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Why concrete is now the ultimate material to use in luxury homes

Words by Emily Brooks

Concrete is a Marmite material. Whether you love it for its ability to fashion sculptural, modernist masterpieces, or hate it for all the dreary offices and car parks made from it, there's rarely room for ambivalence.

What's certain, though, is that its popularity is no longer confined to projects like cool warehouse conversions: it can truly be a luxury material, and has emerged as a key feature of some of the priciest high-end homes.

Architect Cousins & Cousins recently finished work on a home in Highgate that typifies this approach. It's built around two shear walls in cast concrete – structurally, it's a scaled-down version of the concrete cores that soar into the sky when a new tower block goes up.

The concrete has been left exposed, and the walls form a dramatic, top-lit, triple-height atrium, with a cantilevered timber staircase, and glazing all the way along the rear of the house.

"There's a tremendous sense of light, openness and volume, which is an interesting contradiction, since concrete is usually associated with brutalism, heavy structures and closed-in spaces," says architect Ben Cousins. "It shows that it can also be used elegantly and sympathetically within this super-prime world, where it's all about the luxuriousness of materials."

The walls were cast on site, with horizontal wooden boards forming the mould. Pouring the concrete took a matter of hours, but the preparation was a much longer process. There were experiments on everything from its colour – to make sure it had some warmth to it, making it feel homely – to the texture of the timber moulds' grain.

Cousins says that the way concrete takes on the shape and detail of its mould is both its best and worst quality, because any errors are there for all to see. On a high-end project, mistakes aren't acceptable: "There's an honesty to it, but it can be a friend or a foe," adds Cousins.

"You get one shot at the formwork, and if you get it wrong then it's a very expensive mistake. You literally have to start again."

Architect Rodrigo Moreno Masey says that concrete floors are "not for the faint hearted". "Unlike selecting a beautiful slab of stone, once it's poured, that's it. There are no touch-ups. I think what's changed – alongside the skill of the contractors now working in this area – is that people are more willing to accept the floor, with its swirling imperfections and blemishes, as beautiful in itself.

"When done right, in large poured slabs, both warm in colour and soft to touch, it is perfect for beautiful open spaces. Brave luxury clients should embrace it."

Having plenty of forethought is key to success with concrete, says Jonathan Ashmore, founder and director of London and Dubai-based Anarchitect.

“It is important that any sockets, recessed light fittings and niches are incorporated at the beginning before the concrete is poured or applied. Making modifications afterwards often leads to a badly patched surface. This is an often-overlooked concern when working with this material as a refined, luxurious and decorative finish.”

Mike Rundell, who made his name at the turn of the millennium designing art galleries such as White Cube, has gone to great lengths to ensure that his cast concrete is perfect.

A just-completed project in Cap Ferrat in the South of France has some concrete elements, but because the building work took a couple of years, the white sand that he had specified wasn't quite the same shade every time – which had the potential to make the house look less than sugar-cube consistent.

“The solution was to mine all of our sand from one place, in one go,” he says. “We took a great chunk of mountain, ground it up and stored it for two and a half years, then slowly used it up.”

Unlike Cousins & Cousins' timber board-marked walls, which are similar to brutalist buildings such as London's Hayward Gallery, Rundell is trying to create something more akin to the sculptural timelessness of stone. When the mould is taken off, “it comes out with all the quality of a marble that had been formed over tens of thousands of years – but in a matter of hours”.

In London, Rundell designed a basement pool area with a vaulted ceiling made from curved cast-concrete structural components. “We put a bit of mica [a silicate material] into it, and then sprayed the face with acid so that it exposed the mica, making it slightly iridescent. It raises it above what could otherwise have looked like a white painted finish.”

Although concrete is linked with urban design, it can work in a rural location, too. Interior designer Henriette von Stockhausen, of VSP Interiors, mixes a chequerboard concrete floor with elegant antiques in the kitchen of her Dorset home, for example.

Architect Guy Hollaway extended his 18th-century cottage in Kent using glass, concrete and timber as his chosen palette of materials. The original house is red brick, so the extension makes for a satisfying contrast, with concrete used for the floors, staircase and kitchen island.

Hollaway became slightly addicted to the process: his builder went on a course to learn how to lay the concrete floor, and they took it from there, eventually heading outside to make a polished-concrete swimming pool and a gravity-defying cantilevered table.

Hollaway is more accepting of the imperfections of the process. “You can see the aggregate in some of the stair treads. That's because, when you work the concrete as it's curing, the stones drop to the bottom and the concrete comes to the top.

“It's so time-critical, there might not be time to work every tread to the same degree.” He says his pool is “amazing. I was worried we'd end up with the water looking grey, but in fact it's much bluer than you'd think, because it reflects the sky”.

Kitchen company Eggersmann Design says concrete is its most requested material. The firm covers super-prime areas such as Knightsbridge and Belgravia, and founder and creative director Gary Singer says that “there is a definite shift towards it being a must in the most affluent areas of London”.

However, rather than incorporating cast-in-situ elements such as worktops, Eggersmann Design uses a thin microcement render that mimics the look of concrete but is lightweight.

“Our designers love to mix it with other materials like rough-cut timbers, metals and textured natural stone,” says Singer.

But only by using more valuable materials alongside concrete does it feel truly luxurious. Interior designer Staffan Tollgard just completed a contemporary villa in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, for which he commissioned sculptor Erwan Boulloud to make a bespoke concrete triptych inlaid with swirling brass.

“The rawness of the reinforced concrete counterposes the expressive organic detailing of the brass inlay,” says Tollgard.

The silky microcement used by Eggersmann Design is not limited to kitchens. It is also very popular in bathrooms because, sealed properly, it’s waterproof. Kote London, which specialises in this material, has developed a range of variations, from matt and suede-like to pearlescent; cement with a luxury twist.

It can be coloured, too, using natural pigments that aren’t harsh on the eye – pink and green are particularly popular, according to Mark Barnes, of Kote London.

“The beauty of these products is that they’re seamless: you can make any area look like one piece of concrete,” he says. “There’s no such thing as ‘standard’ any more. You can create whatever you want.”

