

by Fu-Tung Cheng



Balancing Color with Nature's Timelessness

Color is about visual relationships and what makes our world vibrant. That means choosing colors is generally the last and most difficult choice when making design decisions for the kitchen and bath. It's always easier to work on the space, the plan, the shape, and all the details of a project in a black-and-white world before considering color.

Choosing colors is like staging a play and then choosing the right actors to bring complexity and subtlety to the characters, giving the play focus and balance so that it truly reflects a slice of life. Color is built of layers of tones, hues, chroma, and intensity – all unpredictable, subtle and complex. It can also reveal character in materials; and some color theorists claim that color can affect mood.

NATURE'S COLORS

There are no wrong colors in nature. However brash, bold, extreme or subdued, nature's colors always seem right, or appropriate. A brief snorkeling excursion in the tropical waters of Hawaii reveals the broad range and depth of nature's palette. From the pink coral

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and purple urchins to the teeming multi-color banded reef fish and tangerine starfish, there is no hesitation, no restraint.

On the other hand, in the upper valley reaches of the Grand Tetons by a river in the early winter, the colors of the river rock and sand or the bare branches stripped of foliage are often an assortment of subdued, washed-out grays and browns. The only bright color to be found may be a single leaf clinging to a twig displaying the faded red rust of late fall. It all seems – and feels – right.

In nature, color follows the seasons and geography. Color is constantly changing in the natural world and, yet, is relatively static in our homes. We alter our dress to accommodate the seasonal weather and fashion dictates of the latest color trends. However, we usually don't change our wall colors to match the seasons, nor do we change the cabinet or countertop colors.

Therefore, our selection of finishes and fixtures for our homes are choices

we must live with through all the seasons, year after year. We simply don't have the luxury of changing finishes and fixtures at the whim of trends. And that is probably what makes color decisions and choices in most aspects of our environment so daunting and fearful: We know we have to live with our choices for a relatively long time.

When it comes to which color choices work and which do not, it's all about context. While in a commercial setting, countertops can be flamboyant with flashy colors that excite one's visual sense, I believe that good design in residential kitchens and baths is about choosing materials and colors that are appropriate (less intense colors) to the overall feeling of the project.

DESIGN PALETTE

The fear of making the wrong color decision can cause paralysis. However, after many years of imposing my decisions (with plenty of trepidation on both sides, I might add) on my clients' homes, I have learned a few things about what colors seem to work best in the kitchen or bath.

When developing an overall color palette for a project, I aspire to reflect the delicate balance that occurs so effortlessly in nature. This is a range of colors one might find scavenging stones at a beach, or walking the shoreline and happen upon a piece of beach-washed glass, or sifting the bed of a forest floor for numerous natural treasures.

When I first started making concrete countertops, I was tempted by all the color possibilities with pigments and white cement. I soon learned that white cement powder didn't mute the color intensity of the pigments. Naturally, I wanted to explore the potential freedom of expression with a bright color palette. In fact, a few of my fellow pioneers in concrete countertops were exploring the same avenues and subsequently introduced a great variety of colors in their countertop projects.

But after considerable color exploration, I came to the conclusion that nature's colors are the most appealing for the kitchen and bath. This is one of the things I love about working with concrete; the material really has a wonderful, earthy quality. What defines "earthy" is obviously quite subjective, but I suspect that it's something that you know when you see it, feel it and touch it. Consequently, using bright, intense, pastel-like colors with concrete did not seem appropriate to the material itself. It seemed to me that intense

colors, although at first spectacular, would soon become outdated and wearisome.

Blending color and texture provides a universally appealing surface that is both subtle and timeless. In concrete, these two elements blend with the mass of the object to create something that not only looks good, but feels good. Like a natural object, the subtle refraction of light from the sand, fines, and rock in the concrete is what gives it life and depth. The pigments are, for the most part, made from iron oxides (basically rust) or minerals that occur naturally as well.

Because concrete is fundamentally from the earth, when using concrete, I go for a color palette that works with the timeless feel of that earthiness. Of course, these are colors that work in all aspects of the kitchen and bath – not just the countertops. Even better, they won't go in and out of style with the trendiness of a fashion statement. Finally, they work well with today's trend toward natural materials in the kitchen and bath, making them a perfect, timeless design choice.

CONCRETE TEXTURE

Texture adds another interesting element to a well-designed kitchen or bath. This can also be used to enhance the feeling of nature in a design. To add texture and imbue projects with a sense of natural beauty, I have used semi-precious stones (turquoise, amazonite, jadeite, and others) as decorative aggregates in some of my concrete countertops. They are generally too expensive to seed throughout the mix so we use them sparingly by sprinkling them on the surface of the molds and broadcasting them onto the top surface of site pours.

The intense colors of these aggregates can provide a tasteful accent to the warm or cool tones of concrete. The variegation produced by exposed aggregates, sand and fines creates an overall effect that is inspired by nature but does not imitate nature.

For those seeking some additional color accents in their countertops, con-

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sider creating a mottled or variegated surface. This look can be effectively achieved with concrete that parallels the texture that naturally occurs in granite and marble.

In choosing concrete colors, keep in mind that it's difficult to precisely match specific colors. I inform my clients that we cannot do so because there are simply too many variables. These include everything from aggregate quarry differences to multiple sources of cement; ingredients from different geographic locations tend to yield slightly different color results.

I take into account, too, that concrete exposed to sun and weather will change color over time and any coloring I use will tend to become muted. For example, concrete colored with ultramarine blue, blue green, or with organic black pigments (lamp, or carbon black) are prone to fading.

COLOR HIERARCHY

Color must always be considered in the broader context of the overall design of the kitchen. I'm very conscious of how

color plays out in cabinets, backsplashes, floors and ceilings. To use color more effectively, I'll create a hierarchy of attention, or focus. For example, if the countertop is the primary focus of the attention in a kitchen, due to its size, form or color, I might specify a neutral material for other counters in the room, possibly black granite, stainless steel or, for a more traditional kitchen, ordinary tile.

Finally, I think it's important to note that within certain parameters, there are no hard-and-fast rules for good and bad taste in the use of color. Color that naturally evolves from one's creativity might be the most appropriate. This approach also gives us the freedom to be comfortable with our choices rather than always measuring ourselves against what, in the end, is a subjective standard.

Perhaps we do best by celebrating those expressions of our own creativity and leave it at that.

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Concrete Countertops: Design, Forms, and Finishes for the New Kitchen and Bath (Taunton Press).

His firm's work has appeared in a host of publications, and has been honored with numerous awards, including the Architectural Record's Record Houses; "The Look of Gaggenau" Award for Kitchen Design; the ASID Interior Design Specialty Award; the Stellar Award, American Society of Interior Designers; Sunset Magazine Design West Awards; and first-place honors in the American HomeStyle & Gardening Kitchen & Bath Design Contest, the NKBA Design Competition, the Fisher & Paykel Design Competition, the Sub-Zero Kitchen Design Competition, and numerous others.

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Editor's Note: Beginning this month, Fu-Tung Cheng will be addressing inspirational design ideas for kitchens and baths in a regular column, appearing exclusively in *Kitchen & Bath Design News*.

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