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A YEAR-ROUND GUIDE TO
PRODUCTS & SUPPLIERS

Solid as a Rock

Photo by Walt Roycraft, Walt Roycraft Photography, Nicholasville, KY

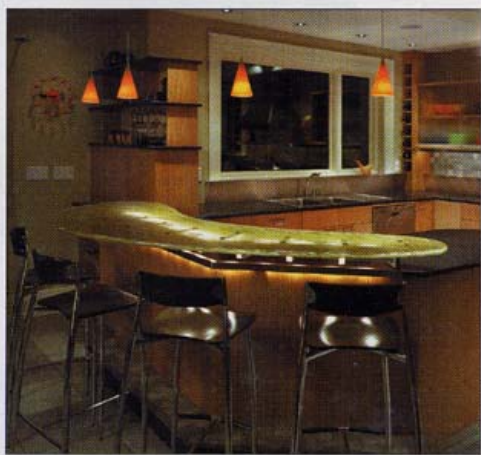
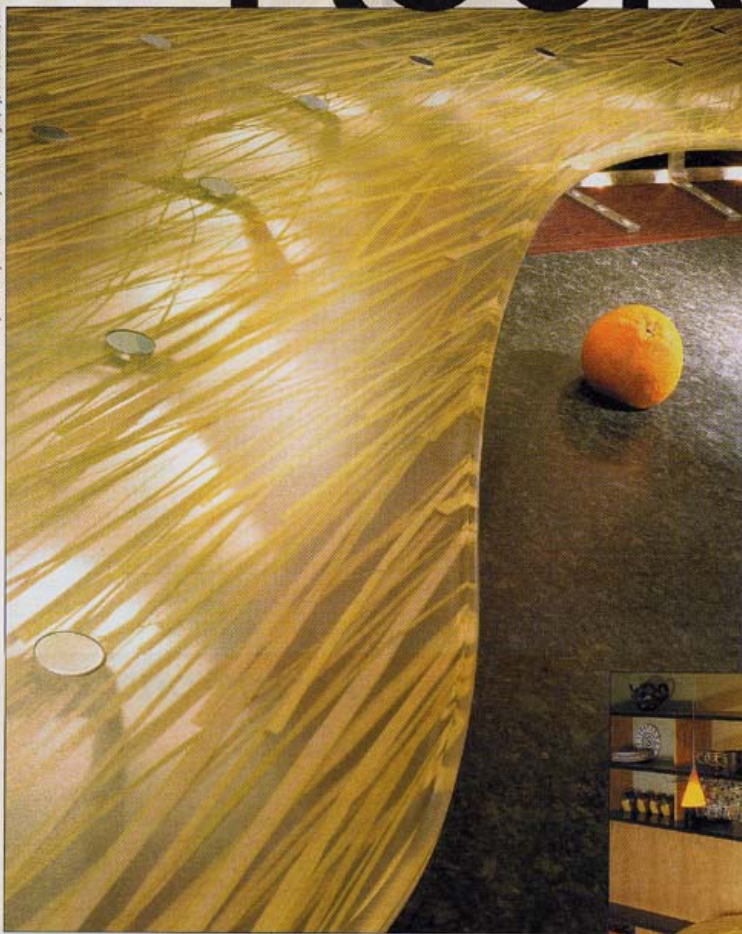


Photo by Walt Roycraft, Walt Roycraft Photography, Nicholasville, KY

According to Graham Pohl of POHL ROSA POHL architecture + design, this amoeba-shaped Lumicor top (installed in his own residence) features imbedded beach grass for a highly organic look and a stark contrast to the angular lines of the space (see above, left and below).

BY JOHN FILIPPELLI

To create a truly innovative kitchen or bath countertop project, it takes more than just a great looking material, an innovative edge treatment or unusual insets. The best countertop designs may be style conscious, but they also have to be solid as a rock to please today's discerning consumers.

These are the sentiments of fabricators and designers recently interviewed by *Kitchen & Bath*

Design News, who relate that although the desire for a personalized environment is still high on clients' lists, having a countertop that is durable is just as vital.

As a result, notes Steve Serafen, general manager for Norwich, NY-based Precision Built Tops, LLC, countertop trends are constantly changing – and, in some cases, moving in unconventional ways.

Sometimes this means heading off the beaten track by looking at



Photo by Walt Roycraft, Walt Roycraft Photography, Nicholasville, KY



An impressive 8'-wide and 2.5"-thick, this island countertop (seen at left and below) features Cocobolo solid surface designed to replicate hand-rubbed wood and minimize maintenance issues, according to Steve Serafen of Precision Built Tops, LLC.

While innovations in countertop materials abound, several case studies show how today's stylish projects also focus on durability.

more durable, less commonly used materials. For instance, Serafen notes, "In our shop, we are seeing a trend toward more unique materials such as soapstone and teak wood. I don't think these unique materials are for every fabricator out there. For the ones willing to go the extra mile, however, the end results are well worth it."

Joel Miller, principal of Brockton, MA-based Sterling-Miller Designs, Inc., agrees: "Solid surfaces may have some competition from natural and engineered stone in the kitchen, but what was once considered

unconventional for Corian and other solid surfaces is now becoming more mainstream." As a result, getting a hipper, edgier look sometimes means considering something totally different.

Of course it's possible to get a new look with familiar materials, as innovations in manufacturing create more creative options. For instance, "Fabricators and manufacturers are increasingly trying to give solid surface materials a uniqueness to separate them from other countertop materials," says Gus Blum, president of Blum's Solid Surface Products, Inc. As a result, today's solid sur-



face choices are a far cry from those of even a few years ago, with unusual designs, textures, inset materials and other variations that create new possibilities.

But, regardless of the types of materials clients choose, one thing is becoming abundantly clear: People want durable countertops they can rely on – whether it be for entertaining guests or for everyday use.

On this and the following three pages, *Kitchen & Bath Design News* looks at recent examples of countertop fabrication projects that offer a glimpse toward the future of countertop design inno-

vation – without sacrificing that all-important function.

HOME SWEET HOME

When architect Graham Pohl of Lexington, KY-based POHL ROSA POHL architecture + design set out to install this striking kitchen counter (see photos, Page 66), he knew that nothing but perfection would do – especially considering that the project was for him and his wife.

He explains: "The kitchen is like a laboratory, requiring simple surfaces that can withstand a lot of abuse, but still clean up with ease." To do this, he



Above: According to Joel Miller of Sterling-Miller Designs, Inc., the sweeping curves and strategically placed overhangs give this high-end vanity (above) its character. At right: The unique, protruding sink design was achieved by creating customized molds that had to be constructed to thermoform the Corian.

designed "a counter that features crisp, orthogonal lines and hard surfaces." Specifically, Pohl chose an amoeba-shaped Lumicor top with imbedded beach grass, which he notes, "offers a highly organic form to relieve otherwise angular lines."

He explains: "The bar top is designed to contrast with this [angular] aesthetic. It is also the first thing you see as you enter the kitchen/family room from the other parts of the house, so it really is the literal and figurative heart of the space, providing the place where people gather to talk and eat."

Handling the countertop fabrication and casework was John Leininger, president of Lexington, KY-based Leininger Cabinets and Woodworking, who offers: "The biggest challenge for me was to fluidly tie the three different countertop materials that Graham selected together so that they looked like they belonged where they were. Figuring out the order in which the granite top, stainless steel backsplashes and tile walls were to be installed was interesting."



He continues: "How dissimilar materials meet each other is tricky and almost always requires dead-on accuracy."

"Great care was taken to control the appearance of the top as one views it from above," says Pohl. "The Lumicor floats on minimal stainless steel brackets, which were painstakingly configured to suggest vertebrae."

"The biggest challenge was being sure that the stainless steel bracket holes lined up between the Lumicor and the granite."

Each of the nine stainless steel brackets were fabricated at a different angle and length

because of the way they aligned on the granite in regard to the Lumicor," notes Leininger, who adds that the stainless steel brackets fastened to a wood top that butted the granite.

Pohl adds: "Lighting the piece from above and below accentuates the three-dimensional quality of the beach grass, as well, and the diffracting finish on the bottom provides mystery by causing the brackets to disappear from view."

Leininger notes, "When you have these natural materials like sea grass inside and you cut it, the edge of the sea grass is exposed in some areas. It can

wick up moisture and discolor. Therefore, you have to cut a thin spline around the top of the edge to relieve the sea grass from the edge and then fill the slot with epoxy and buff it out."

Also noteworthy, according to Pohl, is that the aesthetics of the kitchen reflect a growing design trend in the industry. "Plastics are becoming ever more sophisticated, and the design professional will continue to explore the potential inherent in using transparent and translucent materials for surfaces that have traditionally been opaque."

Regarding its striking appearance, Pohl is quick to add: "It is a glowing sculpture that is pleasing to the eye, but entirely in service to the functional need for casual

dining around the edge of the working kitchen."

Summarizing the project, he points out: "While the honed black granite in the rest of the kitchen is visually quiet and strictly utilitarian, the Lumicor top greets the eye and stimulates the imagination."

ALL FAUX ONE

Asked to create an island and countertops that offered the authentic look of wood – while minimizing maintenance issues. Steve Serafen found that sometimes things truly are "better than the real thing."

He explains: "The homeowners loved the idea of hand-rubbed wood on the island and honed marble for the main tops, but were concerned about the maintenance of both. Therefore, we selected Cocobolo [from Hudson Surfaces] for the island and white Carrera for the main tops. It afforded us the look of a hand-rubbed exotic wood as well as the look of honed marble without the maintenance issues normally associated with these products, such as end graining, warping or finish problems."

But, there were other factors to consider, he recalls. "The sheer size of the main island was our first obstacle. The island is 8 feet wide, more than eight feet long and two-and-a-half inches thick – all made out of solid surface. It had large, sweeping arcs with corner cuts to accent the corner corbels."

As a result, he decided the best way to complete the project was through old-fashioned, hand-craftsmanship. He explains, "This top was made without any CNC machining. Therefore, perfect templates had to be fabricated to allow the larger bottom arc to mirror image the top arc," he says. "To achieve the desired thickness, we had to stack five layers and build the top in two sections. We stacked and glued two sheets together, then cut the arc and the edge profile for the top section. We used 170 sq. ft. of material to do the entire island."

He continues: "It was a huge, monstrous thing – it had to be wet-sanded out because we wanted it to look like a hand-rubbed finish. Just reaching the center of the island was a chore. We had to strap ourselves up to reach it – I felt like I was mountain climbing!"

WEIGHTY ISSUES

Asked to create the focal point of a client's new-construction kitchen, fabricator Bob Lewandowski and Gus Blum, president of Freeport, PA-based Blum's Solid Surface, Inc. knew that they had to create something special.

"The customer wasn't happy with the original laminate countertops, and he wanted a seamless look – something unique, rustic and original. He requested a table, wall panels, range hood and countertop pieces," Blum explains.

He continues: "The clients also

had some of their own ideas. For instance, they wanted the countertops to be the focal point of the kitchen, and everything needed to have a chiseled, rustic look."

To that end, Blum notes that the client chose Keystone Black Sand solid surface. "Solid surface was used because of its design ability and its ability to be seamed, thermoformed and chiseled," he says, adding, "and the darker color gave the chisel marks a lighter look. The countertops are the focal point. As soon as you walk

weightier issue, Blum adds.

"We hard-seamed the base together, and the concern was with it hard-seamed – and with sharp inside corners on solid surface – there could be the possibility of cracking with any sort of stress put on it," he explains.

To avoid the solid surface bearing the brunt of the weight, Lewandowski built a 1"-thick, plywood frame inside the solid surface frame. "The weight of the table is sitting on the plywood," he concludes.



A chiseled, rustic look highlights this stunning peninsula top and the countertops in this new-construction kitchen, which were created by fabricator Bob Lewandowski of Freeport, PA-based Blum's Solid Surface, Inc. and company president, Gus Blum.

into the dining room and the kitchen, you see them."

But accommodating such a unique aesthetic also created unique fabrication challenges – especially for the custom-made peninsula top.

Blum explains: "[Since the peninsula comes up on two 45° angles], the concern was that if they were not plumb and were cut straight and we trimmed the panels, then the margin would not be equal."

To correct this, Lewandowski dry-fit all of the panels and tacked them onto the piece with hot melt. Lewandowski then removed the panels, brought them back to the shop and did the layouts for the columns and chiseling.

"[By doing it this way], Bob could cut all his borders nice and straight and put the uneven parts into the part that was chiseled," says Blum. "If you measured those panels, they might be off up to a 1/4" from top to bottom, but that is not noticeable with the border at all."

However, there was an even

FOUND IN TRANSLATION

While nuances of a project can sometimes be lost in the translation, when Joel Miller created this stunning high-end vanity project, he knew there was no room for interpretation.

He explains: "As with many high-end custom projects, the [goal] was to interpret a conceptual sketch and turn it into an accurate reality for the client."

But some things are easier said than done, notes Miller, who worked with architect Paul Hajian of Watertown, MA-based Hajian Architects on the project.

"The location of this master bathroom vanity counter created a challenge because the home consisted of multiple levels, with the master bathroom on the top level. Therefore, aside from having a complex shape, this counter now had to be separated into multiple sections to get it to the desired location in the home," he continues.

He adds: "When finally located, each piece needed to be accurate, taking into consideration

that it would make contact with four walls, which are [very rarely ever] perfectly square."

Miller notes: "The design of the countertop was for both aesthetic and functional reasons. The sweeping curves and overhangs gave the countertop its character, but this shape also served to provide more working space and allowed for two adults to use the sinks simultaneously without [repeatedly obstructing] each other's routine."

He believes "the most unique aspect of this application was the way that the sinks protruded beyond the cabinetry."

Customized molds had to be constructed to thermoform the

Corian, he notes, which resulted in the bathroom sinks taking on an eye-catching, finished appearance on the exterior.

"The idea was to make the front edge of the sink as thin as possible while keeping the profile tolerances consistent. The thinner the edge, the more noticeable any deviation would be," he says. "This also meant that we had to relocate the overflows from their traditional location and make a custom overflow hole and connection in the desired location."

Creating such an esoteric design did have its advantages, Miller believes, especially when it came to material selection. "I believe that the design chose the material for itself. Other materials would not have allowed for the client's vision to be realized," he suggests.

Miller has seen more use of solid surface in high-end applications, but adds, "There seems to be less use of the material for countertops in high-end kitchen applications, but in the same homes, we have used as many as 70 sheets of Corian for wall cladding, complemented by 3"-thick floating shelves."

He concludes: "The finished product [offered] a monolithic appearance that, I believe, only a solid surface material would have accomplished." KBDN