

# THE EMERGING DECORATIVE APPEAL OF CONCRETE

By David Harris

Nothing wants to remain dull and ordinary all its life. Concrete is no exception. The concrete industries fastest growing and most exciting new sector is in decorative concrete. Whether new or old, this once mundane and utilitarian material is now front and center as the high-end design focal piece of choice for a variety of new or remodeled homes, and businesses. It turns out concrete is one of the most malleable materials on earth. It can be shaped, textured, colored, stamped, and stained. It can be applied vertically in showers or as a unique wall covering, or horizontally for beautiful and durable flooring. Concrete is even making its mark as a high end counter top alternative. In a market saturated with machine made plastic derived countertops (silestone, corian, quartz, etc.), concrete offers a warm natural aesthetic created totally by hand by dedicated craftsmen. Even natural stone



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counters which were once dubbed the “standard of luxury”, are now carried by Home Depot and Lowes and are all too often machine fabricated, generic items which are now found in even the most ordinary of homes. In a time where it seems everything is mass produced, concrete, in all its decorative forms, provides a unique custom alternative for those who are willing to be a little creative and explore the exciting options that decorative concrete has to offer.

As a contractor I feel very strongly that the decorative concrete industry has become too vast for one contractor to be an expert in every new aspect. As an example, concrete staining has nothing to do with forming and pouring a concrete patio. Stamping newly placed concrete has nothing to do with diamond polishing a concrete slab, and vertical overlays have nothing to do with pre-cast concrete counters and sinks. This industry has shown unparalleled growth in recent years. I would caution any builder reading this to choose a specialist in the related field chosen for application. In other words, if your client requests acid stain and seal for their interior flooring, by all means try to find a contractor who specializes in staining and not a “jack of all trades” who advertises all avenues of decorative concrete services. This being the case, I am qualified to speak in depth concerning 3 areas of the industry. Diamond polished concrete flooring, stain/dye and sealed concrete flooring, and pre-cast concrete counters, sinks, tiles, and furniture.

### DECORATIVE CONCRETE FLOORING

Contractors are now implementing several techniques, processes, and products to stain concrete for interior or exterior applications. The two most common are:

- Acid Stain: Acid stains, which are metallic salts in a diluted acidic solution, react with hydrated lime in hardened concrete to yield insoluble colored compounds that become a permanent part of the concrete surface. These reactions are often unique to each individual concrete surface. The desirable, non-uniform nature of acid stains are referred to as color modeling and can be experienced for a variety of reasons and expressed in a variety of forms.

- Water-based Stains and Dyes: These stains offer an exciting alternative to

typical acid stains. Water-based stains and dyes provide color by penetrating the surface of the concrete through the microscopic open pores of the concrete surface. There is no chemical reaction as with typical acid stains. This allows for an expanded color palette unattainable with chemical reaction stains (acid stains). The greater degree of color predictability and color control makes these stain alternatives ideal for intricate designs, or customers who require a strict tolerance for color uniformity.

### WHAT COLORS ARE AVAILABLE WITH STAINED CONCRETE FLOORING?

Stained concrete flooring is available in a wide variety of colors. Each technique lends its own unique color tones and character. Color modeling, which is the appearance of high and low color tones, is a desired effect and is one of the many aesthetic properties of stained concrete flooring that has made it so popular.

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• Acid Stain: 8 standard colors that range from tans and rusts, greens and blue-greens, and shades of black. Due to the nature of the acid stain process, the flooring is almost always mottled. These naturally occurring color reactions are what make acid stains so unique and attractive. No two floors are alike. (For more on the specifics of how acid stains work, please view Acid Stain: Client info and agreement form found at [www.riverbedconcrete.com](http://www.riverbedconcrete.com) )

• Water-based Stains and Dyes: An almost endless array of colors are

available, giving this process a much wider color palette to work from. Water-based stains are a wonderful choice for outdoor applications in the south Texas landscape. A wide variety of subtle earth tones are available which are very complimentary to the natural stone and stucco exteriors of our homes in this area. Other colors made uniquely available with water-based stains are: absolute black, blues, reds, and silver. You may ask then, why don't you always use water-based stains or dyes in place of acid stains? Water-based stains, although very attractive, do not naturally produce the color modeling so prized with acid stains. All color modeling must be faux finished by a concrete artisan. Dyes have a wide range of possibility, but are limited to interior spaces as no dye is UV stable.

### POLISHED CONCRETE

Polished concrete systems are fast becoming the ultimate flooring material for commercial and residential settings. Thanks to recent advances in polishing equipment and techniques, contractors are now grinding and polishing concrete floor surfaces, whether new or old, to a high-gloss finish that never needs waxes or coatings. Factor in the superior durability and performance of polished concrete, and it's no wonder why more

retail, warehouse, and office facilities are opting for polished concrete flooring as an alternative to marble, granite, tile, linoleum, or coated concrete (coated: epoxy, urethane, acrylic, silicone). Even homeowners are catching on to the decorative appeal of these smooth, high-luster floors, which can be stained or colored integrally to replicate the look of polished stone.

### PRE-CAST CONCRETE COUNTERTOPS & SINKS

Pre-cast concrete counters and sinks are miles apart from poured-in-place concrete countertops. Pre-Cast concrete countertops and sinks are fabricated off-site and exhibit a perfectly flat diamond polished surface. They may be pigmented integrally or topically, however, I recommend integral pigments for long lasting low maintenance coloring. Pre-cast concrete products are cured under controllable conditions and may consist of a variety of proprietary mix designs that are unique to each contractor. Many mix designs are now utilizing post-industrial recycled materials, which further make these concrete products very eco-friendly. Sink molds are either custom carved by hand from foam and fiberglass or more recently, generic ready to use molds may

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be purchased online from a variety of vendors each with their own sizes and shapes. Pre-cast concrete countertops and sinks are stain resistant, not stain proof. This allows them to take on a "Living Finish" over time. They will merge with wine spills, lemon, oil stains and other reminders of daily life to form a beautiful patina. This patina gives the concrete surface character, warmth and depth. Granite, marble and Corian® are today found in most subdivisions while concrete is used in thoughtful, custom homes. Granite is ok for houses, but concrete is for homes.

To determine whether concrete is right for you and your client, think about whether you feel that;

- You want something unique and personalized
- You want something that looks natural and has character
- You appreciate high-quality, handcrafted items
- Granite is too shiny, too formal or too common
- Synthetic solid surface materials look and feel like plastic
- You need a color or visual texture that's not available with other countertop materials.

If so, concrete countertops and sinks may be just right for you.

Architects and designers love concrete. Concrete is modern, it is rustic, it is structural and it works with almost every design. Concrete has deep, warm, solid stunning colors. Concrete can be molded into exciting shapes like Trough or Vessel sinks and offers the kind of variety found only in a crafted material that is made from start to finish by hand –Concrete products have personality and confidence in mass not found in other product alternatives. ●

For more information on beautifying concrete floors, contact David W. Harris, President and Managing Principal of Riverbed Concrete Inc.

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