

Solid Style Feature Article by Anastasia Hackett

Contemporary architecture has been baring a building's structural necessities in a show of style for several years now. Support beams have become feature columns and contoured rooflines are revealed by sloping ceilings. Now it is time for the concrete slab itself to come into its own.

One of the most stunning and simplistic trends in home design at the moment is the honed and polished concrete floors showcased in venues like the recently constructed Ballarat Art Gallery and Melbourne's new Mirvac Hotel. Rather than dressing the slab up with tiles or down with carpet, the concrete itself has become feature flooring, with a finish similar to the sleek, solid sheen of marble, minus the divide lines.

The notion of a concrete floor may seem cold and austere, yet it is anything but. "We have used it a little bit in recent projects over the last couple of years," says Graham Nottle of Gabriel and Elizabeth Poole Design Company. "People really like it." "I think it suits any type of home, obviously it has a harder finish than, say, a timber floor but put in a house that already has a softer feel it complements it really well, especially with the use of timber trims elsewhere. That is all very subjective, of course," he says.

However subjective personal design preferences and housing styles may be, honed and polished concrete does have certain advantages over other surfaces that cannot be denied. Firstly it is extremely versatile. Its ultimate finish is limited only by imagination. Honed to expose the aggregate, a showcase of stones sneaks into view from the surface which, depending on the concrete mix, may be a rainbow of river rocks and quartz or a conservative blend of black and grey pebbles. Alternatively it can be honed to only a limited level, maintaining a slick coverage of steady colour, be it the standard grey or any other chosen from a wide palette of options, milky white to Tuscan terracotta .

Variations in polish levels also produce an array of finishes. It can be a gleaming slab of mirror-like quality, reflecting modern downlights until it appears to be a floor full of stars. Or, at the other extreme, sand is added to create a gritty, grip-on surface suitable for swimming pool sidings and outdoor entertainment areas. "It is a good material to use throughout the house because it is suitable in wet areas like the bathroom and laundry but it also works well in living areas and bedrooms. So it is quite versatile in that regard and we like it when you get that sort of continuity throughout the home," Graham says.

The second key advantage of concrete floors is the way it marries so well with other major design trends of the moment, like the edge toward sustainability. Environmental scientist Annette Gill lives in Brahminy House, a eco-home prototype designed by the Maroochy Shire Council. Its concrete floor goes hand in hand with

the home's sustainable design that has been carefully crafted to suit climatic conditions and according to Annette it does a very good job.

"It's got to do with thermal mass," Annette explains. "It maintains a fairly constant temperature and it is supposed to react to temperatures in a similar way to the earth so it warms when the sun hits it and cools in the shade. This home has been designed to maximize that effect in the interest of energy efficiency so the floors stay cool in summer and are warm in winter. When you come in from outside either on a cool winter evening or a hot summer day, there really is a fairly dramatic difference in the internal temperature."

Although the environmental aspect may have been the original selling point for Annette, since living with polished concrete floors she has recognised many of its other desirable attributes as well. Its sheer durability, for instance. Almost entirely abrasion resistance, concrete is one of the strongest construction substances known to man and when it is honed and polished it is actually ten times harder than a standard slab. Anyone who has lived with it can vouch for that. "It is harder than a timber floor so you don't have to worry about scratches when you are dragging furniture around. It is easy to maintain and clean and it is really easy with kids because you don't have to worry about spillages like you would with carpet. It's also better for people with allergies," Annette says.

So basically, it comes down to being well suited to the lifestyle of the typical Sunshine Coast family. Graham admits that is part of the attraction, architecturally. "It is very hardwearing when done properly. You can walk on it wet or dry and if you get sand through it it's okay," he says. "So it is really good for the relaxed lifestyle where you don't want to spend all day looking after the carpet."

The key there is the fact that Graham acknowledges the need for the finish to be done properly. Although general design sentiments are overwhelmingly in favour of polished concrete, some slipshod jobs tend to be tarnishing its reputation. As the trend gathers momentum, however, technology is being upgraded all the time. One of the best performing systems is the Australian-developed HiPerFloor, which has just recently become available on the Sunshine Coast through a business called Honed and Polished Concrete. The system is offering an artisan finish with surprising economy. "It actually works out much less expensive than the average tiling job fully installed," explains the owner operator of Honed and Polished Concrete Christopher Bradley. "But the real beauty of it is that you can get almost as many different looks and finishes as you can with tiles but without the grid line effect."

His samples alone show just a selection of the extensive range of finishes available. "People can really do whatever they like with it to create a truly individual product. For instance you can throw a few semi-precious stones on top of the mix so when they are cut back and polished they really sparkle and create interesting features. I have even heard of people throwing gold dust into the floor," he says. Gold dust aside, honed and polished concrete is definitely destined to be the next big thing in Sunshine Coast home design. To find out more phone Christopher on 5494 4873 or 0424 122 836.