

CONCRETE



COUNTERTOPS

Provided by:
The Concrete Network





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WHY CONCRETE?

It's become the new material of choice for designers and homeowners across the United States. Decorative concrete in all of its stained, colored, molded, and personalized glory is popping up in retail stores, trendy restaurants, offices, and homes everywhere.

But leading the charge in the concrete craze is the kitchen countertop.

“People want to have something they can show off, not something that mimics what their friends or neighbors have.”

--Terry Stogner, Concrete Interiors, Alamo, Calif.



Many are welcoming, embracing, and anxiously pursuing concrete for their own kitchen projects. All it typically takes is one look whether it's in a magazine, on a home tour, a television show, or in someone's home and you're hooked.

Concrete's irresistible appeal can be attributed to four things: its versatility, its look of distinction, its natural qualities, and the display of superior craftsmanship.

Versatility

Few materials are as versatile as concrete. You can mold concrete into any shape, color it to match virtually any hue, and you can make it smooth or rough. Its versatility lends to a range of design styles from contemporary to classic.

Concrete countertops can be left looking natural to complement materials like wood, stone, and brick. Or, concrete can be treated with chemical stains, coloring pigments, aggregates, and epoxy coatings that allow concrete to mimic popular materials like marble, granite, and limestone.



“Concrete is the only material that allows you to customize just about every aspect of it, including color, shape, thickness, and texture.”

--Jeff Girard, FormWorks, Raleigh, North Carolina

A Look of Distinction

Concrete's creative possibilities are endless. Each concrete artisan approaches his or her craft personally, achieving a distinct look by building their own forms, developing special casting techniques, and using proprietary materials and coloring methods.

Because each piece is usually made to order, customers can be a part of the creative process.



“People like the look the down-to-earth, rustic look. It's a different feeling. It doesn't feel cold; it's a warm material.”

--Marco Lucioni, Lucioni Arts, Seattle, Washington

Natural Qualities

While products like Corian are popular, many opt for concrete because the look is more natural.

For some people, concrete has more tactile appeal than granite, marble, or ceramic tile.

“Marble may be considered formal, and concrete more earthy. I like to think of concrete as naturalistic. You can create your own topography and your own landscape.”

--Fu-Tung Cheng, Cheng Design, Berkeley, California

Superior Craftsmanship

Most concrete artisans are passionate about their work and take great pains to achieve superior results.



“The money doesn't mean a thing. It's the sense of achievement. It's the knowledge that customers are overwhelmed with what I create and that I've become one with my work.”

--Beau Hibdon, Elements of Time, Redmond, Oregon

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

How Concrete Countertops are made

Every concrete countertop contractor has his or her own proprietary construction method. Some of the common points and issues include:



- Countertops are either made on site (cast-in-place), or produced in a shop and then transported to the project and installed. Fabulous work can be done using either method.
- Countertops are made of cement, lightweight aggregates, and a combination of additives.
- Additives such as fiber reinforcement, silica fume pozzolan, and acrylic are often used.
- Some type of reinforcement is used, usually structural steel, wire mesh, fiberglass, and/or fibers. Sometimes more than one type of reinforcement is used.
- The countertops are cured.
- Countertops are often ground. For example, Craig Smith of DEX Studios specializes in terrazzo finishes. He brings his countertops to life by integrating colored glass and aggregates, and then polishing the surface down to reveal the speckles of shine and brilliant color.
- Countertops are always sealed. The type of seal, method and number of coats of sealer is unique to each concrete contractor.

“Our work is 100 percent custom, but our approach is not. We follow a very rigorous program in the way materials are processed.”

--Gerry Santora, Soupcan Inc., Chicago, Illinois

THICKNESS & WEIGHT OF CONCRETE COUNTERTOPS

Thickness

The standard slab thickness is 1.5 inches. Two-inch slabs are also quite common. It is possible to make a thicker countertop, and is usually done for aesthetic reasons. If a 6-inch slab is desired, the back and center are still 1.5 inches thick and the front "grows" to the desired thickness. So it still looks 6 inches thick, but is only 6 inches thick in the front.



Weight

A 1.5-inch thick standard concrete countertop weighs about 18.75 pounds per square foot. (Granite is approximately 18 pounds per square foot.) The countertop weight can be less if lightweight concrete is used. But some countertop contractors will not use lightweight concrete because it has less strength.

Standard cabinetry will support the concrete slabs as the weight of the countertops is distributed over a large area.



CHOOSE YOUR HUE

One of the many benefits of concrete is the wide range of colors and hues available. Is it cobalt blue you're after? Maybe a spicy pumpkin or deep eggplant, an earthy terrazzo or rich jet black? Whatever your pleasure, concrete can accommodate.



Concrete countertop contractors each offer their own unique standard and premium colors.

Samples will always be different because each contractor has their own secret recipe for constructing the countertops and employing different types and amounts of cement and aggregates. In fact, cement varies in different parts of the country. There are different brands of pigments, stains, and aggregate colors, so concrete countertops will always be unique.

“It's a blank palette. The range of colors is huge.”

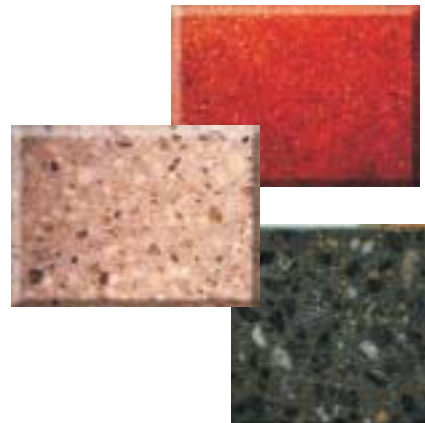
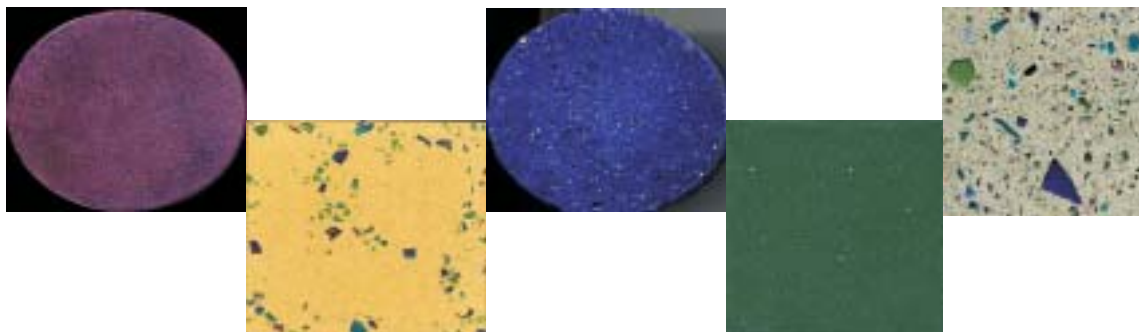
--Teresa Unruh, Colorado Hardscapes

Color matching is in no way an exact science. Samples of custom colors (like the five below) or requests for matching a particular color will always be more expensive than samples of standard colors. In most cases, the price of samples is applied against the cost of the order.

How To Get Samples

Each concrete countertop contractor has standard samples and offers custom color samples.

Standard color samples (and remember, each contractor's samples will be different) runs in the \$25-\$50 range. Custom color samples run from \$75 to \$150.



HOW MUCH YOU CAN EXPECT TO PAY

Concrete countertops are a custom-crafted material for high-end use and made by designers or architects.

Some consumers think of concrete as being a cheaper alternative to other available countertop surfaces. But when you think about buying a concrete countertop, you should do so based on its beauty, artistry, and customization.

The price of the concrete countertop is broken down into countertop construction, shipping (if required), and installation.

Prices to Manufacture Concrete Countertops

Standard 1.5" thick concrete countertops range from \$65 to \$125 per square foot.

These items add to the cost:

- Irregular or curved shapes.
- 2" thick concrete
- Integral drain boards
- Custom edges
- Back splashes

Large orders sometimes reduce the cost. Some contractors only quote on a per-job basis.



“We're doing something different every time. Every project is a prototype.”

--Gerry Santora, Soupcan Inc.

Shipping Costs

Countertop contractors in almost all cases install their own product in their market area, eliminating shipping expenses. Shipping method and carrier, for those firms that do ship, varies by contractor. Discuss this with the contractor.

Installation Costs

Installation, when done by the countertop contractors, runs in the \$40-\$50 per hour, per person, range.

Other installations, such as those when the countertop has been shipped, should be done by a contractor experienced in installing countertops. Rates vary by region. The countertops arrive to the site in a completed state and no modifications should be needed.

Most of the concrete countertop contractors provide detailed installation instructions. Request these instructions and make sure your installer understands the installation instructions prior to the countertops arriving on the jobsite.

CONCRETE'S INHERENT PROPERTIES: WHAT TO EXPECT

Like any other material, concrete has properties that require special care and attention. One of the biggest questions that comes up is whether concrete countertops will develop cracks. The answer: Not always, but concrete countertops can develop hairline cracks. The cracks tend to be non-structural and result from the natural shrinkage of the concrete.

But many view this unpredictable, imperfect quality as one of the many assets of concrete.

“Imperfections are part of the appeal. ... Most people prefer the aged appearance that this natural occurrence bestows in contrast to the cold and unvarying smoothness of plastic products such as Corian and Formica.”

--Buddy Rhodes, Buddy Rhodes Studio, San Francisco, California

Each concrete countertop contractor has his or her own reinforcement method. For instance, Soupcan Inc. uses fiber reinforcing technology. They believe their proprietary formulation drastically reduces the chances for both structural and hairline cracking. The conventional wire mesh and rebar reinforcement acts only after cracking has occurred.

Other contractors have success using rebar, mesh, fiber reinforcement, and/or other methods of reinforcement.

No matter what reinforcing method is used, hairline cracks, which are non-structural, may still occur.

Stains

Concrete countertops have sealers applied for water and stain resistance. (Left in its natural state, unsealed, concrete is porous and will stain.)

Soupcan Inc. makes their countertops less permeable meaning less stain resistant by adding water conditioners to their countertop mix formulation. This affects the capillary structure of the concrete itself.

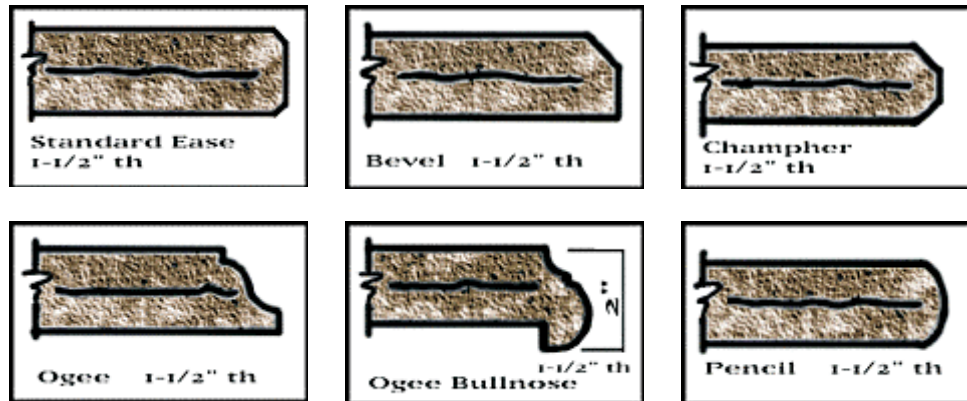
Jeff Girard at FormWorks has created a countertop that doesn't stain. His sealing system uses a heavy-duty industrial-grade sealer that is food-safe, colorless and non-yellowing.

He's even put the sealer up to a grueling test, slathering turmeric spice and oil, ketchup, mustard, balsamic vinegar, coffee, and lemon juice all over the sample, letting it sit for more than 100 hours. The sealer did not stain. He's also placed a 450-degree pan directly on the sealer without scorching, burning, or bubbling.



EDGE DETAILS, INSERTS, SPECIAL SHAPES

Another one of the many benefits of concrete countertops is having a broad choice in the types of edging. Many concrete contractors offer a selection of standard edging, like these six below from Buddy Rhodes Studio. Many contractors will also work with you in achieving a custom look.



In addition, you can insert items, such as these **imbedded copper rods** by Buddy Rhodes Studio.



Trivets or **stainless steel heat racks**, like this set by Soupcan Inc., can also be built in to concrete countertops.



In addition, most concrete contractors can make **L-shaped**, **V-shaped**, and **curved** countertops. Buddy Rhodes Studio created this curved countertop.



SIGNATURE TREATMENTS

Because concrete can be molded into any form, the options for countertop shapes and edge details are endless. And of course homeowners can custom-tint their concrete countertops to match an existing color scheme. But one of the most special attributes of concrete is the ability to express your individuality through personal embellishments like embedded artifacts and personal mementos.

Buddy Rhodes' signature is creating a “**veined**” surface on his countertops, right. These resemble two-toned marble, achieved through pressing the concrete into a special mold, then filling the veins with different colors. He then grinds the concrete down to reveal the aggregate and the veins.



Jeff Girard of FormWorks often works with homeowners who want **metals, seashells, broken bottles**, and even staples from moving boxes embedded into their countertop. He even had a unique project in which the homeowner wanted old bottle fragments excavated from the historic home's back yard to tie the rich past with the new countertop.

Craig Smith of DEX Studios specializes in terrazzo finishes. He brings his countertops to life by integrating **colored glass** and aggregates, and then polishing the surface down to reveal the speckles of shine and brilliant color.



And Fu-Tung Cheng loves to inlay **stone, fossils**, or other interesting objects to achieve an earthy, natural feel. In fact, he hand-selects appealing objects at rock shows and salvage yards.



CARING FOR YOUR CONCRETE COUNTERTOP

Once your concrete countertop is installed, you'll want to take care of it. You'll want to keep the following in mind:

- Don't cut on concrete countertops. It won't hurt the concrete, but it will damage the sealer, which keeps out water and stains.
- Always use cutting boards when chopping and preparing foods.
- Avoid placing hot pans on concrete countertops. Concrete is very heat resistant, but, again, the concern is damaging or discoloring the sealer.
- Consider asking your contractor to build in trivets (before the countertop is installed). Some will build in steel, brass or copper. These types of trivets not only contribute to the total design of your countertop and kitchen, but they're functional, too.
- Avoid abrasive soaps or cleansers. CONCRETEWORKS STUDIO recommends a mild, nonabrasive, non-ammonia soap for daily cleaning. They suggest Simple Green (diluted as instructed) or Dr. Bronner's natural soap (5 parts water, one part soap). Soupcan, Inc. recommends a neutral pH cleanser and warm water. They say you should avoid using abrasive pads.
- Follow the instructions provided by your concrete contractor.



ABOUT THE CONCRETE NETWORK

The Concrete Network (www.concretenetwork.com) is the definitive concrete industry web portal with a directory for concrete construction services and concrete products. It draws over a quarter million visitors per month.

ConcreteNetwork.Com was born at the 1999 World of Concrete Trade Show in Las Vegas. Founder, Jim Peterson, a former Vice President of a major concrete contractor in Riverside, California, had an idea to create a definitive industry portal on the World Wide Web.

Concrete Network's directory lists concrete contractors and other industry suppliers and experts in 58 specialties in 164 metro areas. The directory is organized by area and specialty, such as patios, pool decks, driveways, countertops, acid-stained floors, stamped concrete, and water features, among many others.

Site visitors can choose a metro area and view the concrete construction services and concrete products that are available in the area and obtain full contact information for the listed businesses.

ConcreteNetwork.Com's web site's extensive articles and directories constitute a repository of information and a resource about the industry's products and services, including concrete home construction, stamping and other decorative concrete products, resurfacing products, concrete stains, boom pumps, and literally hundreds of other products.

SITE HIGHLIGHTS & NEW FEATURES

THE IDEA CENTER

Slide shows featuring concrete countertops, interior floors, pool decks, patios, water features, furniture, and much more! A new slide show is added each week!

THE DESIGN CENTER

Designer Jeanine Laiza has a field day designing inviting indoor and outdoor rooms with innovative concrete products and surfaces.



WEEKLY CONTRACTOR FEATURES

Michele Dawson writes each week on one of the contractor members of The Concrete Network; these fabulous artisans build outrageous pool decks, interior floors, countertops, patios...anything with concrete.

PRODUCT FEATURES

Anne Balogh, former editor of Concrete Construction Magazine, writes on concrete industry products for The Concrete Network. Innovations such as stamped overlay wall systems, "concrete engraving", and numerous other products are covered. If it's useful and innovative, you'll find it on The Concrete Network.



DECORATIVE CONCRETE TECHNIQUES

Jeff Potvin writes on decorative concrete techniques for The Concrete Network. Potvin, a civil engineer and the owner of Architectural Concrete Consultants, has nearly 15 years of experience in the architectural concrete industry. His experience includes stamped concrete, overlays, form-liners, acid stains, counter tops and coatings.

INDUSTRY LEADERS

We cover industry leaders such as Buddy Rhodes, the father of concrete countertops; Bob Harris from L.M. Scofield, an innovator in decorative concrete techniques; Barbara Sargent, on Kemiko Concrete Stains, who is taking the concrete acid staining industry to a new level. How did they get to the top? We get the inside scoop. The Concrete Network is dedicated to showing site visitors what is possible with concrete and how to find a contractor to get the job done.

