

ROCK SOLID REVOLUTION

*Concrete counters move to the mainstream
as designers embrace its versatility
and advanced casting techniques.*

BY LISA WALKER

blame the Soviets for giving concrete a bad name. Cold War-era photos showed us formerly graceful cities—Warsaw, Berlin, Saint Petersburg, Havana—blighted by block after relentless block of the featureless concrete buildings that defined Iron Curtain chic. So how did this dependable but drab material make the leap from cinderblocks and driveways to stylish interior surfaces in America?

Actually, it wasn't such a big stretch. Concrete has a long history of decorative use, even in Florida where, mixed with marble chips to make terrazzo, it was common in houses, from modest to mansions, in the middle of the last century. Long used in California and Europe to create high-end interiors, the versatile stone product is slowly making a comeback in the Sunshine State.

The keys to its growing popularity are simple: versatility and improvements in technology.

What makes concrete different from natural stones such as granite and marble or solids such as Corian or Lava Stone is that it's almost infinitely plastic, its uses, shape and color limited only by imagination. One only has to look at the fantastical concrete shapes of Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles to recognize how versatile concrete can be in the hands of an artist.

"With granite and marble, you choose what comes out of the ground; concrete you design." Russell "Boom" Bechkowiak should know. He has spent thousands of hours designing, blending and casting concrete surfaces for homes and has watched the adoption of concrete accelerate.

"It started with high-end installations," Bechkowiak notes. "I recently saw a profile of Gwyneth Paltrow's home, and she has concrete countertops. It started from the top down, and from the West Coast and East Coast and has moved inward. There's something about the geometry and the mix of mineral colors blended into what was a liquid that is now solid. You can't stop looking at it. Concrete has a warmth to it; some of that warmth is visual and some is tactile."





California designers have commonly used concrete countertops for at least two decades, while it made its first high-end appearances in Orlando within the last few years. “Designers are always looking at different products. What drew me to concrete was that it was different from granite,” says Troy Beasley, of Beasley & Henley Interior Design. “Granite’s a good product, but when I saw concrete, I thought ‘Eureka, here’s something very cool, a raw material that’s very appealing.’ I had worked with granite for a long time and knew it well. I didn’t know if I could recommend concrete to a client, so to get some experience with it, I ended up using it in my own home, and I’ve been very happy.”

Designer Joan DesCombes of Architectural Artworks likes concrete so much that she used it in a Winter Park kitchen that won the coveted National Kitchen and Bath Pinnacle Award in 2008.

“Concrete is an artistic, hand-made product,” she explains. DesCombes uses noted California designer Fu-Tung Cheng to create concrete surfaces for her clients. “The people we use are artisans, not the guy who pours your driveway. The surfaces are pre-cast and shipped to us. They can be fabricated in modular units to fit standard or custom cabinetry and can be personalized with inlays, fossils or semi-precious beads to provide textural interest.”



More designers recognize concrete as an ideal material for creating countertops that are not only durable but works of art. Though it’s porous, and scratches and stains are more likely, concrete is a high-quality, unlimited signature beauty for those who can embrace its flaws.





In a sense, it's this very flexibility that is one of concrete's drawbacks. "The palette you can design with is almost limitless," Bechkowiak says. "Concrete is only limited by your imagination and by your ability to make a mold retrieve the casting from the mold in a usable state."

"Most consumers and designers want options, but in the sense of picking from a finite range of possibilities. If you're buying granite or marble, you'll go to the distributor and look at actual slabs of material in the rack. With concrete, you're designing it on paper, and you won't see the actual product going in your home until after it's cast."

Concrete also exhibits the inconsistencies of a handmade product. "The control in the process isn't as precise as it is for natural stone," Bechkowiak continues. "It's not worked by machine from start to finish and that can yield unexpected results and a little serendipity. If you're looking for a product that's very uniform from kitchen to bath to garage, concrete may not be able to perform the same way a solid manufactured surface like Corian can. It's interesting because granite often has flaws

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or color variations and people are willing to accept that. Because concrete can be controlled, they expect it to be flawless.”

With an understanding of what concrete can't do, designers and homeowners are still embracing the material's unique advantages. Features such as drainboards, sinks, corners and unusual edge profiles can be cast right into the counter, giving the overall design a sleekness that's hard to match with other materials.

“Let's say you want to turn a corner and bookmatch the surfaces,” Bechkowiak says. “That can be hard to do with natural stone, but a skilled caster can cast the counter with the corner in place and no seam. It's done commonly and successfully.”

The weight issue of concrete has been solved through the use of novel composites. Concrete that's reinforced with a layer of glass-fiber material can be cast thinner to eliminate weight. Fu-Tung Cheng has trademarked his process, known as GeoCrete. Bechkowiak has his own unique process, adding recycled glass to his concrete to produce a wide range of color and surface effects.

How to know if concrete is right for your new home or remodel?

“Get to the know the material,” DesCombes advises. “I ask clients a lot of questions. If someone asks for a material that's really low maintenance, they don't really want concrete. If someone says they want stainless steel, but they also don't want scratches in the countertops, then they don't really want stainless. The scratches create a wonderful patina that make stainless so attractive. The same kinds of considerations apply to concrete.”

“If someone's not going to cut on a cutting board, concrete will scar,” Beasley agrees. “We've scarred our countertop at home, and we don't mind because we're in a Spanish-style home that has some mars and scars that are part of its character.”

It's those two words, character and versatility, that designers keep using when they talk about concrete. In addition to its shape-shifting ability in the kitchen, it's spreading to other rooms and other uses.

“We're making fireplace surrounds with concrete, and it's fabulous outdoors for water features and firepits. It has a lot of uses,” DesCombes says.

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