

Concrete has come a long way in the last few years and is now enjoying a renaissance as a must-have feature in the best contemporary-style homes. Clive Fewins explores your options.

Polished concrete is a popular choice for people who like crisp, clean, minimalist interiors. It is sleek and smooth, has a feeling of great toughness and solidity, and can offer beautiful worn-saddle-style finishes. As a surface it is very tactile, and many consider it the perfect material to give a contemporary edge and a clean look to complement the pared-down appearance of contemporary homes.

A skilled practitioner can add all manner of ingredients to the mix – particularly in the case of floors – as the material will accept many different colours, textures and inlays. With worktops, polished concrete experts stick to established colours, though a handful, such as Carole Vincent, author of *Concrete Works*, will produce any colour.

There are two ways of creating polished concrete worktops. You can either have them cast in situ or in the workshop. Either option is fairly expensive. The cheapest precast polished concrete worktops cost around £300 per linear metre for 40mm-thick sections that measure 600mm from front to back.

Architects and designers like to see polished concrete worktops cast in situ because then they can 'design them into' the building. By this means it is possible to achieve interesting and unusual shapes – kidney-shaped island units are a popular case in point. Having polished concrete cast in situ also means you can cantilever out a continuous work surface that, in effect, forms part of the building. A work surface like this is therefore structural, and has no joints.

Many would argue that casting worktops in situ means that the material is being used in the way it was intended – architecturally. However, casting in this way is an expensive option: worktops of this type can easily run into several thousands of pounds because of the labour involved.

Manufacturers of precast work surfaces say this method produces a far superior finish at a much cheaper price, and also provides a wider choice of colours and finishes. They



New Uses for **CONCRETE**

admit that sections are heavy and difficult to lift into place and that the joints are visible in the completed job, but stress that they can be transported in 3m lengths. "They come ready sealed with a high-tech reactive sealant that is fused into the material," explains Guy Bamford of Dorset-based MASS, who specialises in serving kitchen companies and self-builders. "Site-cast worktops stain easily and need much higher levels of maintenance."

It is possible to cast your own concrete worktops. However, expert Ian Hume of Totem, a specialist in casting in situ, does not recommend it. "There is an awful lot to learn if you want to make it look really good," says Ian. "Accelerating the set, grinding and polishing are all processes that require a good deal of skill in order to get the edge and surface looking perfect. And sealing is a specialist subject in its own right." ▶

Floors, however, are a different matter. Here self-builders are quite frequently prepared to have a go. In North London, architect Robert Dye and his wife, Lucinda, attempted it in the extension to their large 19th century terraced house. They used 'spacer bars' of aluminum, which they set into the wet concrete. Apart from forming part of the design, the bars create deliberately weakened pathways along which – they hope – cracks will travel, rather than going through the main mass of the floor.

Because floor areas are much larger than those of work surfaces, you can be more adventurous with the materials that you add. In the USA all sorts of materials from pigments, glass, ceramics, cores of wood, brass or aluminum strips and 'islands' of stone or pebbles are added to concrete floors — and when it comes to colouring there are few limits. You can also build in patterns, from the regular to the totally abstract, to create exactly the feel you desire. In British homes, polished concrete floors tend to be quite conservative in colour, and generally made from grey concrete, natural aggregates, and pigments that yield natural hues. This reflects the desire in contemporary-style homes for a 'calmer' floor. However, if you wish to experiment with exciting colours there are many new epoxy and acrylic dyes, stains and paints now available.

If you do decide to have a go yourself, a power float will cut out a lot of the hard work involved in the initial trowellings. However, according to Mark Bradley at Paul Davies Design, you'll also require a lot of hard work to achieve a really good finish. If you have your heart set on achieving something eye-catching and exciting, you could try adding some inlays. An alternative would be to vary the surface by experimenting with advanced techniques such as grinding, acid-washing and dry-cutting. If you are interested in learning more, visit an American website run by the acknowledged master of the art, Fu-Tung Cheng, at www.chengdesign.com ■



USEFUL CONTACTS: Carole Vincent: 01840 250263; MASS: 0870 241 8171 www.massconcrete.co.uk; Totem Design: 020 7243 0692 www.totem-uk.com; Paul Davies Design: 020 8541 0838 www.pauldavesdesign.co.uk; Roundhouse: 020 7736 7362; **Sealants and finishes** – 'Triple C': 01229 588449; IFS: 01925 220000; **Books** – *Concrete at Home* by Fu-Tung Cheng (Taunton £14.50); *Concrete Works* by Carole Vincent (Alison Hodge £9.95)