

gray matters

the latest decorative concretes are more than a chip off the old block.

by nigel f. maynard

Once upon a time, concrete was like your unkempt childhood neighbor who had braces, a buzz cut, and thick glasses. But like your friend, who now flashes a winning smile and wears Brioni suits, concrete has blossomed into a snazzy trendsetter, a sophisticated spec for almost any project.

A mainstay of building construction for eons, until recent years the product's drab gray mien was considered too cold for all but the most esoteric decorative purposes. But as with industrial-looking stainless steel appliances, now widely accepted

by the mainstream and newly tailored for residential use, concrete has been reinvented and re-engineered for the home. Some of its deficiencies have been tamed, and a great deal more art has developed within the craft.

Concrete floors—colored and stained, scored and inlaid—were the first decorative use to catch on. Pacific Coast architects led the way,



SharonRisedorph/Buddy Rhodes Studio

Concrete countertops, such as this one by architect Ken Ruppel and Buddy Rhodes Studio, offer colors no natural stone can match.

employing concrete floors both inside and immediately outside the house to reinforce a connection between interior and exterior space. Now, other temperate areas of the country rely on the same visual trick. In fashion-forward jobs, concrete moves off the floor to fireplace surrounds and even cast-in-place interior walls.

kitchen chameleon

Still, the most frequent interior spec for decorative concrete is in the kitchen and bath. Colored with a wide variety of pigments, concrete offers a vast palette and an inspiringly blank slate.

That's why architect Michael Baushke uses it in so many of his projects. A principal at Apparatus Architecture in San Francisco, Baushke and

his partner Stuart Hills spec it for countertops, sinks, drain boards, islands, bars, and many other applications.

"Stone is one of the best products to use in a kitchen," Baushke admits. "But finished concrete goes one step further. You can play with thickness and edges because it's more versatile. It has the same characteristics as stone, but you get more options."

Architect Marc Toma first happened upon concrete many years ago when an intrepid client brought the material to him. "The client had an affinity for new materials and was very much interested in it," says Toma, a principal of Burks Toma Architects in Berkeley, Calif. "We investigated its benefits and found great things." Toma has since been bowled

over by the material's intensity, the way it absorbs colors and reflects light. "It is very luminescent," he says. "It ages well, and it has a hefty look that says quality."

Architect Dick Clark is another concrete fan. "It's easy to clean, long lasting, and as durable as granite," says the principal of Dick Clark Architecture in Austin, Texas. And when he specs the material for countertops, he sees fresh canvas for creativity: "We put in granite dust to give the surface a nice sparkle," he explains. "We also put in broken bottles. I like things that I can grind down."

casting call

Starting at about \$100 per square foot, concrete can either be cast in place or pre-

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Fabricators such as Cheng Design and Soupcan can add drainboards, glass inserts, or broken bottles to create a one-of-a-kind look.



Courtesy Cheng Design



Courtesy Soupcan

cast at the fabricator's workshop. Because a good finish requires many hours of grinding, sanding, polishing, and sealing, most experts say precast is the way to go.

"The problem with cast in place is that you need the workers in your kitchen for days," says Susan Andrews, marketing manager for San Francisco-based Buddy Rhodes Studio, a leading practitioner of the concrete craft. Not only can on-site fabricators cause a traffic jam with other installers (and clients if it's a renovation), site work is almost always more expensive.

"Cast in place is also a messy procedure," says Ryan M. Martin, new projects manager at Oakland, Calif.-based Concreteworks Studio. "What you see is what you get, and you often get a sidewalk look," Andrews concurs. "It really makes sense to do it in the studio."

counter intelligence

As with any artisan, finding and selecting a concrete fabricator is tough, but there are some solid track records within the young medium. The aforementioned Buddy

Rhodes Studio is known for producing meticulous indoor and outdoor concrete tiles, precast counters, sinks, tubs, surrounds, and many other architectural elements. Their product line is entirely handmade and colored, and Andrews says the studio is always working on new colors to keep the palette fresh.

Mark Rogero, who was trained as an architect, founded Concreteworks Studio in 1991 and is the primary developer of all its products. Using a lightweight cement-based composite, the firm designs, fabricates, and hand finishes tiles, stair treads, whirlpools, furniture, fireplaces, and more. But countertops still account for about 85 percent of his business, Martin says.

Chicago-based Soupcan used to make all types of countertops, but concrete counters now account for about 75 percent of its work, says president Jerry Santora. The company's line includes precast countertops in 16 natural, unpigmented base tones and 11 pigmented colors, but numerous custom color combinations are available.

Another top fabricator is Cheng Design in Berkeley, Calif. The firm, led by renowned kitchen and interior designer Fu Tung Cheng, has developed a concrete product called Geocrete.

The material has a honed-looking surface that, unlike other concrete products, is not achieved through polishing or buffing. The countertops very nearly come out of the mold looking the way they do, the company says. Eight standard colors are available.

higher education

Concrete has come a long way since it was first speeded in cutting-edge houses about a decade ago (early applications in Eichler and Wright houses notwithstanding). Its second act has raised it to a whole new level of craftsmanship and beauty. Yet it retains some of its original flaws, or characteristics—depending on how you and your clients look at it.

Hairline cracks still can develop, despite what some fabricators claim. It also can be scratched, and hot pans will scorch the surface. But for architects such as Dick Clark, these imperfections factor in the appeal and charm of concrete. "The cracks are part of the beauty of the product," he says.

Because it's somewhat porous, the material is vul-

nerable to staining. All fabricators initially apply an FDA-approved penetrating wax, but periodic resealing is required to maintain general stain resistance. However, even when properly sealed, the surface remains susceptible to highly acidic liquids such as red wine, lemon juice, and vinegar.

Soupcan's Jerry Santora claims his company has made some progress in addressing concrete's deficiencies with a number of specialized surfaces. "We offer a range of finishes, from a low-sheen high-heat resistant surface to a surface that resists scratching."

Another consideration when choosing concrete is its heft. Most high quality base cabinets should carry the load adequately, but be cautious of cantilevering and other less supportive installations, Clark advises. You'll likely see severe cracking if the support is inadequate. Like any other custom product, concrete's quality is entirely dependent on the skills of the craftsman. Experience is key here. Ask for references, request samples of work, and check to see that the company has a long list of successful projects.

Concrete might not be for everyone, but its looks, versatility, and durability make it a solid spec. "Its color and texture are different from stone and tile," says Marc Toma. "With a little planning, it will seamlessly adapt to its surrounding and will match any client." ra



David O. Marlow/Buddy Rhodes Studio

A waterproof product, concrete is equally at home in this bath by Michael Fuller Architects.