

Trend Setter

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September/October 2008

Materials

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By Jennie Farnsworth

Genuine Stone proves itself to be a time-tested option for design professionals.

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The material's strength, beauty and uniqueness always have made natural stone a top choice for building design professionals. Even when design trends take drastic changes, Genuine Stone has steadily continued to increase its presence in the built environment. Once just a staple for exterior structural use, natural stone has expanded to hardscaping, flooring, kitchens, bathrooms and more. And while many materials' popularity has waxed and waned, industry professionals agree that Genuine Stone has not only held steady as a top choice for design professionals and owners, but is seeing continued growth in the market.

"Stone has been so successful in terms of being a durable product, one that sort of transcends the trends, and is seen as a classic product that will carry through the lifetime of the given application. Because of these reasons, people have started to use natural stone more," says Tyra Dellacroce, VP of national interior sales at Connecticut Stone Supplies of Milford, Conn.

Transcending the trends

From commercial to residential, exterior to interior, Genuine Stone's steadily increasing popularity has had many influences that have helped jettison the material into even greater use.

Unique design capabilities

While past design trends often have been seeded deeply in repetitive use, many design professionals now are bucking this philosophy and searching for inventive, unique and untapped creative designs.

"Architects and designers constantly reference uniqueness, creativity — they want something that's different — and every piece of genuine natural stone is unique," says Mark Fernandes, president of Charles Luck Stone Centers of Richmond, Va., and chairman of the Natural Stone Council.

Brenda Edwards, owner of TexaStone Quarries in Garden City, Texas, agrees. "We're seeing a lot of unique and different design uses of natural stone. We're seeing a lot of water features used in interior applications. In commercial applications, they're completing a lot of unique fountains, park areas and municipal areas in natural stone, which gives a natural softness to the building. Of course, certain areas are going to be more apt to certain styles of design."

Recently, in addition to the already inherent uniqueness of Genuine Stone, the number of stone varieties available to design professionals also is expanding. As the world market continues to open up, a seemingly exponential spectrum of natural stone varieties is beginning to make its way into U.S. building designs.

Competition and technology

Dellacroce believes that the creation of manufactured stone proved to be a great boost to Genuine Stone because it "woke" the industry up and encouraged its members to look at the products differently. "The reason manufactured stone came into being was to answer something that the industry was not responding to," she says.

In response, the stone industry created improved technologies that made their products more competitive, both in physical structure and price, such as the introduction of natural thin stone.

"Most of the major stone quarries around the United States are now producing their own thin stone," Dellacroce explains. "It's great because it has all of the benefits that the manufactured stone had — a lighter weight, more cost-effective, and easier to install — but it's real stone."

Edwards said that the industry's investment in technology has evened the playing field. "I believe the homeowner would always rather have the real thing as opposed to manufactured, and I think the cost for natural stone is comparable now," she says. "If the consumer is given a choice, they're going to choose natural stone."

Technological advances, such as natural thin stone, have not only increased the material's use among its core market share, but has opened the door for use in lower economies. "From an affordability standpoint, [thin stone] opens up the demographic that the product can serve," Fernandes says.

New industry technologies also have aided in designers' search for unique and distinctive design opportunities. From natural and polished, to antiqued and leather, the number of natural stone finishes has become almost as limitless as the types of stone available.

"What [designers] enjoy the most about genuine natural stone is the palette that's available to them," Fernandes says. "What we see a lot now is they're mixing materials and finishes. So for a patio, for example, they may mix a honed material, sandblasted material and a natural cleft material, creating a really interesting pattern. They're savoring the design flexibility of the product."

Dellacroce agrees, adding, "The trend seems to be that architects are using the full knowledge and capabilities of the industry to design to the specific style of the home. So rather than coming in and saying, 'This is really hot right now, we're going to use this,' they're finding that the same product can be tumbled, flamed, sandblasted, bush hammered, or any number of different ways. To that end, they are specifying specific to their architectural intent more than [designing for] what's considered popular."

Aspiration

Commercial and high-end residential building design has made extensive use of natural stone, which has further increased its prestige and longstanding prominence. In seeing these grand uses of natural stone and longing for the finer things in life, Americans have aspired to someday have their master bath completed in natural stone from tip to toe and a stately stone pool, outdoor kitchen and hardscaping ensemble for their own future homes.

"When we look at things that we aspire to, or look at things that we are inspired by, we hope to one day participate in these things," Fernandes says. "A lot of it is when we look at that fantastic house that may be a price point or two above ours, and we say 'Man, I would love to have that someday.'"

"Spas and resorts are a perfect example," he continues. "Worldwide, a lot of spas and resorts really have to try to differentiate themselves. So [they] really kicked up how they were trying to design their spaces, incorporating a lot of Genuine Stone in earth tone colors for that soothing ambiance. And guess what we're seeing in residential: The master bath is our ultimate sanctuary, and we're seeing an incredible push toward big master baths with a heavy spa influence. It's not just stone tile in the shower any more; now we see it in the floor, walls and more."

Cocooning

Industry experts also state that the psychological effects of Sept. 11 have created a need in Americans to nest, or "cocoon," using their financial resources toward making their home the perfect place to be.

"Ever since 9-11 and the travel industry slowed down, we definitely saw people start to pay more attention on their homes and start to put their money into their homes," Dellacroce says. "People weren't traveling as much, they were entertaining at home, so as a result they were trying to create a very comfortable and relaxing place to entertain. So we saw a big increase in the number of creative uses for stone in the backyard, whether it was something as simple as a barbeque or outdoor fireplace, to more elaborate pools incorporating waterfalls, boulder landscaping or stone pool houses. We definitely saw a spike because people were staying put and putting more money into their homes, and hardscaping was a trend that took." MD

Jennie Farnsworth is an Atlanta-based freelance writer and editor. Article reprinted from the March 2008 issue of Masonry magazine.