

Breaking the mould

THIS FAMILY TURNED THEIR BACK ON TRADITIONAL FRILLS AND FURNITURE TO EMBRACE A MORE MODERN AESTHETIC IN THE FORM OF CONCRETE

Photography by Edina van der Wyck



MATERIALS: CONCRETE

Concrete is the overriding element of Geraldine Bedell and Charles Leadbeater's new North London house both inside and out yet, initially, it was the last thing they had in mind. 'I had no real sense of concrete as a high-end, finish material. It made me think of badly constructed Brutalist buildings from the Sixties that afterwards were deemed to be mistakes,' says Geraldine, a journalist for *The Observer*.

But gradually, through discussions with their architects Azman Owens who initially considered zinc panels instead, they realised that concrete could provide them with the appropriate aesthetic for their modernist new home. It suited the raw urban environment of the

end-of-alley plot, which they had bought to accommodate their four children and two offices after struggling to fit into a conventional Victorian house. 'Little by little, I started to educate myself. I went to an RIBA exhibition on concrete and subsequently looked at a Tadao Ando building.' By the time a £25k overspend led to the suggestion that they plump for a cheaper material, they realised they couldn't do without the material they'd once reviled.

'My eyes filled with tears and I suddenly realised it symbolised the most special, radical thing about the design.'

The result is a crisp, angular house with walls, floors and stairs predominantly of cast concrete. These expanses are relieved by a glazed garden façade with wooden shutters. ▶

Unadorned concrete walls in the bedrooms add a rawness to the building

Wooden shutters add extra interest to the exterior



MATERIALS: CONCRETE

Below, the use of concrete even extends to the stairs; the material contributes towards the simple aesthetic of the house with its pared down décor, right

THERE WAS INITIAL SHOCK AT THE GREYNESS OF THE INTERIOR, BUT NOW THE FAMILY WOULD NOT DREAM OF PRETTIFYING ANY OF THE WALLS





Above, right, concrete completes the Modernist look, left, juxtaposed with the full-height glazed kitchen doors, the greyiness of the concrete is impressive rather than dull



Geraldine particularly liked the material's variable character and its handcrafted nature. Pouring concrete, she says, requires the same standard of joinery as making the dining room table. Interior concrete walls were given a coating of sealant but are otherwise left raw. Exterior walls have an anti-graffiti wax.

After initial shock at the greyness, she finds the concrete visually appealing and wouldn't dream of prettifying what for some would be too harsh an aesthetic. Indeed, the idea of puncturing the walls to hang pictures fills her with horror:

'I live a hectic life and there's something very soothing and delightful about the concrete.'

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* Geraldine Bedell's book on building her own home.

The Handmade House

(Penguin, £8.99). ▶

WHAT THE ARCHITECT SAYS

Once derided as shoddy and ugly, concrete has undergone a Renaissance, re-inventing itself as a material suitable for high-end application. As a result cast concrete is sought after as an internal finish in its own right rather than being covered up.

'Concrete is like baking a cake. Every recipe is different. You have to see the variables as a positive thing,' says Joyce Owens, the architect behind Geraldine Bedell's Handmade House.

It's all in the mix. Concrete is made of a combination of cement, sand, stone and water which hardens to make a stone-like mass. Add tints to change the colour or other additives such as chips of glass to get special visual effects. Concrete can also be reinforced for extra structural strength using steel or glass. ■



MAIN APPLICATIONS

- 1 Traditional pre-cast concrete blocks, faced in brick or other cladding or rendered.** These are used for formwork. Lightweight aircrete (aircrete.co.uk) concrete blocks allow particularly fast construction.
- 2 Handcrafted specialist pouring** done in situ with the aid of specially-devised shuttering or moulds.
- 3 Insulating Concrete Formwork.** This consists of hollow polystyrene bricks filled with concrete and rendered over, and requires only basic building skills.
- 4 Prefabricated architectural cladding.** This is formed from thin panels of glass fibre reinforced concrete that can be moulded to give details and textures. These can be coloured.

PROS & CONS

PROS

- * Great strength
- * Offers seamless surface when poured in situ. This gives a free-form appearance and can be useful for achieving adventurous and contemporary designs (although it may need formwork and reinforcing)
- * High level of thermal mass
- * Can be used as both an internal and external finish with natural variations adding character to the surface. Adding tints and additives can also achieve desired colour and special effects
- * Good for flood plain use as recovers quicker than wood and steel from flooding
- * Usually locally sourced (the UK is a net exporter of concrete)
- * Concrete buildings can be recycled as aggregate for new buildings
- * Non-combustible

CONS

- * Harsh appearance
- * Needs careful detailing
- * Risk of imperfections when pouring concrete
- * Responsible for 2.6 per cent of UK carbon dioxide emissions in 2002.

FIND OUT MORE

- * **The Concrete Centre** (07004 500 500; concretecentre.com)
- * **Formwork Association** (07004 266 273; icfinfo.org.uk)
- * **Glass fibre Reinforced Concrete Association** (0870 350 5607; grca.org.uk)