



Photo by Matthew Millman, Courtesy of Cheng Design

PLANE & FANCY

THE BOOM IN DECORATIVE CONCRETE COUNTERTOPS, SINKS AND MUCH MORE

by STEVEN H. MILLER, CDT

THE WORD "COUNTER" ORIGINALLY MEANT A SURFACE IN A BUSINESS ESTABLISHMENT FOR COUNTING OUT GOODS AND MONEY. IT HAS GROWN TO MEAN A SURFACE THAT YOU CAN COUNT ON IN A VERY different sense: countertops have become essential features of almost everybody's lives. They've completely replaced the kitchen worktable of 100 years ago, and have similarly taken over bathrooms. They are surfaces we count on to be clean and durable so we can fulfill some of our most basic needs.

Because the history of countertops is relatively brief, there is no one dominant, traditional material. Instead, it's a history of constant innovation. The "newest" cutting-edge material to emerge – largely over the past two decades – is concrete.

Today, concrete countertops and sinks have become a niche industry, one of the brightest lights in the decorative concrete explosion. Countertop designers and materials suppliers are a major group at the 2011 Concrete Decor Show & Spring Training, the only national trade show devoted exclusively to decorative concrete. Many of the country's foremost countertop experts and leading suppliers of concrete countertop/sink materials will be there including Cheng Concrete, Buddy Rhodes Artisan Concrete, Gore Design, enCOUNTER Professional Concrete and Fishstone. They will be showing their products, demonstrating their techniques and



COUNTERTOPS ONLY BEGAN THE CONVERSATION



Photo by Matthew Millman, Courtesy of Cheng Design



Image Courtesy of Buddy Rhodes Design

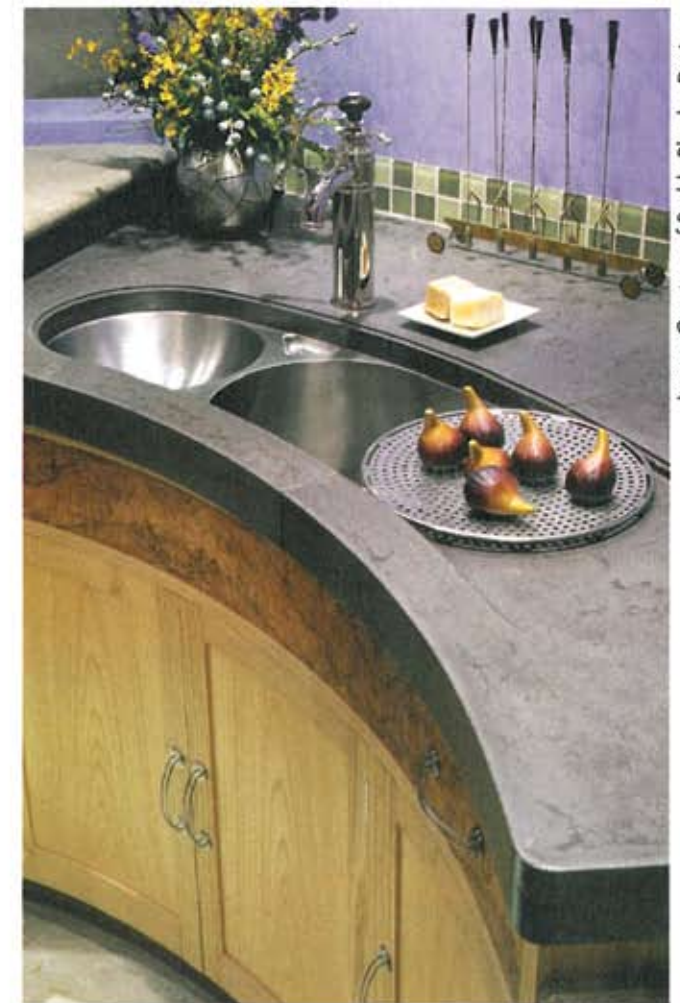


Image Courtesy of Buddy Rhodes Design

leading hands-on workshops for attendees during the four days of the show, March 15-18, 2011, in Nashville Tenn.

COUNTER INTUITIVE

Concrete countertops initially caught on because they offered a range of new looks, as well as excellent performance. During the 1990s, when planes of shiny granite dominated kitchen and bathroom design, concrete became the exciting upstart of the industry. Colored concrete was not yet familiar to most people. Neither was polished concrete. The variety of different appearances possible by grinding to expose aggregate included stone-like looks that worked as a granite alternative. "Creative" aggregates like stainless steel screws or glass beads, ground off into cross-sections, made a slab into a conversation piece. And then, there were looks unique to concrete, and homeowners embraced them too.

The countertop designers who started it all went further: they reinvented concrete for their own purposes. They modified conventional concrete. They experimented with dry-pack mixes that present far more variegation and individualistic features than wet-cast. GFRC (glass-fiber reinforced concrete) gave them the ability to make thin countertops – one inch and less – that could be shop-fabricated, transported and installed without a crane.

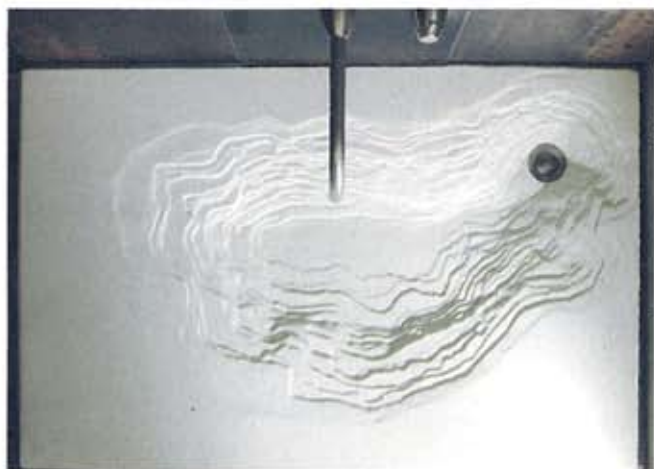
Then they broke into the third dimension. Integral sinks in an array of creative shapes took the countertop to a whole new level, where it could become the design focus of an entire kitchen.

In fact, training is one of the key factors in the countertop boom. Virtually all of the major designers tell the same story: people saw their stuff and asked how it's done. The designers became trainers, with students across the continent. Then

top left Bathroom sink with inlaid nautilus shell by Cheng Design.

top right Kitchen serving ledge with side panels featuring a hard-troweled finish, by Buddy Rhodes.

bottom right A Buddy Rhodes countertop with integral sink and drainboard. The pressed finish is the result of dry-packing in the mold, then filling voids with a contrasting color.



Images Courtesy of Gore Design



A gallery of Brandon Gore sinks, respectively: the Erosion sink, the Spine sink, the Cottonwood sink, the Humboldt sink, and the TFK sink.

the students became practitioners who needed materials. The designers, many of whom had evolved their own materials specially suited to countertops and sinks, became manufacturers, as well as distributors of third-party materials they were already buying in bulk for their own work. Their students, many of whom were contractors, spread the awareness of decorative concrete everywhere, and vastly increased its availability, too.

MATERIAL SUCCESS

Along the way, these designers have innovated at every turn, reinventing concrete for their own purposes.

"When I was solely a fabricator, my phone wouldn't stop ringing with people asking me how to do it," recounts Buddy Rhodes, president of Buddy Rhodes Artisan Concrete, one of the pioneers of the field (buddyrhodes.com). "It's a special kind of concrete, it's not a foundation or a sidewalk. I developed this formula and this mix that I find easy to use, so I'm training people how to use it. But I still like to get my hands dirty too."

Rhodes has worked extensively with dry-pack casting, where getting your hands dirty is the essence of the art. Instead of pouring a flowable mix, the mold is hand-packed with a dry, almost crumbly polymer-modified concrete, often brightly colored. The pressed finish makes compaction uneven, creating tiny air bubbles, small craters and miniature canyons in the surface. After stripping the mold, imperfections can be filled with a matching color for a tone-on-tone effect, or with a contrasting color for more drama.

Rhodes is also enthusiastic about GFRC (glass fiber reinforced concrete). It can be applied by spraying into a mold or onto a three-dimensional shape, can be shaped by hand and can be formed into very thin, structurally sound slabs, one-inch-thick or less. In fact, Rhodes said he loves that there are so many options available now. "You can cast top up or top down. You can think about fabric forming. The sky's the limit because of the mix design and reinforcement. This new stuff is a lot more like clay, more pliable, it's more like an artist's medium."

GFRC has been something of a revolution for precasters. Because thin slabs are practical, larger projects can be pre-cast in the shop. Longer slabs can be made with less fear of shrinkage cracking.

"It's given us the ability to make products we couldn't make before," explains Brandon Gore of Gore Design, Phoenix, Ariz. (goredesignco.com). "A 20-foot-sink would have been nearly impossible before. With GFRC, we use 30-60 percent less material, it's much greener and weight is dramatically decreased. When I ship it, the contractor can easily take it up five flights of stairs. With the old stuff, they would have had to use a crane for installation."

Doug Bannister, president of enCOUNTER Professional Concrete (encountertop.com), took a different

route to avoid cracking: he re-engineered ordinary portland cement concrete. "I attended a lecture by Dr. Ken Hover, PhD from Cornell," Bannister recalls. "It was life-changing. I realized that cement paste is the enemy. If you can minimize that, you can minimize cracking. We minimize it with particle packing. We start with a larger aggregate than most people – 3/8-inch – and go all the way down to the size of a cement particle." With his high strength mix – up to 8,870 psi – pieces can be smooth-troweled 70 feet long with no joints, without cracking.

Cheng Concrete (chengdesign.com), the company that really launched the countertop explosion, is now offering an even more versatile reinforced mix called D-FRC (decorative-fiber reinforced concrete). Lighter in weight than GFRC, it affords design flexibility by making larger formats and thinner sections – as thin as 3/8-inch – practical.

CONCRETE IN 3-D

Countertops led to integral concrete sinks, which led to re-thinking sinks. Long and narrow. Inverted pyramid. A sensuous wave with a slit-drain in the bottom.

Carrie Fischer of Fishstone (ConcreteCountertopSupply.com) said she feels that going beyond flat surfaces is the major trend of the business. "Our most successful customers have made that transition. They found things that stone-typical fabricators can't make: sinks, tables, benches, planters. It requires a lot more artistic ability, and you have to be able to deal with a specialized customer who wants a custom piece. The small-shop owners who are many of our customers are multi-talented people, with artistic and crafts ability, and sales ability."

Gore made his mark in the countertop world with a sink that looks like a canyon eroded over centuries. One write-up of the Erosion Sink made him world-famous in the design community.

"The creative aspects of concrete are the defining element of the material," Gore explains. "With hard-surfacing materials like Corian or granite, you're very limited. Flat materials have to be joined to make any non-flat shape. The frontier of concrete, for me, is fabric forming. Fabrics create a natural shape, and the eye perceives that it's natural."

Fischer observes that this market heavily favors creativity. "Design something really unique and interesting," she advises, "and you can put any kind of price tag on it for the high-end customer."

CONCRETE CONQUEST

Countertops and sinks have led to a variety of other applications. Concrete, in its new forms, with its new options, has broken out of the kitchen and bathroom, led by designers and fabricators with imagination and ambition.

"Countertops just started the conversation," says An-



Design by landscape designer Jopher Delaney. Image Courtesy Buddy Rhodes



Photo by Matthew Millman. Courtesy of Cheng Design

top Concrete tile patio by Buddy Rhodes

bottom Concrete fireplace by Cheng Design



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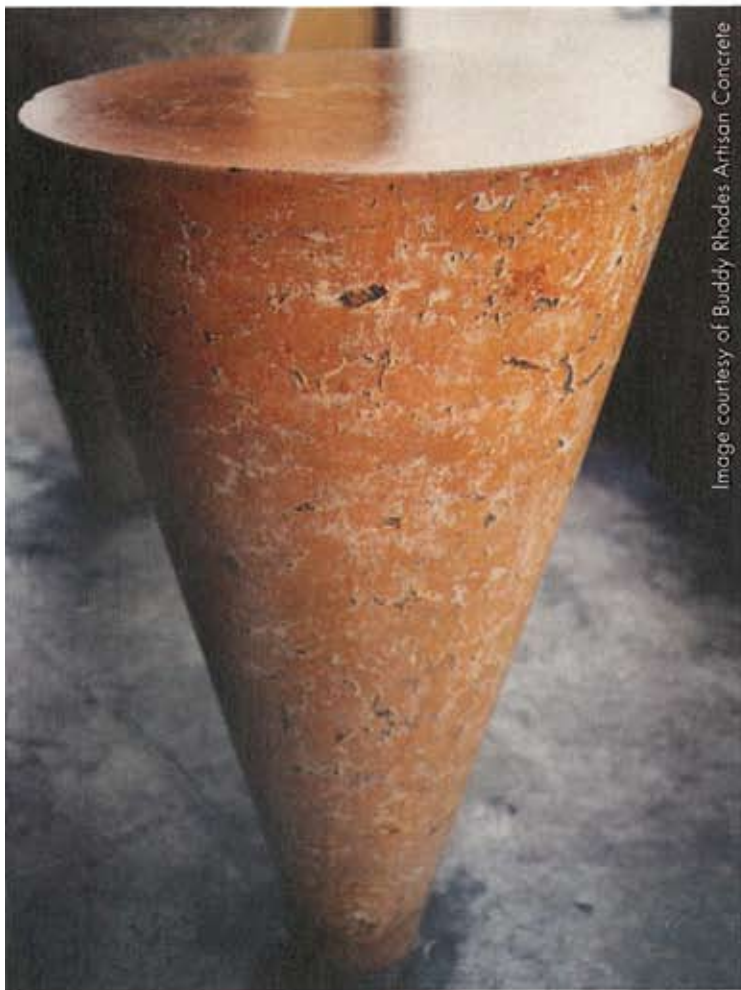


Image courtesy of Buddy Rhodes, Artisan Concrete

top Water feature by Cheng Design

bottom Pressed-finish cone table by Buddy Rhodes.

nalyn Chargualaf-Peluso, co-president of Cheng Concrete. "Concrete countertops were an entry point, it came in at people's comfort level. But when they became familiar with concrete, they asked for more."

Fireplace surrounds and hearths, water features, furniture and functional objects have all become part of the repertoire of countertop makers with their specialized materials and techniques. Thin-concrete technologies such as GFRC and D-FRC make it practical to do wall panels, tiles, stair treads and nosings, as well.

"What's exciting," Chargualaf-Peluso adds, "is that people are gravitating towards concrete, they're specifying concrete as a material for their homes."

Company founder Fu-Tung Cheng originally trained as a sculptor and painter, and began making objects for home design out of various materials (including concrete) more than 35 years ago. In 2002, he wrote a book, "Concrete Countertops," that became a best seller in the remodeling industry, and launched Cheng's own concrete business as well as many others.

Cheng is currently designing a concrete house, a project that began as a request for a countertop. The owner already had a completed design, with plan approvals, when she approached Cheng about a counter. After discussing ideas with him, she became intrigued by concrete and ended up having Cheng re-design her home.

As Chargualaf-Peluso says, "The conversation doesn't stop at countertops."

SPREADING INFLUENCE

In fact, the conversations are multiplying. Even in the down economy, suppliers have seen continued demand for products and training.

One development that Buddy Rhodes is very enthusiastic about is the 2011 Concrete Decor Show & Spring Training, and what it means for the emergence of the decorative concrete community.

"This is the first show that's really brought us all together so we can talk amongst ourselves, go to seminars, exchange ideas," Rhodes explains. "It's a great place for contractors and designers to come, because you can see all the manufacturers in one place, not spread out like it is at other shows where you're mixed in with building bridges and highways. I'm very excited about it."

For more information about the 2011 Concrete Décor Show & Spring Training, see ConcreteDecorShow.com or call 877-935-8906. 📞

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