said Mullen. "It's meant to give you this feeling of interior design, so it's an entire look."

This can mean hardwood flooring in one vignette and porcelain or mosaic tile in another. "We're really trying to inspire the customer to see things they wouldn't normally see... and for them to invest in their house," he explained.

To offer something of interest to any visitor, the showroom features a variety of design styles. In the kitchen vignettes, appliance brands are integrated into the distinct looks so that the contemporary kitchen includes Gaggenau products; the traditional kitchen shows Thermador; and transitional kitchens have combinations of La Cornue, Sub-Zero and Wolf. All displays have power for lighting and clocks, and one kitchen, which is used for events and presentations, is live with a functional cooktop, ovens and sink.



**ABOVE** The combination of wood lacquer on the island and the glass doors imparts a soothing effect in this kitchen vignette featuring Sub-Zero and Wolf appliances. Photo by Eymeric Willing.

**BELOW** The showroom's expanse of tile samples inspires new possibilities, and the space includes custom tables for selecting and pairing products. The wall "art" shows hexagonal tiles from Walker Zanger.

In addition to vignettes and product display areas, the showroom provides a number of boardrooms that are accessible by designers and clients. In the main tile area, large tables offer a place to lay out and organize products. Everything is arranged around the intention to inspire visitors with new possibilities through a combination of designed vignettes and significant product displays.

#### INNOVATION, BUILT-IN

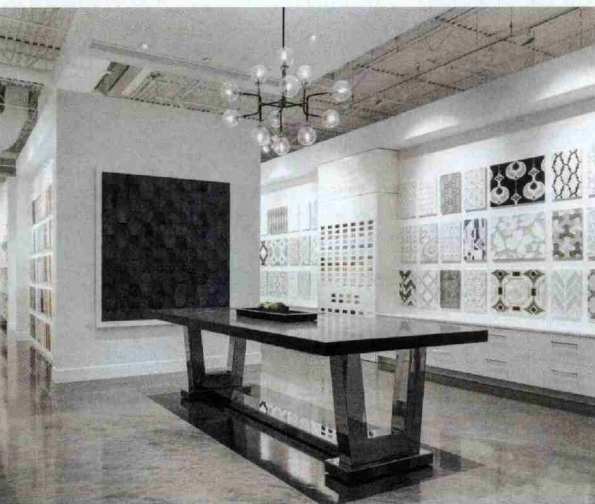
At KBIS 2018, Empire Kitchen & Bath's new showroom inspired the Innovative Showroom Awards Advisory Board to honor the space as the winner for the Large Independent Retail Showroom category and the Overall Award.

"With so many great entries from across North America, we were pleased just to be recognized for our new showroom," said Mullen. "To win the overall award was definitely a highlight in my 27 years in the kitchen and bath industry. It was also reassuring that after months of design, construction and execution of our ideas, we were recognized by our industry peers for the quality design work our team completed and that we are so proud to be able to offer to our local market."

The dual approach of this pioneering showroom offers multiple benefits. Set up like a department store, the space allows visitors to experience each brand on its own, while the inclusion of vignettes serves to spark new ideas. Visitors are able to pull individual brands, similar to a luxury retail store, and at the same time, each display has been designed in the manner of a home with ceiling details, floors, cabinetry and different styles, according to Mullen. While no showroom can present every option to every client, he wanted to engage with visitors to offer them a wide range of possibilities.

"The whole intent was really to show the variety of our design capabilities [and] our cabinet production options," said Mullen, who explained that the hope is that by giving them something to aspire to, clients will be inspired to do more than they initially planned – whether that means investing more in their kitchen backsplash or walking away with a revamped idea of what their entire house could be.

In addition to the one-stop shopping experience that brings cabinetry, tile, plumbing, lighting, hardware and appliances together and displays them in home-like settings, the showroom was built with an innovative approach to construction and design through the use of healthy building materials that did not sacrifice on style.





## LIST OF BRANDS DISPLAYED

**ACCESSORIES:** Ginger, Rocky Mountain Hardware, Top Knobs, Urban Archaeology & Waterworks

**APPLIANCES:** American Flange, ASKO, Brigade, Gaggenau, La Cornue, Sub-Zero, Thermador, U-Line, Wolf & Wolf Gourmet

**CUSTOM CABINETRY:** Downsvieview Kitchens & Empire Kitchen & Bath  
**HARDWARE:** Downsvieview Kitchens, Emtek/Assa Abloy, Ginger, Newport Brass, Rocky Mountain Hardware, Top Knobs & Waterworks

**LIGHTING:** Ginger, Rocky Mountain Hardware, Sun Valley Bronze, Urban Archaeology, Visual Comfort & Co. & Waterworks

**TILE & NATURAL STONE:** Ann Sacks, Artistic Tile, Island Stone, Lunada Bay Tile, Mosaïque Surface, New Ravenna, Oceanside Glass Tile, Pratt & Larson, SICIS, Sonoma Tilemakers, Walker Zanger & Waterworks

**PLUMBING:** BLANCO, California Faucets, Dornbracht, Franke, GROHE, Hansgrohe, Herbeau, KOHLER, KWC, Newport Brass, Perrin & Rowe, TOTO, Waterworks & Wetstyle



“We, as a company, are focused on offering healthy spaces to our clients,” said Mullen. “We built this facility to the healthiest standard we could. We designed this space to be healthy not only for our employees, but also for our customers.” For example, designers used non-VOC materials and paints, and working areas have no carpet.

### AN ABUNDANCE OF OPTIONS

Two of the highlights in the showroom are the ample tile display and the Waterworks area. Empire boasts a large inventory of product samples, which makes it easy for clients to pull together designs onsite. In the spacious tile display area, entire collections are featured so that if a manufacturer offers multiple colors in various shapes and sizes, clients can see, touch and compare them immediately.

“We’re showing 60 to 80 boards on any given company,” said Mullen, who explained that with

**ABOVE** A Waterworks mini-vignette includes tubs, showerheads and wall tiles to help visitors imagine the possibilities offered with various product combinations.

**BELOW LEFT** With Downsvieview Kitchens cabinets and a marble floor that is carried to the countertops and used to frame each cabinet section, this vignette was intended to show what investment in design can look like.

12 tile companies represented, the tile display area is as impressive as it is visually stimulating.

Additionally, Empire is a large, independent Waterworks retail showroom and has invested a lot of space for the brand. Waterworks products can be found in plumbing, as well as in accessories, hardware, lighting, natural stone and tile. The breadth of offerings allows some vignettes to be styled solely from the brand’s products.

“We felt that we were creating a showroom that was exceptional, and the acknowledgement of being a finalist – and ultimately winning the two awards [at KBIS] – validated that others also recognized the vision, passion and care we put into our new showroom,” said Mullen.

And the recognition has not stopped. In May, Empire Kitchen & Bath took home the Coverings Installation & Design Award for Commercial Stone Design.

## SOURCES

**DESIGNER:** Empire Kitchen & Bath; **ARCHITECT:** McKinley Burkart  
**PHOTOGRAPHERS:** Eymeric Widling Photography (photo noted) & Rob Moroto, Calgary Photos (all other photos)

