

F O C U S

This
Month

CONCRETE INDUSTRY



Interview with

Tony Leos, President
Creative Concrete Solutions
Schertz, TX

Hard art

Decorative concrete is an evolving art, with new techniques, materials and ideas coming to the forefront each year.

Tony Leos, president of Creative Concrete Solutions, has a few design innovations of his own to give concrete surfaces the look of wood, stone or tile.

"What I find keeps me really busy is the hand-cut decorative side of it," Leos said. "I cut wood floors into the concrete. You cannot tell it's not a wood floor."

"There are a variety of stamping tools out there that create a surface that looks like wood. The problem with stamping is that it's great for a porch or something exterior. But, you don't get as good a finish as you do on an interior floor, and it's not smooth. When you stamp concrete, even with a very minor stamp, it creates an uneven surface."

Leos makes his own tools and is in the process of getting patents for them.

After years as the owner of a facility contracting company, Leos learned he enjoyed the concrete end of the jobs the most.

"We maintained all the Exons, Conocos, Finas and all the gas stations from Laredo all the way to Georgetown."

After 911, much of the oil company work went away and he went to work in general construction. In 2002 he started Creative Concrete Solutions, and does both commercial and residential work.

Leos believes the possibilities are still wide open for the use of decorative concrete surfaces.

"Anything you can imagine can be made in concrete – full kitchens, exterior kitchens, bathrooms."

Leos noted one area still developing in the San Antonio area is the use of vertical overlays, especially on fireplaces and on kitchen backsplashes.

"This vertical overlay goes up about 3/8 of an inch thick and can be tooled to look like stone or brick or whatever. You save a ton of material and in cost – more than half."

One of the most popular uses of decorative concrete is around pools, on decks and walkways. Whether a flagstone, slate or brick look, the material has a benefit not found with traditional stone and brick materials.

"With mortar joints and water you tend to grow a lot of algae, and even with an aquatic sealer, you have to keep maintaining it. We find that with just the concrete sealed with acrylics we are pretty successful."

Along with the traditional finishes for concrete, like staining to create the look of marble, or geometric stained cut concrete, the look of granite can be cre-

ated. Leos said the look is achieved by adding speckling material to it.

"There are all kinds of techniques you can do. The most rewarding thing is imagining a plain old piece of concrete and creating art from it."

No matter what technique is applied, Leos feels good equipment can affect the final outcome.

"Sprayers are pretty important. You have to use a decent sprayer to achieve a level looking floor. Some sprayers will really puddle it down, and some folks think the more stain you put down the more color you are going to get. It's actually the opposite. What happens is that acid sits on the concrete and puddles, and will actually reject the stain instead of burning it in deeper. It will burn the top of that slab."

Leos has not seen significant changes in materials, although he said manufacturers are incorporating a higher percentage of solids in sealers, creating a harder finish.

"The waxes that are out there now are just incredible. The old school way was you buffed a wax in with a floor buffer and burnished that wax in. That's all kind of gone away, because everything is a liquid polymer wax now."

"With the staining, it hasn't changed except there are a few more colors out. The process is still the same. Concrete is still concrete. Even old concrete, 50-60 years old, will look just like a slab poured four weeks ago."

Though materials have stayed consistent, prices have not, according to Leos.

"Some of our materials are petroleum based and have increased. For instance, sealers have gone up \$7 per gallon in the last three months or so."

Another challenge the industry has always faced is protecting the concrete

surface once it is poured and once the finish is complete.

"Every trade has to step on your floor, and instead of folks going in with a soft shoe, you've got work boots, and the possibility of pliers and hammers falling on your floor. We have to try to protect the floors as much as we can."

"In the past four or five years I think all the trades have come together to realize they have to be a little more careful because the floors are done. "When we sign a customer we give them new construction stages and the homeowner has the other trades sign off on it. It reminds everybody to be careful and explains what they can and cannot do. That has been a good tool."

What does Leos feel is the most significant challenge the decorative concrete industry faces?

"Each other. I think there are many guys getting into this and they haven't quite done the homework yet."

Leos noted that a good contractor will carry insurance, pay taxes and attend schools to learn about the evolving industry.

"Unfortunately there are guys getting into it and basically underbidding good contractors. What I would like to see is everybody get on one level playing field. There is nothing wrong with a guy making what he needs to make."

"It has happened to me. I have bid jobs where I figured out the square footage, and we will get calls back from the customer that 'so and so' came back at \$400 dollars to do the job, and I bid \$1,700 dollars. I can't pay my insurance and labor for that. If everybody kept the market where it should be, everybody could make a living – and there is plenty of work in San Antonio." –kf