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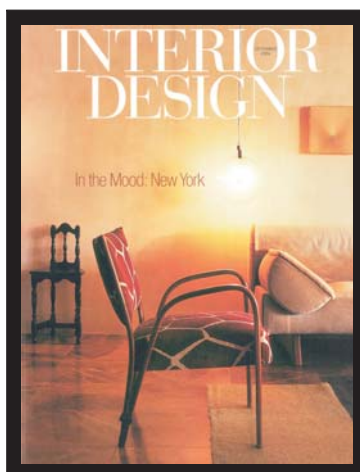
FU-TUNG CHENG CLEARLY COMES from artistic stock. Not only was his mother a colorist at the Walt Disney Studio, but three of his brothers also pursued careers in the arts—public-installation artist, painter, filmmaker. And Cheng himself started out as a painter and sculptor.

In order to support himself, he established Cheng Design as a renovation and repair company in 1978. One common job involved replacing rotting kitchen woodwork caused by sink water seeping under countertops. Looking for a remedy, Cheng cast an all-in-one concrete counter and sink for his own house.

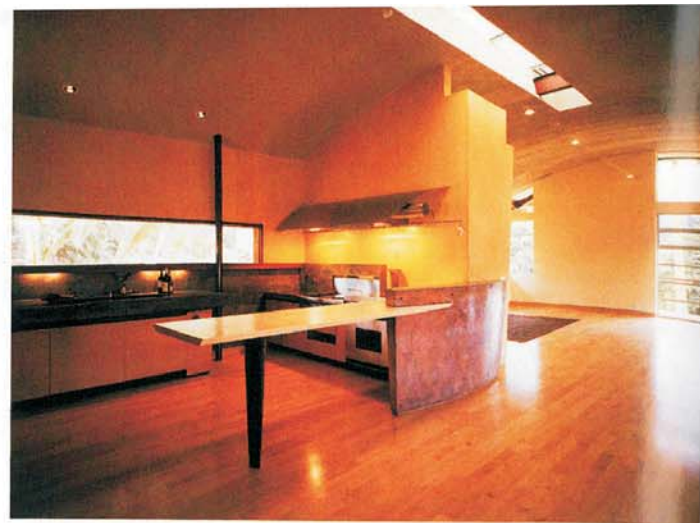
Cheng knew sculpture when he saw it. And so did the media. After the 1988 publication of his experimental kitchen—a tranquil blend of modernism and craftsmanship—it sparked a vogue for concrete in culinary settings. A mere 10 years later, his now full-service firm was designing everything from range ventilation hoods to entire houses.

concrete expressionist

Fu-Tung Cheng takes an artistic approach to kitchen design



Clockwise from top left: The founder and owner of Cheng Design. The integrally colored cast-concrete partition wall of a kitchen in Del Mar, California. Stainless-steel and concrete counters combined with custom bamboo-plywood cabinetry in Berkeley, California.



What sets your designs apart from other high-end custom kitchens?

Like most designers, I always look at the latest materials, but I never adopt something just because it's new or fashionable. Trend-driven styles look dated immediately. I'll use what's durable and practical—for instance concrete, which has always been my signature.

I also employ craftspeople, so the work shows a touch of the hand. That way, there's no clue as to when most of my projects were built. We add emotionally expressive details to the mix, such as embedding fossils in a cement countertop or creating a hollow for a cutting board to rest in, and we think about emotionally satisfying ergonomics, like

the way cabinet doors are configured or how smoothly they open.

Other than concrete, what materials do you work with?

For many years, I loved vertical-grain Douglas fir, but I quit using it because of the depletion issues. Now I specify bamboo almost exclusively. (My conscience feels better.) We use a lot of stainless steel, too, and some copper and granite.

Do you see other kitchen materials on the horizon?

There will probably be stronger forms of glass and, out of necessity, more kinds of composite wood. There might be a turn to exotic metals, such as titanium, and maybe zinc will resurface. It's an old metal that stains easily. →



Untouchable.

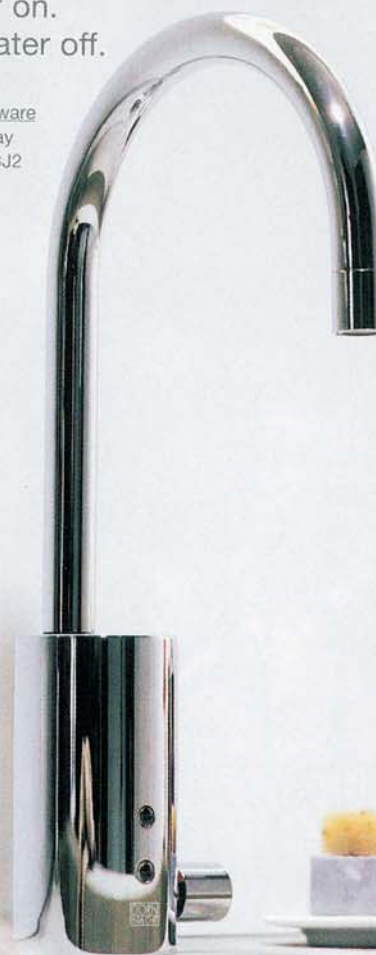
Hand in. Water on.
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kitchen&bath

but it has a warmth you don't get with aluminum, and it doesn't resonate.

Have you noticed any major trends lately?

There's a much greater willingness to combine disparate materials. You'll see stainless steel, concrete, granite, wood, and plaster used in the same space—without it looking cluttered or incongruous.

What do kitchen clients ask for today?

For everything to cost less! In terms of design, they expect durability and efficiency, although they often ask for more space than they really need, with separate areas for preparation, cooking, cleanup, and so forth. And they load up on appliances that don't leave very much room for creativity.

Haven't you been designing some appliances recently?

Yes, I've been working with the Zephyr Corporation on a line of kitchen hoods. Often product designs are compromised during manufacture, but Zephyr's design and fab-



ricating divisions in Italy are dynamic and nimble.

How does your own lifestyle affect your designs?

I'm particularly conscious of children, because I have a 5-year-old who's just the right height to bang her head on a counter edge. So I've inset cast-polyurethane bumpers on counters and rounded off a few sharp corners, too, though I don't like the look.

What's your favorite aspect of kitchen design?

When I can make something for people to gather around. It's like designing a plaza that everybody uses and loves.

—Sheila Kim-Jamet



Clockwise from top: Stainless-steel sink fittings in Napa, California. Shade, a Cheng-designed vent hood for Zephyr. A perforated stainless-steel door forming part of a kitchen island's base in Oakland, California.