

# CONCRETE GOES UPSCALE

As an industry forms around concrete counters, backsplashes, sinks and tables, artisans worry that 'fly-by-nights' will cheapen the appeal



IMAGE CREDITS: GRAY COUNTERTOP WITH FLECKS IS A STAFF PHOTO BY JULIE LEONARD; OTHERS COURTESY OF BUDDY RHODES STUDIO

By JOHN MURAWSKI  
STAFF WRITER

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## IS CONCRETE RIGHT FOR YOU?

Concrete countertops and fixtures are becoming increasingly popular in home renovation. But determining whether concrete is right for you depends on your budget and tastes.

### PROS

**Aesthetics:** Customized, one-of-a-kind designs are regarded as functional sculptures. No one will own a countertop like yours. At right, a concrete kitchen countertop incorporates handprints.

**Variety:** The material can be tinted any color and adorned with objects such as marble chips, jewelry or fiber-optic illumination.



### CONS

**Cost:** Custom-made products are considerably more expensive than most other types of materials.

**Availability:** Customers have to find a concrete designer who appeals to their tastes and budgets.

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Not so long ago, only the urbane and affluent were in the know on concrete countertops. To the rest of us, concrete was an ugly word that suggested sidewalks and driveways.

The master craftsmen of concrete design had every reason to be pleased with this state of affairs. A boom in real estate values and a proliferation of millionaires have fueled a lucrative market for the kitchen surfaces, which can cost more than granite.

Then interior design glossies shone the spotlight on counters, tables, sinks and bathtubs molded and twisted from concrete, and this "liquid stone" as artisans call it, found a wider following.

Two years ago, a concrete artisan in Raleigh started a training center, The Concrete Countertop Institute, and the city became a focal point for East Coast concrete designers.

This week, the institute held the industry's first countertop conference. It drew more than 200 people from 41 states and several countries to the State Fairgrounds.

The industry is still tiny, with about 350 concrete countertop manufacturers listed on an industry Web site, [concretenetwork.com](http://concretenetwork.com). That number is expected to grow quickly, however — a fact that some industry veterans aren't celebrating. Conference participants said they are concerned that the competition could turn this high-end amenity into another low-budget home improvement product. And when concrete is available to everyone and

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loses its exclusivity, wealthy customers might move on to some other must-have counter.

"The [next] phase would probably be — and I hope it never gets there — the mass market," said Jeff Girard, president of the Concrete Countertop Institute. "Everything that's mass-produced automatically becomes a commodity."

Concrete's appeal comes in part from its malleable nature. Pigments can be added to create just about any color, objects can be inlaid for a distinctive look, and it can be sculpted and molded for a specific shape or room. But it also can deteriorate when it's poorly made.

"The fly-by-nights give fellas like us a bad name," Girard said. "They put out a product not worthy of the name 'concrete.' It's essentially a piece of sidewalk. They crack, they chip, they're horribly stained. There's some good examples of some really bad concrete in Raleigh at several restaurants."

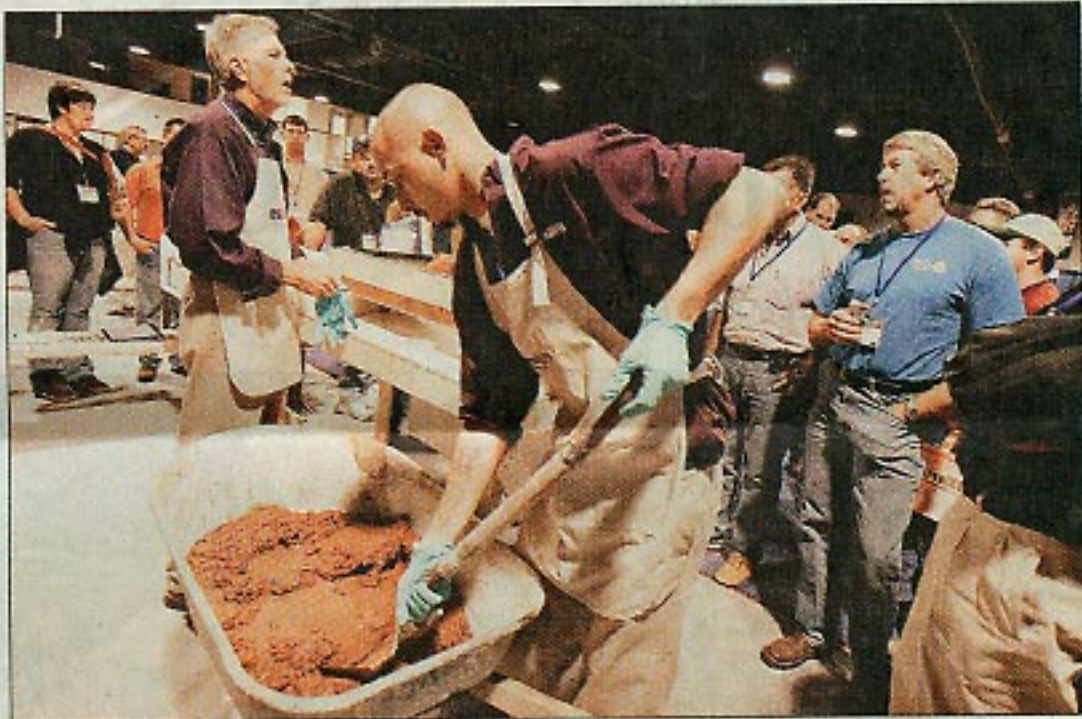
One seminar title summed it up: "Are you selling a Hyundai or a Lexus? Concrete Marketing 101."

Concrete countertop fabricators are admired as much for their handiwork as for the star quotient of their clients. Many at the conference said their typical client was a "bourgeois bohemian" — a sort-of yuppie's yuppie willing to pay whatever it takes to express a personal sense of style.

Michael Bustin, a concrete materials designer at Meld in Raleigh, has designed concrete fixtures for New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Girard counts NASCAR racer Tony Stewart as a client.

"The market segment we're in, the clientele is extremely particular," Girard said. "I had a client who had a metal Trojan horse, on wheels, and it must have been 8 to 10 feet high. He put in a swimming pool — in the house. And he had a \$50,000 stereo system."

Like many concrete fabricators, Bustin is circumspect about his prices, but he let slip that he once designed a \$10,000 concrete sink. Concrete countertops tend to sell for slightly above granite in many markets. A Consumer Reports review in 2004 priced concrete coun-



Apron-clad employees of enCounter, Doug Bannister, left, and Tim Frazier demonstrate mold-making for a hand-pressed sink at the Concrete Countertop Institute conference in Raleigh.

STAFF PHOTOS BY JULI LEONARD



Klein & Co. displayed its selection of aggregate materials at the conference, which was held at the State Fairgrounds.

foot installed, and granite at \$50 to \$100. Designers at this week's conference say the price of concrete countertops can range from \$100 to \$400 a square foot, depending on the detail and labor involved.

The market is concentrated around pockets of wealth and trendiness in cities such as San Francisco, New York and Washington. Raleigh's recent arrival into the realm of concrete is a historical accident. Girard is a civil engineer turned concrete artist who moved

Barbara, Calif., with his wife, Lane Mangum, a North Carolina native. At the time, he was working as a civil engineer and decided to make a concrete counter for his home after reading an article about the subject. Soon after, he started making the counters for others, eventually making it his full-time work. Mangum, who works at the Concrete Countertop Institute as service director, estimates that about two dozen people in North Carolina make concrete countertops.

stitute, concrete counters went bi-coastal. The West Coast fabricators tend to be more holistic and abstract, conference participants agreed, while the East Coast culture is more functional and utilitarian. Out West, concrete sculpture can evoke the mood of a Japanese tea ceremony and suggest elements of feng shui. In the East, Girard applies civil engineering techniques, and Bustin uses three-dimensional computer modeling.

Richard Taylor, owner of Designed Concrete Surfaces in Roanoke, Va., chucked a career in mechanical engineering a year and a half ago for a calling in concrete. "You can have 400 pounds of concrete and if you add a half cup of water too much, you throw the mix off," he said. "It's not a commodity. It's not running down to Lowe's on the weekend and putting it on."

Alexander Kitchin, owner of Prettyhard in Charlottesville, Va., was an English literature major at the University of Virginia who went on to study architecture before discovering the joys of concrete.

"This is more like living material," Kitchin said.

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