

FIX IT UP!

Bruce Turner

Stone Surfaces – Going Natural

If you visit open houses on Sundays, you probably consider it pretty quaint when you walk in and find countertops or showers made of ceramic tile. Like linoleum floors, they seem outdated today, but 25 years ago they were in fashion.

A decade later, we were installing Corian® and other solid-surface polymers on kitchen countertops and lots of cultured marble (a semi-artificial surface made from ground marble dust and resins) on shower walls. Today, the fashion has changed again. Probably 85 percent of what we install this year will be natural stone – granite and marble slabs and stone tile. (“Tile” refers to anything square – whether it be ceramic, porcelainized or natural stone.) I like natural stone because Mother Nature creates so many interesting colors and textures, and each piece is unique.

So what kind of stone is best? It depends on where you’re using it, as well as personal taste. You have to be careful, particularly with kitchen countertops and bathroom vanity tops, to use a material that’s hard enough to resist cleaning chemicals, sharp objects and stains.

That’s why granite has become a popular choice for countertops. It’s lovely, practical and highly resistant to stains, burns and cuts. Granite can be either polished or honed (sanded down for a more subdued finish), and granite tiles also work beautifully for fireplaces and entryways. The newest trend is using marble or granite slabs for shower walls instead of tiles.

Natural marble has been a symbol of palatial elegance for centuries, and it still is. People who want to make a design statement are attracted to marble, because the colors, contrasts and movements in the patterns of marble create a real “wow” factor for bathrooms, entryway floors and fireplaces. But marble is softer than granite and more likely to stain, scratch, scorch or be “etched” by something acidic, so before choosing a marble countertop you should seriously consider how you feel about marks and imperfections. The same is true of limestone, another increasingly popular stone that is softer than granite.

I have a personal affection for granite. Over time, natural stone takes on a patina – a sheen produced by age and use. Many people find the richness of aging granite very attractive, like the smile lines on a loved one’s face. That’s not true with other materials. Cultured marble, for example, begins to degrade the moment you install it – the first swipe with the wrong cleaning compound can scratch it. But the little scars that granite accumulates over the years actually add character somehow.

Granite and marble slabs are more expensive than traditional ceramic tile, of course – but not by as much as you might think. Prices have come down dramatically over the years, and depending on the details you select, a stone countertop can be surprisingly competitive with tile. Once you pick out a slab you love from a specialty granite and marble warehouse, they’ll take the measurements, custom-cut your countertop, deliver it and install it. (If you’re comfortable with demolition and plumbing work, you can do the job yourself.) Shop around for the best prices, because they’re not – excuse the pun – set in stone.

Bruce Turner is president of TurnerBuilt, Inc. He can be reached at bturner@turnerbuilt.com.