



## FALLING FOR PAVEMENT

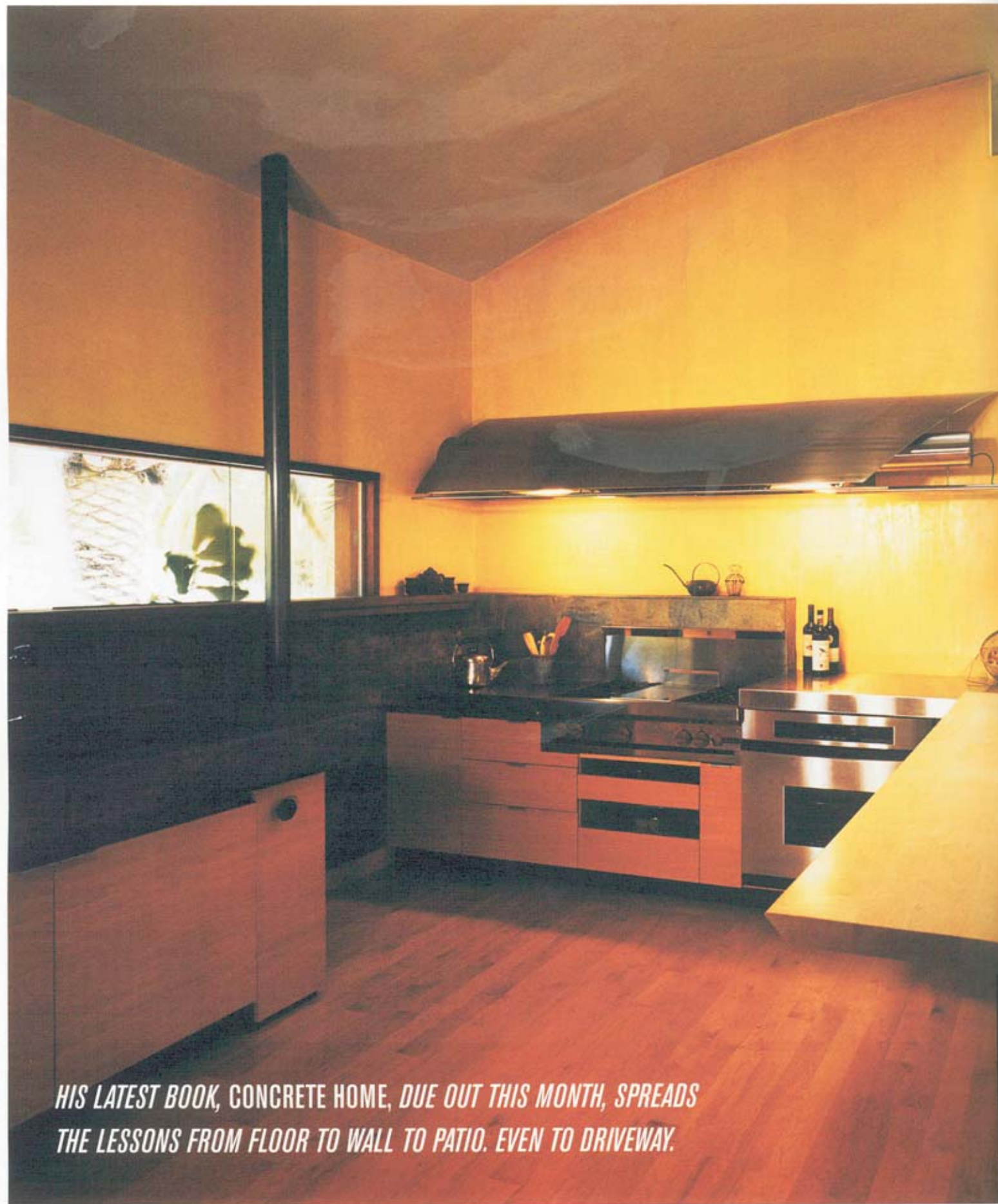
*Concrete gets a sleek makeover—and a moment in the Del Mar sun* BY ANDREW MYERS PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEBBIE BEACHAM

Fu-Tung Cheng doesn't just cast his dreams (and success) in concrete, he molds, incises, inlays, colors, polishes, stains, stamps and sculpts them as well. Once the stuff of utilitarian freeways and driveways, cinder blocks and sidewalks, concrete in Cheng's hands becomes custom countertops, floors, walls, mantles and fireplace surrounds, as well as columns and fountains, the details of which—be they discreetly inlaid ammonite fossils (Cheng's signature), a color wheel's worth of pigments and aggregates, or the incorporation of other media such as wood or water—elevate the prosaic to poetry. His latest challenge? One-of-a-kind houses-as-art.

One of four bespoke residences that Cheng and his firm, Berkeley-based Cheng Design, have under their belt, this house on a Del Mar hillside contrasts industrial materials—concrete block, galvanized siding, steel columns and welded I-beams—with stained-wood siding and a wooden frame that supports the roof. But what separates the house from the postmodern herd is less its clever inspiration (Airstream trailers and Quonset huts) and more the hard fact and soft artistry of Cheng's concrete. Outside, a cast staircase wall leads to an interior of polished concrete floors, countertops and partition walls, each element supporting the whole. Lines of copper inlaid in a concrete floor echo a curved ceiling; muted celadon and aubergine pigments in the concrete pick up the wall color; unexpected objects—fossils, polished stones, computer parts, even an automatic transmission valve cover—add interest and whimsy.

Born in 1948 in Van Nuys to a family of artists, Cheng's love of concrete was slow to take form, an accident of necessity and open-minded experimentation. A graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, with a degree in fine arts, Cheng spent a collegiate year in Japan studying Buddhism, Japanese culture and the martial art Shorinji Kenpo (he's now a second degree black belt as well as a decades-long Tai Chi practitioner). While his studies shaped an aesthetic that embraces minimalism, a respect for the organic and purity of form, they did little to fill a bank account. That notwithstanding, in 1975 Cheng found a house in Albany, California, near Berkeley, that was simply too cheap to pass up, and with a loan from a sibling (the only one who is not an artist), Cheng became a homeowner. Never mind that the house was, according to Cheng, a "near wreck." CONTINUED...

Concrete Cool: The entrance to this hidden Del Mar house docked against a gentle slope



*HIS LATEST BOOK, CONCRETE HOME, DUE OUT THIS MONTH, SPREADS THE LESSONS FROM FLOOR TO WALL TO PATIO. EVEN TO DRIVEWAY.*



...CONTINUED What followed was a 10-year renovation that became a de facto graduate school in building, during which Cheng became proficient in carpentry, electrical and plumbing. His Eureka! moment, however, came not in the bathtub but while he was trying to waterproof his cousin's kitchen sink. A synapse fired "Concrete," and from that counter intelligence sprang a life's work.

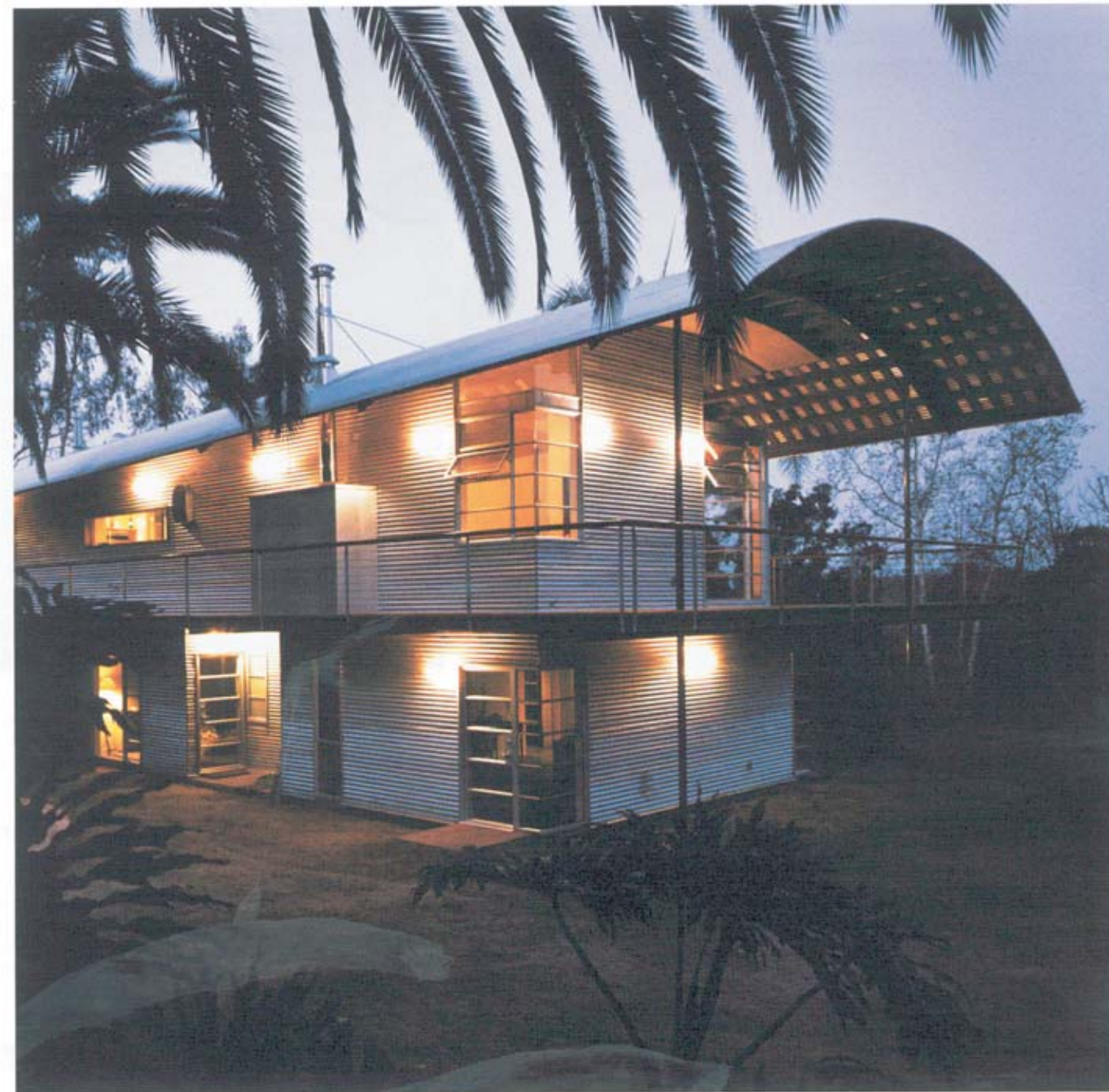
How though to make an artistic evolution an aesthetic revolution? The power of the word, with lots and lots of pictures. *Concrete Countertops*, Cheng's 2002 how-to bestseller, teaches concrete counter construction from start to finish, design to pour, and his latest book, *Concrete at Home*, due out this month, spreads the lessons from floor to wall to patio. Even to driveway. ■



Left: The Del Mar kitchen boasts signature Cheng concrete counter tops. Above: Zenlike serenity in the living room



*LINES OF COPPER INLAID IN A CONCRETE FLOOR ECHO A CURVED CEILING; MUTED CELADON AND AUBERGINE PIGMENTS IN THE CONCRETE PICK UP THE WALL COLOR*



Left: Galvanized steel and wood beams add sculpture to the backdrop. Above: Quonset hut inspiration