

Engineered Stone Deserves a Hard, Hard Look

Granite is hot today, but engineered stone is gaining in popularity—fast.

By Marcia Jedd

Move over, granite, and make room for engineered stone products. Granite, the surface of choice in kitchens and bathrooms in recent years, is a hard, natural stone known to resist heat, stains and scratches. Designers, architects and homeowners love it for its natural appearance and the subtle depth of color it adds to the room.

But engineered or man-made stone products are increasingly popular and comparable to granite in just about every way. In fact, say some advocates, it is superior in some important considerations.

Engineered stone products are primarily—more than 90 percent—made of natural quartz, the hardest non-precious stone, bound together by resins. On the other hand, granite is only about 40 percent to 60 percent quartz; the rest is made up of softer minerals and impurities.

Why man-made stone?

Engineered stone products require less maintenance than granite because they are non-porous. For example, they don't have to be sealed periodically. Their impervious surface provides more stain and bacterial resistance than granite.

“The durability of these products is great,” says Leah Palmer Johnson, senior project manager and designer with Ramsey Engler Ltd., an interior design firm in Minneapolis. In the unlikely event that the surface gets a minor stain or scratch, someone from the fabrication shop can buff it out. “Deeper scratches or difficult stains may require taking the material out and back to the shop for buffing and polishing with a high-pressure water buffing process,” she adds.

Man-made quartz surfaces are more heat-resistant than natural stone, too, says Mike Nagel, CGR, CAPS, president of Remodel One, Inc., a remodeling firm in Roselle, Ill. “If you put a hot pot on granite, you can crack it.” He points out, though, that none of the manufacturers recommends putting hot items directly on the surface of any engineered-stone products. However, most manufacturers of engineered stone offer a 10-year limited warranty—another plus over granite, which may have a base warranty.

In addition to kitchen countertops, engineered stone products can be used for shower and tub surrounds, vanities and other surfaces throughout the home. And unlike porous granite, which can foster bacteria, they are ideal for commercial settings, especially daycare centers, hospitals and foodservice providers.

If one of the attractions of granite is that it will last forever, engineered stone might be an even better choice. Should something happen to the granite countertop—a crack or large chip—it is unlikely that the fabricator will be able to match the natural material exactly. With engineered stone, it's relatively easy to replace the damaged section with a piece that is indistinguishable from the original.

So if homeowners who really want their countertops to last forever should take a hard look at engineered stone. After all, who wants mismatched counters forever?