

# Socially Conscious Design

An interview with

# Fu-Tung Cheng



When designer Fu-Tung Cheng takes on a bathroom or kitchen, or an entire house, he's naturally concerned about function and aesthetics—but he's also pondering how his design will impact Mother Earth. Founder of the award-winning Berkeley firm Cheng Design, he is renowned for sublime spaces, innovative materials, and exquisite details, as well as a best-selling book, *Concrete Countertops*. His work has been featured in publications worldwide, including *Architectural Digest*, *Elle Decor*, and *Global Architecture*. We chatted with Cheng about the challenges of creating design with a social conscience.

Hemlock fir cabinetry and bamboo flooring bring warmth to this efficient kitchen, which revolves around a cooking island featuring stainless steel countertops.

**San Francisco magazine: How would you describe your environmental design philosophy?**

**Fu-Tung Cheng:** My main contribution to environmental design is conservation. If you produce timeless, creative design and people respond to it, you've helped to combat the consumer throwaway mentality.

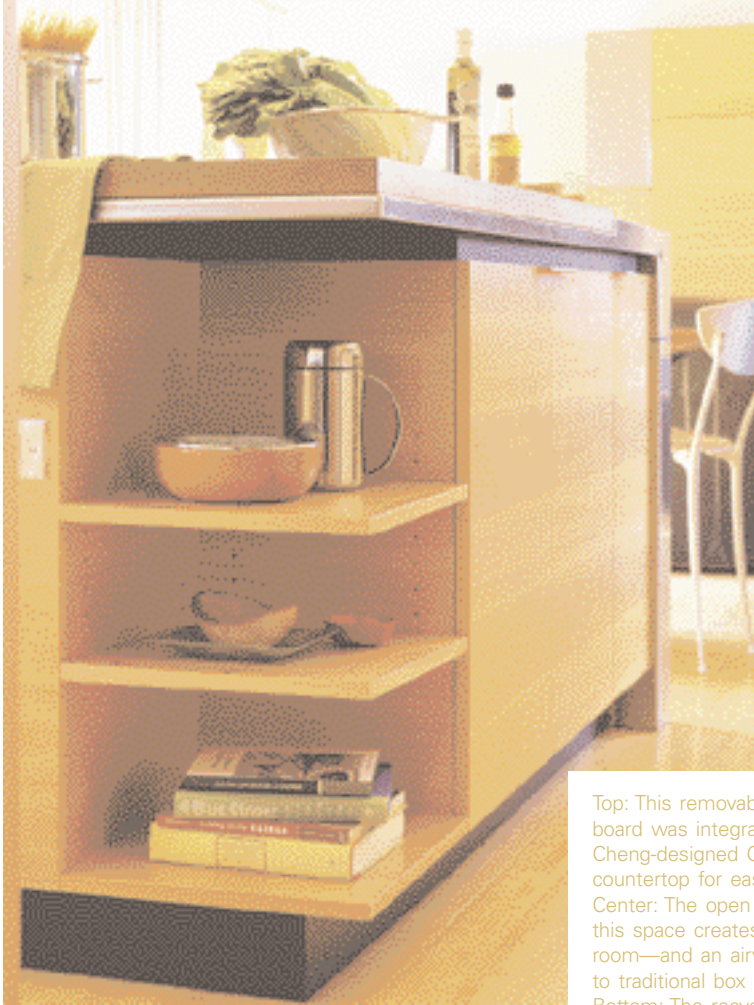
**SFM: So you don't follow design trends?**

**Cheng:** I try not to be wedded to any style. When clients come to me, they get what I do. People still photograph designs I did 15 or 20 years ago, and

they can't quite figure out when I did them. That's an indicator that what I do transcends the immediacy of a particular style.

**SFM: How do you choose the materials you use?**

**Cheng:** We use materials in a new way that people respond to emotionally in an old way, the way they'd respond to a great Provençal kitchen with a stone fireplace and tiled tables. And we try to use sustainable materials. I used to use Douglas fir in most of our kitchens because I loved its wonderful grain. But



Top: This removable chopping board was integrated into a Cheng-designed Geocrete™ countertop for ease of use. Center: The open shelving in this space creates breathing room—and an airy alternative to traditional box cabinets. Bottom: The recycled glass tiles are a complementary background for this efficient appliance garage.



the old-growth trees are practically gone. I realized I was promoting an aesthetic that wasn't sustainable, so we switched to bamboo. A harvestable crop of bamboo will grow in five years, avoiding wood that comes from endangered environments.

**SFM: Your designs tend to be very customized. How do you personalize your work for a client?**

**Cheng:** My design is, by definition, personal. We use concrete because it can be molded into something that's not off-the-shelf. Also, it's collaborative. Everyone contributes—the client, the contractor, the guy sanding the floor. Even when somebody suggests something outrageous, I consider it. One piece I'm really proud of is a water element we did. The client said, "I want a water piece. I want to take these bookcases out and put it here." Now, would I have suggested that? No. But I jumped at the opportunity.

**SFM: How much should someone spend on, say, a kitchen or bath remodel?**

**Cheng:** To redo a kitchen, the cost should be proportionate to the value of the home—15 to 30 percent. Do the maximum you can do. It's not like buying a new car. It won't depreciate. It always comes down to time, money, and quality. It's this triangle. If you don't have a lot of money and you want quality, it takes time.

**SFM: The San Francisco area has many historic homes. What approach do you take when remodeling or adding to one of these homes?**

**Cheng:** It is foolish to inject either a modern anomaly or a contemporary imitation. The trick is to have a contemporary vision with all of the verve, creativity, and invention in materials and design that inspired the original historic home to begin with. It takes a great deal of maturity and sensitivity.

**SFM: In the Bay Area, space is at a premium. How would you design a small space?**

**Cheng:** There's no formula. In Japan, miniaturization is an art—spaces feel bigger than they are. It can be done with plants, lights, or the amount of detail. It can be done by getting simple and spacious, or by getting complex and intricate so the eye gets absorbed into it. The best designers hit their stride when they've matured and figured out a few things—the big, the small. Pretty soon, you know what's appropriate.

**SFM: You've said you see inherent contradictions in creating luxury design and being socially responsible. What do you mean?**

**Cheng:** Compared with some of the abject poverty and deprivation worldwide, everything I'm doing could be interpreted as decadent. It's very hard for me to reconcile that. In Mahayana Buddhism, they believe that if you're just one step away from enlightenment, you don't take that step. Nobody gets there until everybody gets there. I'd like to think that no matter how successful we feel, as long as there are people suffering, we do not feel complacent.