

Concrete offers a distinctive new look for kitchen and bathroom countertops. Courtesy Cheng Design and Buddy Rhodes Studio



Concrete countertops have become a solid seller among fastidious homeowners.

Concrete has always been a supremely pragmatic, reliable thing, the substance of manholes and highway slabs. So who could have predicted its newest incarnation – as the trendy, upscale material of choice for kitchen countertops?

"It's very versatile yet practical," declares Fu-Tung Cheng, CEO and principal designer of Cheng Design, and president of Cheng Design Products, Berkeley, Calif. Its biggest advantage? Concrete enables clients to customize their countertops in ways that aren't possible with stone or solid surfaces.

For instance, Jeff Girard, P.E., CEO of FormWorks LLC in Raleigh, N.C., cites a current project for the kitchen of a professional race car driver. "We're putting race car engine parts in the concrete," he explains. "You cannot do that with any other material." Another client, whose father had passed away, had personal items such as his cufflinks embedded in the top of her writing desk as a reminder of him. Buddy Rhodes, owner of Buddy Rhodes Studio, Inc., in San Francisco, recalls a job where a family made impressions of their hands for the backsplash, which accompanied a countertop with a copper inlay.

Concrete can be dyed, shaped, installed in a very thick slab for a massive look that's not feasible to fabricate in stone, and decorated with metal inlays or color aggregate – the only limit is a designer's imagination. "A lot of people just make slabs," says Cheng. "That's playing the hand wrong."

counter culture

By Daina Darzin Manning

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Concrete fits well into today's design trend of soothing, natural materials and matte finishes. Courtesy Buddy Rhodes Studio

Concrete has also come into vogue because upscale consumers are looking for something new. "It's a completely unique material that's not readily available to the masses," explains Girard. "You can't go to Home Depot and buy it. Granite has become almost passe – it's the default high-end material."

"All the wealthy people are tired of looking at granite," echoes Cheng. "They see it as a mundane product because it's so prevalent."

Granite also usually features a glossy, hard surface, whereas today's overall design trends are toward soothing, natural materials and matte finishes. For instance, oil-rubbed bronze for faucets instead of shiny brass; natural wood surfaces; and matte natural stone such as limestone (and honed granite, which has a less shiny surface). With its warm, handmade feel, concrete fits perfectly into this trend.

"The aesthetic is imperfection, so the color, the surfaces are never quite the same," elaborates Gerry Santosa, president of Soupcan, Inc., in Chicago. "[Concrete] looks great with just about any cabinet style."

Since the concrete countertop trend started in California, the perception is that concrete tops fit best into the clean-lined, Asian-influenced contemporary designs that are popular on the West Coast. But even though concrete is indeed perfect for a modern look, fabricators insist it can work with a wide variety of design styles.

"When you say concrete, people picture the sidewalk, this chalky gray stuff," says James Gardiner, owner and precast

designer of The King's Grant in Easton, Md., whose designs recently appeared on an HGTV Dream House. In fact, Gardiner prefers to call his countertops "formed stone" or "cast stone." "Our concrete is probably the most unrecognizable to the naked eye," he says. "Most people who see it have no idea what it's made of."

"I can see a concrete counter in a lot of homes," notes Leslie Cohen, owner of Leslie Cohen Designs in Encinitas, Calif. Cohen is a kitchen and bath designer who's done several installations with concrete. "It's a unique look." She sees it as appropriate in a rustic setting as well as contemporary.

"We make our countertops look as authentically aged and old as we can," says Gardiner, who takes his design cues from books of reclaimed stone products from France which are hundreds of years old. He employs distressing and aging methods similar to those utilized by the furniture industry. "We distress the edges, sand and grind and chip to give it a weathered, worn look," he explains. Santosa notes that traditional stone colors such as terra cotta or ochre give concrete more of an antique, Old World look.

Similarly, Rhodes cites installations in vintage Arts and Crafts homes prevalent in the Bay Area, as well as "antique, Tuscan farmhouse kinds of [looks]. And I have [a concrete countertop] in an old Victorian in San Francisco, and it looks great." In the latter, Rhodes combined a plain, gray countertop with a retro-look stove and a vaulted ceiling.

Girard recently installed concrete in a Rainbow Row historical home in Charleston, S.C. (Charleston-style homes feature the multistory construction with large multiple-story porches usually associated with New Orleans). In this environment, Girard chose dark green concrete and combined it with mahogany cabinets, a beige/pink travertine floor and stainless steel appliances, with stainless steel banding on the countertop. "Together they work in harmony, but each has its own identity," he notes.

In addition to countertops, concrete also works on such design elements as fireplace surrounds, bar tops, islands and tables. As Cheng points out, concrete was considered a decorative material in the 1920s, but was replaced by plastics in the 1950s. And now it's undergoing a glorious resurgence.

FABRICATION ISSUES

While designers and fabricators are uniformly enthusiastic about concrete, they differ widely in their opinions about its maintenance and in their individual fabricating techniques.

For instance, Gardiner casts his tops right side up in molds made of Vycom PVC board, and manipulates the finish to allow



Concrete can be dyed, shaped and installed in a thick slab for a massive look. Courtesy The King's Grant