

BEYOND MERE COLOR

Scored And Acid-Stained Concrete Floors Offer Dramatic Custom Design At Affordable Prices

by Karen Leach

First came color, launching the once-despised concrete floor out of the garage and into vacation homes and other places where easy-maintenance was a prime requirement. Now, advanced techniques for pattern, texture and design have launched concrete as a material of choice for dramatic design in high-end entry halls. Austin's 1998 Parade of Homes, showing some of the most creative and livable homes in Texas, featured four houses (of six total in the event) that used stained and patterned concrete as central design features.

For homeowners, custom concrete is a solution that combines the best of all worlds. It's inexpensive, durable (lasting as long or longer than any material on the market), easy to maintain and offers a chance to create custom design features, as attractive as the most expensive floor coverings.

Three basic techniques have become the standard for coloring decorative concrete floors: pigments, added to the concrete mix, dry shake materials that are laid on top of wet concrete and acid staining of cured concrete. Patterns are created by either embossing the wet concrete or scoring cured concrete with a masonry saw.

According to Austin artist Neal Nickel, who creates custom-designed concrete floors for business and homeowners around the state, scoring and acid staining offer the best satisfaction for designer and homeowners around the state, scoring and acid staining offer the best satisfaction for designer and homeowner.

"I like these techniques because they offer the greatest flexibility. The others require the owners to make decisions early in the construction process," Nickel explains. "Scoring and acid staining gives the owner more time to consider the overall effect on the room and to incorporate special features of the house in the decorative motif. A good floor design can pull the disparate elements of a house together."

In renovation or redecorating projects, old concrete floors can be scored and stained as long as there is no significant deterioration of the slab and the surface can be properly cleaned and prepped.

Nickel also likes the look and the durability of the acid stain techniques. "Pigments added to the concrete often are so saturated that you get no variation or modulation in the color, giving a flat, uninteresting look. Acid staining gives beautiful color variations that mimic natural stone," he says. "The color is permanent. It will only wear off if the concrete wears off."

Scoring of the floor is done using a diamond-tipped masonry saw. For circles and intricate curved patterns, Nickel

uses a miniature masonry saw attached to a compass-like tool that he devised.

Nickel's designs vary from simple grid patterns to elaborate, full-floor designs that incorporate features found elsewhere in the house. For example in traditional-style Texas house near Austin. Nickel created a star-shaped medallion for the entry hall that incorporates as accent colors the reds and yellows of the stained glass in the front door. A large compass rose in off-white, medium brown and black, surrounded by a grid pattern that extends through-out the room, makes a dramatic statement in another home. A client who brought a home with a garish red concrete porch had Nickel tone down the effect by adding a central grid pattern in paler red with a border made from squares and rectangles of brick and a mottled red and white.

Once the color and pattern are complete, Nickel finishes the floor with a wax sealer that he mixes himself. Buffing is the final step to add a subtle shine.

"I find that epoxy sealers tend to yellow, while lacquer finishes can chip off over time. Wax sealers stay clear and wear well," Nickel says. "In the 1997 Austin Parade of Homes there were two concrete floors, one sealed with wax, the other with lacquer. After 30,000 people had walked on the floors in a two-week period, the lacquer sealer had to be reworked. All that the sealer needed was a rebuff and it was fine."

Expect to see more clients asking for decorative concrete floors in the future. "When I started this business, people were using concrete as a cheap but cool way to do a vacation house. In recent years, the technique has caught on as a full-on design element in high end homes," says Nickel.

With its durability, price and design distinction, custom concrete floors are likely to remain popular for many years to come.

Neal Nickel would be happy to answer questions, call "Concrete Nickel" at (512) 472-6474. □

