



Solid As a Sidewalk

"Corian has no soul; it doesn't touch your emotions," says designer Fu-Tung Cheng, founder of Cheng Design in Berkeley, California, of the all-purpose polymer that's finding its way onto kitchen counters. Cheng eschews the squeaky-clean material in favor of the gritty. "Concrete stands out because of its ability to mimic any kind of form," he extols. "It's an incredibly versatile material." Although this plastic mixture of Portland cement, sand, gravel, and water is what makes up most city sidewalks, under Cheng's direction it takes on a rich character not seen on the urban beat.

But Cheng's designs are not just simple surfaces made to display the latest KitchenAid appliances. They are, in Cheng's words, "practical landscapes." A countertop isn't always flat. Cheng's unique terrain consists of inlays that serve as built-in trivets and fruit-bowl hollows. Cutting boards make for wooden plateaus.

The popularity of Cheng's concrete designs inspired a book, *Concrete Countertops: Design, Forms, and Finishes for the New Kitchen and Bath* (Taunton Press, 2002), written with Eric Olsen, that marries Cheng's unique design philosophy with a do-it-yourself attitude. In addition,

Cheng's firm is marketing a kit so that anyone can start mixing their own gray-matter landscapes. The kit includes just about everything but the actual concrete: NeoMix (an add-in of pigment, aggregate, and accelerators), sealer and wax, finishing pads, and tools.

Cheng's custom countertops are made from Geocrete, a proprietary mix he developed; NeoMix is the next best thing. The average person, Cheng explains, "is going to buy bags of Sakrete, which is very poorly made concrete. So I thought that we should beef it up." What the NeoMix kit doesn't have is Cheng himself, but it does provide instructions on everything from mold making to sealing and maintenance.

A countertop made from the kit costs about the same as custom Formica. It's not easy to pour your own concrete, but the process is certainly doable and offers creative possibilities. The do-it-yourselfer can take inspiration from Cheng's ingenuity—or from one of his demonstrations. "I did a cooking show just like *Yan Can Cook*," Cheng recounts enthusiastically. "I had all the ingredients. I treated it just like I was baking a cake. Concrete's just a little bigger and a little heavier." ■



With his concrete countertops, Cheng creates complex landscapes rather than flat planes. You can create your own countertop terrain with Cheng's Do-It-Yourself Kit. It costs \$339–379 and is available at www.chengdesign.com/neo mix.

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