





SHE NEVER PLANNED TO TAKE OVER THE FAMILY BUSINESS. THEN COVID CHANGED EVERYTHING.

Carolien Fehmers quietly absorbed decades of expertise at her mother's design-build firm. Now, as Cynthia Bennett & Associates marks 45 years, she's leading it through its most consequential chapter — rebuilding homes lost in the recent fires.

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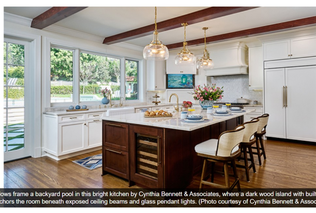

Large windows frame a backyard pool in this bright kitchen by Cynthia Bennett & Associates, where a dark wood island with built-in wine storage anchors the room beneath exposed ceiling beams and glass pendant lights. (Photo courtesy of Cynthia Bennett & Associates)

Carolien Fehmers, the CEO and president of Cynthia Bennett & Associates, never intended to run the company. For more than a decade, she was perfectly content building an interior design practice inside her mother's storied firm — doing furniture floor plans, choosing paint colors, selecting window treatments, sourcing furniture, and curating lighting for remodeling clients. The business of general contracting, the architectural drawings, the permit negotiations — that was her mother's world.

"It was never supposed to be me," Fehmers said. "I was very happy doing decorating and building my clientele and living my own kind of separate business within her business."

But succession has a way of choosing you. This year, the South Pasadena design-build firm that Cynthia Bennett founded in 1981 as a modest kitchen design specialty shop celebrates its 45th anniversary — with her daughter at the helm, navigating a chapter that neither woman could have imagined.

From the beginning, the firm has operated on a single principle: *full service*. From start to finish, the firm leads and accompanies their clients through every step. Every project is overseen from initial concept through initial architectural drawings, permitting, construction, and completed with interior design — and only as a complete package. Perfection can't be achieved piecemeal.

An Apprenticeship She Didn't Know She Was Serving

Fehmers joined the company in 2007 as an assistant to the firm's staff interior designer. Her ambition was narrow and specific: build the interior design department into something that could stand on its own. Within 6 months she took over the department. The department quickly became a thriving practice — a startup, in effect, incubating inside an established contracting firm.

But something else was happening beneath the surface. Every remodeling project she touched as the interior designer — every kitchen expansion, every addition, every historical restoration — was a quiet education in the full scope of what Cynthia Bennett & Associates did.



Carolien Fehmers with her mother, Cynthia Bennett, who founded the company in 1981. [Courtesy photograph]

"I soaked it up like a sponge and I didn't even realize it," Fehmers said. "Every project I would go and do paint colors and window treatments, and lighting for the remodeling clients — so I was familiar with all the jobs and what we did."

Around 2018, Bennett — nearing retirement age and beginning to think about stepping back — started looking for a successor. The answer, it turned out, had been working down the hall for over a decade. Fehmers began training in earnest, studying for, and eventually earning her general contractor's license.

The timing could not have been more dramatic.

A Pandemic, a Loss, and an Unplanned Beginning

Fehmers received her contractor's license just as COVID-19 descended on Southern California in early 2020. Bennett, then 80, had a husband who was seriously ill. She stopped coming into the office. The transition that had been planned as a gradual handoff became, almost overnight, a full transfer of responsibility.

Bennett's husband died during the pandemic. She never returned to the firm.

"It wasn't that busy at that time, so we only had a couple jobs," Fehmers recalled. "I just started doing it, and I realized how much I had picked up just working in the company for so long."

She paused. "When it came time for me to run it, I knew more than I thought, and it was actually not that hard."

In the six years since, Fehmers has reshaped the firm while preserving its foundational identity. She operates with a hands-on philosophy that she believes is central to the company's endurance — visiting job sites personally almost every day, maintaining direct relationships with clients.

Forty-Five Years of Kitchens That Still Work

The longevity of Cynthia Bennett & Associates is, in some respects, best measured not by the business itself but by its products. Fehmers now fields calls from homeowners her mother worked with three decades ago — not because anything has failed, but because styles have changed, and they need updating.

"I'm getting calls now from old clients that remodeled their kitchen with my mother 30 years ago," she said. "And now they're calling and telling me that it's a little dated. Everything still works, and we're hesitant about remodeling, but I think it's time. We have a tile countertop.' And I say yes… I think it's time to get a solid surface countertop at this point!"

The firm offers a 10-year warranty on its work. In practice, the commitment extends far longer. "Once we remodel their house, they're always under our umbrella," Fehmers said. A worn cabinet hinge, years after the warranty has expired. They'll take care of it.

Fehmers attributes that durability to a philosophy her mother established early on: even though the firm holds its own general contractor's license, it exclusively hires licensed and insured subcontractors. "They have their own license to keep in good standing," Fehmers explained. "I think it's a double layer of perfection."

The approach makes Cynthia Bennett & Associates more expensive than some competitors. Fehmers is frank about that. "We're not the cheapest," she said. "I always tell people; you get what you pay for."

From Experts to Dream Actualizers

When Bennett founded the firm in 1981, there were no design shows on television, no websites where homeowners could browse kitchens or tile for inspiration. Clients arrived with little more than a vague sense that their home needed work, and the firm supplied everything — tile options, light fixtures, plumbing selections, furniture, materials.

"We were the experts, and we had the books to show them," Fehmers said. "The internet wasn't that big yet. People didn't have internet to go and look at kitchens that they liked or tile that they liked."

That dynamic has inverted. Today's clients arrive with pictures of friends' kitchens, ideas pulled from websites, and firm opinions about what they want. The firm's role has shifted from prescriber to collaborator.

"We actualize your dreams," Fehmers said. "People think of it and have a vision, but don't know exactly how to put it together. And so, we help with that."

The company has also evolved well beyond its origins as a kitchen design shop. Today it offers a full suite of services: kitchen and bath design, remodeling and additions, historical restoration, general contracting, green design, project management, interior design, universal access design, and home automation. Many of its projects involve restoring homes from the first half of the 20th century, as well as mid-century modern residences, and the firm has earned a reputation for what it calls "seamless design" — remodels that honor the architectural integrity of the original structure. The firm also donates most of its demolition material to Habitat for Humanity, providing clients with a tax credit while keeping waste out of landfills.

After the Fires: Rebuilding the Community

The most consequential work Cynthia Bennett & Associates is doing right now has nothing to do with anniversary celebrations. In the aftermath of the recent devastating fires, the firm is rebuilding a home for a longtime client — someone they had completed an addition for in 2015, and whose entire house was destroyed. They are also developing plans for another client who lost their home.



Carolien Fehmers at the rebuild of a home for a longtime client — someone Cynthia Bennet & Associates had completed an addition for in 2015, and whose entire house was destroyed. The firm are also developing plans for another client who lost their home. [Courtesy photo]

For Fehmers, the fire rebuilds carry a different emotional weight than a typical remodel. "Rebuilds are a lot easier than remodels," she said, with the pragmatism of someone who has opened enough century-old walls to know what surprises lurk inside. "Remodels of a hundred-year-old house — you have all these surprises. You open up the walls and there's all this knob and tube that you have to deal with. A new house, it's all new, so it's more straightforward."

She added, quietly: "And it's fun because we get to rebuild back and help."

Right Here on Fair Oaks

The office of Cynthia Bennett & Associates sits on Fair Oaks Avenue in South Pasadena, visible to the thousands of commuters who pass it daily. Fehmers said prospective clients frequently tell her they had been driving by for years before they finally called.

It is, in miniature, the story of the firm itself — a quiet, steady presence that has endured for 45 years by doing what it has always done well, adapting when the world changed, and being there when people needed it most.

"We're local," Fehmers said. "We've been here 45 years. We're not going anywhere."

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Cynthia Bennett & Associates is a full-service design-build firm located in South Pasadena. The firm handles every phase of residential projects from design through construction and interior design as a single integrated process, and does not offer design-only or construction-only services. The firm has been recognized with the Pasadena Weekly *Best of awards in 2021, 2022, and 2025, and received a 2023 Design Build Award. For more information, call (626) 375-0511.*









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<< March, 2026 >>

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
				12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

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