

THE BUDDY RHODES STORY

CHANGING THE FACE OF DECORATIVE CONCRETE

by Liz McGeachy

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ECORATIVE CONCRETE” MAY BE A FAMILIAR TERM TO MANY IN THE DESIGN AND BUILDING WORLD TODAY, BUT WHEN BUDDY

RHODES FIRST STARTED CREATING FUNCTIONAL ART FROM CONCRETE ALMOST 30 YEARS AGO, NOBODY KNEW WHAT HE WAS TALKING ABOUT.

“When Buddy first attended World of Concrete as an inquisitive concrete artist, no one had ever heard of decorative concrete,” said Susan Andrews, vice-president for marketing at Buddy Rhodes Concrete Products and Rhodes’ wife. “They didn’t know what to put on the badge after his name. Buddy chose ‘Pre-Stressed’ because he figured he was stressed enough before he came to the show.”

Today Buddy Rhodes is one of the most familiar names in this industry. His business, headquartered in the San Francisco area, produces the line of concrete products Rhodes created, DVDs and books about working with the products, and workshops directed by his authorized trainers. The Buddy Rhodes portfolio of concrete projects includes home countertops and fireplaces, public artwork, restaurant counters and tables, and more – each one functional, but all hand-crafted works of art.



Photos Courtesy
Buddy Rhodes

Buddy Rhodes started out as an artist and potter in upstate New York. He moved to San Francisco in 1979 and attended the San Francisco Art Institute. During this time, his artwork was evolving.

“My projects were getting bigger and bigger, though the kilns I was using were getting smaller,” Rhodes said.

His frustrations lead him to look for something that had the same malleable properties of clay and didn’t require kiln-firing, so he turned to concrete. But regular concrete was too wet, so he began experimenting, eventually coming up with an entire line of products that can be used to make unique countertops, sinks, and furniture.

“I came to concrete through the back door,” he said.

Whichever door he came through, Rhodes’ entrance to the concrete world helped create options for those wanting something unique

and beautiful in their home or commercial building. Today, there are many artisans throughout the country working with decorative concrete.

“When Buddy first started, he was the only one,” said Andrews. “A few more came on for the next five to ten years, and now the horses are all out of the corral. Buddy Rhodes definitely had a role in the growth of the industry,” along with some others in the industry.

One of the biggest obstacles the business has had to overcome is the image of concrete as anything but a quality artistic product.

“People ask, ‘Why would I want to put a sidewalk on my counter?’” Buddy said. “But once they see it, they see that it’s not a sidewalk. You can color it and polish it, or have different types of textures.”

Above: Buddy Rhodes and Buddy Henry, V.P. of Morale. One of the biggest obstacles that decorative concrete has had to overcome is its image as an ugly, commonplace building material. Buddy Rhodes has played a large part in changing that image.

Below: Buddy shows off a custom bench project poured and created with his Counter Mix at the Concrete Décor show.



Photo by Kevin Padden

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Pigment can be added to concrete to make a variety of colors, including purples, browns, blues, and pinks, and Rhodes' products come in three textures: pressed, hard troweled, and ground. Because a mold is made first, all types of creative designs are possible. In addition, a variety of aggregate material can be added (such as recycled glass) for a different appearance.

While the materials used in decorative concrete are not expensive, the product is hand made, meaning the expense comes in the design and creation. This is where the "Buddy Rhodes artisans" come in. These are people who have been trained by one of the Buddy Rhodes authorized trainers and meet a high level of quality control for working with and designing in concrete. There are now 26 located throughout the country.

Many people use Buddy Rhodes artisans when they want someone else to create their project, but Buddy Rhodes concrete products can also be used by the do-it-yourselfer. There are classes for working with Buddy Rhodes products, as well as books and DVDs. Some kind of training is helpful because this concrete is not like regular concrete.

"There are a few pivotal lessons that an artisan must learn – mainly that this is not the same as doing flat-work – and a few errors that are commonly made by people who have not had training of one kind or another," said Andrews. "One thing that is important to understand is that the Buddy Rhodes Counter Mix is very different than other mixes – it's mixed differently and it performs differently – and its users like those differences once they are familiar with the product. Errors made by uninformed practitioners can seriously affect the success of the project, so it's important to learn the basics and then practice a bit before casting your mother-in-law's countertop. That said, many new users, even ones using the products just for their own homes, have been very successful."

Rhodes said that despite the recession, the interest in decorative concrete has continued to grow over the past ten years. While originally interest was concentrated on the West Coast, artisans can now be found throughout the country. Buddy Rhodes products can also be found for sale by distributors in most areas of the country, including the Southeast where it's available through Braxton-Bragg.

"Interest continues to grow, either do-it-yourself or having someone else do it," Rhodes said. "I think people like it because it's a hand-made product. Very few things in the home are hand made any more."

One product that is gaining popularity is the Buddy Rhodes Ultra Green Concrete Mix. This mix is made from 91% recycled content (like crushed sidewalks or foundations) and provides a 50 percent energy savings over regular concrete. Rhodes has been working on a recycled mix for 10 years and is excited about the outcome.



Above: Buddy in his shop with a 48" planter. The mold for this project is available in the Buddy Rhodes product line, and video instructions for it are included in the DVD entitled Advanced Techniques with Buddy Rhodes.

Right: This kitchen project for a Sonoma, CA home used Buddy Rhodes Hard trowel concrete. Produced in integral pumpkin color mix, the countertops also have an iron oxide wash to enhance the warm earth tones.

Below: Creating a custom tinted concrete sink at a Buddy Rhodes seminar.

"It's an all purpose gray concrete I've been developing for years," Rhodes said. "It can be for people who want to do a backyard project but want to keep waste out of the landfill. Green is all the buzz now. And concrete is such a great place to recycle."

Anyone interested in the growing phenomenon of decorative concrete should start with the Buddy Rhodes web site, www.buddyrhodes.com, where there are photos of different projects, information about working with the products, and videos about how it's done. They can see Buddy Rhodes in action in several videos (including a bloopers collection) and see that in addition to the growing success of his business, he is an artist at his core.

"I still consider myself a functional artist," he said. "I can get frustrated with the business end, but that's part of it. I still try to do hands-on projects. That's where I find the most satisfaction."



Countertop photo by David Duncan Livingston

