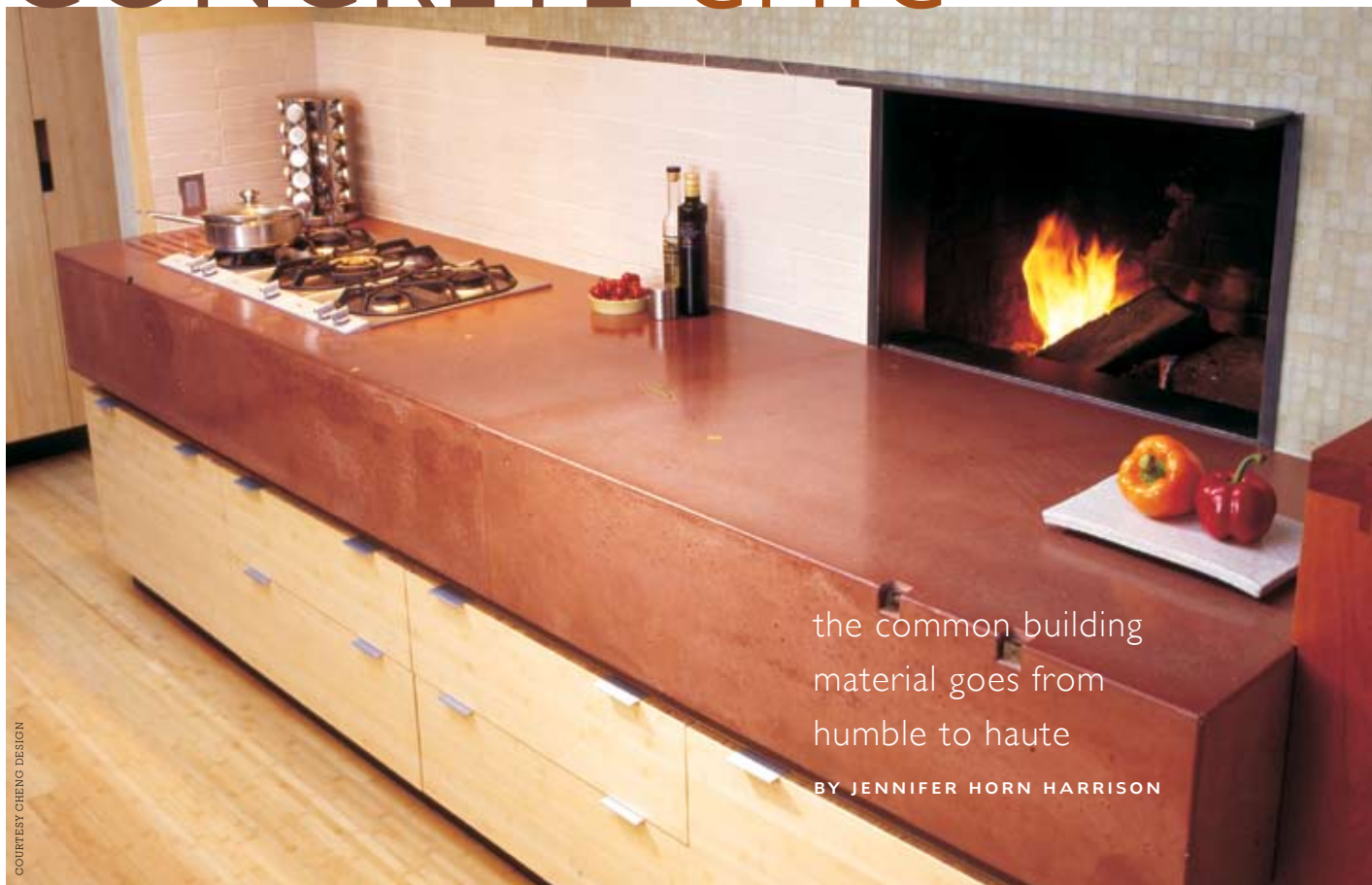


CONCRETE chic



COURTESY CHENG DESIGN

the common building
material goes from
humble to haute

BY JENNIFER HORN HARRISON

BLAME IT ON A DINNER PARTY. Steve Silberman's home boasts aqua-blue kitchen counters. They sparkle in the foreground of his Olympic Peninsula waterfront home, along with matching backsplashes and a built-in drain board that empties into the sink.

The kitchen casts a surprisingly warm glow, given the hard surface that envelopes the room: the counters are made of concrete. Yes—concrete. It's not just for the school playground anymore: it is the latest and greatest in design, and it's anything but dull and grey. >>

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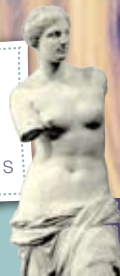
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<< The dinner party was a catalyst because Silberman, who was remodeling his kitchen and shopping for countertops at the time, was leaning towards a certain popular style. But upon arriving at a friends' home for a dinner party, he realized that they "had the exact same kitchen counters I was about to get." Wanting a unique and personal look, he stumbled upon concrete, and a whole new world opened up.

Tommy Cook, a Washington-based precast concrete designer, worked with Silberman and his wife to create their seaside kitchen oasis. Silberman was so happy with the result that he teamed up with Cook; today they own Absolute ConcreteWorks in Poulsbo, Washington, together—giving a whole new meaning to the phrase "customer satisfaction."

history lesson

Technically, concrete is made of aggregate, cement, additives, and water, yielding a sturdy surface. >>



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PHOTOS BY DANE MEYER

concrete has an organic and earthy feel that is unique

<<

Concrete is nothing new. Cement, a main component in concrete, was a popular building material in ancient Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt. Thomas Edison built concrete houses in 1908. Today, concrete is being used for anything and everything—from fireplace mantles to poolside seating.

everything and the kitchen sink

According to the National Kitchen and Bath Association, countertops are one of the greatest costs of a kitchen remodel (second only to cabinets). Kitchens often serve as the family hub, party gathering place, and general room for creation and cooking, so it's no wonder their design is serious business.

At last count, hundreds of countertop options exist, but concrete may be the most surprising. "Their first reaction is, 'You're putting sidewalks—or a driveway—in my kitchen?'" laughs Silberman about people's initial response. But this is nothing like the roads you drive on.

- **Color**—from shiny black to rosy red or neutral tones, concrete can be customized into different colors, hues, and patterns. Color is concocted by using different recipes and different pigments; stains and aggregate colors impact the final color of the counter as well. A favorite piece of china or a swatch of fabric can serve as inspiration for the exact color of the countertop. It can be shined, buffed, or textured, too.

- **Shape**—this is where concrete's diversity shines. It can be shaped into virtually anything, with curves and angles welcomed. Concrete naturally evokes images of heaviness, but it can be thin and traditional, with edges that are either graceful or contemporary or rough. Design options are limitless.

- **Additions**—many items, such as sinks and soap dishes, can be integrated into concrete countertops; this grants a seamless look when cast from the same concrete as the counters.

- **Life- and earth-friendly**—like life, concrete is not flawless. But according to its proponents, that is part of its beauty. It has an organic and earthy feel that is unique. Concrete is also eco-friendly, as it uses renewable natural materials. >>

IMAGINE *the* POSSIBILITIES...



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versatility

"In my eyes, it can't be touched," Cook, who is part artist, part contractor, says about concrete. He recently used the material to make a sixteen-piece custom fireplace for a home on Bainbridge Island. The design incorporated a traditional marble look, and even the masons on the job were fooled.

Every room in the house can utilize concrete. Cook recently designed a "pond tub" to be the focal point and centerpiece of a client's bathroom. Going off an inspiration that the customer had, he designed a tub with a spoutless faucet that yields a waterfall effect.

Concrete doesn't have to be built-in. Tables, chairs, and garden art can all be shaped, rattled, and rolled from concrete.

express yourself

Concrete allows personality and personal life interests to shine through. Special shells, rocks, or other materials can be inlaid into countertops, tubs, and sinks.

Silberman tells of customers that were in search of a bench to serve as a memorial for their grandparents at the family vacation home. They searched high and low, but could find nothing that was worthy. They finally decided to design their own bench out of concrete, and they gathered ferns from the family property to spell out "In Loving Memory" on the seat.

cost

There is no set price for concrete design. Because each job is unique and personal, so is the price. As for countertops, concrete tends to be higher per square foot because of the craftsmanship and time that goes

into designing and installing the counters. "We measure everything down to the last drop," says Silberman. A labor-intensive project can often demand an equally intensive price. General price ranges for concrete counters have been quoted as being anywhere from \$65 to \$125 per square foot to \$170 to \$225 per square foot—comparable to high-end granite countertops "with considerably more versatility and design elements," adds Silberman.

care and concern

Concrete does have its idiosyncrasies. The surface can get hairline cracks, but they are not structural and are thought to lend to the nature, beauty, and art of this medium.

Most concrete counters are installed and then sealed and waxed. Some specialists recommend that homeowners apply a special wax monthly to encourage a protective coating. As for stains and smudges, concrete, like granite, can stain if spills are left for too long, so it's best to wipe up spilled milk right away. And acidic foods, such as lemon juice or vinegar, are best left for the cutting board.

Speaking of cutting, concrete is not exactly knife-friendly. Cutting directly on the concrete isn't recommended, because knife marks can impact the surface. Hot pots and pans aren't welcome either, as they can adversely affect the wax and sealer. But because of concrete's versatility, inlay butcher blocks for cutting and stainless, brass, or copper trivets for hot pots and pans can be the perfect answer to these issues.

When cleaning, a simple mild soap does the trick. Concrete doesn't require heavy cleansers or mixes (remember, this isn't the highway, it's your home) and over time it can gather character marks or a patina, making concrete even more your own. *png*

Jennifer Horn Harrison is a reporter specializing in home and health. She is a reporter for the television show California Country and produces stories for various networks, including HGTV and DIY.



PHOTOS BY DANE MEYER