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YourBusiness ByDesign

Section Editor: Stacey Freed

A Good Mixer

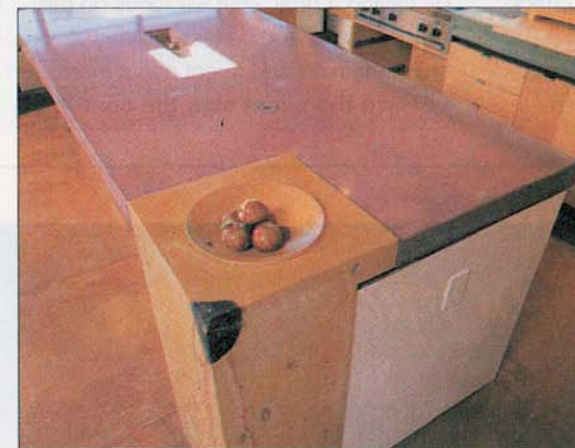
Designer and remodeler Fu-Tung Cheng wouldn't quibble with the use of Corian, granite, or Silestone in a kitchen, but he's wary of the way the kitchen and bath industry has stuck to those materials to drive design. "The industry built the idea of a traditional kitchen being a box with particular detail applied to the box cover. Boxes are easy to make, and they work with the cabinet industry. The best thing to put on top of the box is a slab."

Clichéd though the phrase has become, Cheng has been thinking outside that box for more than two decades, when he first created a concrete countertop for his home. He likes concrete for its sculptural qualities and versatility. It's "liquid stone," he says. "We can pour and manipulate and shape it."

Cheng, who owns Cheng Design in Berkeley, Calif., and who has written two books about using concrete in design — *Concrete Countertops* (written with Eric Olsen, published by The Taunton Press) and *Concrete at Home* — uses varied broom finishes



To create the countertop (left), the rebar grid is placed on the form, enough concrete to support the rebar is shoveled in, and the grid is lifted so it's about 2 inches off the bottom of the form. The remainder of the concrete is then placed and spread throughout the form before being floated with a wooden darby. The large island countertop (below) has a fruit bowl and an art piece built into it.



but they're difficult to come by in small quantities. Instead, Cheng created NeoMix, which could be described as the concrete equivalent of cake mix. One version, used most often by DIYers, just needs the addition of water and cement; the pigment is already included. The other version is packaged as separate ingredients and intended for the professional designer/contractor. It is not pigmented and allows more creative and technical freedom.



on his countertops and walls; inlays and embeds other materials such as stone; and pairs the concrete with stainless steel, wood, granite, tile, and even laminate. "There's a reason for using [each material] in different places," he says. Also, Cheng's customized pieces have an emotional component. "If a client has a wonderful marble with a pattern that they love, you can put a piece of that into an area where they can roll pastry."

Anyone can create the countertops, and Cheng's company offers workshops on creating and designing with concrete forms

(www.concreteexchange.com); there's also a how-to DVD.

The countertops, which need to be made close to where they will be used, are heavy, and must be created in "manageable pieces" that are then joined, the joints tying into the overall design of the counter and often becoming a design element in themselves. Although the concrete components are somewhat delicate to install, those "in the field love working with [concrete] because they're not assembling something; they're actually creating something," Cheng says.

Cheng's company sells several products: Geocrete is a brand name for a pre-made concrete countertop created by Cheng and made by his fabrication shop. To do it yourself, you could buy plasticizers and other components,

Originally, Cheng's high-end clients saw concrete as a differentiator, but it's affordable, and has wide appeal. If you do the mold yourself, a basic 2 1/2-inch-thick, 25-inch-wide by 12-foot-long countertop with a sink in it can be made for as little as \$3 to \$5 a square foot.

To critics worried about hygiene issues such as bacteria, Cheng says that sealed concrete is as porous as marble, an accepted countertop material. If wine or vinegar acid etches a ring into the concrete, the stain can easily be scrubbed out and the area resealed. "People still have hardwood floors, even though if someone walks on it in stilettos it will mar," he says. "In the context of appropriate application and good design, concrete can be part of your aesthetic toolbox." —S.F.