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Counter Proposals

Engineered stone and concrete offer alternatives to natural countertops

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Ever get that sinking feeling?

Natural stone, specifically granite, has been the king of kitchen countertops for some time. Watch any home show or flip open a glossy magazine and if there is a mid- to high-end kitchen on display, there is a very good chance the counters are made of granite. Why not? Granite comes in the colors that only nature can provide, it takes abuse well and it will last as long as the house. But natural stone counters are not perfect. And where there are imperfections, there are opportunities for new products.

The latest is engineered stone, a manufactured product that blends quartz and resin to look like nature's best. "When engineered stone products first came out, they looked fake," said Norman Kellershon, president of North Shore Kitchens in Huntington. "But now they are producing products that look just like natural stone and they are impregnable against staining, which is a problem with natural stone." Engineered products provide a tough, durable surface that is stronger than natural ones, which also allows for deeper unsupported overhangs on islands or breakfast bars.

Unlike granite and marble, engineered stone is available in standard dimensions and colors. "With engineered stone, the color we show the client in the showroom is exactly the color they will get," said Richard Sirlin, owner of Lakeville Kitchen & Bath in Lindenhurst. "With granite every slab is different, every slab varies." Size variations can cause headaches for kitchen designers and countertop fabricators because a quality installation requires slabs to be harvested from the same area at the quarry.

Granite, marble and engineered pieces are comparably priced—about \$75 per square foot for a mid-range product—but like most things, the sky's the limit. "There are some granites that are like semiprecious stones and can cost hundreds of dollars a square foot," said Kellershon. The availability of inventory also influences price. "Granite is tremendously dependent on supply and demand," said Sirlin. "If a particular color of granite becomes popular and there is a low supply, the price is going to escalate."



Unlike the standard look of engineered stone, a concrete counter is one of a kind. In addition to custom colors, there is potential for special edge treatments, ornate inlays and features like integrated sinks. "For architects and designers, it means they can design something that is unique," said Ben Turley of Surface Scapes in Northport. "Homeowners look toward concrete because it is a custom counter that is different from the granite their neighbors have," he said.

But it is a natural product, thus like granite or marble it must be coated to prevent stains. Turley said he applies a sealant depending on how the area will be used. An outdoor bar top has different requirements than the typical kitchen counter, which usually receives a topical sealant. The typical installation takes about three weeks from creating the template to completion and prices range from \$85 to \$110 per square foot.

Both engineered stone and concrete counters are available in a wide range of colors. For those keeping count, the edge goes to concrete because the fabricator tints the mixture for each project; in theory no two counters will be exactly the same. But homeowners can easily find the shade that goes with their cabinets no matter which material they choose. Kellershon suggested choosing flooring and countertop colors that complement one another. "They are both horizontal surfaces and the eye tends to view them in the same plane," he said.

Another trend is incorporating divergent materials, especially when the kitchen contains an island. "I see a lot of wood and concrete, rather than concrete with stone or metal," said Turley. In those cases, butcher's block is a favorite, but not necessarily the traditional maple. Instead, exotic species like teak or cherry are increasingly being used. The key is avoiding a matchy-matchy look. The products applied to the horizontal surfaces should be avoided on vertical ones. "Visually, it is too much," said Kellershon.

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