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For Kitchen Counters, Chairs, Humble Concrete's Now Hot: Moving A 400-Pound Table

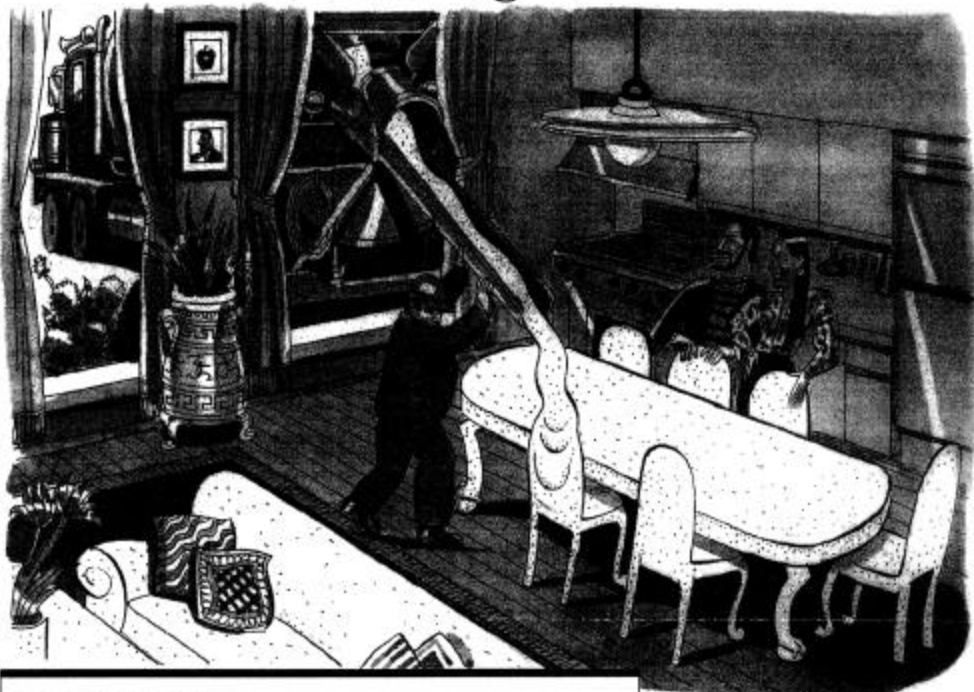
By DANIELLE REED

WHEN ANNE KNALL decided to redo the classic, all-cherry kitchen in her Indianapolis ranch home, she went for something a little different: Concrete counters embedded with fossils, flecks of granite, shells and glass. "It's like nothing you'd expect from looking at the outside of the home," Mrs. Knall says. "It's really a work of art."

The latest hot look in home design? Take a look at the garage floor. In a trend that started in downtown Manhattan lofts and the houses of Los Angeles hipsters, once-humble concrete is challenging granite and marble as the material of choice for everything from kitchen counters to fireplace mantels—and even chairs. Sales of cement (the major ingredient in concrete) are expected to rise 27% this year for use in homes, according to the Portland Cement Association. "You're really looking at a concrete revival," says Ward Malisch of the American Concrete Institute.

Sculpting Chairs

Homeowners and designers say the material has certain advantages: It's waterproof, fireproof, doesn't rot and can be easily molded into any shape or stained any color. It can even be sculpted—concrete artist Gary Simpson makes concrete chairs in the shape of a palm and recliners that look like a human



Steve Jones

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body. All for a price, of course. Though made of sand, water, gravel and cement, the stuff can run as high as \$100 a square foot—about the same as high-end granite.

And even for that kind of money, you can't actually do a lot of things on it that you might expect to do on a kitchen counter. Like cutting food, for instance. "It will scar," explains Duncan Highsmith, who recently put an 18-foot concrete countertop in his Madison, Wis., home. His solution: a built-in cutting board—no slicing beyond the edges. Concrete's also more porous than traditional stone, meaning things like lemons and red wine will stain it. Anyone who's bothered by that "shouldn't have a concrete countertop," says designer Fu-Tung Cheng, a concrete pioneer who recently published a guide to pouring your own.

And it isn't for anybody with shaky floorboards, designers warn. In fact, some makers advise checking with an architect to make sure your floors won't buckle under the strain

When It Pours

More companies and designers across the country are pushing concrete furnishings for the mainstream. Here, some of what's available.

COMPANY	PRODUCTS	COMMENTS
Elements of Time Redmond, Ore. www.elementsofetime.com	Counters, furniture, indoor/outdoor decoration	Just because it's the stuff that's in sidewalks doesn't make it cheap: Coffee tables range from \$2,500 to \$4,000—cracks are part of the look.
Cheng Design Berkeley, Calif. www.chengdesign.com	Home design, from kitchens to walls	Designer Fu-Tung Cheng wrote the book on concrete—literally. His pour-your-own guide has sold more than 25,000 copies.
Knoll Furniture www.knollshop.com	Seating	Designed by architect Maya Lin. Company recommends bringing "sunring blocks" indoors when it gets cold—but they weigh around 60 pounds.
Kaldari Orange County, Calif. www.kaldari.com	Counters, flooring, architectural details, furniture	Owner/artisan Gary Simpson says counters are the mainstay of his business. Just don't cut on them—concrete can scar and stain.
Clodagh Design New York www.clodagh.com	From headboards to wall sconces	Downtown designer has been doing concrete since the '80s. A recent addition: A freestanding bathtub made from a crack-resistant mix.
Bomanite www.bomanite.com	Flooring, countertops, steps, walls	Your garage floor, only nicer. Will do thin decorative veneers to hide cracking on old floors.

of your new kitchen counters or chairs. You need to warn the movers, too. Doug Davidge, for instance, loves the concrete kitchen table and base he recently bought for his Manhattan Beach, Calif., home. But whenever he moves, he's planning on leaving them behind. That's because they weigh 400 pounds and had to be lugged up the stairs in pieces by a crew of three. "It nearly killed us," he says.

Designers have been using decorative concrete since the early part of the 20th century. Legendary architect Frank Lloyd Wright was a big fan, using the material in landmark houses like Fallingwater in western Pennsylva-

nia. But after falling out of favor during the 1960s, concrete was pretty much relegated to basement walls and garage floors. Then, during the '80s, a handful of cutting-edge designers began using it in raw loft spaces and minimalist houses, polishing it to a high sheen and adding color. But even hipster homeowners rebelled when they realized that it was actually pretty hard to keep up—and had a nasty tendency to crack.

But now, concrete artisans and makers say they've solved many of the material's problems, including coming up

with special mixes that resist cracking and thin concrete overlays that can make a damaged surface look new. That's what contractor Steve Harriman did for Indiana homeowner Doug Parker's new rec-room floor, after it developed 40-foot-long cracks. Now the floor is covered with a multicolored geometric pattern inspired by Wright's stained-glass windows. "It is clearly the design element in the room," Mr. Parker says.

Unforgiving

Indeed, concrete converts say that when it's done well, the material's so elegant they can forget it came out of the back of a mixing truck. Not long ago, Palm Beach, Fla., builder Bill Elias unthinkingly picked up a hammer and nail to hang a picture on the concrete wall in his son's room. The result, predictably: "a bent nail and a sort of large dimple in the wall." Next time, says Mr. Elias, "I'm definitely using a hammer drill."

And despite all the hassles, many concrete fans say they wouldn't consider going back to plain old stone, not least because the new material sets their homes apart. Mrs. Knall says her kitchen counters often confound visitors—some people even try to brush off the flecks of granite and shells in the surface, thinking they're not supposed to be there. Besides, she says, "there's always something new to discover" about the countertop. "It's like a new toy. How many counters can you say that about?"



Gary Simpson table & chair



Maya Lin stools