

Concrete, with Polish, Can Be a Star

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by Catherine Murrell



Name: Fu-Tung Cheng.

Position: Founder of Cheng Design and Construction in Berkeley, California, and author, most recently of *Concrete at Home* (The Taunton Press, March 2005)

Resume: Cheng opened his design firm in 1987. He is also the author of *Concrete Countertops* (The Taunton Press, 2002). He coordinates the Cheng Concrete Exchange, an online resource for information on interior concrete.

Quote: "Although concrete has often been relegated to the role of understudy, it's a great actor. It can take the starring role."

Q: Concrete has developed a reputation as a merely utilitarian building material. Why should homeowners give it a second look?

A: Historically, concrete has been used expressively all over the place. If you open your eyes to concrete, you'll start noticing it. You'll see these Art Deco edifices with these neat patterns and carvings. Most people now think they're stone, but they're actually concrete. At the turn of the century, concrete was a vibrant expressive material used for finishes. It was the new high-tech material. Dynamic designers like Frank Lloyd Wright began using concrete in really creative ways. During World War II and the '50s, modernism came, and there was a stripping away of all these decorative elements — of the wedding-cake kind of floral designs and the Art Deco graphic designs that had been expressed in concrete. Then, for a 25-, even 40-year period, concrete became an understudy. It was always covered with something else — it was the subfloor. It was used structurally but not used as a finish material.

Although concrete has often been relegated to the role of understudy, it's a great actor. It can take the starring role. In recent years, there's been a revival of interest

in concrete. People are realizing that it has the ability to mimic anything. It can replicate anything you can make a mold of. If you treat concrete right, if you polish it up, it can do so much, and it will look so good. It lends itself to expression in ways that other materials just don't.



It's also a very functional material. You can't cut drain boards into Corian or Formica, and you can't cut them easily into granite. A drain board is a sculpted area that drains water from your countertop into your sink, the way the Rubbermaid plastic piece that goes under the average dish rack does. With concrete, you don't have to set a plastic drain board on your countertop. The drain board is built in. It's ground in the concrete so that it becomes a functional sculpture.

People are really drawn to the mass of concrete — they can't keep their hands off of it, especially when it combines form and function. It can be inlaid with mosaics and objects, you can add copper to it or tile. When you orchestrate a composition of form and function that really works, people just go crazy. They love it. Concrete is this inexpensive material, but concrete countertops appeal to people who could buy any kind of countertop they wanted, people who could buy titanium countertops if they wanted to.

Q: What interior roles can concrete play?

A: Concrete is great as a flooring material in a foyer where you're transitioning to wood. You want something practical that can withstand water, something that's not going to crack. It's also great for partition walls — for little dividers between rooms or for a partition in a bathroom. It can make a wall that's kind of sculptural and has a presence about it — and a beautiful finish. You can use concrete for fireplaces — especially these days with the tinny and anemic-looking metal fireplace inserts that have become ubiquitous. These fireplace inserts don't have any emotional appeal. They're just a pale shadow of what fireplaces used to be. You can use concrete to build a façade around a fireplace insert and make it look quite substantial. People really respond to the earthiness of concrete.

Q: What possibilities does concrete offer those on modest budgets?

A: The material itself is cheap. That's the beauty of concrete. It's like cotton. You can go to JCPenney and get a cotton T-shirt or you can get a cotton T-shirt at Saks Fifth Avenue. One will cost more than the other, but they're both cotton T-shirts. Some of the difference in price may be marketing, but there's also a difference in craftsmanship. Concrete appeals to both ends of the spectrum, to people on a budget and to people who can afford whatever they want. There are systems you can use that make it really easy to [make your own countertop](#). What you get depends on the effort you put into it, the preparation you do before. It's like painting. A good paint job is all about the prep. Anybody can put on a coat of paint and make it look good — as long as they keep it simple.

Q: What's a good starter project for do-it-yourselfers?

A: A simple [bathroom](#) vanity is a really great place to start. Or just start with a little table, with a little bench or with rectangles and circles — basic geometric shapes. You could do simple paving stones for your garden or make tiles for your bathroom. Get your feet wet a little bit and then progress to a concrete countertop for your [kitchen](#).



Get used to finishing the material, grinding it and polishing it. As a beginner, you want to grind and polish the concrete — you can grind away all the sins. If you get pockmarks, you can grind it and fill in the little holes with a slurry compound — in a different color if you want. Twenty years ago, you'd have to use these big commercial machines and these very expensive diamond stones to grind concrete. Now that technology is available on a consumer level.

Q: How forgiving is concrete as a countertop or flooring material? Does it stain?

A: Yes, it can stain. There are sealers you can use that will protect concrete from all stains, but they look plastic and they divorce you from the surface. I like to use penetrating sealers that do a modest job of sealing the pores and then you add wax to the surface. They don't look plastic, and you can still feel the surface of the

concrete. With these sealers, the concrete is susceptible the same way a hardwood floor might be. If you let spilt cabernet sit on the surface for 15 minutes, it will start working through the wax. It might leave a mark. Of course, you don't intend to leave cabernet sitting on the counter that long, but it might happen.

Fortunately, it's not difficult to fix small stains. And even if you need to grind and polish the whole surface of a countertop, you can do so in a matter of hours. It can be very easily brought back to looking almost new. In between refinishing the concrete, you may have to tolerate a few marks here and there, but if you really sculpt the material, if you make it something special, then people will forgive all the little marks and transgressions because they see past all that. If, on the other hand, you make your countertop just a simple slab, then the eye will go straight to the little aberrations because there's nothing else there.