



AS FEATURED IN:  
*"WEATHERING THE STORM"*  
CASUAL LIVING  
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## HURRICANE SURVIVORS

by Geoff Thompson



# WEATHERING THE STORM

Houston designers turn to performance materials to rebuild after the flood



The piles of wreckage were so deep, bulldozers had to push the debris close enough to the street so the cherry pickers could get it.

"I DON'T WANT TO GIVE PEOPLE SOMETHING that's going to wind up at the curb."

Tina Browne, a Houston interior designer, speaks emphatically, punctuating points with the pencil in her left hand. In the aftermath of the devastation from Hurricane Harvey, where more than 200,000 Houston homes flooded, many of Browne's clients turned to the designer for help picking up the pieces and rebuilding their houses. For many of them, this wasn't their first flood—it was their third or fourth.

As more requests began to pile up, so did the debris in Houston yards and streets as people returned to their homes and started the painful process of throwing out ruined . . . everything.

Furniture. Heirlooms. Whole walls. Entire kitchens.

The piles of wreckage were so deep, bulldozers had to be called in to help get the debris close enough to the street so the cherry pickers could reach it.

"These people are still in shock," Browne says. So one of her first goals was to help clients return to normalcy.

## HURRICANE SURVIVORS

*Continued*



The Bay Court line (of lighting fixtures) is beautiful, especially in a bright nickel finish. I don't just talk about using outdoor fixtures indoors—I do it.

—Tina Browne

And if she gets her way, maybe remain in a state of normalcy, whenever the next flood comes.

### A NEW WAY

As those requests piled up, Browne called her friend Wendy Bantle to help. Bantle is an interior planner, highly involved in LEED construction methods.

Browne has a process for her clients, involving meticulous research that she logs into spreadsheets—row after row, column after column of flooring, cabinets, light fixtures, vendors and prices, all organized by product group or area of use.

Many of those rebuilding were “doing what they always did” or what the builders told them to, not necessarily thinking clearly because of the shock. Browne wanted to change that, but didn’t know exactly how.

She decided that she would share her research, holding a “summit,” as she calls it, with Bantle. Their goal was to share the research and

to present to clients a new (some might say radical) idea: Bring what works outdoors indoors.

Fifteen people attended the summit, where Browne explained her big idea to use materials made to withstand the elements. Materials made to live outdoors. Materials that could survive a flood.

Brown discovered that Sunbrella fabrics work well on indoor throw pillows and even entire sofas.

When Browne remodeled her own kitchen, she used medium density fiberboard (MDF) on the cabinets because of the cost.

“Honey, no one massages my cabinets; they don’t know if it’s wood,” she says with an amused smirk. So she already had it in her head that wood cabinets are not

a requisite. But while cost-effective, MDF can’t get wet—Browne would need a more durable solution.

### WATERPROOF WONDERS

Several years ago, Browne’s husband, Houston architect Charles Browne, brought home Loll Designs Adirondack chairs made from high density polyethylene (HDPE) in a fun electric blue color. They’ve made it through brutal Houston summers and torrential downpours, still looking like the day they first showed up on her back porch.

Connecting the dots, Browne started researching HDPE cabinets, and stumbled upon Werever Outdoor Cabinetry, which uses HDPE exclusively. She immediately reached out to Werever for samples (they have 11 colors) and began working on the kitchen (she chose white for this client).

With Bantle’s knowledge of LEED methods, she knew all about the benefits of green materials like HDPE, and

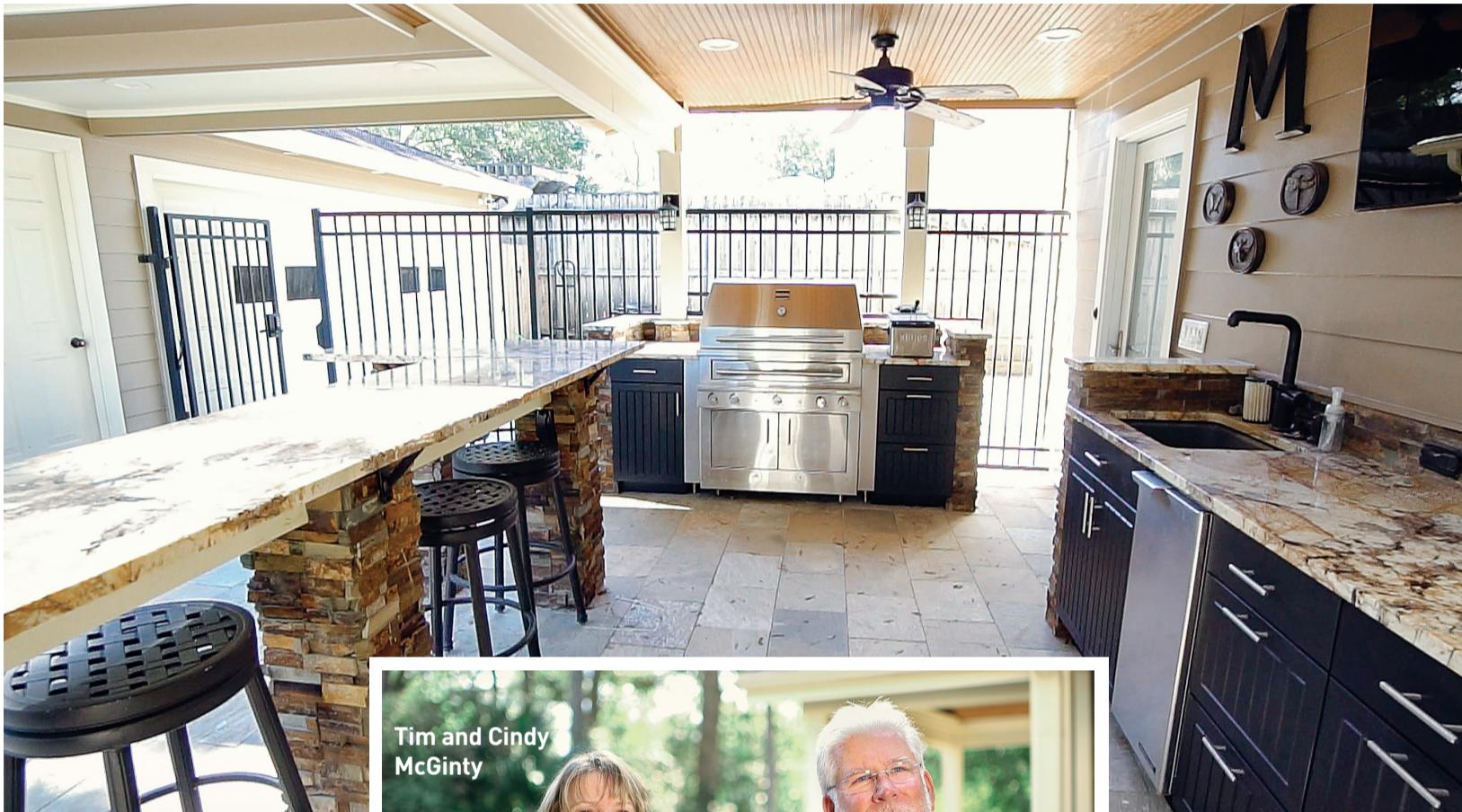


I don't want to give people something that's going to wind up at the curb.

—Tina Browne,  
*Houston interior designer*

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*Continued*



**To come back to find everything ruined, but our outdoor kitchen still looking brand new—you can't imagine how good that felt.**

*—Tim McGinty, Houston homeowner*

was on board. So Browne started looking at other products that would transition well to interior use for an environment that might again flood.

Another idea involves Sunbrella fabrics used on indoor throw pillows or even entire couches. "Sunbrella is to fabrics what Werever is to cabinets," Browne says. "These fabrics are gorgeous and they last."

The design doesn't just stop at kitchens that will survive a flood. She's using cement board rather than drywall, topped with HDPE and PVC panels for wainscoting. She's also incorporating porcelain tile flooring. ("You know this is made out of recycled toilets?" she asks, holding up a tile that looks like reclaimed wood.)

Brown sourced dining tables from Telescope Casual, known for its impenetrable marine grade polymer (MGP) furnishings, and Seaside Casual, which makes tables

and chairs from recycled HDPE, both of which look like wood. For an eclectic look, Browne added the 111 Navy chairs from Emeco (named for the 111 recycled PET bottles from which the chairs are made). No real, actual wood anywhere.

The flooding impacted countless businesses, so Browne also is redesigning a dental office using HDPE cabinetry.

In her own home, she uses Progress Lighting fixtures

that are designed for the outdoors. "Progress Lighting has great outdoor lighting that looks good indoors as well as outdoors," she says. "The Bay Court line is beautiful, especially in a bright nickel finish. I don't just talk about using outdoor fixtures indoors—I do it."

Browne and Bantle won't hear of "plastic looking" cabinets. When they're installed and have their "jewelry" (hardware) on, no one sees them as plastic.

"There's a knowledge gap," Bantle says about builders using outdoor cabinets indoors. "We want to bridge that gap." She sees a natural progression of traditionally outdoor materials like HDPE to be used indoors in flood-prone areas.

### NEW NORMAL

For Houston couple Tim and Cindy McGinty, their Werever outdoor kitchen with built-in Kalamazoo grill were the only things that made it through the flooding. They were so ecstatic that something survived; they made it their priority to get their backyard area, complete with pool and fire pit, up and running again.

For the McGintys, it's all about normalcy. "To come back to find everything ruined, but our outdoor kitchen still looking brand new—you can't imagine how good that felt," Tim says.

It took three days for the repair service to get all the

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*Continued*

fish out of their pool. With a pressure washer and some strong fungicides, they had the outdoor kitchen cleaned up and ready to go within a couple hours. The grill required a couple new fuses, but was similarly ready for business in short order.

Pre-flood, their outdoor kitchen and living space was the center of their home. Now, it's the ONLY place. They drop by nearly every

mad," Tim says with a laugh. The McGinty's neighbor might not be the only one reconsidering his outdoor kitchen choice.

A recent *Casual Living* study revealed that while there are a significant number of existing stainless steel outdoor kitchens (39% versus 19% polymer), the trend is for more polymer. Weather-resistant polymer accounted for 40% of planned outdoor

**For places like Houston where properties have flooded multiple times—with some paid out well beyond their actual value—homeowners could be in for a nasty surprise when FEMA will only cover a percentage of the next claim.**

day to use their outdoor kitchen—if only to enjoy a cup of coffee or a glass of wine—even though they're living in a nearby apartment, and they expect they're at least six months away from moving back.

"We hope to be moved back in by the time our son graduates high school in late May," Cindy says. They admit that might be an optimistic timeline. In their neighborhood, their backyard and outdoor living space is the only one that looks back to normal.

Many of the McGinty's neighbors are in the same boat, with houses flooded and uninhabitable for months, fish still in swimming pools, muck everywhere. Several of their neighbors have stainless steel outdoor kitchen cabinets, which did not fare as well as the HDPE cabinets.

"When my neighbor saw how much better our kitchen looked after the flood compared to his (which is virtually unusable), he was so

kitchens, versus just 19% for stainless steel.

### HIGH TIDES AHEAD

Enduring high water is a way of life in the Houston area. Its geography and geology make it prone to flooding. In fact, shortly after its founding in 1836 along the banks of the Buffalo Bayou, the first settlement flooded.

Downtown Houston was devastated by intense flooding in 1929 and 1935. Indeed, the Tax Day Flood in April 2016 and the Memorial Day Flood in May 2015 were also catastrophic.

Until Harvey, the flooding from Tropical Storm Allison in 2001 was considered the benchmark. Allison damaged 70,000 homes, 95,000 vehicles and caused 23 fatalities. Harvey damaged 203,000 homes, up to 500,000 vehicles and caused at least 70 fatalities.

Backed by history, Browne and Bantle are correct when they say matter-of-factly that



The stainless steel outdoor kitchen cabinets in the top photo did not fare as well as the HDPE cabinets in the McGinty's outdoor kitchen.

another flood is coming. They want their clients to be better prepared. They also offer a practical reason, even to homeowners who carry flood insurance.

"Percentages are coming," Browne says. The National Flood Insurance Program is not exactly flush with cash (it's actually \$24.6 billion... ahem... under water). And for places like Houston where properties have flooded multiple times—with some paid

out well beyond their actual value—homeowners could be in for a nasty surprise when FEMA will only cover a percentage of the next claim.

For many Houston residents, the idea of another flood is too much to bear. But Browne and Bantle know it's only a matter of time, and they want people to be able to survive a flood, without having to put their entire lives out on the curb. ☐



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