

# CONCRETE STAINING TODAY

MARKET TRENDS AND  
ECONOMIC FACTORS  
INFLUENCING THE STAINED  
CONCRETE INDUSTRY

BY CHRIS SULLIVAN

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## INTRODUCTION:

# WHAT'S INFLUENCING THE FUTURE OF STAINED CONCRETE

After decades of being considered a nontraditional cutting-edge flooring system, stained concrete floors have become mainstream. In recent years, however, competition from other flooring surfaces and economic forces have slowed the explosive growth of stained concrete, taking the industry from one of rapid growth to one that is more mature.

For almost 50 years, the marbled and variegated finishes produced by acid stains have become the benchmark that most modern stains look to emulate. In fact, one thing most of the newer-generation stains have in common is their ability to produce an acid-stain look faster, easier, and cheaper. The expanded color palette with the new nonreactive stains has also allowed stained concrete to better compete against traditional flooring materials such as tile, wood, and carpet.

One sore spot: The low cost and wide availability of the newer concrete stains has also had some negative consequences by attracting do-it-yourselfers and inexperienced applicators in search of a fast profit. They have made it difficult to protect the history and quality of stained concrete by producing unmanageable expectations in terms of aesthetics and performance, reducing profits for professional installers and reducing the credibility for concrete stains as a viable flooring option. Still, there are many designers who continue to appreciate stained concrete finishes for their economy, clean lines, and ability to meet eco-friendly specifications.

Although the health of the stained concrete industry today is good, we can take steps to make it better. Here several veteran concrete staining contractors weigh in on the main economic factors and market trends influencing our industry today. — **CHRIS SULLIVAN**

New products are primarily water-based and come in a wide range of colors.

## TREND: WATER-BASED STAINS

When comparing old products to new products in the concrete stain and dye industry, there is acid stain and there is everything else. Until the late 1990s, reactive acid stains had been the staple for close to 100 years. In the early 2000s, new products started appearing, and the pace and variety of new stains entering the market has only increased over the last years.

### THESE NEW PRODUCTS HAVE A VARIETY OF FEATURES INCLUDING:

- They are primarily water-based.
- They come in a wide range of colors.
- Most are UV stable, so they can be used for both exterior and interior applications.
- The liquid portion of these new stains and dyes is primarily water or water-based resins, which fits what's considered acceptable by U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) building program.
- The active or color portion of most new stains is mostly paint-grade resins that are finely dispersed to allow for better penetration into concrete.



*A variety of colors are available with water-based stains as seen in this color chart from Smith Paints.*



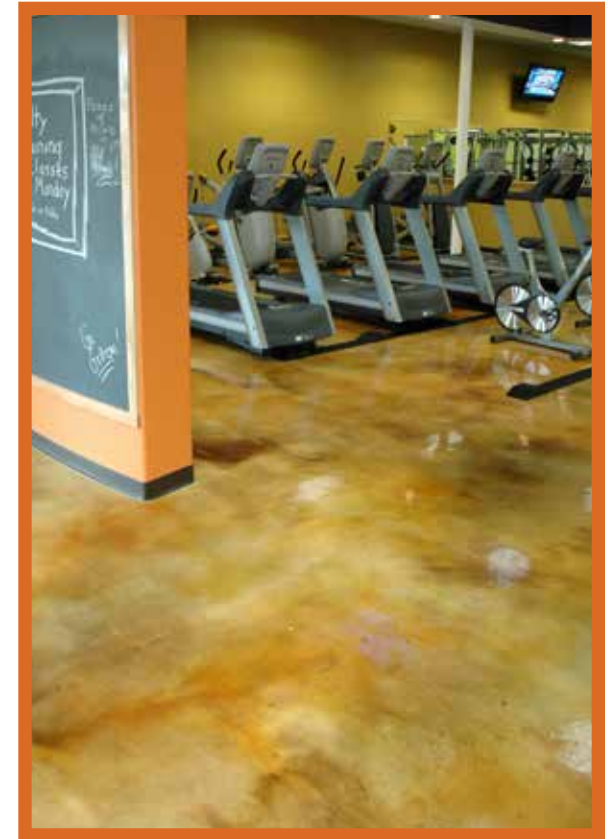
**“I use newer stain and dye technology when needed, but always default back to acid stains for the base color.”** – TIM FISHER

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Depending on who you talk to, the level of excitement about new products in the stained concrete industry varies greatly. Most of the products are touted as acid stain replacements that can save time and labor while achieving the same look and appearance as an acid stain. Some contractors are truly excited about the ongoing surge of water-based nonreactive stains and dyes into the market, while others tend to stick with the tried-and-true acid stains that have been working for them for years. That said, nearly all contractors have used the new-generation stains and dyes. Just how much comes down to individual preference and the specific project.

Tim Fisher, owner of Fisher's Concrete Company, Louisville, Colo., is not that excited about the new stains, but this does not preclude him from using them. He prefers the look and feel of acid stains, but when the job calls for a color or look that acid stain can't produce, he will use a newer water-based acrylic stain to achieve the desired result.

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CUSTOM CONCRETE SOLUTIONS

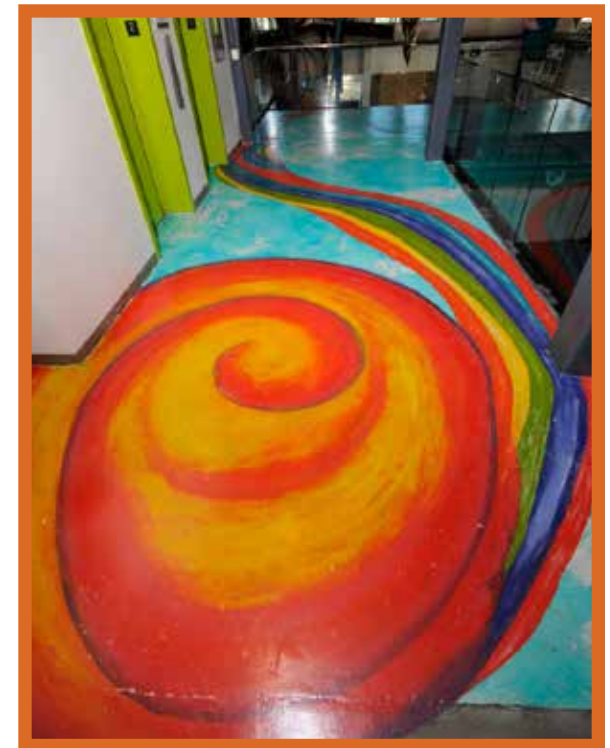
*To get a one-of-a-kind look, Don Pinger of Custom Concrete Solutions uses a combination of stains and dyes. On this project, he resurfaced the floor with a white overlay, lightly stained it with a water-based stain, and then dyed the floor with a solvent-based dye applied while the floor was flooded with water. For the finishing touch, he applied a thick coat of clear epoxy, infused with three different metallic colors.*



On the opposite side of the excitement spectrum is Shelly Rigsby, owner of Acanthus/Concrete Stain Designs, Dallas. Rigsby loves the look of acid stains, but told me she is excited about the new products on the market and has used all of them in her work. She follows color trends, and loves the expanded color palette the new stains and dyes offer. Rigsby says that before she uses any new technology or product, she does her homework. She tests the products and makes sure they are compatible with all of the other products she uses on her projects, and she always reads the technical data sheets.

Greg Hyde, owner of Hyde Concrete in Annapolis, M.D., is someone who falls in the middle. "I'm inherently inquisitive and interested in new products," he says, but he does not get overly excited about them. He has his proven system, but likes keeping on top of new technology. He is less excited about how the new stain products look and more interested in product consistency and customer service from the manufacturer. "It comes down to service, and that the product performs consistently from job to job," he says.

The professional applicator who is serious about staining concrete will look at new products as they appear on the market, but will end up using those that meet their expectations in regard to performance and service.



*New stains and dyes offer an expanded color palette for achieving unique combinations of colors.*



**TREND:**

# MORE CHOICES, MORE COMPETITION

Stained concrete is a unique market in that it blends the historically conservative nature of the concrete stain palette with the demands of the fast-paced and always changing flooring and color industries. The traditional look of concrete stain is now feeling the pressure of the ever-changing color and pattern trends generated from the commercial flooring industry. This pressure has created a division within the staining industry, as the traditionalist holds true to the time-honored earth-tone marbled hues of acid-stained concrete, while the new generation of installers embraces the new easy-to-use media and bright colors that have made their way into the mainstream.

## INSTALLERS:

### TRADITIONALIST

Holds true to the time-honored earth-tone marbled hues of acid-stained concrete



### NEW GENERATION

Embraces the new easy-to-use media and bright colors making their way into the mainstream



## A BROADER COLOR PALETTE

The natural and unique marbling effects of acid stains have been taken to a new level with the introduction of new stain and dye technology. Now contractors are blending different stain media to achieve colors and finishes even more unique than those previously obtained from classic acid stains alone. Rigsby calls this trend “multi-media.” She uses different colors from different stain media to achieve distinctive looks exclusive to her. This multi-media approach is also prevalent in Hyde’s work. “We use a little bit of everything in our work,” he says. Hyde likes blending and layering different types of stains to obtain a one-of-a-kind look for his clients.

“Spicy earth-tone colors are coming to the end of the design cycle,” says Rigsby. “We are beginning to see cleaner, brighter, and lighter colors being used.” With the introduction of new concrete dyes and acrylic-based stains, the stained concrete industry can now meet the demands of today’s color trends while allowing installers to get creative with new looks.

## NEW APPLICATIONS

Another trend in the stained concrete industry is where stains and dyes are now being used. The rapid growth in the popularity of polished concrete has been a boon for stains in recent years. Because of their tinting strength and ability to penetrate deeply into concrete, concrete dyes have become the go-to product when coloring polished concrete floors. “Less stained concrete and more polished and dyed concrete is the trend,” says Fisher.



*While acid stains traditionally offer a limited palette of earth-tone colors (see top color chart), concrete dyes and water-based stains offer dozens of colors to choose from. Color charts provided by Scofield.*



## MORE COMPETITION

An unfortunate trend, according to most of the installers I spoke with, is the influx of unskilled installers entering the concrete staining industry. While staining concrete may look easy, obtaining a top-quality product requires years of experience. Increased numbers of poorly trained installers has also led to price erosion in the stained concrete industry in all regions of the country over the last few years. “Good installers are being chased out by low cost competition,” Rigsby says.

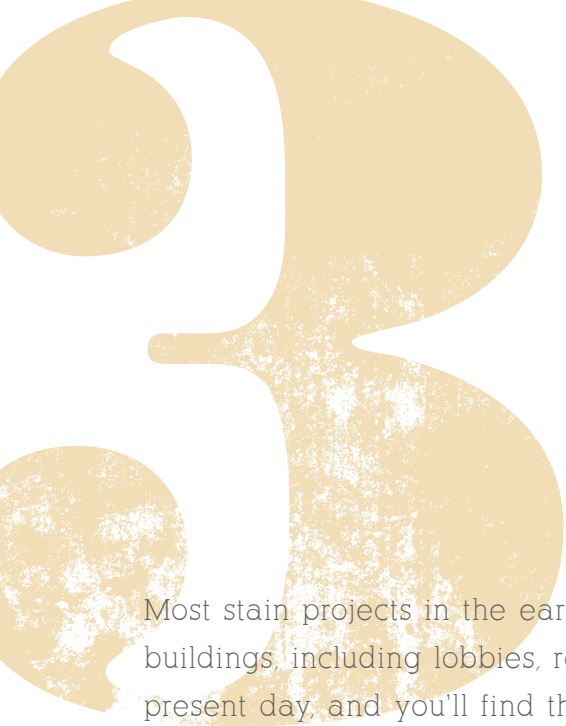
### RELATED RESOURCES:

[Buyer's Guide to Concrete Stains and Dyes](#)  
[Video: Using Concrete Stains with Overlays](#)



## A GREATER EMPHASIS ON SURFACE PREPARATION

*A more recent trend in the stained concrete industry involves surface preparation, a less talked about part of staining yet one that is critical to the final outcome. Today most professional stain installers incorporate some form of surface preparation into all of their staining jobs. Hyde grinds all concrete before applying stains. The idea of grinding or honing the concrete prior to staining was unheard of a decade ago, but now is a growing trend. Another trend is the use of cement-based overlays or microtoppings as both a stand-alone surface and as a new palette for stained floors. Fisher prefers to apply stain to overlays versus concrete because of the control it gives him in the color and finish. No matter the preferred method of surface preparation, doing nothing to the concrete prior to staining is no longer an accepted method.*



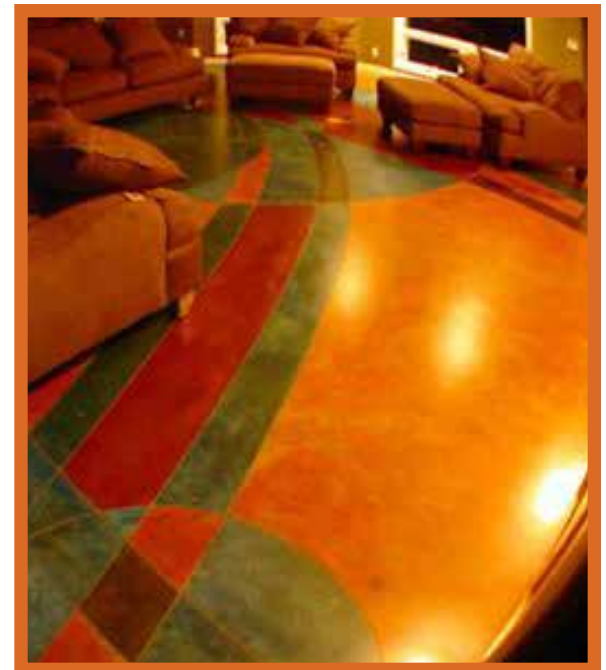
Concrete stains have expanded far beyond interior commercial spaces and are now commonplace in the home as well as outdoors.

**TREND:**

# EXPANDED MARKETS

Most stain projects in the early days were applied to finished floors in commercial buildings, including lobbies, restaurants, and office spaces. Fast forward to the present day, and you'll find that concrete stains have expanded far beyond interior commercial spaces and are now commonplace in the home as well as outdoors. This expansion in the applications for stains is in part due to the introduction of water-based stains and dyes in the early 2000s. This new generation of stains offers an expanded color palette and are much easier and faster to install. The other major factor that has led to the expansion in the use of stains is growing awareness. Stained concrete has become a mainstream flooring option embraced by both businesses and homeowners because of its design versatility and ease of maintenance.

Interior concrete remains a large portion of the stained concrete market. While time-honored earth tones produced by acid stains are still popular, lighter colors are becoming more popular. "Thanks to the expanded color palette of modern stains, along with the forward thinking of the design and installer communities, the interior stain market remains strong," says Dave Pettigrew, owner of Diamond D Concrete, Capitola, Calif.



DIAMOND D CONCRETE

*Earth tones produced by acid stains are still popular, but lighter colors are gaining interest.*



SALZANO CUSTOM CONCRETE



STAINTEC



PIZZAZZ PAINTING

*Because of improvements in stain and sealer technology, more contractors are now staining exterior concrete.*

## MARKET CHALLENGES

One market that has actually experienced a drop-off in stain use is restaurants and food service facilities, primarily due to poor expectation management and lack of proper maintenance by the food service sector. Large companies, such as Starbucks, who once specified stained floors in many of their stores, no longer do so. Without proper maintenance, a stained floor—no matter how well installed and sealed—will show wear, and food service floors can be some of the most difficult to maintain because of the heavy foot traffic, chairs and tables being moved around, and food spills. That said, some contractors, such as Hyde, are having success staining restaurant floors. He has a system that works, and he spends time educating his clients on maintenance.

### RELATED RESOURCES:

[How to Protect and Maintain Stained Concrete](#)

Exterior concrete is a relatively new area for stains and has become popular as a stand-alone coloring option in only the last 5 to 10 years. Installers have become savvy over the last decade in how to finish exterior concrete so that it works with stains, and new technology has provided easy-to-apply stains that come in a much larger color selection. In addition, improvements in sealer technology and a more educated installation community have led to fewer failures and better long-term results. However, the extent of exterior stain use often varies by region. “We still see most of our stain work inside because of our environment,” says Hyde. He also says that the East Coast is behind Texas and California when it comes to using stains.

Maintenance is often considered a bad word in the flooring industry. Most home or business owners want a zero-maintenance floor, but no such thing exists. Even high-end dyed and polished floors require some maintenance. The good news is that over time consumers have become educated and manufacturers and installers have become adept at offering maintenance systems for stained floors. “Customers now understand why maintenance is important, and that if they want the beauty of a stained concrete floor, maintenance is just part of the package,” says Rigsby.

TREND:



GLOSS FINISH



MATTE FINISH

LM SCOFIELD

# MATTE-FINISH SEALERS

Stained concrete needs to stay ahead of the curve when it comes to trends and being a good value when compared to other flooring options. I always encourage installers to promote the inherent advantages that come with stained concrete. For example, stained concrete can save flooring costs by utilizing the concrete substrate that is already in place. The seamless finish also provides an easy-to-clean floor that does not contain chemicals that can affect indoor air quality or promote mold growth. These are all hot-button issues today, especially among the design community.

Today's stained concrete customer is also looking for a broader color palette and an easy-to-maintain finish. Nothing affects a stain project more than the sealer system. Not only does the sealer provide protection from day-to-day wear, it

also produces the all-important final finish and gloss level. The trend in sealers has slowly been migrating away from the use of high-gloss products. "There has been a long run of high-gloss sealers, but we are seeing a change toward satin and matte finishes," says Rigsby.

The client base is finding that sealers with lower gloss levels are easier to clean and don't show wear as much as high-gloss sealers do. Hyde says that he is seeing a 50-50 split in the specification of gloss versus matte sealers in his market. "We point people in the direction of matte and satin finishes because they show less scratching, and it is tough to maintain gloss on a floor."

**RELATED RESOURCES:**

[Buyer's Guide to Concrete Sealers](#)

[Fixing Common Sealer Problems: Expert Tips](#)



Clients are finding that sealers with lower gloss levels are easier to clean and don't show wear as much as high-gloss sealers do.

### CHOOSING THE RIGHT LOOK AND FINISH

By no means are the days of gloss sealers over. However, there is a definite shift toward less-shiny alternatives. Manufacturers of sealers are also getting behind the trend by offering more low-gloss options. "When used in the right application, gloss sealers are perfect, but we are seeing more people select lower-gloss sealers," says Rigsby.

Hyde says that his clients want to learn more about taking care of stained concrete. "Education is still a huge component of what we do. The internet provides some information, but clients still need and want more." While the websites of stain manufacturers and installers are great resources, nothing compares to face-to-face communication and first-hand education. "Most of my customers still don't know the possibilities of stained concrete," says Pettigrew. He says that most of his clients are upscale homeowners who work with designers but still want his direction. "Customers have a general color theme in mind and let me work with them to dial in the final look and finish," he says.



HYDE CONCRETE

## CONCLUSION:

# WEATHERING AN ECONOMIC STORM: CAN STAINED CONCRETE REMAIN COMPETITIVE IN TODAY'S MARKETPLACE?

As with any product or business tied to the construction industry, the economic downturn that started in 2008 dealt a blow that would be long lasting, and one that the industry is still recovering from. The collapse of the housing market took some of the wind out of the sails of the decorative concrete industry. Stained concrete was not spared from the downturn, and in fact concrete stains experienced a 40% to 50% reduction in overall usage. Toward the end of 2008, installers who had made a very good living staining concrete for both residential and commercial projects quickly found themselves having to diversify into other industries to make ends meet.

The health of the stained concrete industry today is good, but could be better. Big economic factors such as residential housing, financial lending, and consumer confidence have long-lasting consequences that trickle down to even the most specialized and niche markets, such as stained concrete. The economic recovery, and subsequent improvement of these large-scale economic factors has been slow, but improvement can be seen. In my travels it has been reassuring to hear that the industry is improving, contractors are getting more work, and the amount of stained concrete projects being bid is increasing.

We also can't ignore a less tangible aspect of the industry: Do people still like and want stained concrete? Overall, I have found that the desire for stained concrete is still strong. The ability of staining to create a unique one-of-a-kind floor, using an economical and environmentally friendly process, will be timeless. — **CHRIS SULLIVAN**



# RESOURCES

**BONUS:** Avoid the school of hard-knocks with additional hindsight from these veteran installers at <http://www.concretenetwork.com/products-stains/hindsight.html>

## LEARN MORE:

### STAINED CONCRETE Q&A

Have technical questions about stained concrete?

Visit Chris Sullivan's Corner:

<http://www.concretenetwork.com/fix-acid-stains/>

### FIND STAINED CONCRETE PRODUCTS

<http://www.concretenetwork.com/suppliers/>

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THE END