



THE ABSTRACT BECOMES CONCRETE

Designer Fu-Tung Cheng's Innovative Concrete Forms and Finishes for Kitchens, Baths and Other-Rooms

THERE IS NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN; modern trends are merely reinventions of the old. Yet every once in a while, a designer or an artist steps forth and conceives new applications, new methods for time-tested materials. The result is the very definition of innovation. Such is the case with award-winning designer Fu-Tung Cheng, whose creative applications of concrete have bred a new approach to modern kitchen and bath design. In Cheng's and in the hands of the many craftsmen he has inspired, concrete is no longer a mere architectural understudy. Rather the 'liquid stone' is being used to create unique, hand-crafted concrete countertops for kitchens and baths, as well as other applications in additional rooms where homeowners desire personal identity and personal style. For

WRITTEN BY SHALENE KELLY | PHOTOS BY MATTHEW MILLMAN, COURTESY OF TAUNTON PRESS

anyone seeking new design options for his/her kitchen or bath space, Cheng's countertop craft is creating viable, beautiful alternatives to traditional granite and synthetics.

THE DESIGNER Cheng is the principal of design firm Cheng Design, Berkely, Calif., and it's fair to say he is "the" mastermind behind the concrete countertop and concrete at-home movement. Growing up in a family of artists, Cheng learned at an early age to appreciate both traditional and non-traditional, avant-garde creations and the aesthetics and utility of form and function. This upbringing fostered Cheng's affinity for creating one-of-a-kind and intriguing, functional at-home concrete designs. In fact, nearly 20 years ago, Cheng crafted his first concrete countertop in his own home. "When you come from an art background," he said, "you reach and do things in a naïve manner. You do them because it's what you want to do. I wasn't in the countertop business (then); I wasn't trying to create a business. I was just doing this for myself, to create a functional, working countertop for myself in a way that would be inexpensive and would deliver more bang for the buck."

THE EVOLUTION OF CONCRETE AS A DESIGN MEDIUM Though Cheng's first concrete countertop may have been constructed two decades ago, concrete was first used as a structural material by the early Romans. The material, however, didn't evolve into an expressive movement until the turn of the 20th century, when "innovative architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Bernard Maybeck and Julia Morgan and others of their generation saw the potential of this 'liquid stone' and exploited and explored

all manners of expressive architectural structures and details with concrete," said Cheng. "During the late '20s and '30s, the Art Deco and Moderne building facades all used concrete as the sculptural medium.

"During the period after World War II and well into the 1980s, concrete lost its stage-front role in architecture and became an understudy once more," Cheng said.

Over the last 20 years, however, Cheng has been exploring the use of concrete as an expressive material once again, and those exploits have resulted in the reinvention of concrete as a multifaceted design element. In his experiences, the designer has re-discovered both the utility and the aesthetic appeal of the material. Likewise, his clients continue to show an increased enthusiasm for all things concrete.

THE RISE OF THE CONCRETE COUNTERTOP Cheng's first concrete countertop was the "the seminal experiment that proves that it works, and to this day it is still functioning." Cheng often shows people his initial creation, and they think the product is innovative. In actuality, it is 20 years old. Nevertheless, when high-end clients visit Cheng's home, it is this "vintage" countertop in the 10-by-14-foot kitchen that has his guests oohing and ahing.

So what is its appeal? "People are looking for something that emotionally touches them," Cheng said. "They, in turn, actually go up and touch the concrete. There is a reason for that; it's earthy, but (with concrete countertops) you're putting into it all these sophisticated forms and configurations, grinding and showing all these aggregates as though it were a man-made granite or marble." Cheng says the product is durable as well, but one of its most

The kitchen in this San Francisco loft portrays the unique design options that can be created with concrete.





appealing features is its ability to conform to any mold or shape the homeowner desires. According to Cheng, a rebirth of good craftsmanship has created applications for concrete that were never before imagined. "Above all, as a finish material, (concrete) can mimic anything you put into it ... Whatever costume you put it into, it can enlighten that. For the last 20 or 30 years, (concrete) was relegated to just an understudy ... Suddenly there is a renaissance of what you can do with it because of both technological changes and a new appreciation of good craftsmanship in concrete ... The big message behind all this is that there is more appreciation across the board of all innovation and good design, regardless of the material."

That message is apparently being heard. Tens of thousands of Cheng's first book, *Concrete Countertops* (Taunton Press), are currently in print, and his second, *Concrete at Home* (also by Taunton Press), is following on the heels of the first. In addition, hundreds of professionals are joining the Concreteexchange (www.con-

creteexchange.com), an informative resource that provides an instructional DVD for do-it-yourselfers and training for concrete professionals. This eager response indicates that designers and homeowners alike are excited about the untapped design potential of this ancient material. Case in point: In 2004, *USA Today* listed concrete countertops as the hot new product, and *Consumer Reports* (Aug-Sept. 2004 issue) listed it for the first time ever as a material suitable for customization.

With the mass market's enthusiastic response, concrete is gaining more ground than it has in decades. Despite its seemingly endless positive points, Cheng cautions homeowners that, as with every type of material, concrete does have its disadvantages. "It's going to stain, it's going to have a little crazing," Cheng said. "(But) take for example, wood floors. People put wood floors in their kitchen, throughout their house. They come in from the snow, they stomp on the floor, it gets wet, or they walk on it with high heels and it dents. There are a lot

Above left: The drop-down front on this kitchen cabinet covers old brick. Above: Concrete walls and countertops contribute to the warm, earthy appeal of this kitchen.

Above right: A concrete countertop is complete with a perforated stainless steel soap tray, sink and slate inlay. Bottom right: This concrete creation is a stunning design feature in this penthouse bath.

of disadvantages to wood floors, but people like it because it's emotionally warm. It's the same with countertops."

CONCRETE AND THE MODERN HOMEOWNER

As the popularity of concrete continues to rise, modern homeowners will have more access to concrete countertop options than ever before. "The concrete countertop market is at a pivotal point," Cheng said. "Excited and stimulated by the designs in high-end kitchens with concrete countertops they see in home and shelter magazines, as well as in the mass media, consumers are searching for local fabricators of the work they see published." By the same token, Cheng says many concrete professionals are sensing the opportunities and are excited to broaden their offerings with countertops.

With this increased interest, it is important to maintain the artistic integrity of concrete. "Without the artistry," Cheng said, "the sculpting, and the sense of integration into

design and style, concrete countertops will fail to capture the imagination of the end user, as they inevitably discover the vulnerabilities of concrete. Without good design, concrete is just porous stone."

Mere porous stone, perhaps, but a porous stone that becomes a compelling masterpiece in the hands of Fu-Tung Cheng and other trained professionals. So with concrete creations as intriguing as Cheng's, some might consider it a disgrace to confine such designs to the kitchen or bath. Therefore, much to the delight of Cheng and appreciative homeowners alike, the designer's artistic mastery is being carried throughout the entire home.

"I don't want to be pegged into being a kitchen designer," Cheng said. "I don't resent it, it's just that I was given an opportunity and I focused and applied design. By that same token, with that same sensibility, someone said, 'I love your kitchen; I saw it in a magazine. Do you design houses?' and I said, 'Sure.' And that was my first house. Subsequently, we have done about seven houses, and I love doing whole houses, I love doing larger projects."

With this combined portfolio of kitchen, bath and larger-project concrete creations, Cheng has helped move concrete to the forefront of modern design. While it's true that there may be nothing entirely new under the sun, and though Cheng's material of choice may be an ancient product, his propensity to craft fresh, eye-catching creations from an age-old material is opening a bright new world of design possibilities for homeowners. □

For more information on Fu-Tung Cheng and his concrete creations, visit www.chengdesign.com or www.concreteexchange.com, or pick up Concrete Countertops or Concrete at Home, both by Fu-Tung Cheng with Eric Olsen, published by Taunton Press.