

CONCRETE revolutionary

By Liz McCarthy

“Concrete is obviously my material of choice,” said Fu-Tung Cheng. “To me, what is more important is the motivation behind that choice.” His original idea to use concrete was sculptural, based on the ability to transform concrete into virtually any shape that becomes a solid mass. The possibilities for creative expression were endless. This versatility and the customization that is possible with concrete is also what drew Cheng to the material. “Most aspects of our industry are orientated towards standardization – the appliances, the cabinet box, the codes,” he said. “Here’s a design element that can be brought in that works to customize every project. It can be applied specifically to each job, but is a very versatile and durable product.”

To Cheng, that is the importance of his use of concrete, and by extension, the importance of his designs. “I was looking to bring back a level of individualization and personalization to the kitchen. That was the foundation, the basis of my introducing concrete into kitchen design. Once I began approaching kitchen design that way, it brought out a sense of timeless design, one not associated with any trend,” said Cheng. Visitors to his home, a showcase of his first concrete countertops, think it is brand new. There is nothing to identify it with a certain era. “The overall design is difficult to place, which leads to a somewhat universal appeal,” explained Cheng. “Because it touches something emotional, it reminds them of older times, particularly the sense of mass in the older kitchens found in Europe. That expression of emotion makes us feel connected to traditional design.”

Cheng purchased his home in Albany, California, just north of Berkeley, in 1975. It was a near-wreck built in the 1880s, and he rebuilt the house while living in it, salvaging and recycling used materials. “It was this time in my life, when I had more time than money, that the foundation for what I’m doing now was laid,” remembered Cheng. “The idea of working with used materials and of being very green, economically I had no other choice, but I was also very keen to the idea.” As is often the case, necessity was the mother of invention. “Necessity reinforced the idea of looking for innovative ways of doing things,” said Cheng.

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World of Concrete

Innovative could be the ideal adjective to describe Cheng. Schooled in fine arts, he had no professional industry training. “My training was purely by jumping in and by working and making mistakes and learning from them over a long time...” he said. “I often feel that I am more of a street musician playing in a concert hall with a trained pianist. It is a melding of the structure and academic with the stimulation and vibrancy of the street.”

At his California-based design company, Cheng heads a team of architects, designers and artisans. Founded in 1978, Cheng Design began with residential renovations and built a reputation for innovative kitchen and bath design. Cheng Design has since evolved into a custom home and commercial product design firm. Today Cheng Design is internationally known for its inspired concrete forms produced in the Berkeley workshop. The firm has reinvented the traditional kitchen and bathroom by using concrete as a sculptural element and incorporating the aesthetics of nature.

In response to a growing demand from both existing clients and the design community, the firm launched Cheng Design Products, Inc. in early 1998 to introduce the Cheng Design aesthetic to a broader market. Cheng Design Products’ line includes a series of distinct kitchen hood designs, as well as modular kitchen and bathroom countertops made from Geocrete™, a proprietary, lightweight concrete. Cheng is also currently working on a luxury, high-end cabinet line that will be released shortly. “When designing my products, I apply what I have learned from my custom clients and align it for a broader audience. I develop a design cache that can work across a wide market,” said Cheng.

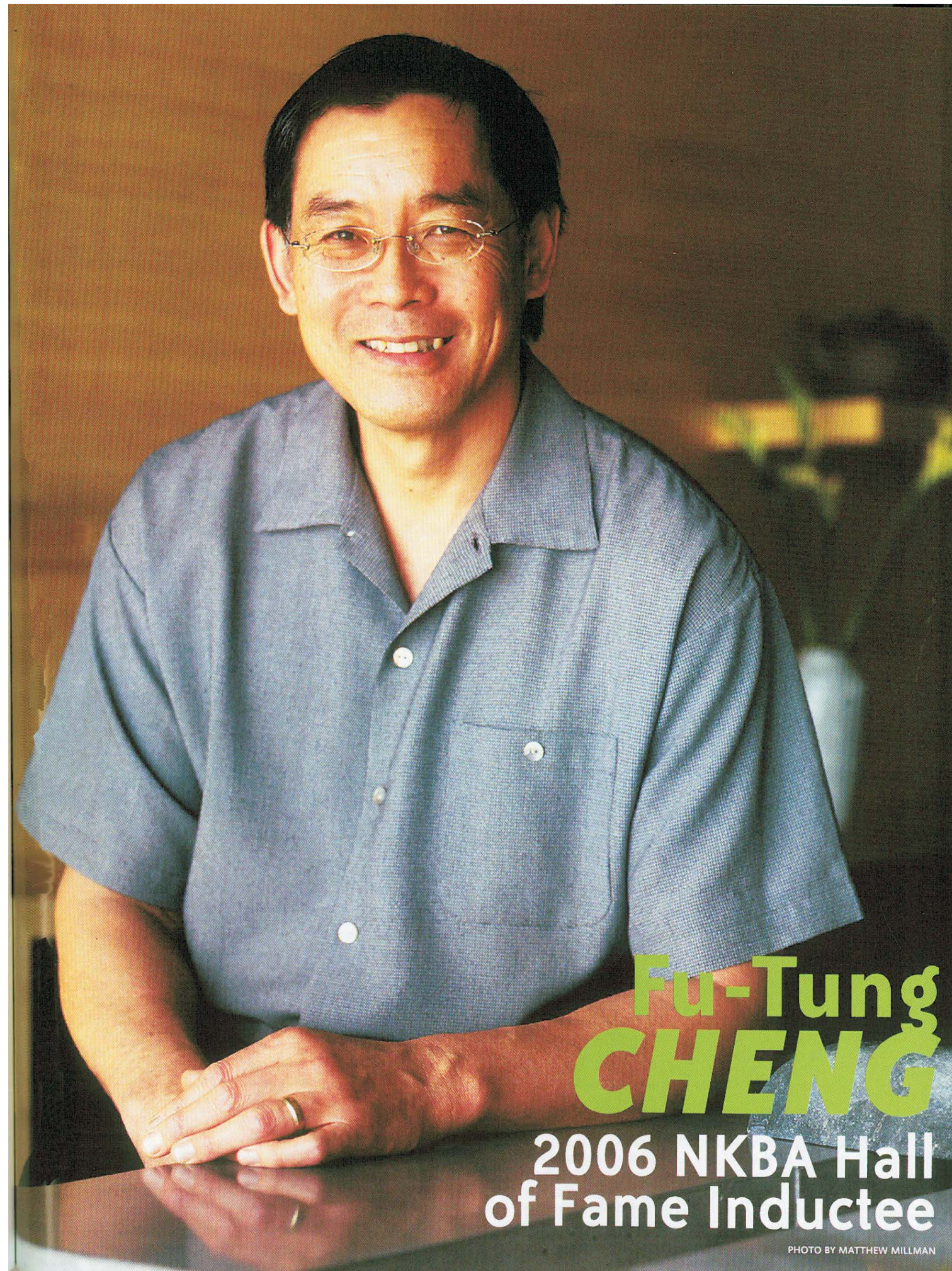
In 2003, Cheng created the Cheng Concrete Exchange, an online channel for all topics, products and information related to interior concrete use. The Exchange also offers workshops and programs for participants to gain hands-on experience in underlying techniques and design principles. A testament to Cheng’s popularity, every workshop held this year sold out and upcoming courses are sold out until July. “Concrete projects are inherently best produced by local craftspeople in their local environment,” explained Cheng, citing the cumbersome weight and difficulty in shipping. “My goal is to empower people to do their own thing and be creative and to allow that creativity to permeate and raise the bar in the craftsman industry, not to create clones of me.”

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Design Inspiration

“Concrete fits into my design philosophy, which was to find a way to bring the same emotional response that people have of older, traditional design to contemporary design,” said Cheng. The trick is succeeding within the limits and the guidelines of the kitchen and bath industry and meeting standards necessary to provide customers with acceptable products. “It is an invigorating process,” said Cheng. “One must adapt the design so the element will fit within the context, but still be different from everyone else.”

Rather than mimic the works of the past, Cheng suggest designers inspire themselves to find the appropriate expression of the present. “We can create new, original details in our kitchen and bath designs that are true to our times,” said Cheng. “Don’t imitate the flower or the mountain, just take inspiration from them.”



Fu-Tung
CHENG

2006 NKBA Hall
of Fame Inductee

PHOTO BY MATTHEW MILLMAN

