



## The Granite Look

by Patrick Galvin

Up until a few years ago, choices for "working" kitchen tops were three-fold: ceramic tile (the old standby); Corian (introduced by DuPont in 1971); and high-pressure decorative laminates. Laminates proved to be the overwhelming favorite because of the variety of textures and almost unlimited range of colors, patterns, and woodgrains they provide.

Genuine marble or granite was too bulky and too pricey for most situations. But this changed dramatically when laser technology allowed European marble and granite to be sliced wafer thin—as thin as 1/4-inch. And 4x8 sheets of reinforced thinly-sliced marble and granite quickly won favor on commercial walls. When high-end West German cabinet manufacturers began introducing the panels in their U.S. kitchens, the die was cast—the granite look was "in." U.S. builders found themselves facing a growing demand for stone tops. They sought local (and cheaper) sources—and they sought respectable substitutes. Here's a rundown of the materials available for those wishing to have the stone look:

**Genuine granite.** The real thing is one of the most impervious materials, great in kitchen or bath in its new thin form. It can be polished or matte finished, and only very hot oil might stain it. Cost varies wildly according to the distributor's desire to sell, but it is typically \$80 to \$150 per square foot. Thin panels of marble might run about 15 percent less. One N.Y. granite supplier speculates that during 1987 the material will be installed in well over 100,000 kitchens and baths.

**Rover Marble and Petra.** Imported from Italy, Rover Marble looks like marble and Petra looks like granite. In both cases they are 96 percent natural, and crushed and bound with polyester colored to match the chips. Rover claims the binder is stronger than the original. Materials are cut in slabs 11 mm thick (about 1/2 inch) and about 12x15-inches or 12x24-inches.

A new countertop configuration offered by Rover's importer in Rochester, N.Y. offers 4x8-foot sheets, either 3/4-inch or 1/2-inch "mini-slabs" of 2x4-feet with matching pieces for dual use as waterfall edge or backsplash cove. MKS Industries in Syracuse, N.Y. quoted it on one countertop job at \$65 per running foot (2 feet deep).

**Nonporous polyesters.** (Avonite, Formica 2000X, Nevamar Fountainhead.) These are like cultured marbles in that they use a polyester base. They're like Corian because they are homogeneous and machinable with hand tools. They use a non-porous polyester, which eliminates the need for a gelcoat surface that is common with regular cultured marbles. They can be made in any desired size, shape, or color, in addition to standard choices. Avonite, which can look like granite, marble, wood, or glass in at least 18 colors, is unique in

its variety. Sheet size is 3x10-feet by 1/2-inch, with custom sizes available for a minimum order of 140 sheets. Some designers have found it too soft for installation in direct sunlight, and the manufacturer recommends against putting dark colors in high-heat applications. So it is favored for bathrooms. Prices vary. One distributor tells of paying \$175 per square foot. MKS prices it at \$54 in white, \$60 for other colors.

Formica 2000X is basically the same, but uses different fillers which might make it more heat-resistant. It was developed as Quintessa by Wildon Industries, and can be bought with or without integral single or double lavs in six colors in sizes oriented to vanity tops. It's also available in sheets in lengths up to 144 inches, in thicknesses of 5/16, 1/2, 3/4, and in widths of 19, 25, 30, or 36 inches.

**Corian remains unique with more than 60 percent natural minerals bound with an acrylic monomer.**

Nevamar's Fountainhead is newer and is just now reaching national distribution. Its granite look is called Black Matrix, and it also offers two whites, a gray, a rose, and a beige. Sheet size is 8, 10, or 12 feet x 30 or 36 inches, 1/2- or 3/4-inch thick for horizontal use or 1/4-inch for verticals.

Marlan, by Perma-Bilt, is only one of several bathroom products by this firm. Its main application seems to be to top Perma-Bilt vanity cabinets. There are no kitchen applications in the literature, nor are there applications for sheets, such as tub surrounds. They are vanity tops, period. But they have the advantage of the new generation in that they are homogeneous, and thus can be drilled, routed, or otherwise worked with ordinary tools.

**DuPont Corian.** On the market for nearly two decades, Corian remains unique with more than 60 percent natural minerals bound with an acrylic monomer, rather than polyester. It can withstand common use, and now moves into chic circles with two new granite-like finishes: Sierra Dusk (light-colored), and Sierra Midnight (dark-colored).

Corian offers sheets or tops with or without integral single or double bowls for kitchen or bath. You can also buy separate Corian sinks and lavs that can be mounted in various ways, including an attractive "under-mount" technique that fuses different sections of the material—for example, you might combine a Sierra deck with a Satin Gray bowl. There are 45 sizes and styles ranging up to 145 inches long in thicknesses of 1/4, 1/2, or 3/4 inch, and in several widths. New this year for trim or edge treatments are

chocolate or raspberry gels that can be applied into routed cuts and that harden into real Corian. But designers regularly use strips of chrome, wood, Lucite, or decorative laminate to treat edges. MKS prices Corian at \$42 per running foot in Cameo White, \$48 in Sierra, exclusive of special edge treatment.

**Cultured marble and onyx.** New universal resins, lightweight fillers, and nonporous polyesters, are just now becoming available to manufacturers. They can result in a homogeneous material that does not need a gelcoat, so they will be machinable in the field and, in use, will be repairable like Avonite or Corian.

The cost will be variety. In giving up the gelcoat, the new materials will be more limited in color, size, and sometimes shape (on a custom basis). But you'll be able to buy from local suppliers.

The light fillers can cut weight in half. A cultured marble tub that weighed 200 pounds a year ago might weigh little more than 100 pounds today.

Cultured onyx will cost a third more, or close to the price of white Corian. Its filler, which might be aluminum trihydrate or a frit (a mixture of alkalies, or glass) has a refractive index similar to the polyester binder resin, making it translucent, whereas the filler in cultured marble is an opaque calcium carbonate. So cultured marble is the better choice for a granite look.

To be sure you're getting the best, look for the ANSI label on bath fixtures or for a CMI/NAHB-RF label, (Cultured Marble Institute/National Association of Home Builders Re-

search Foundation).

**Ceramic tile.** Among all of these wonders, don't forget ceramic tile. It never pretended to be anything other than what it is, and its applications are virtually unlimited. Generally, tile is about the same price as Corian. If anything, prices will be more stable than any of the newer materials. ■

### For more information:

**Rover:** International Design Materials, Box 60981, Rochester, N.Y. 14606; 716/458-3943.

**Avonite:** 12836 Arroyo St., Sylmar, CA 91342; 818/365-6923.

**Formica 2000X:** Wildon Industries, 1 Stanford Rd., Piscataway, NJ 08854; 800/624-1914.

**Fountainhead:** Nevamar, 8339 Telegraph Rd., Odenton, MD 21113; 301/569-5000.

**Marlan:** Perma-Bilt, 19306 S. Normandie Ave., Torrance, CA 90502; 213/321-6953.

**Corian:** DuPont, Brandywine Bldg., Wilmington, DE 19898; 302/774-0999.

**American Olean:** Lansdale, PA 19446; 215/855-2111.

**Cultured Marble Institute:** 435 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60611; 312/644-6061.

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Believe it or not, they are both the same material, Avonite, looking like granite or glassy marble.