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A Guide to Concrete Countertops and Architectural Elements

Vol. 2 No. 1 • Spring 2009

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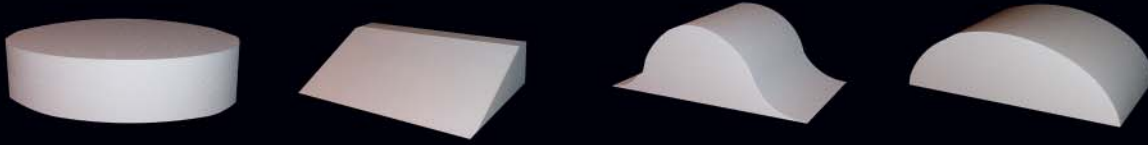
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A Guide to Concrete Countertops and Architectural Elements

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On the cover: A tabletop for an outdoor barbecue grill created by master artisan Jeremy French of Mandala Design.

Photo courtesy of Mandala Design

countertop pioneers

Noteworthy creators of concrete countertops and architectural elements



The Geometry of Artistry

Mandala Design, Asheville, N.C.

by David Searls

Jeremy French doesn't sound like a big fan of delayed gratification.

"I never finished high school," he admits, before explaining his transition from landscape designer to the owner of Mandala Design, the high-end concrete design firm he founded in 2004 in Asheville, N.C.

"With landscaping, you have to wait 15 years before it properly grows out and you know what you've got," he says. "I wanted to express myself in a micro way rather than the macro, because I've never eased into anything in my life."

Thoughts and abstractions and digressions come a mile a minute to the personable and confident concrete artisan. Listeners scratching their heads over his "micro versus macro" comment might also feel they've missed a turn somewhere as French explains the Fibonacci sequence, a mathematical formula in which each number is equal to the sum of the preceding two numbers, and how Fibonacci impacted his design of a kitchen island project.



Photos courtesy of Mandala Design

French can plunge to cosmic depths at one moment and be glib the next as he shrugs off any suggestion he trained to do decorative concrete. “I don’t know,” he says when asked how he figured out what he was doing in his early days. “I just did it by doing it.”

When asked to undertake a project beyond his level of experience, he says that his standard response is something along this line: “I have no idea how to do it, and I’ll have it to you by the end of the week.”

French is minimizing his own talent, because his custom work in counters, tabletops, vanities, fireplace surrounds, water features — even a 980-pound bathtub — is stunning. Crafted in glass-fiber reinforced concrete (GFRC), the results have the elegance of marble, the power of granite and a delicate artistry all his own.

He’s never advertised, French says, because he’s never had to. And the only result of the economic downswing he’s seen so far in his city of 70,000 is a slight drop-off in commercial work. He’s landed enough residential contracts to make up the shortfall.

“We handle a little high-end new construction, but a lot more of it is remodeling for people who want to or are forced to stay in their homes (by the economy),” he says. French says that he also does a little consulting and production work to help make ends meet.

He had a partner for the first couple years he was in business, but he’s solo these days, except for his half dozen employees. No surprise there. It’s not easy imaging French sharing his abstract vision or cocky spirit with anyone else.

Mathematically speaking, he must feel that he added by subtraction. ☺



countertop pioneers



Engineering a Dream Gig

Solid Solutions Studios, Fresno, Calif.

by David Searls

Compared to working on deadline with Christina Aguilera, Phil Collins and the Spice Girls, decorative concrete is a breeze.

"In a lot of ways the two professions are similar," says Evan Lloyd, comparing his days as a sound engineer for a Los Angeles recording studio to his present gig — president and owner of Fresno, Calif.-based Solid Solutions Studios. "Both fields allow for creative expression, but there's much more stress in a recording studio."

Roughly 75 percent of Lloyd's business is residential, and much of it involves countertops. He's also done commercial work, mostly flooring, for restaurants, offices and sushi bars.

"My clients like subtlety," he says, explaining the popularity in California's

Central Valley for earth tones. "But we also do combinations of color and acid stains and dyes. Just as long as it's nothing too wild. Gray is our most popular color here."

Lloyd has had to downsize his company recently, but decorative concrete in this economy is still easier for him to take than the old days.

"When we had a record to put out for Disney, it might be 27 straight hours in the studio," he recalls. "I'd kiss my wife goodbye on a Tuesday and tell her I hoped to see her on Friday." Lloyd didn't perceive much of a future in his chosen profession, either. "I'd see that the top guys in my industry weren't making a whole lot more money than me, but they were working a lot more hours."

If the stress and long hours weren't incentive enough to start thinking about a



career change, the recording studio where he worked went out of business. Fate seemed to be telling Lloyd ... something.

It was about this time that his father-in-law introduced him to decorative concrete. Seeing the potential immediately, he and his wife moved back to her hometown of Fresno, where he set up shop in his two-car garage.

Lloyd founded Solid Solutions in 2003. By the height of the real estate boom, Lloyd owned a 5,000-square-foot facility and employed six. Today, Lloyd has no regular employees, and he conducts business in a 1,600-square-foot hanger built in his backyard for a private plane he doesn't own.

So what? He's doing what he loves. What's stressful about that?


"We've definitely been impacted by it," he says of the economic downturn. "But I'm fine financially. We just had to downsize everything." That means that while he used to supervise the work of others, these days he rolls up his sleeves and gets his hands dirty again, just like when he started out.

"Now I've got a two- or three-week backlog rather than the two or three months of contracts I had when I started out. But that's okay. The quality of work is higher when you're not so damn busy."


What he loves best is the work/life balance. Lloyd's favorite assignments involve the precast countertops he can do in his converted backyard airplane hanger. They allow him to work close to his family, which now includes a nearly year-old son.

For Lloyd, that's a lot more fun than hanging out with the Spice Girls. ☺

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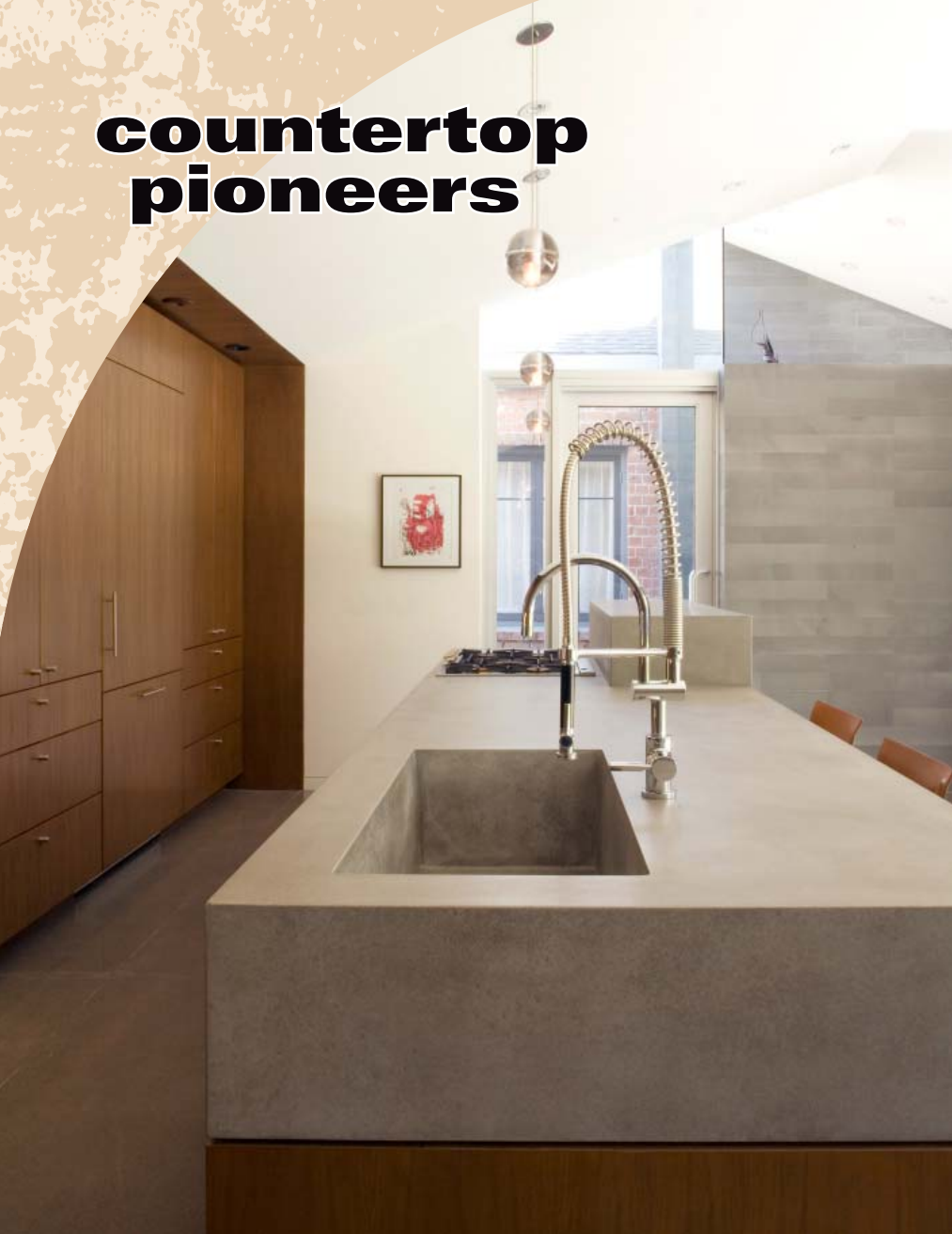
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Out of the Garage

**URBAN Concrete Design,
Phoenix, Ariz.**

by David Searls

No one's more passionate about their art than the hard-working members of your typical undiscovered garage band. They can put in a full day at work before jamming all night whether or not there's a remote possibility of a paycheck.

But it's not just musicians who exhibit that kind of dedication and resilience. Jim Ralston, president and owner of URBAN Concrete Design in Phoenix, Ariz., pursued his passion in a similar manner.

"I've been around concrete ever since I could walk," he says, crediting a father who owned a ready-mix plant. In an effort to branch out and get away from the too familiar, Ralston trained as a welder. But it didn't take. He worked in architectural precast for 17 or 18 years.

"I remember having to do concrete countertops in precast for a post office once and wondering what they were thinking," he says.

Of course, that was before Ralston discovered that the functionality of concrete extended well beyond driveways and parking lots. About a decade ago, he read one of the books by California decorative concrete innovator Fu-Tung Cheng. As he puts it, "Cheng ruined me for my employer."

Photo courtesy of Merz Project



Photo courtesy of URBAN Concrete Design

With his newfound book in hand, Ralston spent his after hours in his garage, determined to make a concrete chess table the Cheng way. He finished the piece in 2000. He was basically just doodling around, trying to see if he could create something as good as a piece he'd seen on eBay.

Here's the twist: Ralston found a buyer for his experimental table in a newly opened coffee shop near his home.

Next, their coffee roaster needed a polished concrete base. And after that, Ralston made concrete countertops for his own kitchen, and then graduated to the kitchen of his wife's best friend.

He might have a hard time nailing down the exact moment when passion turned to commerce, but he eventually found his way right back into the concrete jungle he thought he'd left behind when he left home — and he's loving every moment of it.

Ralston and the four full-time employees of URBAN Concrete Design, launched in 2004, are building a regional reputation as a high-end artisan firm specializing in custom countertops, water features, fireplace surrounds, floor tiles, wall claddings and other site work for residential and commercial clients in both new construction and remodeling.

Ralston also teaches a class for Cheng Concrete on working with glass-fiber reinforced concrete (GFRC), a lighter-weight, high-tensile-strength material that's opened up new possibilities in decorative concrete.

With Phoenix among the hardest-hit American regions in the real estate meltdown, Ralston's business has certainly changed, but not for the worse. "What's gone away," he says, "is the idea of people pulling equity out of their homes to remodel their kitchens." That was the case when he started out, in the "good old days," when as late as two years ago he says he was turning business away.

But the mortgage boom in Arizona had also resulted in a whole lot of characters with varying degrees of industry knowledge and experience starting and operating decorative concrete businesses in their garages, Ralston says. When the economy slumped, "there was a weeding out of a lot



Photo courtesy of Merz Project

of those guys," he observes.

As a result, his market share has improved. Architects and general contractors have him on their speed dial. Among his proudest achievements are the sleek, white lobby of the BSH Gallery and Training Center in Scottsdale, commissioned by the architectural firm Merz Project, and the ultracontemporary kitchen of the AIA Desert Living Home of the Year for 2007, in Phoenix.

He says that residential customers are

more knowledgeable about decorative concrete today than they were five years ago — and more excited about its possibilities. Ralston says that the only direction he gives outside salespeople in the acquisition of prospects is, "Dude, just get me in front of them."

Jim Ralston might talk like a garage rocker, but his garage days are obviously far behind him. ☺

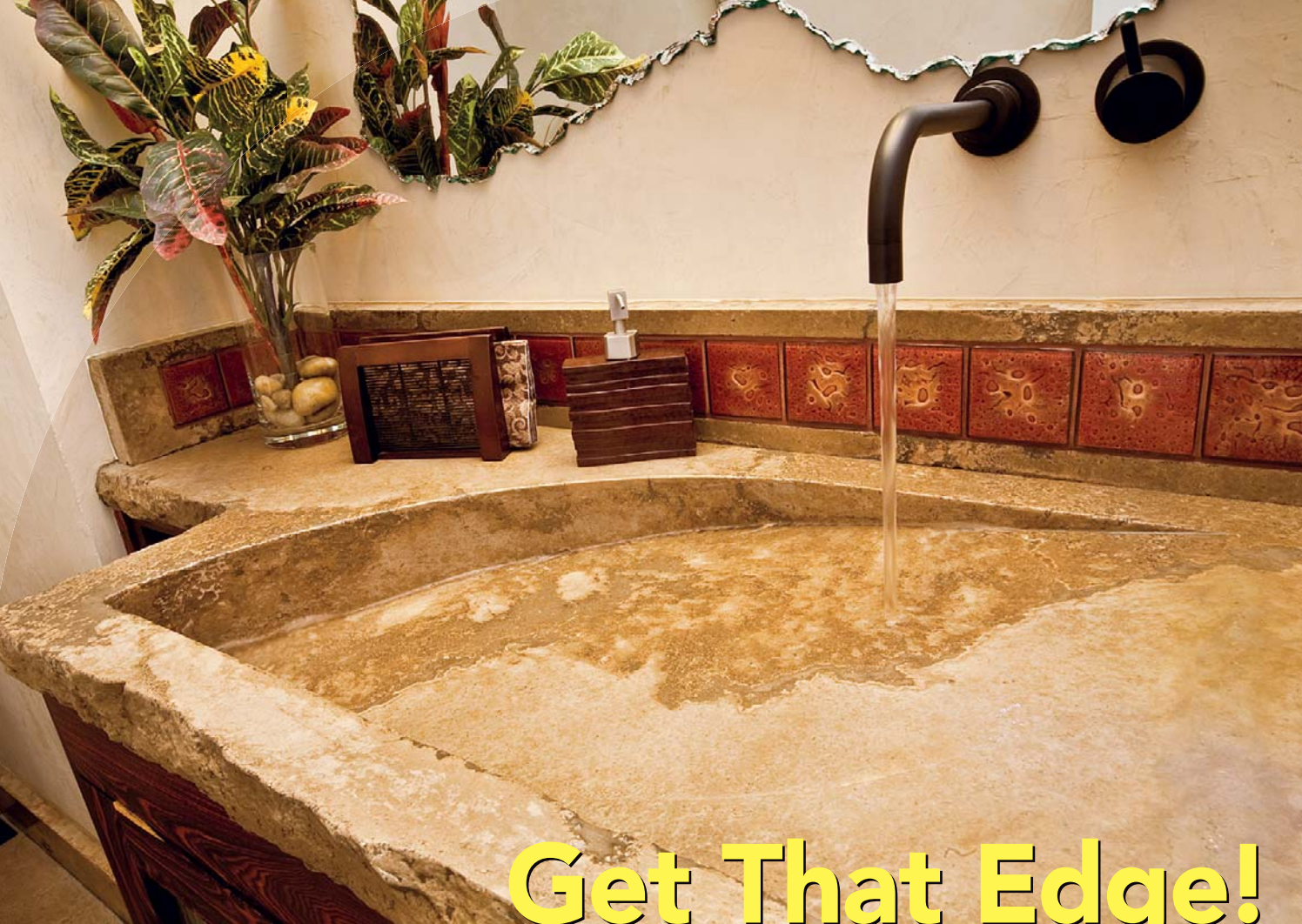


Photo by April Smith Photography

Get That Edge!

How Edge Forms Can Transform a Countertop

by Amy Johnson

When an expanse of concrete countertop makes a statement in a kitchen, bathroom or bar, the edge is what really adds the exclamation point. The shape and texture of the edge helps make the counter look contemporary, traditional, formal, playful or unique.

Concrete forms and molds

Many concrete countertops are plain slabs with square corners. This solid farmhouse look is simple to achieve by pouring a concrete countertop mix into a simple form. Wood forms lend themselves to shaping square corners, but it is difficult to use wood to achieve rounded corners and curved edges.

This problem is solved by using forms made of extruded polystyrene

foam (EPS). Shapes popular for stone countertops are widely available in EPS. For example, Stegmeier LLC supplies disposable EPS forms in five traditional profiles. Used mostly for cast-in-place counters, they are adhered to the cabinets with double-stick tape and secured by tie wires. Because EPS is more flexible than wood, these forms can be curved to create rounded corners. "You can bend a smooth, tight radius by compressing the foam," marketing director Bud Stegmeier explains. "Three strips of fiberglass tape on the outside of the form keep it from snapping. The inside radius compresses to form a curve, and you have a rounded corner that maintains the profile." Stegmeier also makes EPS forms for backsplashes.

Another company supplying EPS forms is PreiTech Corp. This company brought its expertise in thermoforming and extruded plastics and polystyrene foam to the decorative concrete industry in 2005, supplying EPS forms for precast and cast-in-place countertops. Edge forms include precut corners in various angles that “fit on the money with no foam blows,” avoiding a problem that can occur when cutting foam, according to company president Michael Eastergard. Their patent-pending design eliminates the need for tie wires. These edge forms are supplied in classical shapes, such as bullnose or French curve.

Photo courtesy of The Concrete Countertop Institute



Above: Profiling wheels run on standard polishers are usually used with water, which keeps the face cool. If they are used for dry polishing, they should be operated at about 500 rpm to 1,000 rpm to avoid overheating.

Left: This chamfer edge on a surround was cut with a profiling wheel to expose the aggregate and add a decorative accent.



Photo courtesy of The Concrete Countertop Institute

PreiTech also supplies a ledge form that can be used to support reusable urethane rubber molds. “You can use the ledge form to hold a urethane mold in any pattern,” Eastergard says. “If you have a box of ledge forms, you have the ability to form any type of countertop edge in a short amount of time.” Polyurethane rubber molds in various designs are available from manufacturers of stamping tools for decorative concrete. Popular designs include rock edges, rope details and other repeatable patterns. Some contractors use molds for stair risers or swimming pool edges to give shape to countertops.



Photo courtesy of Stegmeier LLC

Using fiberglass tape, a polystyrene foam form can be bent into a curve with a smooth, tight radius that maintains the profile with minimum distortion.



A bevel-profiling wheel was used to cut the angle in this edge and expose the aggregate.



A piece of flexible architectural molding was used to create this traditional egg and dart pattern.



This countertop's flat surfaces were ground and polished to expose the colorful aggregate. The curved edge was formed by casting the concrete against a piece of 3/4-inch round-over molding.

Architectural moldings

Concrete artisans often look beyond concrete suppliers for countertop edge inspiration. A rich source is architectural molding. "Concrete countertops don't have to be only modern and contemporary," says Jeffrey Girard, P.E., president of The Concrete Countertop Institute. "You can use moldings to echo in reverse the room's crown molding or cabinet design in concrete to match any style." A simple cove or round molding helps a countertop fit in with traditional décor. A more elaborate edge can be achieved with a detailed molding, such as one with a traditional egg-and-dart motif.

Inexpensive standard wood moldings are widely available from home supply stores, according to Girard. When using them, he recommends, seal the wood and make sure the sealer is completely dry before it comes in contact with wet concrete. "Otherwise, moisture will make the wood swell, which can distort the shape and cause cracking or demolding problems," he says. Sealing the wood of the molding will also result in a cleaner release and a smoother surface.

Decorative moldings are also available in rigid foam plastic that is already waterproof. These can be placed in the form and used right away without sealing. A form release should be used if the molding is painted, to prevent paint from adhering to the concrete.

Girard also uses more flexible moldings made of hard rubber to create classical architectural details. "Concrete countertops don't have to be only modern and contemporary," he says. "You can use moldings to echo in reverse the room's crown molding or cabinet design in concrete."

Some of these molding products are not available everywhere. Girard recommends trying home supply stores first and then moving on to specialty trim shops. An Internet search will also yield resources outside a specific locality.

Custom edge designs

Originally a finish carpenter, Tommy Cook, co-owner and principal artisan at Absolute ConcreteWorks LLC, based in Poulsbo, Wash., is very familiar with these standard architectural moldings. He



Above: The edges of this concrete bar and footrest were shaped using a plaster mold.

Left: The concrete for this counter was cast upside down and pressed into a form with a copper inlay. The edges were formed with a custom plaster mold.



Photo courtesy of Absolute ConcreteWorks LLC

This countertop was cast in a regular rectangular form. The curved indent was created by putting a piece of half round in the form before casting.



Photo courtesy of The Concrete Countertop Institute

This stone edge was achieved using a urethane mold from a decorative concrete supplier.

sometimes takes this idea a step farther by designing custom profiles and arranging for a trim company to cut them to order. For example, a standard 3/4-inch chamfer edge is easy enough to find, but when Cook wanted a quarter-inch molding, he had it custom cut from larger stock material. A trim shop can also set up their routers and jigs to cut a more detailed profile.

Cook keeps an eye out for specialty moldings such as roses, trains or flower designs used for chair rails and wainscoting that can be used to create one-of-a-kind countertop edges. "You can use anything that's about 2 inches high (or cut to size) with a relief to get a cool finish, usually for about \$2 to \$20 per linear foot," he says. Concrete cast against the molding will come out with

the pattern in reverse.

To get a positive imprint, Cook makes a rubber mold of the architectural molding or other “found” shapes. For example, a customer once brought in a dog whose paw prints she wanted preserved in her kitchen counter. Cook pressed the dog’s paws into plaster just before it set to get a distinct print. Then he clear-coated the plaster and filled it with liquid polyurethane rubber. When this cured, he demolded it and attached it to the concrete edge form with double-stick tape (spray adhesive may also be used). Now the paw print pattern runs along the vertical edge of the GFRG countertop.

Cook also uses clay to sculpt custom designs. For example, to get a the look of a chiseled rock edge, he packs a form with clay and then presses broken rocks into it at random. If using oil-based plastiline modeling clay instead of water-based clay, he recommends washing the concrete with lacquer thinner to break the oils down before sealing.

One of the more innovative techniques for custom edges on countertops is being practiced and taught at Buddy Rhodes Artisan Concrete. Students there learn to create custom molds in plaster. “We create a screed with a two-dimensional profile,” explains Buddy Rhodes Concrete Products CEO Stephen Schatz. “Then we draw it along a rail like the edge of the table or around a radius, and we build up plaster by hand in layers until the whole shape is filled in.”

Profiling

Another new edge treatment has nothing to do with forms or molds at all. Over the past four or five years, profile wheels for shaping stone have been gaining popularity. These are diamond cutters that run on standard polishers, something akin to a wood router. They are used to shape edges on both cast-in-place and precast countertops. These are typically used for wet grinding, to keep the concrete and the grinder from overheating. “But you have to go dry sometimes, when the countertop is already in place and you can’t have water everywhere,” Jeff Girard explains. “The challenge with running the profile wheel dry is that the heat of the friction melts the bond holding the diamonds in place.

So go slow, in the range of 500 to 1,000 rpm.” Even then, running the polisher dry shortens the tool life.

Edge treatments for concrete countertops give artisans many creative options for delivering a look that is unique and personal for their customers. Dramatic sculptural effects can be achieved by hand, but creative use of existing materials, whether or not they

were originally intended for concrete, can have just as much impact. ☺

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Warming Up to Fireplace Surrounds

These architectural elements
are one of the hottest trends
in decorative concrete

To create the look of this fireplace, Cement Elegance veneered the drywall above and around the fireplace façade with a cementitious microtopping, then cut a score pattern into it to simulate large tiles. The rest of the fireplace was all red brick, over which they installed a microtopping.



Photo by Zachary Alan

A fireplace installed on an outdoor balcony in Pacific Beach, Calif. The fireplace is 10 feet across and equipped with three EcoSmart burners. The top piece was hollow-cast, but it's still heavy — it weighs about 600 pounds.

by Kelly O'Brien

“You’re missing the boat if a lot of your paycheck isn’t coming from fireplaces,” says Ben Ashby, owner of Utah-based Concrete Encounters.

Ashby is one of many decorative craftsmen who have come to rely on concrete fireplace surrounds for a healthy percentage of their business. Not only do fireplace surrounds require little (in terms of materials and equipment) that a countertop contractor doesn’t already have, but they often present a welcome design challenge.

“The first, most challenging part of a fireplace surround is the design,” says Bayard Fox, owner of Cement Elegance in Bend, Ore. That assessment was echoed by virtually every contractor *Concrete Decor* spoke with for this article.

The first step in designing a fireplace surround — as with most decorative concrete projects — is to educate your client. Starting the design process can be very difficult, says Mike Wellman of Concast Studios in Oceano, Calif., “due to the fact that there’s a million zillion things you can do with concrete.” Because of this, Wellman says that his first step is to get the client to look at some examples of what can be done. Whether it’s your company’s portfolio, online photo galleries, or a certain decorative concrete magazine that falls to hand, it’s very important to get your clients thinking realistically (and creatively) about what their options are.

One of the most exciting things about fireplace surrounds — both for the contractor and for the client — is that they



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Photo courtesy of Roger Turk, Northlight Photography

This single-piece GFRC fireplace from Absolute ConcreteWorks LLC was surround-cast in a solid color. The face tapers slightly towards the firebox. The block hearth is a separate piece.

offer a lot in the way of design freedom. “Countertops are a pretty cut-and-dried thing,” says Ashby, “and you only have so much leeway. Fireplaces are just the opposite.”

Tommy Cook’s fireplaces are certainly a testament to that. Cook’s company, Absolute ConcreteWorks LLC, recently completed a fireplace for a family of avid musicians. Their great room featured a classic baby grand piano, which provided the basis for their design. “They wanted the fireplace to mimic the baby grand,” says Cook, and so it does. The mantle is supported by two columns with detail work to match the piano legs, and the entire piece is glossy, jet-black concrete.

And Cook’s piano surround is just one example among, as Wellman might say, zillions. Ashby has a fireplace project coming up that is big enough to stand in, with a mantle supported by two standing concrete bears. Zachary Alan, owner of Pourfolio Custom Concrete in San Diego, Calif., recently suspended a concrete surround in the middle of a wall made entirely of windows. The list goes on.

Those examples are, of course, on the more fanciful end of the spectrum, but even with more down-to-earth designs, fireplace surrounds are always more about form than function.

“We’re trying to create somewhat of a statement piece, a conversation piece,” says Alan.

Wellman agrees. “It’s about getting the client to look at it as a work of art.”

Cost and strategy

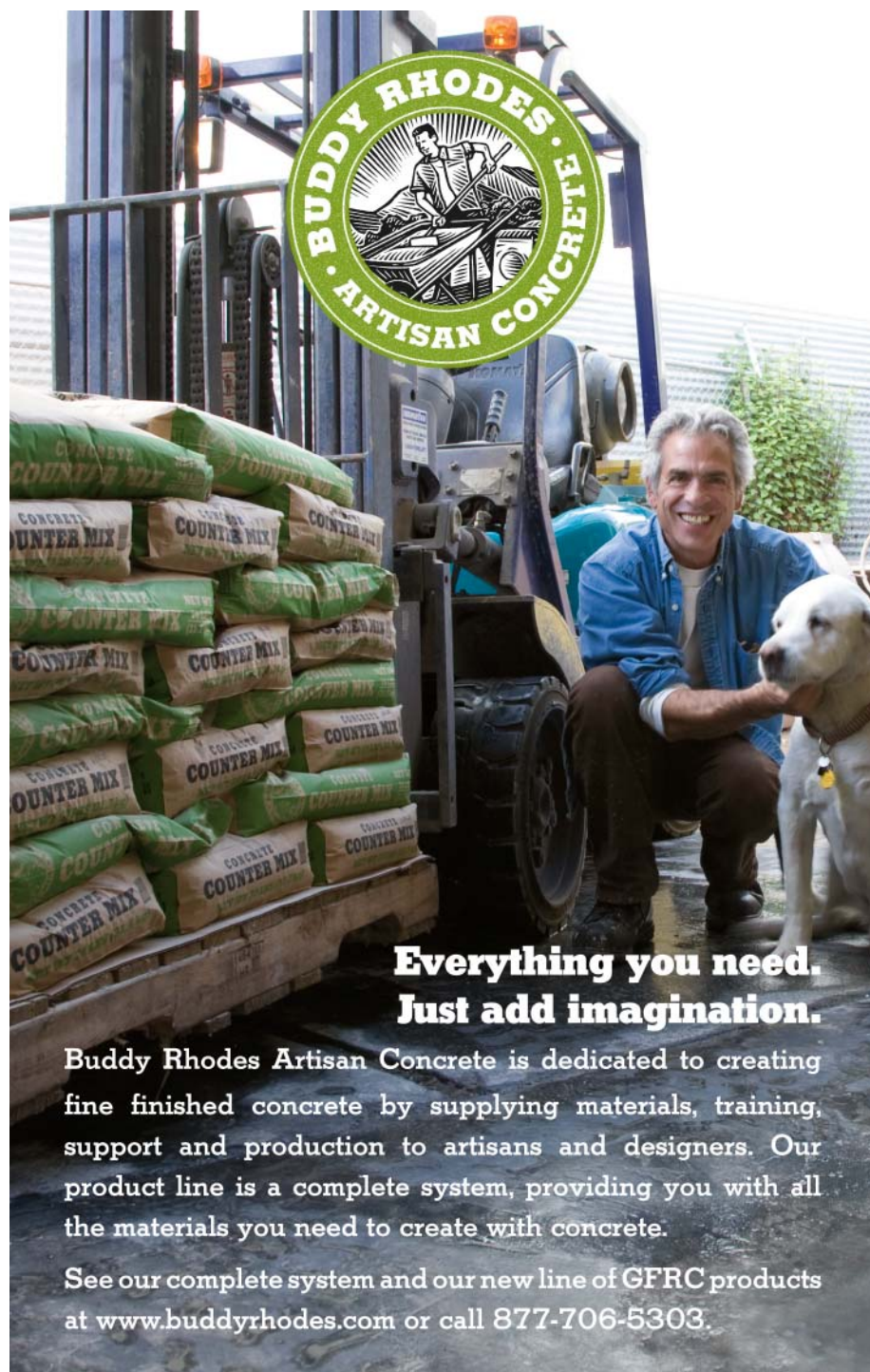
As with any work of art, price point is a key consideration for fireplace surrounds. Carl Finney, of Sonoma Cast Stone, based in Petaluma, Calif., says it’s about balancing the cost against the complexity of the design. “The designing of various complex molded edges and balanced curves needs to take into account not only aesthetics, but also cost versus practicality as well,” he says. “One needs to look at the design in negative image to see how the mold can be made up of available shapes, rather than having material sculpted and shaped by hand or machine to make the mold.” As Wellman puts it, “mold-making equals time,” which, as they say, is money.

Once the client has a clear image of what she wants in her fireplace as well

as what she’ll be paying, it’s time to talk logistics. After design, says Ashby, the next most important thing when it comes to fireplace surrounds is having a grasp on the basic engineering that goes into them.

And the construction considerations for fireplace surrounds differ significantly from those of countertop projects. When mounting a countertop, you have a row

of cabinets or another base designed specifically to support a large flat surface parallel to the ground. That’s not true with vertical pieces and floors. “The vertical wall is never, ever, ever going to be nice and on one plane,” says Wellman, “but you’re not going to go yell at the drywall and framing guys.” In other words, unlike with countertop supports, there’s nothing you can do about an



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Photo by Zachary Alan

Top: Zachary Alan, owner of Pourfolio, says this design was a collaboration with the homeowners. It was intended to anchor the room with a strong presence. The clients never used the fireplace they were replacing, but they wanted the new model to be a focal point in their lives as they went forward. The surround was cast in five pieces, and the top piece interlocks with the two flanking it, using a tongue-and-groove process.




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Photo courtesy of Concast Studios

off-square wall.

And that's not the only concern. Fireplace surrounds deal with a lot more planes and angles than countertops, and all of them need to be taken into careful consideration. "The fact that you're dealing with two planes — if you have jacked-up drywall or a messed-up floor plane ... There are lots of pitfalls and whatnot to deal with there from a construction standpoint," Wellman says.

With all those factors taken into consideration, the construction challenge essentially boils down to attachment — basically, says Wellman, "How do you get a big, cool-looking fireplace to stay on a big vertical wall?" And not only that, how do you get it to stay on a vertical wall without any visible means of support? "It is commonly desired to have the hearth, and sometimes the mantle, to appear floating, with no visual supports," says Fox, at Cement Elegance.

Ashby says his standard practice is to put about 90 percent of the structural weight on the wall. Alan at Pourfolio typically uses a French cleat to suspend his pieces from the wall, but every project is different. Remember the fireplace in the wall of windows? Alan says they had to cast channels for steel plates that ran floor to ceiling. It all depends on the room and the piece and the interaction between them.

Weighty considerations

Of course, the other central consideration when devising a method of attachment is weight, determined largely by your choice of concrete mix. Cook, for example, primarily uses glass-fiber reinforced concrete for his surrounds because he says it lets him accomplish his design goals with fewer, lighter pieces. Fox also relies on GFRC, especially when it comes to big, monolithic designs. One recent project — an 18-foot long, 20-inch deep hearth — would have been considerably trickier without GFRC. "If this piece was made with the solid wet-cast technique, it would have weighed approximately 2,700 pounds and would have had to be craned into the house prior to the roof install," he says. (Seams weren't an option — the client wanted a single piece.) "Instead we used the GFRC method to create the appearance of a solid piece, but the walls were 3/4-inch thick, and it was carried into the house with three guys," Fox says. The whole piece weighed about 400 pounds.

This doesn't mean that GFRC is the only way to go. Other contractors, like Alan and Ashby, prefer wet-cast concrete for aesthetic reasons. Ashby, in the area of Utah where he operates, does almost exclusively traditional designs, a look he says is easier to accomplish with wet-cast concrete. "I think GFRC is a great product — sometimes," he says. But he feels it "lends itself to a very contemporary feel," which isn't what his clientele wants.

Photo courtesy of Concast Studios

Mike Wellman of Concast Studios worked with the client on the design of this fireplace, which matches the art deco style of the house. It has what he calls "flowing rivers of decorative stone and shell."



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This fireplace from Pourfolio is a single casting with grooves to give it dimension. Because the mantle tilts forward into the room, a French cleat was cast into the piece and attached snugly to the wall. The clients' artwork and the color of their sofa inspired the design.

Alan for his part is “unapologetically on the contemporary side,” which serves him very well in San Diego. But he also stays away from GFRC, preferring instead the “stacked aggregate look” he gets by pouring his pieces facedown into the mold atop a vibrating table.

In order to mitigate the weight issues with wet-cast concrete, Ashby uses a high-strength mix by TXI Maximizer that, he says, results in pieces that are two-thirds the weight of normal concrete. Alan also employs hollow spaces in his designs as often as possible to cut down on weight.

Don't sweat the heat

With all these special considerations that go into putting together a fireplace surround, it may come as a surprise that heat — something pretty closely associated with fire — is not really a big concern.

“We have never had any issues with heat exposure on our surrounds,” says Finney, at Sonoma Cast Stone. “Concrete is inherently fireproof, and we make sure that no heat-sensitive coatings are used.”

Decorative concrete artisan Buddy Rhodes also has never seen any heat-related problems. “Since the fireplace surround is on the outside of the firebox, heat isn't much of a problem,” he says. “Concrete does not like direct flame, but other than that it should be fine.”

Doug Bannister, of Oklahoma City's The Stamp Store, says the mixes they recommend for fireplace surrounds — their standard countertop mix and their lightweight vertical mix — are both heat-resistant, and he also says most sealers are good up to 350 degrees. To be on the safe side, though, Wellman recommends doing your own heat tests on your sealers, since not all sealer manufacturers rate their products for heat resistance.

Fireplace surrounds certainly pose some unique challenges, but they also offer a chance to really get those creative juices flowing and deliver a piece of unforgettable concrete artistry. ☺

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Photos by Troyce Hoffman

Outside and Outstanding

by Emily Panter

Trying to manage ultraviolet light exposure in California isn't an easy thing to do, particularly when it comes to its effect on concrete sealers. Luckily for Napa, Calif., homeowners Trish and John Danby, Joe Bates of Fabrication was able to get a handle on the situation, creating a countertop for an outdoor kitchen that still looks great more than a year later.

"One of the biggest challenges of outdoor work is, of course, the exposure, with UV being the biggest worry here in Napa," says Bates. "It gets stinking hot in the summer, and the kitchen's orientation guaranteed a solid dose of UV year-round."

Bates' clients had their hearts set on concrete from the start. He says, "They had done their research and were well prepared with their questions and concerns, which made our job a lot

easier. The main concern was sealer. John (Danby) meant what he said when he told me, 'I'm going to use this thing all the time,' and we had to get it right. It had to be UV-stable and effective as a sealer."

Wax was rejected as an option. Bates had no interest in "stinky topical sealers," he says, and the Danbys had no interest in rewaxing frequently.

As it happens, at around the same time, Bates had been testing various application methods with Counter Guard First Seal from Innovative Concrete Technologies. Jon Schuler from ICT assured Bates that the lithium-based sealer was completely UV-stable and had excellent stain resistance. So that's what he used.

After the sealer was chosen came the actual construction of the countertops, which was no small task. In total, Bates



and his two-man crew had to create 78 square feet of countertop. "Trying to get it all on and off our two tables was one of the biggest challenges," Bates says. "We have a small shop."

Everything else, however, went smoothly for Bates. "It was pretty straightforward," he says.

The countertops were developed with Fabrication's own mix design, which at the start of the job was a simple portland cement mix with aggregate and sand. "Jon turned us on to using more pozzolans, so we introduced VCAS (vitreous calcium aluminosilicate) to it," Bates says.

The countertops were then ground to a light sand finish.

Since the project was too large to do as one piece, Bates took advantage of the situation and incorporated unique angles at the seams of each smaller piece to add interest. He says the most intriguing aspect of the project to him was simply its large size.

In addition to the countertops, Bates and his team also constructed wall caps for the project. Getting identical colors from so many batches was a bit of a struggle, but Bates had some help from

manufacturer B&J Colorants.

"The guys at B&J were great at educating me on color and UV exposure — what actually gives the impression of color fade and how to avoid it — as well as matching up to the Benjamin Moore paint samples the client had picked," he says.

Despite a few challenges along the way, Bates says that all of the hard work has paid off. "The job was a major confidence booster for our shop and has led us to continue to develop and tweak mix designs to optimize sealer performance," he says. "It has also allowed us to actively seek out more outdoor work — a very popular addition around these parts. We made a believer out of Foster Construction, the general contractor, who has since urged clients to use more concrete."

The project also proved to Bates that he made the right decision to use First Seal.

"It looks as good today as when we installed it, and I've never had to go back except to admire it," he says. "We've used nothing but First Seal since." ☺

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Photos courtesy of Surface Studios LLC



Counter-UV from Surface 519

As Bob Chatterton, co-owner of Surface 519, puts it, “Countertops are just a sealing nightmare. It’s asked that they be resistant to everything under the sun.”

So it seems a natural correlation to make a stain- and scratch-resistant coating that uses the sun — or at least the sun’s ultraviolet rays.

Surface 519’s Counter-UV, a sealer for countertops, cures using UV light and gives a natural look to a surface. Photoinitiators in the hybrid nanotechnology-resin sealer allow the coating to harden almost instantly when exposed to a certain wavelength of light.

Without the special curing lamp, Counter-UV won’t cure. “That can be a good thing in the fact that it allows you to work it into pinholes and deal with other nuances of sealing concrete,” Chatterton says. “It gives you as much time as you

need to make that happen.”

Counter-UV works similarly to other countertop sealers in that it can be rolled or sprayed onto the surface. It resists stains and scratches, as well as acidic foods and condiments, Chatterton says. “It pretty much covers anything you would use a kitchen countertop for.”

Another of the product’s selling points is the look it leaves on concrete. “People want (the concrete) to look as natural as possible,” Chatterton says. “This looks and feels natural. I’ve had people look at it and swear there wasn’t even a coating on there.”

Counter-UV typically is applied at about 3 to 5 mils thick, but after it has been absorbed and sanded, only 1 or 2 mils of coating will remain on the surface.

Although the cost of Counter-UV is comparable to other countertop sealers,

the special curing lamp costs about \$2,900. However, Chatterton believes the sealer is worth the price. “It answers all the questions that everybody has,” he says. “It enhances color, looks natural, is scratch resistant and stain resistant, offers a fast cure and turnaround, and is completely VOC free.”

Chatterton says the issue most UV coatings for concrete have to overcome is adhesion. Short wet-out times and intense cure conditions can produce a compromised bond. “Our nanotechnology not only overcomes this risk but does so without the use of separate primers or conditioners,” he says. “One-step single-component application takes out all the risk.”

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