



THE TAO OF FU-TUNG CHENG

NATIONALLY KNOWN FOR PROMOTING THE USE OF CAST CONCRETE, THE EAST BAY DESIGNER TALKS ABOUT HIS INNOVATIVE KITCHENS AND WHOLE-HOUSE DESIGN PLANS.

BY CHLOÉ HARRIS

Perhaps it's the calming energy that seems to emanate from designer Fu-Tung Cheng—who, after more than 25 years in the industry, still draws each and every design by hand—that gives warmth to his sleek concrete countertops, fireplaces, floors and walls. Despite concrete's reputation as an industrial material, this California-born designer, martial-arts master and tai chi instructor has proven that concrete used in residential construction can be anything but cold.

ABOVE: In this Pacific Heights kitchen, the curve of the cast-in-place concrete divider echoes the shape of the space. The range hood is made of hand-burnished stainless steel. RIGHT: Fu-Tung Cheng.

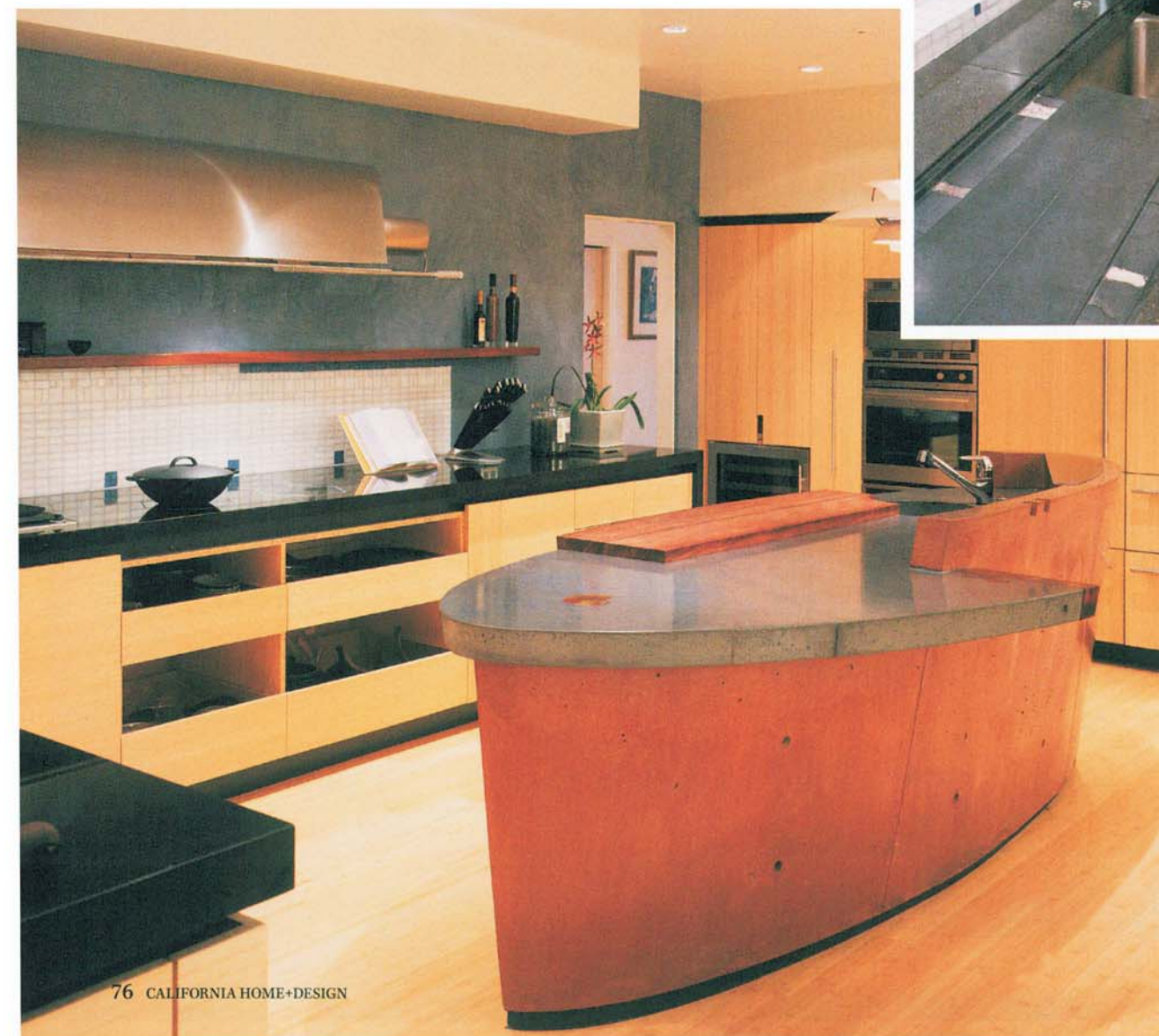


When Cheng graduated from UC Berkeley with a bachelor of fine arts (in terms of practical application, "it's up there with a degree in basket weaving," he laughs), he saw no viable means of supporting himself, so he went to work doing residential renovations—a less-than-glamorous pursuit involving the revitalization of homes in various states of disrepair. But when he purchased his own East Bay home in 1971 and began the renovation of a lifetime, his destiny began to take shape with his first cast-concrete countertop.

Like many budding designers, Cheng had more time on his hands than money in his pockets—34 years later, he admits that his home is still a work in progress—and he spent much of that time musing about cost-efficient design solutions. A 14-foot slab of cast concrete offered an inexpensive but ideal answer to the need for a kitchen counter. An amateur chef, Cheng designed the countertop to act as a kind of kitchen laboratory: "You want to be able to make a mess in the kitchen—cook, chop vegetables," he says. "But at the same time, I wanted to create a landscape in a sense, and it occurred to me that



LEFT: The elliptical shape of the concrete prep island in the kitchen of this weekend getaway made pouring it on-site too difficult—instead, it was cast elsewhere and installed fully formed. TOP: Into the island Cheng embedded an ammonite—a spiral-shaped fossil dating back to the time of the dinosaurs. ABOVE: The concrete countertop along the wall contains a stainless-steel sink with a built-in drainboard and a sliding cutting board.





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concrete could be sculpted.” With this unrestricted material, the options for customized features are endless, and Cheng has developed dozens of applications—including integrated cutting-board slots, stainless-steel trivets and decorative accents such as inlaid objects and hand-wrought finishes.

With two best-selling books—including 2002’s *Concrete Countertops* and *Concrete at Home*, which was released this spring—as well as his trademarked line of Geocrete countertops and a partnership with Zephyr Ventilation to create both high-end and affordable range hoods, Cheng is redefining the possibilities for one of the most readily available materials on earth. Specializing mainly in kitchens and baths from the get-go, Cheng turned his focus in the '90s to designing entire custom homes featuring cast-in-place concrete. With four houses in California and a fifth off the coast of Puerto Rico—a Bay Area family’s dramatic cliffside vacation home in glass, steel and concrete—the sky is the limit

for Cheng. His sixth construction, “a standard *Concrete at Home* house,” as he puts it, breaks ground in Menlo Park this summer, and plans are currently being drawn up for the East Bay headquarters of Zephyr Ventilation.

Experimenting with concrete has clearly been profitable for Cheng, and he remains unafraid to continue testing the material’s boundaries. His latest project—Téance, a teahouse in Albany that Cheng co-owns with friend Winnie Yu—acts as a showplace for Cheng’s surprisingly soft touch with concrete. “The shape, form and texture of concrete have been underutilized,” he notes. “It can be shaped to create sculpture, ground to reveal aggregate and invested with other materials to give it life. It is as versatile to building as cotton is to clothing. It’s all in the way you weave it.” ■

Though monolithic in appearance, this 10-foot-long terra-cotta-colored concrete counter—designed to frame a fireplace-turned-wood-fired oven—seems to float above the bamboo lower cabinets.