

Concrete Goes Upscale

Innovative Forms and Finishes Give New Life to an Old Material

The Christian Science Monitor

Wednesday, March 23, 2005

by Clayton Collins



Among the fine finishing materials available to builders and remodelers there are some established stars: Corian, tile, and granite each have their boosters. Just eye the neighbors' new kitchen countertops to see which is in vogue.

But when the stone dust settles later this decade, don't be surprised to see the warm patina of ... concrete.

It's not only counters. Think half walls and columns, bathtubs and sinks. The popularity of decorative forms of concrete - a material that may still evoke the image of a Politburo building or parking garage - has firmly set on the West Coast and now crept east.

Decorators and bold homeowners hail its free-form nature and its capacity to reflect an individual's taste through imprints, inlays, and colors.

It's not cheap; installations often cost about the same as granite. And it's not always easy. But if some contractors still balk at the potential complexity, say experts, others are tapping their inner artisans and happily expanding past more repetitive, pour-and-smooth "flatwork."

"The myth of concrete as a dull, gray, not especially aesthetically pleasing material is starting to be shattered," says Jim Niehoff, spokesman for a clearly interested party, the Portland Cement Association in Skokie, Ill. His organization tracks the market share of homes built primarily of concrete - of which portland cement is a key component.

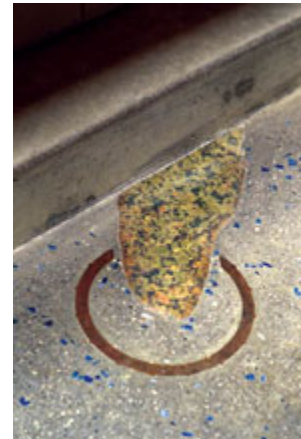
That share grew from 3 percent in 1993 to more than 16 percent in 2003. But not all

of the action is on the structural side, says Mr. Niehoff, who notes a surge in the use of stained and stamped concrete for interior uses.

"The number of inquiries that we get regarding [concrete countertops](#)," he says, "has also increased dramatically over the past several years."

"It absolutely has not hit its peak," says Bev Garnant, executive director of the American Society of Concrete Contractors in St. Louis.

Statistics on decorative concrete, she says, have not been compiled. Still, where once the main uses were countertops, some contractors now report calls for full kitchens. One builder she knows offers a palette of some 800 colors.



Bay Area craftsman Gary Nakamoto points to a recent trend toward adding crushed glass to mixed concrete.

"You can add a lot of variation to it," he says. "Most recently I've seen [glass-infused concrete] that's highly polished, almost like terrazzo."

The expressive new uses actually represent a renaissance. By the turn of the last century, concrete - steel-reinforced since the 1860s - was being seen as something more than just "an underlayment material," says Fu-Tung Cheng, principal of the Berkeley, Calif., Cheng Design and author of [Concrete at Home](#).

Its popularity raged on into the 1930s, he says. It waned in the postwar years as steel and plastic reigned. "What I'm trying to do is put some emotional soul back into modernist work," says Mr. Cheng, who stresses concrete's art-form component. He favors unique surfaces - stamped with such found objects as old auto parts, or tin ceiling tiles. Concrete around Cheng's fireplaces is often hand-tooled to look like stonework.

Homeowners shouldn't be timid about taking what can seem like a modernist leap, he says. The look might not be for everyone, but consider the degree of mix-and-match already being done. "People say 'I have a traditional kitchen,' " Cheng says, "and they're sitting there with six-burner, stainless-steel stoves and SubZero refrigerators - and all of this with cabinets in a 16th-century French derivative of rococo."

Concrete is not entirely out of the reach of the [do-it-yourself](#), Home Depot set. Cheng has sent bags of mix and instructions home with his firm's secretarial staffers and friends - and witnessed success.

Major work requires knowledge of stress levels and shrinkage, weight distribution, and the curing process. But "anybody can make a slab countertop with an undermount sink and a soap dish or a simple inlay or drainboard," he says. "In that sense it is really accessible."

Of course, the work rarely involves just a sack of mix and a trowel. Costs can mount. But cost doesn't appear to keep broadening interest at bay. Cindy Hamm launched a concrete-installation firm with her husband in suburban Dallas in 1996. Business grew by about 70 percent a year, she says, and so she recently reinvented her company. Now called Decosup Dallas, it manufactures decorative concrete and also provides training to other contractors.

Ms. Hamm's own customers - who spend \$6,000 to \$15,000 per job - relish the concrete's custom qualities. Interest keeps building. "It's just been unreal," she says. "I do think it is the new granite. It's a material like no other. Every installation is completely different from the last, and I think that's what people like about it. It's earthy, and not so trendy. An artistic piece."



"I believe that people are now looking not just for natural, but [also] different," says Mariel Hautoux, president of Art & Maison in Miami.

"People don't choose it because it's less expensive than granite or because they don't like granite," she says. "They choose it because it [can reflect] their lifestyle. The material is able to be molded." Even in the conservative Northeast, concrete is taking hold. Here, "if it's the same price or more, people are usually going to go with the tried and true; they're less likely to experiment," says Ray Iacobacci, who runs Form-Function Concrete in Rowley, Mass. Still, he says, where he was viewed as "nuts" 15 years ago for [installing a concrete countertop](#), he has doubled his business in each of the past five years - and watched enthusiasm soar.

"[Clients' counters] have become real expressions of themselves," he says. Often requested: sea glass and shells.

Mr. Iacobacci creates his pieces upside down on stainless-steel tables in his shop, maintaining control and keeping the messy work out of clients' homes.

"It's still custom work, and in the end it is always an extensive project," says Ms. Hautoux. Like Iacobacci, she and a partner handle jobs themselves from start to finish.

As long as big jobs require specialists, wait lists may be long, experts say. But even that could change as contractors see opportunity in the work. At a recent trade show, Cheng says he was swamped with interest. His own [training seminars](#) are sold out for the next six months.

Often attending those sessions are 30-year veterans of the concrete trade, he says, men with gnarled hands and bone-crushing handshakes. "They come in, arms folded, really skeptical," he says. "And when they leave after five days ... it's edifying to see their expressions of joy."

Cheng's advice for them may hold for homeowners, too. "This is about expression," he says. "You have to find your own voice."