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A Guide to Concrete Countertops and Architectural Elements

Fall 2009

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Photo courtesy of J&M Lifestyles LLC

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2009 Concrete Countertop Design Competition



Winner, Residential

Adam Decker

Barbecue island and fire table, Northridge, Calif.

Features: Sink was cast into an existing piece of granite; piece was notched and grooved to accept LED lights; fire table was poured in place and microtopped; colorants

include Colormaker Sgraffino in Gray, Alcantar White Color Coat, and Surecrete Eco-Stains in Safari Tan and Domino.



Winner, Commercial

Prehistoric Tops & Custom Hardscapes

Pro-Build Store 836 reception area, Grand Junction, Colo.

Features: Stainless steel inlays; recycled glass used for color in the logos; acid stain.



For more information on the winners, plus a look at other noteworthy entries, read the Online Exclusives at ConcreteDecor.net's Decorative Concrete Blogs.

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Wondrous Wall Panels

by Dave Searls

Imagine homeowners having the choice of covering their walls with paint, wallpaper, tile — or concrete panels 1/4 inch thin. Or new homes built with precast modular exterior walls up to 20 feet high that can be manufactured off-site and snapped in place in a few hours.

Concrete wall panels can be thin enough to be applied to an inside wall with epoxy or durable enough to clad a building's exterior and withstand hurricane-strength Florida winds. The common denominator is their lightweight, modular design and ease of installation, finishing and maintenance.

"They're a lot like traditional concrete, but (made from) a much stronger mix," says Raymond Iacobacci

In this "shower niche," J&M Lifestyles LLC carried a "wave" theme in the sink and tub over to the seams in the shower panels to make the seams look purposeful, rather than necessary.



Concrete panels are great for backsplashes as they offer seamless, easy-to-clean areas. Here, a plasma-cut steel fish skeleton is set in translucent concrete. The backsplash panel has a split-face limestone texture that is suggestive of the rock that would host the skeleton naturally.

of Form Function Concrete, a contracting company located in Rowley, Mass. "You need more tensile strength with concrete wall panels because they're only an inch thick."

Or even thinner.

Ryan Brayak of the fabrication and design studio Rock Elements, in Escanaba, Mich., uses wall panels for walk-in showers and other stylish interior flourishes. "Two people can handle them," he says of the 3/4-inch thick concrete panels formed and installed by his company.

Brayak's product offerings include an attractive and easily installed alternative to tile. "All I have to do is make four panels (for a shower enclosure). A couple of people can take them into a home and I can install them in an hour," says Brayak. "There's no time spent setting individual tiles in grout."

That absence of grout also means less opportunity for water penetration, points out Iacobacci, who values both the style and pragmatic advantages of concrete's "monolithic surface." His concrete panels are mostly featured in sinks, shower enclosures, fireplaces, floors and other decorative elements for customers he characterizes as "homeowners who are tired of granite and want something different in the mid-range prices."

While he observes that most of his clients prefer the natural appearance of gray concrete, he can offer the same range of finishes that are available through traditional decorative concrete — including sealing, painting, acid staining and polishing. He can also add exposed aggregate, though he says that's a less popular option these days.

For maintenance, Iacobacci recommends simple waxing.

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Bold molds

Cindy Russell, marketing director for Nawkaw Corp., promotes the durability of the rubber forms manufactured by her company for producing wall panels. Some of them are sold for reuse up to a hundred times. "They're very pliable, so you get multiple pours out of a single mold," she says.

Nawkaw primarily works with precast plants and concrete contractors to produce vertical surfaces with decorative textures. "Everything we do is custom," Russell says. "We can offer a full range of textures, including rock, brick and geometric patterns."

Photoengraving is another dramatic aesthetic possibility. "Give us any photo and we'll scan it and make a mold from it," Russell promises. Nawkaw is currently seeing interest from a museum of flight history and from several counties in Florida. For each, the company would create concrete design elements modeled after thematic photos in the client's collection.

J&M Lifestyles LLC, of Randolph, N.J., purposes concrete panels for residential countertops, vanities, fireplace, tub surrounds and exterior architectural features, according to partner Michelle Radley. For commercial customers, their product offerings include bar walls, as well as backlit signs that have been used for hair salons, a gym and a kitchen showroom.

By using glass-fiber reinforced concrete (GFRC), Radley says that her company has been able to get the panels down to 3/8-inch thicknesses while still offering more flex strength than poured concrete in comparable or greater thicknesses. "You can screw into them without any concerns about cracking," she says.



A residential steam shower that utilizes GFRC wall and ceiling panels and molded seating to keep moisture from escaping.

"The GFRC also makes them good for outdoor use. They won't crack with temperature extremes. We can do overlays, textures, whatever you want. Your largest cost is the first mold."

Ruggedly attractive

For Art Porcella, a designer for Everlast Wall Systems LLC, concrete wall panels are less a fashion statement and more a factor of time, cost and rugged durability in new home and light commercial construction. The Florida-based company specializes in the manufacture and installation of precast concrete bearing and nonbearing walls, columns and beams. The company's tilt-up structural concrete construction work features 5-inch-thick, solid lightweight concrete with 1/2-inch rebar, patented reinforcement and a connection system and scree surface.


"Ninety percent of our projects in Florida have stucco applied to it," he says. "Or you can paint it."

The technology has certainly withstood the test of time.


"We've built 1,200 units like this in north-central Florida since '97. In 2006, we were limited only by our transportation," says Porcella, who admits that the economy has slowed their pace significantly.

Porcella illustrates the time savings of wall panels this way: "We've assembled many 3,000-square-foot structures in three hours or less. There's no way conventional block masons can lay the blocks to buildings of that size in less than several days. During 2006, our best year, we assembled eight houses a week, sometimes three a day."

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Above: Concrete facade panels enclose the front of this residential bar. When drinkers sit at bar stools, the fronts of bars are often kicked and abused. Concrete panels are very durable.


Below: Concrete panels can be subtle and practical. This shower niche box finishes the space between the glass shower wall, the adjoining shower walls and the wall behind the vanity.




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The process has advantages over traditional concrete construction, too.

"Some concrete manufacturers install wall forms and pour the walls on site," he says. "This is very labor-intensive and time-consuming. We schedule our manufacturing to coincide with site preparations so that when the slab is ready, we can assemble immediately, allowing the site work to proceed rapidly."

With a panel thickness that's 3 inches less than traditional concrete block construction, the wall panels allow additional living space to be built into a residence.


But don't think that quality is sacrificed for speed, cost and material

savings. The Everlast system exceeds 180 mph wind load, a prime advantage in hurricane season.


It's a snap

Nolan Mayrhofer, owner and president of Szolyd Development Corp., a Canadian company that designs hard-surface architectural features from advanced concrete-fiber pastes, also prefers panels over traditional concrete construction. "Water infiltration is lessened, and with the embedded fasteners and threads, the speed of construction is amazing," says Mayrhofer. "The modular panels just click together like Legos."

When it comes to panels, he is just

getting started. He incorporated concrete panels when provided consulting services and a full-scale mock-up for The Atrium, a major new commercial building project in Victoria, B.C. He predicts similar jobs are on the horizon for him. 

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Photo courtesy of Counterpart LLC

Decorative kitchen countertops made by Counterpart LLC, located in Raleigh, N.C. Counterpart uses CSA cement exclusively.

The Case For CSA Cements

by Chris Mayo

According to Jeffrey Girard, P.E., founder of The Concrete Countertop Institute, concrete with calcium sulphoaluminate (CSA) is the way to go for countertops.

"When I first used CSA instead of portland cement, I recognized that it offers a technological advantage," he says.

Girard should know. A civil engineer by training, he built his first countertop for his own house. Before long, building countertops was his main source of income. He changed his focus to the teaching side of the business about 5 years ago, establishing the Institute in Raleigh, N.C.

"Whether I was manufacturing countertops for my own use, fabricating them as a business, or teaching others about

concrete countertops, I've always focused more on the technical side rather than the artistic," he says. "From the time I fabricated my first countertop, I've noticed a propensity in the decorative concrete field to focus more on the artistic to the detriment of the technical aspects. In my opinion, the perfect countertop is one that is the result of an equal focus on both."

The need for speed

When Girard touts CSA, he begins by praising it as a fast-setting, high-early-strength binder option. "Concrete made with CSA often achieves compressive strengths in excess of 5,000 psi in 24 hours," he says. "With CSA it's possible to achieve 28-day strength in 24 hours. Using CSA, the concrete countertop

artisan can increase form turnaround significantly. You can have your product out the door almost as fast as you can make it.”

Girard says there are more advantages to using CSA than just speed. “From an environmental standpoint, CSA is far greener than portland cements. Also, unlike portland cements, CSA cements do not produce calcium hydroxide, and that reduces problems like cracking, curling and efflorescence.”

Dave Banko, owner of Counterpart LLC, based in CCI’s Raleigh training facility, started using CSA two years ago. He switched completely about 10 months ago. “Even for a relatively low-volume shop like mine (seven to 10 pieces per month), the time savings offset the higher cost of CSA versus portland. I recently did a countertop with CSA using glass fiber. I poured the concrete around 7 p.m. and the next morning I processed, grouted and was ready to seal by that afternoon. With portland, it probably would have taken about four days to do that.”

On the other hand, Jim Ralston, of Urban Concrete Design in Phoenix, Ariz., has been in the decorative concrete business since 1986. He’s tried CSA and decided to stick with glass-fiber reinforced concrete (GFRC). “You might get twice as much out of your forms and molds if you really work at using CSA, but I don’t really have the need to do that. Using an acrylic curing compound with glass GFRC I can pop the forms in about 17 hours. CSA requires a complicated mix design — definitely not for the novice. I understand the drive behind it, the fast set time and early high strength, but I’m comfortable with the way I’m doing things.”

Sacrificing quality?

Girard believes the quality of CSA concrete is better than that of portland-based mixes. “CSA has a higher flexural and tensile strength, and it’s harder. Because of those factors, countertops made



A kitchen bar-surround countertop by Innovative Concrete Technologies. It was made with 25 percent CSA cement.

Photo courtesy of Innovative Concrete Technologies/Blueconcrete.com



An ornate sink-surround countertop made by Counterpart LLC.

Photo courtesy of Counterpart LLC

with CSA-based concrete aren't prone to cracking or curling, which can be an issue with countertops made with portland. And because CSA results in a harder concrete, it's less porous," he says.

Mike Heidebrink, president of Cheng Concrete, says there is a place for CSA in the high-end decorative concrete industry, but that it also has its negatives. "We've been using CSA as a component in some of our projects, but when it's used as a stand-alone ingredient, we've found that it lacks the tone and richness of depth that we try to infuse in all our projects. That being said, I expect CSA will somewhat

mirror our experience with GFRC — at first it didn't quite meet our aesthetic requirements, but we saw the potential. We experimented with it and ultimately came up with good results. We're currently developing CSA techniques and blends much like we did with GFRC."

Jon Schuler, owner of Innovative Concrete Technologies in Murphys, Calif., started out building countertops and other high-end ornamental concrete products. He discovered that he had more success with his own cement blends, stains and sealers, and he eventually added manufacturing of supplies to

his company's profile. "I'm pro-CSA," he says, "I like the increased reactivity, higher density, early strength, and stain resistance — speed is really a side benefit. But I can't use a straight CSA blend for what I do. With my own blends I can achieve the quality I want, yet manipulate the set time to anywhere between 30 to 120 minutes.

"Everyone should have knowledge of CSA cements and CSA-cement blends. They will become the cornerstone of our industry. As concrete continues to grow in popularity, quicker, more efficient turnaround will become necessary to supply demand, but product quality has to be maintained. CSA cements and CSA blends will satisfy both."

Predicting the future

"Overall there are a number of benefits with CSA cements," says Murray Clarke, owner of Delta Performance Products LLC, a Georgia-based specialty admixture and color component company, and its Web site Blueconcrete.com. "CSA is close to 50 percent greener than portland cements (as it's fired at a much lower temperature than portland). Color additives are constantly being developed and available options will continue to grow. CSA cures more completely than portland mixes. The surface is superior and long-term color fading is dramatically improved.

"As a percentage of the total cement market, CSA is still a relatively small, but growing, segment with no end in sight."

"Your customers want to feel like they're getting their money's worth," Girard says. "They want to be happy with your product tomorrow, next week, next year and in five years. The challenge in the concrete countertop business has always been to make something visually pleasing that stands the test of time. CSA is the obvious next step."

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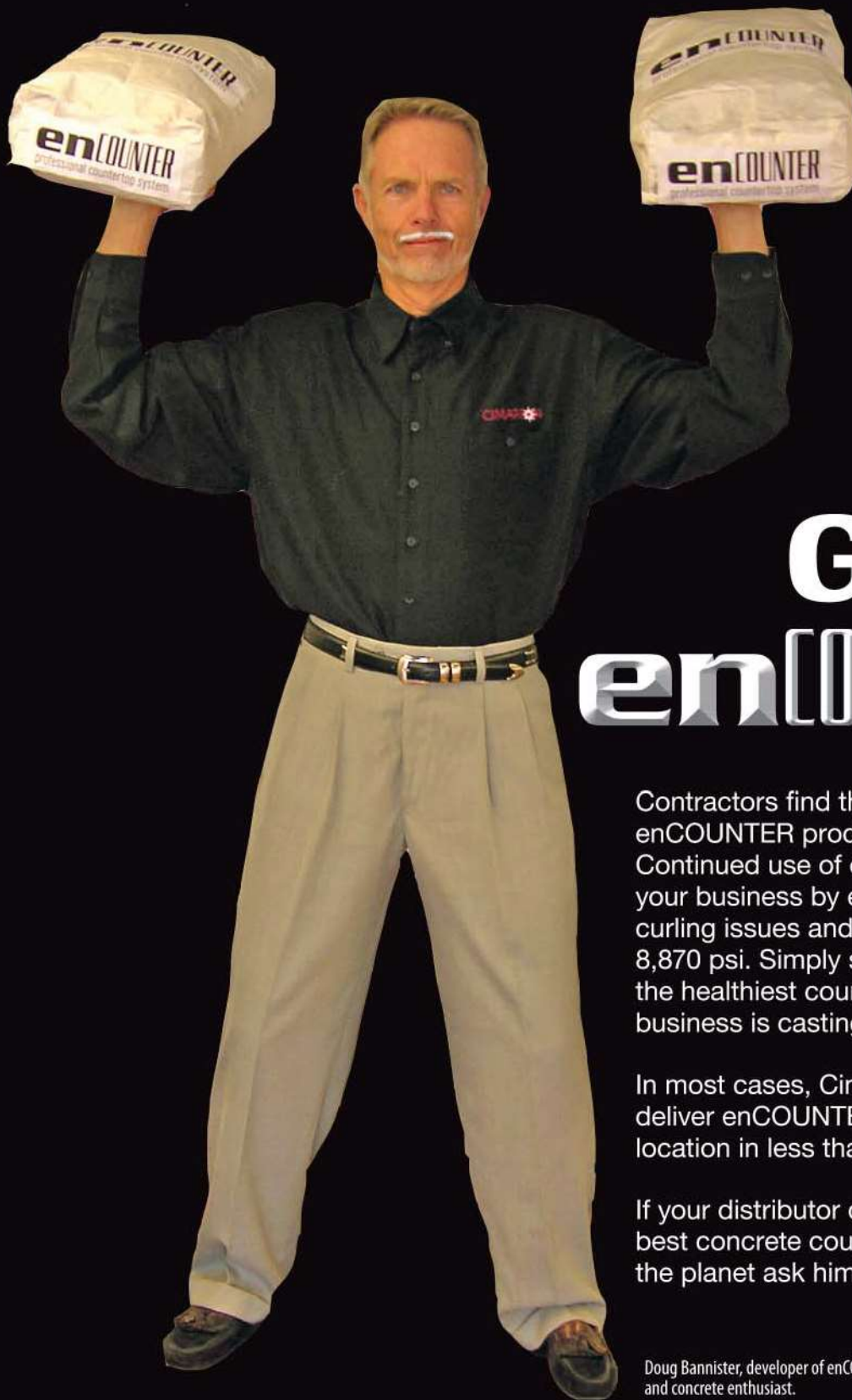
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Photo courtesy of Concrete Countertop Solutions

Z-Counterform from Concrete Countertop Solutions

by Emily Dixon

Ed Baldoni, founder and owner of Concrete Countertop Solutions, came up with the idea for Z-Counterform about five years ago. "I thought there had to be a better way to form concrete countertops," he said.

He's thinks he's found one. Concrete Countertop Solutions has developed an alternative countertop form that will help create cast-in-place countertops with a variety of edge styles. Z-Counterform reduces labor time and doesn't require any double-sided tape or drilling into kitchen cabinets.

What's more, the form is made out of a proprietary blend of PVC, which results in a concrete edge that looks and feels polished when the form is removed. "If you use a polystyrene form, it will leave an unwanted impression on the concrete edge. With Z-Counterform you are left with an edge that appears perfectly smooth," Baldoni says. "Plus, it will save you a ton of labor."

To use Z-Counterforms, simply place them on 1/2-inch cement backer board, fit the forms to the edges and back walls, and

screw down the tabs. Caulk can be used to ensure a leakproof form.

Then the system is ready for pouring. Once the concrete has cured, simply snap off the forms, leaving the tabs under the concrete. "The way Z-Counterform is designed, it just breaks off and you're done," Baldoni says.

Because the PVC is 3 mm thick, the form won't warp or twist when under pressure from the concrete.

Five different form options are available: Square Edge, Double Fancy, Fancy Edge, Full Bullnose and Half Bullnose. In addition, there is a back-wall angle form to prevent concrete from adhering to a wall, plus a reusable rubber faucet knockout. Sink kits with 1-inch or 2-inch radius corner pieces will be available soon.

Each form option is packaged with 64 lineal feet (8 pieces) of edge form and 48 lineal feet (6 pieces) of back-wall angle form.

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