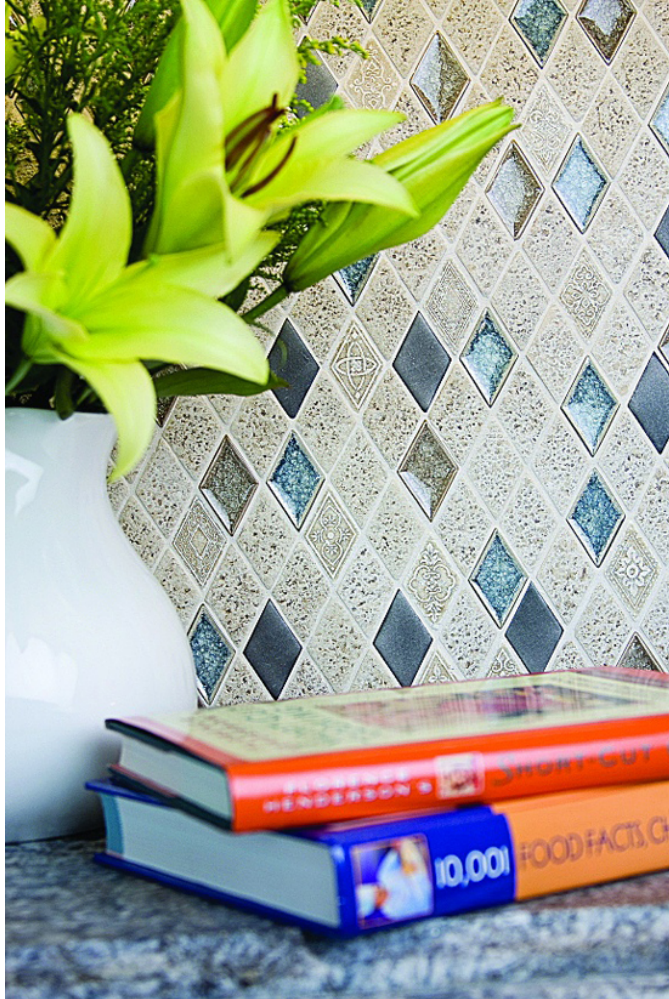


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*The Home Designer***Be a Rock Star - Your Guide to Stone and Tile**

By Brandon Neff



Photos Brandon Neff Design

So, you've decided it's time to redo the kitchen, or bathroom for that matter, but after hand picking the appliances, the extra deep sink, that built-in espresso machine you've been eyeing and the German faucet that resembles a high-performance stick shift, the decision of what to put on the counters and back splash has you impossibly stumped.

If you're like many of my clients, your consternation has you ready to throw in the proverbial dish towel. Tiny beads of flop sweat begin to appear at your brow after just the first 10 minutes in the tile and stone showroom. Glass, metal, natural, ceramic - the list goes on and on. Then, there's the myriad surface materials begging attention - soapstone, quartz, granite, marble, concrete to name a few - enough to send you running back home to re-evaluate that 'ol Formica you've been resenting and is now looking better by the minute.

Time to breathe and reboot.

As we've discussed before, performance over appearance should be your primary objective - a good lesson in life and in design. Therefore, the key to choosing the best material for your next project is understanding how you plan to use it, and being very clear about your expectations of the product. All hard surfacing, regardless of its application, is both an expensive and permanent element. Done right, it can be the show-stopper in your space, but chosen poorly may close on opening night. Read on.

Great Expectations. When it comes to countertops all surfaces are not created equal. Natural stones like granite, marble, onyx, etc., while beautiful to look at can be temperamental. And, like all natural materials they're prone to staining (red wine and berry jams are the most common culprits). Additionally, acids such as citrus juices and even some vinegars can etch the surface of natural stone rendering permanent damage. And, needless to say, if

you're planning to top that kitchen island you've designed in white Arabesco marble and expect it to hold up to the kids' permanent markers, think again.

What to do? Well, one way to minimize the worry of potential scarring and marking is to install a honed finish of your favorite stone. Honing leaves the material without the polished, shiny finish, revealing a beautiful matte look, and in my opinion uniquely enhances the appearance of most marbles. Second, make sure your installer seals the stone properly. Counters are an area where you never want to scrimp - get the very best you can afford and hire reputable fabricators and installers to ensure optimum results.

Low Maintenance. For those of you wanting little, or no upkeep I recommend products like CaesarStone - a manufactured quartz-based material sold as slabs for counters and workstations that is impervious to most common damage, in addition to being antimicrobial - great for the home chef who prepares poultry and meats without worry of cross-contamination.

In fact, CaesarStone's surface is so durable that used as a cutting surface may dull your knives sooner than later. Silestone, another man-made quartz product common in the industry, features the same hard working benefits. You will pay more for these hard wearing surfaces, but the benefits and low upkeep can outweigh their inflated cost. If, however, your style is more Carrie Bradshaw, and your kitchen is more decorative than functional then I would encourage you to go exotic.

From saturated reds, gleaming golds, watery blues and gemstone greens, natural stones come in colors to impress. Keep your cabinetry neutral to showcase your main attraction. In my work, I come across many a client afraid to indulge in a stone they're really drawn to - mainly due to nay-saying friends and neighbors discouraging them from installing anything that's not "resale ready." With all due respect, tell your detractors to take a hike and go with your gut - if your kitchen is truly the heart of your home fill it with the things you love. Enough said.

Style Guide. Knowing the look you're trying to achieve (and the architecture of your space), is integral when choosing hard surfacing. Does your taste lean toward traditional or bohemian? Are you a modernist or looking to achieve a casual cottage chic? For example, heavily veined stones mixed with paneled cabinetry and crown moldings look stunning in pre-war buildings. Tip: mix in an ogee-over-bullnose profile (the fabricated leading edge of the stone) to achieve an old world glamour. Conversely, if your look is more mid-century mod, or even industrial loft, consider a seamless counter and sink detail molded from polished concrete and a mitre edge detail. Never considered concrete? It's a hard working staple that is less expensive to manufacture and can be tinted limitless colors to meet your discriminating eye. Tip: add open shelving in lieu of closed cabinetry to compliment a more dressed down style.

Cost Conscious. So, you've found the stone you love, and decided on how you want to use it. However, you're not done yet. The next step - possibly the most important step - is having your product produced and installed. Now, you may think the material you've just purchased is the most expensive investment you'll make in the process, but unfortunately it's the fabrication.

On average, fabrication (the cutting, detailing and installing) of hard surfacing, can run two to two and a half times the cost of the product per square foot. This is something most homeowners and DIY'ers never factor into their budgets when planning kitchen and bath remodels. Many a client has brought me on board only after a poorly executed installation - leaving me the unenviable job of telling them they have to start all over again.

Remember the golden rule: measure twice, cut once. Do your research before you hire a fabricator. This is no place to cut corners - pun intended.

Lastly, if cost is an overriding constraint in your project, or if you're just looking for a cosmetic change without breaking the bank, consider tiles. Today, almost every variety of natural stone, ceramics and glass is available in a tile format. Most are stocked in a 12" x 12" size, and installed creatively, can look beautiful and perform remarkably well.

When installing tiles, on both counters and flooring, I always encourage my clients to have them placed as close as possible keeping the grout lines to a minimum. Tip: I recommend spacing tiles no more than 1/16" apart, when possible - this will give the effect of a more seamless look while minimizing the inevitable concern of the grout becoming discolored over time compared to wider grout lines. Just a little gift from me to you.



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