

fluent in concrete

Fu-Tung Cheng celebrates concrete in the most expansive ways, including building homes, authoring bestselling books and developing ShapeCrete™ for the homeowner

House #6 in Menlo Park is an evolution of Fu-Tung Cheng's work. Numbers, patterns and colored tiles are cast into the walls; water flows seamlessly from outside to inside the home; and the entranceway is a truly transformational area. Meanwhile, the polished concrete used in the kitchen and for the huge glistening fireplace seems almost a different material than the Beton brut exterior.



TEXT THERESA KEEGAN
PHOTOGRAPHY MATTHEW MILLMAN
ARCHITECT CHENG Design

The entranceway to House #6 in Menlo Park, CA includes lush gardens that mound up to embrace the exterior wall, making the concrete seem to rise from the earth. Color and texture, hand-placed in the wall, add warmth to the concrete. The intimate canopy shifts scale and ushers guests in.



The main entranceway creates a sense of refuge after passing the home's 12-inch thick concrete walls. Natural materials, an intimate human scale and even an indoor-outdoor water feature connects the home's threshold.

When Fu-Tung Cheng removes the concrete molds from his construction sites, he hasn't just built homes – he's built beauty. His reverence for concrete is evident in his kitchens, meditation rooms and just about any part of a home that one can imagine.

Cheng's fascination with concrete started with his own kitchen in a tiny home he bought upon graduating from the University of California, Berkeley with a degree in fine art. "I looked at the kitchen space as a design challenge," he recalls. He questioned the typical paradigm that a kitchen is made of boxes and slabs, and premeasured exacting spaces, which resulted in a beautiful, practical room. All kitchen appliances are within close grasp, cutting boards slide into countertops, and the catching drainboards allow for water to flow easily. "It became an estuary," states Cheng.

"I began to apply a melding of fine art and actual construction," he explains upon starting his company, Cheng Design, in 1986. As a tradesman in construction, he understood the heart of home building, and he initially approached it as a side business to further his career in design.

"I cut my teeth on doing kitchens," he remembers, "and I could design things at an intensive scale." His interiors started winning accolades in 1991, and by 2006, he was inducted into the National Kitchen & Bath Hall of Fame. Since then, his projects have increased in scale. Not only has he built some of the most talked about homes in the San Francisco Bay Area, but he's also written three bestselling books for contractors and homeowners, including "Concrete at Home," and has a nationwide distribution of ShapeCrete™, encouraging people to try smaller concrete projects.



The welcoming foyer uses color and lighting to complement the main living room and its massive concrete fireplace.



Molded, polished concrete forms a free-standing functional counter/sink feature in the main kitchen area. Cheng often returns to his initial start in concrete for inspiration. His first concrete project was creating a functional counter/sink feature in his own small home after graduating from design school.



"When using natural concrete, you get what you get," Cheng says. "It may have bits of color from jade or sandstone; that's what people like about it, it's unpredictability."

"When using natural concrete, you get what you get," he says. "It may have bits of color from jade or sandstone; that's what people like about it, it's unpredictability. Sometimes we polish and grind, sometimes we pour them out. It's an endless array of looking for the right combination."

As an artist, his design efforts – patterns, cutaways and tiny treats that surprise – brighten huge concrete walls that could otherwise seem foreboding. "I can't help myself sometimes," he comments on his unique design approach. "They're embellishments. It complements and reflects, and by getting to that level of detail, (it) brings together a sense of scale to the project."

He continues to say that "concrete is absolutely versatile," while simultaneously admitting that it can be a challenge. "When it hardens, it's very difficult to change." He equates pouring concrete into a form to putting ceramic pieces into a kiln. Colors can streak, and cracks can form. Success is not guaranteed.

Still, the opportunities he finds in concrete far outweigh the obstacles: "You take some risks, and the rewards are tremendous." ■

marketliquidity



"Concrete is basically a liquid stone," Cheng asserts.

The growing appeal of concrete, especially for do-it-yourselfers and home contractors, can be attributed to Cheng's commitment to spreading knowledge about the material. He developed the ShapeCrete™ line, which is distributed nationwide at home stores. Above, people shape concrete bowls using fabric as a mold, while the square planters at Teance in Berkeley, CA were made also using ShapeCrete™. The store needed to create a safety barrier for a floor-level koi pond, and the planters have their own water feature, added from the inner square above the plantings. shapecrete.com

The living room's south-and west-facing windows pleat open to provide a seamless indoor/outdoor experience with easy access to the pool and spa.