

foyer in this Sebastopol, CA, home displays an acid-washed concrete step with inlaid flooring, which helps to distinguish room from room.

THOUGH THERE IS NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN, THERE ARE TIMES WHEN A DESIGNER OR AN ARTIST STEPS FORTH AND CONCEIVES NEW APPLICATIONS AND 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. »

THE ABSTRACT BECOMES CONCRETE

Designer Fu-Tung Cheng's Innovative Concrete Forms and Finishes for the Modern Home.

WRITTEN BY **SHALENE ROBERTS**
photos by Matthew Millman and Fu-Tung Cheng
courtesy of The Taunton Press

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Cheng's creative concrete applications have bred a new approach to modern home design. In his 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 beautiful architectural elements, including unique, hand-crafted concrete countertops, fireplaces, walls, floors and more. For anyone seeking new design options for the home, Cheng's craft is creating viable, beautiful alternatives to traditional building concepts.

Cheng is the principal of design firm Cheng Design, Berkeley, 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 nontraditional, avant-garde creations and the aesthetics and utility of form and function. This upbringing fostered Cheng's affinity for creating 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 naive 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 itself has a much longer history. Concrete was first used as a structural material by the early Romans. It didn't, however, 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

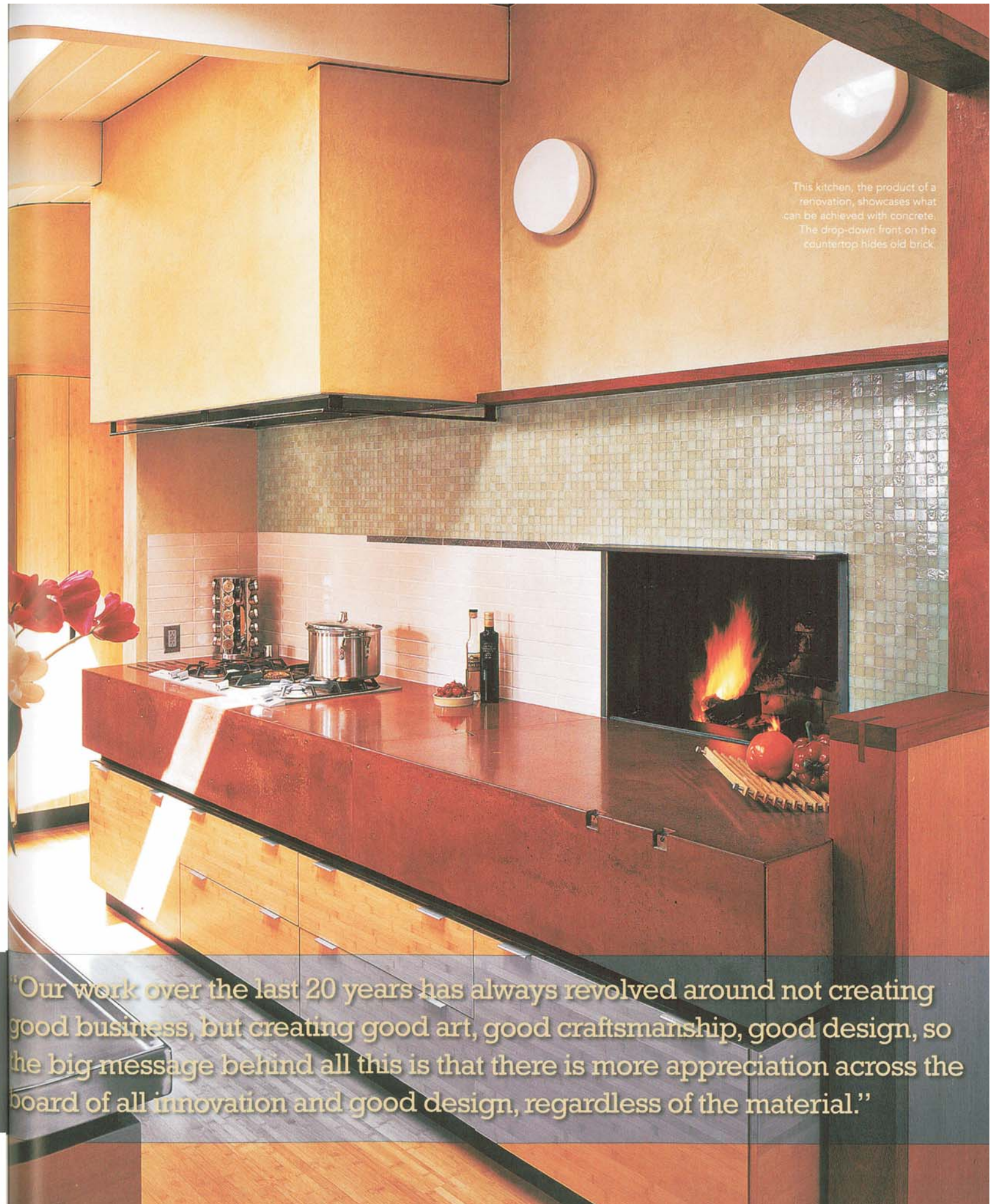
others of their generation saw the potential of this liquid stone and exploited and explored all manners of expressive architectural structures and details with concrete," said Cheng. "During the late '20s and '30s, the Art Deco and Moderne building facades all used concrete as the sculptural medium.

"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. Relegated to retaining walls, supporting subfloors and underpinning foundations, or at most, forming patios, driveways and sidewalks, concrete as a finish material certainly was at a nadir. ... Modernism's pared-down influence on the use of concrete kept it in its understudy, understated role," 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 experience, the designer has rediscovered both the utility and the aesthetic appeal of the material. Likewise, his clients continue to show an increased enthusiasm for all things concrete. Due to this overwhelming response, concrete at-home is gaining widespread popularity.

THE RISE OF THE CONCRETE COUNTERTOP AND BEYOND Cheng's first concrete countertop was 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 guests oohing and ahing.

So what is its appeal? "People are looking for something that emotionally touches them," Cheng said. "They,



This kitchen, the product of a renovation, showcases what can be achieved with concrete. The drop-down front on the countertop hides old brick.



FURTHER READING

PUBLISHED BY THE TAUNTON PRESS AND AUTHORED BY FU-TUNG CHENG WITH ERIC OLSEN, both "Concrete Countertops" and "Concrete at Home" offer in-depth looks into the world of Cheng's stunning concrete creations. Each page couples beautiful designs with practical advice, informative text with rich photographs.

Written specifically for the D-I-Y professional or homeowner, Concrete Countertops and Concrete at Home provide the key information necessary to assist individuals in the creation of their own designs. The books give useful tips on concrete mix design, form creation, pouring, curing, finishing and troubleshooting. For anyone who desires to learn the tricks of the trade, both titles are a must-have.

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Light and warmth that exude from a fireplace beckon
everyone to draw near. Here, a 20-foot-long by 5-foot-high
4-foot-deep piece of concrete adds depth and texture to
a contemporary fireplace surround. As a fireproof material,
concrete is ideal for such applications.





in turn, actually go up and touch the concrete. There is a reason for that; it's earthy." Cheng said the product is durable as well, but one of its most appealing features is its ability to conform to any mold or shape the homeowner or builder 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. ... Playwrights weren't writing plays that could embellish the roles (in which) concrete could do well. There wasn't as much expression in the work. ... 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.

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That message is apparently being heard. In 2002, Cheng published *Concrete Countertops* (The Taunton Press), which boasts tens of thousands of copies in print. In response to this enthusiastic reception, Cheng began offering concrete countertop workshops to homeowners and industry professionals who were interested in learning the craft. The response was phenomenal. Cheng then published his second book, *Concrete at Home* (also by Taunton Press, 2005). This title expanded beyond the scope of the countertop and purposed to show how concrete could be used to craft a variety of other creations throughout the home.

In addition, Cheng has created Concreteexchange (www.concreteexchange.com), an informative resource that provides an instructional DVD for do-it-yourselfers



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DECORATIVE INLAYS

INLAYS, SUCH AS THE ONE SHOWN HERE, can be placed in concrete to add aesthetic appeal and a personalized element to any concrete creation. Inlays can be laid before the concrete pour or can be placed into the wet concrete during the pour. Several factors come into play when determining ideal placement timing, including size and weight.

If placing a large, heavy inlay, timing is key. Place the item too early, and it could sink. Lay it down too late, and it will be difficult to situate the inlay into the hardening concrete. If an inlay is not flat, utilize a finisher who can help to minimize the unevenness. For more information about inlays and other decorative concrete elements, reference *Concrete at Home*.

and training for concrete professionals. Since its inception, hundreds of professionals have joined Concreteexchange, indicating the fact 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 a hot new product, and *Consumer Reports* (Aug-Sept. 2004 issue) listed it for the first time ever as a material suitable for customization.

With such an enthusiastic response, concrete is gaining more ground than it has in decades. However, Cheng does caution that, as with every type of material, concrete does have its disadvantages. When considering whether or not concrete is a viable alternative, it is important to weigh its negatives against the artistic emotion it stimulates. "It's not the best material as a toe-to-toe with granite," Cheng said. "It's going to stain, it's going to have a little crazing, (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 of disadvantages to wood floors, but people like it because it's emotionally warm. ... Granite would be better, but nobody in their right mind, except for maybe the Romans, would put marble everywhere. And even then you put rugs on top of that because it's too cold."

CONCRETE AND THE MODERN HOMEOWNER

As the popularity of concrete rises, homebuilders and homeowners will have more access to this material than ever before. By the same token, Cheng said many concrete professionals are sensing the opportunities and are

excited to broaden their offerings with countertops and other applications. With this increased interest, however, it is important not to neglect the artistic integrity of concrete. "Without the artistry," he said, "the sculpting, and the sense of integration into design and style, concrete will fail to capture the imagination of the end user, as they inevitably discover the vulnerabilities of concrete—namely its porosity and propensity to stain. Without good design, concrete is just porous stone."

Mere porous stone, perhaps, but porous stone that becomes a compelling masterpiece in the hands of Cheng and other trained professionals. And though Cheng began the concrete renaissance within the confines of the kitchen, the possibilities throughout the home are endless.

"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 impressive portfolio of 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 builders and homeowners. **IH**

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Contemporary elements are featured inside a farmhouse, including a concrete platform that supports a wood-burning stove. (Bottom Left) An indoor concrete water place traps water in its shallow basin and collects mineral deposits when the water evaporates.



RESOURCES:

For additional information on concrete fabrication or Fu-Tung Cheng, visit the following web sites:

www.chengdesign.com

www.concreteexchange.com

