

## SMALL WONDER

It takes an attentive hand to raise a tiny tree.

Page 79



## HO-HUM HOME?

Grab a glue gun and bond with crafty pals. Page 81

## STEEL AWAY

Sturdy metal takes on shape of classic roofs. Page 82

# CONCRETE DECISIONS

Paving material gets posh treatment for the home interior

BY LISA KAHN  
FOR THE STAR LEDGER

**L**ike a graceful swan transformed from the drabest of ducklings, concrete is the surprising new darling of high-end interior design.

This everyday material, a barely noticed bore on sidewalks and highway dividers, has architects and residential designers swooning over its beauty, strength, durability and a unique gift for morphing into whatever one's imagination will allow.

It can be done in an artist's palette of colors, take on a limitless array of shapes, and range in texture from rough to mirror-shiny. It's been around since the ancient Romans, but it's now in the mix for floors, countertops and other interior applications.

Whether etched, stamped, sand-blasted, acid-stained, painted, inlaid or stenciled, concrete offers a range of

options unmatched by other materials, says Jim Peterson, president of ConcreteNetwork.com, a comprehensive Web site for industry professionals and consumers.

"Concrete enhances the integrity of an architect's design, is easy to maintain, and it's a great alternative to carpet for people with allergies," Peterson says.

Industry experts also tout concrete as an ideal flooring material for use with "green" energy systems such as radiant heat and passive solar designs because of its high thermal mass, or ability to absorb and store heat.

But homeowners hoping to cement a bargain beware: Despite concrete's utilitarian image, a decorative floor or countertop can be as pricey as the finest hardwood, tile or granite. This may be one reason why the concrete craze, in full bloom on the West Coast and the South, is still in bud in the Garden State, according to Amadeo Cilli. [See **CONCRETE**, Page 78]



Concrete makes an impressive floor, stained with an abstract pattern, left, or done in deep red with controlled lines by Frank Lloyd Wright for his Bachman-Wilson House in Millstone.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DIAMOND D CONCRETE



JERRY MACREA; THE STAR-LEDGER



### CONCRETE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 77

president of the Hackensack company Concrete Concepts of New Jersey (201-488-2968). Cilli, winner of numerous awards for his installations in trendy restaurants, hotels and stores, predicts that the residential market will explode over the next year, as local contractors adapt techniques and "push each other" to bring prices down.

But for now, he says he "breaks the hearts" of 70 percent of his potential customers. "They call me because they think that concrete countertops will be more affordable than granite, which runs between \$90-\$100 per square foot." In truth, the price is roughly comparable, with concrete prices as high as \$125 per square foot, depending on the complexity of edge details, sink cutouts or backsplashes.

Still, for those with pockets deep enough for a custom installation, concrete has a certain elite allure. "Concrete is made with loving hands — it has personality and whispers confidence," reads the seductive copy on one fabricator's Web site. "Granite is okay for houses. But concrete is for homes."

Apparently many Americans involved in new house construction or remodeling

agree. Peterson says that within the past year, ConcreteNetwork, launched in 1999, has seen a substantial increase in online traffic.

"On an average day, we host between 6,000-8,000 visitors," he says. These include a mix of contractors, designers and customers searching for ideas, product innovations and local service providers. "People are smart. They know what they want, and they want it fast."

In fact, today's savvy homeowners seem to be driving much of the demand for decorative interior concrete. Many have seen the material used on Home & Garden Television or read about it in magazines such as Fine Homebuilding. More commercial spaces also have begun using the material, helping to capture the attention of the residential market, says Avis Bishop, a founder of Get Real Surfaces, a Poughkeepsie, N.Y. company that custom manufactures concrete countertops, sinks, flooring, tubs, fireplace surrounds and more.

In response to this clamoring for concrete, contractors are entering a brave new world of design techniques and innovations that seem to change on a weekly basis.

Bob Harris, president of the Decorative Concrete Institute near Atlanta, Ga., conducts hands-on training seminars for professionals around the globe and has just published a 100-page guide to stained concrete interior floors (available through [www.bobharrisguides.com](http://www.bobharrisguides.com)).



Fu-Tung Cheng, co-author of "Concrete Countertops," refines an inlaid detail in a concrete countertop.



Harris, a third-generation concrete finisher whose grandfather helped build the Hoover Dam, says his own interest in the decorative potential of concrete was sparked in the 1980's when he worked on "themed concrete" designs at Disney properties in Orlando. There he used casts to fashion everything from tree branches to alligator paw prints.

#### Creating the "wow" factor

One of concrete's biggest assets is its adaptability, which allows each concrete artisan to approach the craft differently, striving for a "signature look" by developing special casting techniques and proprietary colors and materials, Harris says.

Most of these begin with basic design methods that include stenciling, which employs templates made of paper or vinyl to "block" sections of new or existing concrete, creating colored borders, fields and accents. "Stamping" forms patterns in concrete that resemble brick, slate, stone, tile and even wood, a popular option for beautifying pool decks and driveways. "Staining" utilizes special chemicals that penetrate beneath a new or existing concrete surface to create rich colors and variegated tones. Acid etching, sandblasting and painting add to the seemingly infinite variety of decorative concrete techniques employed today. Logging onto ConcreteNetwork.com is a great way to peek at hundreds of these stunning custom installations.

[Continued next page]

Designers love the versatility of concrete. As flooring, top, it can be stained, stamped or etched with a variety of patterns. Countertops, above, can be inlaid with decorative objects or finished with a high gloss.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MATTHEW MLLINAN





**The Wright connection**

Although in some ways decorative concrete is very of-the-moment, Frank Lloyd Wright first used colored concrete flooring in a home he designed back in 1936. In fact, the dramatic richness of this deep red, leather-like floor became a trademark of Wright's design philosophy, according to Lawrence Tarantino, founder of Tarantino Architect in Millstone. Tarantino and his wife and partner, Sharon, live and work in the 1954 Bachman-Wilson House, designed by Wright and featuring this classic "Colorandum" floor.

Tarantino says Wright also was responsible for reviving the ancient Roman method of radiant heating, in which warmed air was circulated beneath the floors. In Wright's version, a sub-slab fitted with conduits carries hot water beneath the floor, an ideal system for pairing with concrete flooring.

**A DIY project?**

For those with more flash than cash, the idea of mixing and pouring one's own concrete countertops might sound like a great alternative.

The potentially challenging process of working with concrete can be made easier by consulting books, Web sites and

videos, says Fu-Tung Cheng a Berkeley, Calif.-based designer and co-author of the book "Concrete Countertops" (Tanuton Press, 2002).

The book includes planning and design advice, as well as instructions for constructing molds, mixing ingredients, finishing and installation.

"There are lots of exciting things happening in concrete," says Cheng, who is working on another book that expands the residential uses of concrete to floors, fireplaces, walls, room dividers and columns.

"Where concrete has the big advantage is what you can do to it," Cheng says. "What you can inlay into it, what it can complement." Its ability to take the shape of a mold allows it to create practical sculptures within the interior landscape, he says.

Cheng encourages do-it-yourselfers to prepare and get the right tools before tackling a project.

"It is very easy to do, but you just have to take the time and carefully follow the instructions about mold making. That's the key," he says.

His design company also has branched out to offer contractor training as well as products to streamline the process for the daring DIY set. Additional information and products are available through his Web site ([www.chengdesign.com](http://www.chengdesign.com)).

Do-it-yourselfers are cautioned that corner countertops, sink cutouts and other applications require precise measurements, and in such cases hiring an experienced contractor may produce the best results.

**Caring for concrete**

A professionally installed concrete floor or countertop can provide years of beauty and value with relatively low maintenance, says the Concrete Network, which recommends daily dust mopping, sweeping or damp mopping with a mild detergent to control grit, which can scratch the polished concrete surface if left untended.

And if there's one thing that most industry experts will guarantee, it's that concrete can and probably will crack. As with any natural material, "concrete has its own mind," says Amadeo Cilli. The "problem" of cracking can generally be minimized when installed by a professional, he says.

Cheng says large cracks often result from improper mixing and curing, but can be filled with color-matched epoxy. Both Cheng and Cilli agree, however, that a few small cracks can add to the innate beauty of the finished product.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MATTHEW MILLNAR

Cheng pushes concrete into tight places in a countertop mold as Jud Smith, a member of his crew, shovels more in. The molding process allows for the installation of drains and work surfaces, top left.