

Sand, cement, water and style

Contributed by MARSHA FOTTLER
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Traditionally a choice for walls and foundations, driveways, garage floors and outdoor furniture, concrete is now coming into its own as a luxury residential option for counter tops, flooring and even fine furniture.

Famed architects, such as Maya Linn, have been experimenting with molded concrete tables and stools, and Linn now offers a line of signature furniture. New York interior designer Robin Wilson also has a new home collection, but her concrete products (nesting tables, bowls, serving trays and planters), are made of recycled concrete. Wilson's coasters and elegant modern benches started out as demolished bridges and buildings.

As a design medium, concrete has appealing characteristics because it's durable, easy to maintain, eco-friendly and can be completely customized with crushed glass, tile or stone embedded in the design, as well as fiber optics for unique light effects twinkling through star holes in the concrete.

Homeowner Dr. Jameel Audeh opted for concrete counters when he updated the 103-square-foot kitchen in his 2,100-square-foot home in Sarasota. He shares the house with his son, Joseph, who is a senior at St. Stephen's Episcopal School, and his daughter, Ruba, who is studying acting at Boston University and comes to Sarasota for vacations. Both young people had design input into the renovation, which was particularly meaningful to Joseph because he intends to study architecture and urban planning in college.

"During discussions with the architect about the counters, we ran through the options of marble and granite," said Audeh, "and then somebody brought up concrete. I thought it was intriguing that an outdoor and industrial material was moving inside the home. I wanted to know more."

Audeh's designer from TOTeMS Architecture, Gwen Leroy-Kelly, was eager to move ahead with concrete because she's convinced of the material's beauty and creative possibilities. "We had done renovation work for Dr. Audeh a few years ago when he wanted to enlarge the front of his '70s ranch," said Kelly, "so I understood his preference for modern. He also likes a darker color palette, and so for the kitchen we settled on wenge wood for the cabinets, a gray porcelain tile floor and polished gray concrete counter tops."

Kelly suggested Ben Nettles Concrete Design for the counters. "Concrete was the right choice for this kitchen," said Nettles, a 31-year-old graduate of Ringling College of Art and Design, who studied concrete techniques with the famed author and artist Fu-Tung Cheng in California.

"Concrete complements a modern scheme, even though it's also gaining in popularity in traditional settings," said Nettles. "The best feature about a concrete counter is the versatility; you can do almost anything with it in terms of shape, color and the kind of materials you embed into the concrete. Here, the homeowner wanted something simple and sophisticated."

Nettles said a concrete counter averages about \$100 a square foot, putting it in a league with granite. Most counters are about two inches thick. The upkeep is mild soap and water.

Concrete is a mix of sand, water, cement and aggregate, plus pigment, if desired. "For residential projects, we use high-strength concrete," explained Nettles. "It's three times stronger than what is on a driveway. Concrete counters are molded and laid over a steel rebar cage, meaning that parts of the counter can easily be cantilevered. The artistic shapes you can achieve with concrete make it ideal for anyone who wants to make a unique design statement."

Once poured and removed from the mold, the concrete cures at Nettles' Sarasota studio for two weeks and then must cure for two more weeks in the client's home before it can stand up to hard use.

"We apply a one-time, penetrating, stain-blocking sealer to the concrete surface, and that's all you need for the life of the product," said Nettles. "Concrete actually gets harder the older it gets." Dr. Audeh selected a polished surface with no visible aggregate.

Designer Kelly said the primary challenge of the kitchen was the tight space. Audeh didn't want to increase the footprint of the room -- he just wanted to make it seem bigger and be assured that it would function better. Because the kitchen is the visual center of the home and open to other rooms, it had to look chic and blend with the color scheme and minimalistic style of furnishings in the family room, dining area and living room.

Kelly enlarged the two doorways to the kitchen, squaring off existing arches for a more modern look and a better flow

from the kitchen to the family room and dining room. She recessed a floor-to-ceiling, etched glass-front pantry into the kitchen wall by stealing depth from the garage on the other side of the wall. She installed a counter top roll-down glass-front "garage" for the telephone and everyday appliances, such as the toaster and coffee maker.

"To balance the dark cabinets and the gray floor and counters, we added a lot of reflective surfaces, such as glass and stainless steel, for light and bright accents," said Kelly. "The glass-tile mosaic backsplash behind the stove was the homeowner's idea. Dr. Audeh wanted the colors to reference the swimming pool, which one can see from the kitchen. It successfully unites indoor and outdoor spaces."

Kelly further united the interior by running the gray porcelain floor throughout the whole house except for the bedrooms. The tile (with grout lines only 1/16th of an inch wide) mimics the color and texture of the kitchen counters.

Joseph Audeh said his family's kitchen is so beautiful now that he feels slightly guilty. "I wish we cooked more," he admitted, "because it's just so nice to be in this room now."

His father echoed the sentiment. "We did Thanksgiving dinner here and we've attempted a few breakfasts, but cooking will probably be my retirement career someday. But Joseph is right; the kitchen is absolutely great-looking, and it's comfortable. I think this room could be an incentive for more and better meals at home."