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# Concrete Potential

It's an ancient material with a pedestrian past. But concrete is increasingly used by designers who value its versatility and artistic qualities.

BY PATRICIA POORE

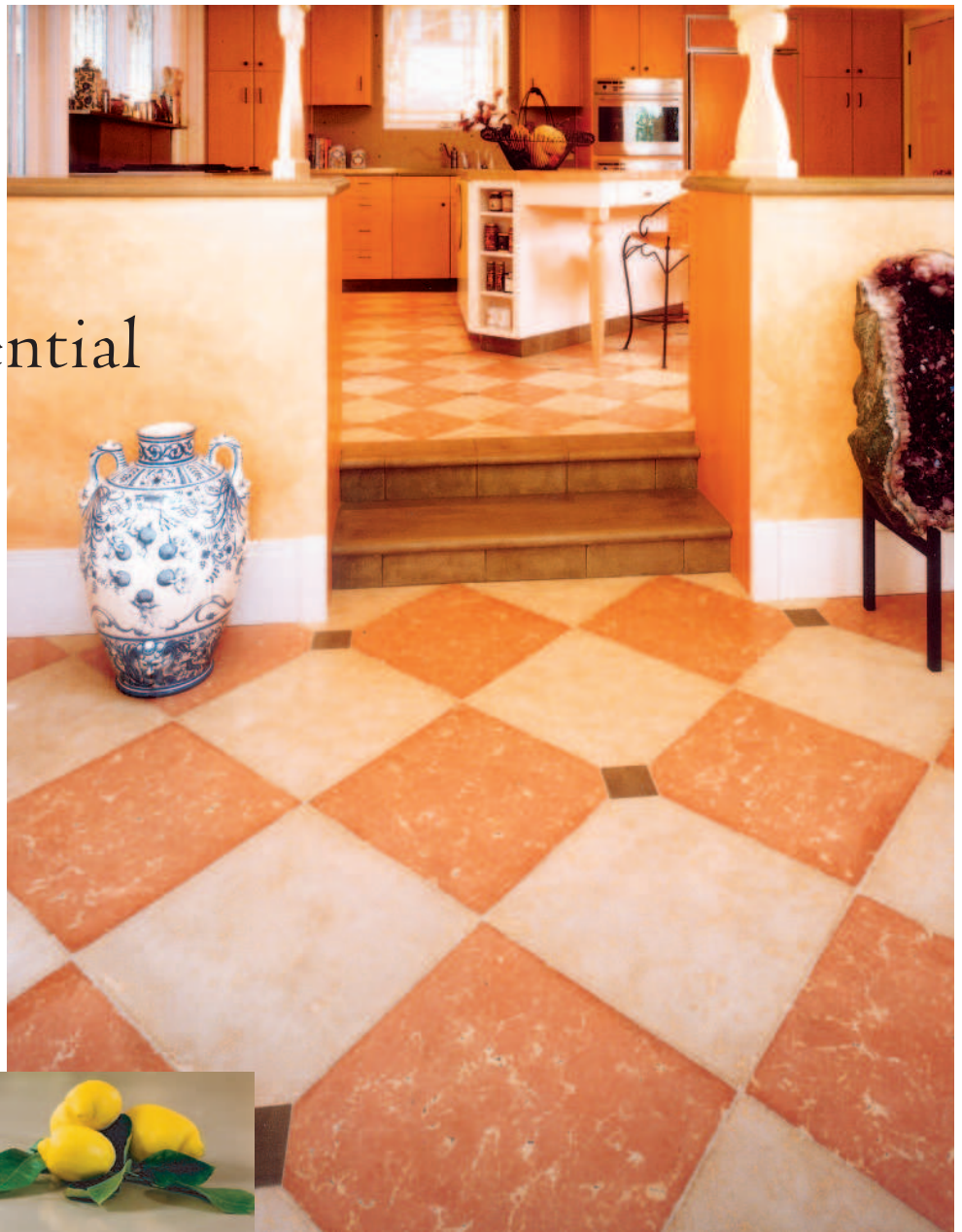
“THE COUNTERTOPS are made from poured-in-place concrete”—increasingly, that's a caption, even in a magazine about traditional interiors. It's very evident that concrete is being used not only in stark, modern applications but also in old houses as a material of choice for countertops, fireplace surrounds, floors, and occasionally furniture.

“Concrete is made from a mixture of gritty aggregate, water, and cement (a fine powder of limestone and clay),” explains Helen Bowers in *Interior Materials & Surfaces* [Firefly Books, 2005]. “Structural poured concrete, as used in major construction work, uses coarse gravel—but very fine aggregate, such as sand, can be used for a smooth finish. Concrete can be cast on site. A form made of plywood, known as shuttering, is built in place. The concrete is poured into the form and left to cure before the shuttering is removed. The technique, commonly used for foundations . . . , can also be [used to create] countertops,” tubs, and built-ins.



**TOP:** A scored and acid-stained concrete floor with a diamond motif provides a lively, low-maintenance base for several rooms.

**ABOVE:** This kitchen counter has a trowel finish. **RIGHT:** A massive tub shows how concrete is perfect for integral, built-in elements. (All three projects by Buddy Rhodes Concrete.)





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Concrete stands up well in almost all applications.

At the kitchen sink, however, acidic foods, abrasive cleansers, and cast-iron pans take their toll.



Recent applications are far more artistic than mere formwork. Acid-staining, for example, transforms a concrete slab into a luxurious floor that resembles marble or glazed stone—a process used experimentally by Frank Lloyd Wright and enjoying new popularity today. Acid-stain consists of a water-based solution of hydrochloric acid and metallic salt pig-

**Workers pour and spread concrete over a floor prepped with rebar, inlays, tubing, and screed guides. This is a sophisticated, high-end interior pour in San Francisco.**

ments. The acid etches the surface, which allows salts to penetrate, where they react with free calcium hydroxide in the concrete. Coloring is usually used along with saw cuts in the slab to suggest stone or tile units.

CONCRETE has taken off as an affordable, “green” building product. “Scored and stained concrete over radiant heat

*Direct to the* **SOURCES** If you want to know more before committing to concrete, get an instant education, complete with photo galleries, at these excellent websites: [concreteexchange.com](http://concreteexchange.com) [includes a national directory of fabricators and artists]; [concretenetwork.com](http://concretenetwork.com) ■ [kemiko.com](http://kemiko.com); [fabcrete.com](http://fabcrete.com) ■ [buddyrhodes.com](http://buddyrhodes.com); [sierraconcrete.com](http://sierraconcrete.com); [sonomastone.com](http://sonomastone.com); [stonesoupconcrete.com](http://stonesoupconcrete.com) ■ The most accessible book on residential use of concrete is Taunton’s new *Concrete at Home* by well-known concrete designer Fu-Tung Cheng [[taunton.com](http://taunton.com)]



**LEFT:** An elegant floor is concrete stained and sealed with Kemiko products. **BELOW:** The “wave sink” by Stone Soup Concrete, ground and polished to expose aggregate and colored glass in the mix. **BELOW LEFT:** The “Biltmore” fireplace looks like Italian limestone [3000 from Sierra Designs].



is a complete package—contractors love it,” says Barbara Sargent, president of Kemiko Concrete Stain. (All Kemiko products meet low-voc guidelines.) A concrete floor is often specified for asthma patients and in wheelchair-accessible homes. Sargent points out that a concrete floor provides a smooth base for anything the next owner might want to add: hardwood flooring, carpets. “Not that they ever do,” she laughs. In fact, “Customers who years ago put in a stained concrete floor because they couldn’t afford stone come back years later [when they’re moving] and tell me they were so pleased, this time they want a concrete floor for its own sake!

“It’s chic, very chic,” Sargent concludes. “The most popular color is Cola—just like old leather—but architects love Black.” ✦

## ENHANCEMENTS

Concrete artists are taking off with the help of a growing armamentarium of specialty products. Hybrid sealers combine the advantages of penetrating and topical (hard-surface) sealers. Concrete dyes penetrate (rather than reacting chemically with the concrete) and are available in a wide palette. Sandblasting and stencils offer various effects. Resists keep certain areas of a pattern from absorbing stain or dye (or getting blasted). Inlays range from copper tubing and linoleum to seashells and stones. ■ Artists use these along with crushed pastels, air-brushing, and other flights of the imagination.

**A compass rose on concrete deck of a portico, applied using stencils, a latex resist product, and acid-stain. [Gracewood Designs; RESOURCES R 112]**



# FABCRETE

CONCRETE ACID STAINS

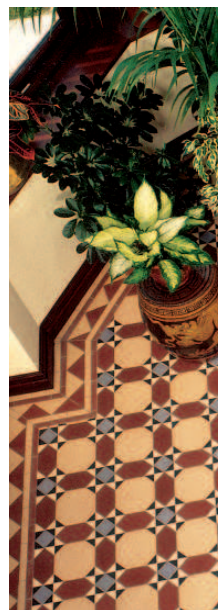
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