

COUNTERTOPSSM & ARCHITECTURAL SURFACES

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A World Of Surfaces



Concrete Countertops for Fun and Profit

ABSOLUTE ConcreteWorks
Mixes Art and Business
to Create its Own
Industry Niche

By Russ Lee

*Take one part
woodworker, mix in
a generous helping
of artiste, add equal
parts structural
engineer, chemist
and environmentalist
and dump the entire
concoction into a mixer.
After combining the
ingredients for a few
minutes, pour into a mold
and sprinkle lightly with
bubbling enthusiasm. Let
stand. Yields one concrete
countertop manufacturer.*

Or more specifically, Tommy Cook of ABSOLUTE ConcreteWorks (ACW) in Poulsbo, Wash.

Unless you've been totally ensconced in a giant cocoon for the past several months, you probably know that concrete countertops are quickly becoming the darling of architects and kitchen and bath designers across the country. In the fashion world of residential countertops, where the purchasing process has rightly evolved into a "countertop experience," concrete has the potential to become the ultimate personalized decorative surface.

Why Concrete?

Let's say Aunt Mary left your customer a considerable inheritance when passing on, which made it possible to remodel the kitchen, including the installation of a new countertop. Dutiful nephew that he is, your customer would like to include something of dear Aunt Mary in the new design to remind the family of her love and generosity. As it turns out, Mary was really into knitting sweaters in DayGlo colors every Christmas for the family.

"We could put Mary's knitting needles right into the countertop in a prominent part of the kitchen," Cook explained. "Just about anything you can think of with sentimental value could become part of a one-of-a-kind installation to make the countertop unique in a very personal way."

It was the personalization factor that caught the attention of former customers and now part-owners, Tina and Steve Silberman. "We were rebuilding a home and wanted countertops that were like nothing anyone else would have," Silberman related. "So we went to several local granite fabricators and picked out a beautiful slab with lots of movement and interesting colors. The salesperson assured us we would never see anything like it anywhere else. It was unique. It was 'our' countertop."

As luck would have it, Silberman and his wife were invited to a get together at a friend's new home and, lo and behold, right there in the kitchen was what appeared to be the very granite countertop pattern they had picked out at the yard. Silberman reconsidered his choice.

"My builder said, 'Steve, you really should check out concrete. They are doing some amazing things with it now,'" Silberman explained. "I told him the last thing I wanted was a sidewalk in my kitchen."

To make a long story short, the Silbermans made contact with Cook and eventually went with concrete countertops of their own design. Over time, one thing led to another and the Silbermans ended up becoming partners in the business. A former boardroom type from Los Angeles, Steve traded his three-piece suit and Mercedes for jeans, crew neck sweater and a



Steve Silberman (l) and Tommy Cook, co-owners of
ABSOLUTE ConcreteWorks.

pickup truck. He couldn't be happier in his new role.

It Starts with the Mold

Life is filled with ironies -- and one of the little ironies of concrete countertop manufacturing at ACW is it often requires the talents of a skilled woodworker to make a custom project come out right. That's because a large percentage of the countertop projects produced there are poured into a mold made from wood.

"It all starts with the mold," explained Cook, "and the better the mold, the better final result. We use a lot of melamine panels for mold making because it is an affordable and durable material. It also helps that we can purchase seconds from the factory at favorable pricing."

Other materials used in mold making include formed acrylic, fiberglass and silicone rubber.

From a production standpoint, the necessity of creating a mold before the project can be produced is one of the limiting factors of concrete countertop manufacturing. In essence, it requires the manufacturer to build the counter-

top twice -- once as a mold and a second time as the finished pour. On the other hand, it is a highly custom process that lends itself well to artistic expression and personalization of the finished countertop, which is a major part of the appeal to the end-user.

"The customer is literally part of the manufacturing process," said Cook. "They decide what elements go into the design and whether it includes items that have sentimental value. The story behind the countertop and its eco-friendly attributes are what draw people to concrete. We have even had customers become so involved in the process that they literally came to the shop and helped participate in the pouring of the art elements of the concrete."

That means the concrete counters will surely become a focal point of conversation when that customer entertains guests at home. It's this "story behind the countertop" experience that generates the kind of passionate, word-of-mouth exposure that no amount of advertising money can buy.

However, there is more to the process than



Cook stands in front of his latest batch of color samples.

pouring a bag of Sacrete into a mold and adding a little water.

A Little Mad Science

Because they work with one-of-a-kind molds and raw ingredients, the folks at ACW are able to control color, texture and pattern of the finished product. Yet, to accurately forecast how a piece will look after it comes out of the mold and goes through the curing process requires experience in chemistry, admixtures, acid staining, sealers, waxes and finishing procedures. Creating an accurate control sample requires an understanding of the properties of the various raw materials used in concrete countertop production and how they interrelate to create what the artist had envisioned.

Yes, artist. And Tommy Cook is known as one of the best.

"It is not uncommon for a customer to bring in a sample of wallpaper or some other visual element they want their countertop to match," explained Cook. "We tell them, 'No problem.' Then I have to figure out how to do it."

In his second-story research and development studio Cook has assembled samples of assorted raw materials in plastic tubs stacked neatly on shelves lining the walls. He uses these ingredients to create the background color for a sample. To this basic mixture he adds decorative elements, such as bits of recycled colored glass, specially selected pebbles, sea shells, geode fragments or colored pigments. If the finished project calls for a colored swirl, he draws on his experience to determine whether it

should be part of the basic mixture or should be applied to the hardened slab as an acid stain.

It often takes a few tries to nail it, but Cook almost always comes up with a credible match for the sample provided by the customer. The process requires a combination of experience, creativity and basic chemistry – and a lot of time.

"Given time and the right materials, a manufacturer can reproduce the look of just about anything," said Cook. "Concrete is the ultimate custom material. We acknowledge up front that it isn't for everyone, but an end-user who wants to inject a little of her personality into the kitchen countertops can't do better than concrete."

Going Commercial

When Steve Silberman joined the company, he determined the best way to preserve the artistic side of the operation while creating a platform for increased profit was to grow the commercial and public sector side of the business. Almost by definition, commercial work called for multiple units of cookie-cutter shapes. Custom coloring was limited to mostly generic background colors. The projects could still be personalized with memorabilia and special elements, but it was almost always on a grander, more high-volume scale.

Plus, it went beyond countertops. Entering the realm of "decorative concrete," commercial work opened up a whole new world of architectural surfaces, including benches, wall caps, monuments, arches, etc., in addition to more traditional countertop applications like vanities,

reception desks and fireplace surrounds.

With a special emphasis on reaching architects and designers, ABSOLUTE ConcreteWorks found itself participating as exhibitors in regional trade and interior design shows geared to that audience. Silberman also began approaching the specification community directly with personal visits, with some initial success, but quickly learned there was a lot of education still to be done.

"The majority of architects are just beginning to think of concrete for applications other than foundations and sidewalks or building cladding," Silberman explained. "The rapid growth of green building and LEED-compliant programs are generating great interest in concrete as viable for architectural decorative surfacing. On average, they are just beginning to have an appreciation for the possibilities of this versatile, sustainable material from an aesthetic perspective."

The need for education notwithstanding, ACW brings in enough commercial work to balance the residential side of the business. The company employs six shop and installation personnel and produces the rough equivalent of four to six kitchens per week, plus commercial projects. As concrete countertop operations go, ACW is one of the larger players in the industry.

"The growth potential for concrete as a decorative surface is substantial," Silberman said. "We have come a long way, but we still have a long way to go as an industry. Consumers and specifiers need to be better educated and we, as manufacturers, need to develop more streamlined methods of production. Concrete will probably never become a mainstream countertop material but it can occupy a formidable market niche that is satisfying, lucrative and eco-friendly."

To that end, ACW hopes its membership in the International Surface Fabricators Association (ISFA) will help accomplish the goal generating of greater awareness for concrete countertops, particularly as the trade association implements an Awareness Campaign directed to opinion leaders in the specification community, as well as consumer publications. "The time has come for an industry association that represents the interest of the entire countertop community to these key market groups," Silberman acknowledged. "We believe ISFA has the will and the horsepower to make that happen."

Meanwhile ACW will continue to do business with its mix of personalized residential countertops and volume-based commercial projects. For Tommy Cook, the artist, and Steve Silberman, the businessman, that is ABSOLUTELY fine. **ISFA**