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Response to The New York Times Article
“What’s Lurking in Your Countertop?”


Typical of stories that seek to excite, rather than inform, the article repeatedly talks about “radiation levels” without explaining what they mean. The article plays to the emotions, rather than basing its focus on scientific fact. In short, it follows the playbook used by two of the largest synthetic stone manufacturers (Silestone and Cambria) who seek to increase their own sales by raising fears about natural stone.

For example, the piece fails to point out that studies have found that granite most commonly used in home countertops is safe. Instead, it vaguely mentions one or two stones that someone deemed to be problematic, then goes on to suggest that the only solution is to remove granite from the home.

We all know that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s solution for radon infiltration is venting, but that fact is also absent from the article.

We are disappointed that The New York Times has compromised the ultimate goal of sharing truth with its readers. But it is precisely because individuals and companies seek to prey on consumer fears and confusion that the Marble Institute of America is working with the independent scientific community to set standards to test granite for radon.

We are spearheading this effort because no other group – not in the scientific community, the university community or in government – has chosen to proceed with such standards. Why? Because they don’t see the risk as being significant. If these groups believed the issue merited attention, I can assure you they would find the resources to do the testing that only the MIA has been willing to fund.

We will provide updates as they become available on www.marble-institute.com.

Garen P. Distelhorst
Publisher
Marble Institute of America

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There is a little bit of world traveler in us all, yearning to visit far away places and experience the mystery of distant lands. Actually touching and feeling the landmarks we’ve only read about in history books, connecting with the spirits of centuries long past. Some of us will make those distant journeys, others may only get as far as the next town, but wherever we go and whatever we do, one of the first places we’ll hasten to visit is somewhere that the architecture distinguishes itself from the ordinary. From quaint cottages tucked away in historic villages to the grand castles of Europe, these places all hold one thing in common... architectural accents in stone.

Fortunately for those of us that long to live with these authentic architectural features each and every day, we have endless options at our disposal in which to create a distinctive home built to withstand the test of time. Ornate details in natural stone once relegated to public buildings, Ivy League Universities and the homes of the rich and famous are now ours to enjoy. From stately columns and courtyard fountains to massive fireplaces and grand staircases, the average homeowner can now surround themselves with elegance, luxury and the everlasting beauty that natural stone offers.

Curb appeal
Whoever said first impressions are important, probably wasn’t talking about curb appeal, but perhaps they should have been. Not only must a home’s outward appearance be attractive for potential future resale, but more importantly, it should be attractive to you.

Indistinguishable cookie cutter homes are rapidly becoming a thing of the past with custom designed homes becoming the norm rather than the exception. In place of being presented with a handful of options, today’s homeowner is given a wide variety of choices from which to create their ideal home. Here are just a few ideas to get you started before you even walk in the front door.

Ideas for your home’s façade
Place smooth limestone or split-faced stone blocks at the outer edge of your home’s façade in the form of quoins to convey the European castle look. Tracing the front door with an ivory colored limestone portico is stunning off-set by an irregular red brick façade. With ivy randomly weaving its way over and around the brick, the look is unmistakably English cottage.

Framing windows with stone adds a rich touch to the home’s curb appeal. Doing so draws the eye away from the entrance to encompass the entire face of the house. Treat your entry porch to an eye-catching “mosaic rug” or a stone medallion. Consider an exterior that incorporates both random/stacked stone with antiqued stucco for a distinctive look.

The foyer
After peaking their interest, your guests are led from the entryway into the foyer. From this transitional space, they should become intrigued at what lies ahead. A duo of columns supporting a simplistic arch will not only frame the view ahead, but like a valuable piece of artwork, will entice visitors to step closer and take a better look. If columns and arches sound a bit over the top for you, simply framing a portal to the next room with stone tile and cast stone trim work will convey a similar rich look at a fraction of the cost.

Columns
Columns in and around today’s home no longer exist merely as supportive structures, nor do they always fall into the historically popular orders of Doric, Ionic and Corinthian. They can now be sculpted into a design that complements your architectural style of choice or simply serve as a functional design element.

Heather E Adams
Founder and co-owner, Natural Stone Design

Capturing timeless design details in natural stone
Ionic and Corinthian. Columns are found scattered throughout the home for a variety of reasons, the most obvious being style. Whether used as a decorative element or to camouflage an existing support, these structures make a bold statement and add a definitive element of grandeur to any space. Cladding a round column with mini mosaics is quite pretty, especially when accompanied by a colorful band of handcrafted tiles. Dull and uninteresting rectangular supports can be reinvented through the use of large stone tiles accented by heavy, prominent borders of carved stone.

The use of columns within the home is relatively unlimited. From private spaces to public areas, they can be found in just about every room of the house, including the master bath and kitchen. For those on a budget, keep in mind that the visual perception of a hollow cast stone column can be just as impressive as one carved from solid stone. Don’t be too quick to delete something this impressive from your wish list.

Ideas for columns

In areas that need dressing up, but do not allow for the introduction of a true column, use a pilaster or half round column instead. Still managing to add character to any space, they are less intrusive and are not as expensive.

Dining rooms that boast dome ceilings can be made to appear as if the dome rests upon a collection of columns. By faux painting the ceiling and adding a crystal chandelier, you can create an enchanting dining decor fit for a king. Don’t overlook the hallway as a place to be creative. This frequently skirted area should hold some interest as it leads you on the pathway to your next destination. The addition of a groin vault ceiling can add a distinctly gothic look. The intersecting vaults of the ceiling may appear to be held in place by simple rows of columns, adding a bit of drama to this typically non-descript space.

When adding a loggia or large porch to the rear of your home, create an arcade look by placing a successive row of columns and arches along the linear expanse. Bow out the center portion of the porch and treat railings with a thick stone handrail and baluster configuration for that unmistakable Italian garden style.
Ideas for the fireplace
Do not overlook the addition of an “over-the-mantle” design. In lieu of a painting, many designers are now incorporating these features to complement the fireplace surround. Often created from the same stone, they add yet another layer of interest.

To dress up an existing wooden mantel, introduce a border of mosaics in a vibrant pattern or color around the firebox. These handcrafted pieces may be a little pricey, but you will need very few to make a big statement.

Do not ignore special places within the home for the addition of a fireplace. Since the advent of vent-free gas logs, it has become possible to add a fireplace in nearly any room in the house. The home office, the library, the kitchen and dining room, all can be greatly enhanced by the amber glow of a warm fire.

In the master suite, connect the bedroom with the bath by way of a large see-through firebox. Not only will it add a spark of romance to both rooms, but will also give you two fireplaces for the price of one!

The vent hood
Searching for just the right style can be challenging, finding the perfect design element to express that “look” can be a major undertaking. When it comes to kitchens, there is one architectural icon that is capable of single-handedly delivering the punch necessary to carry the entire room. That stunning focal point is…the stone vent hood. Nothing will set your kitchen apart from the mundane or make a more distinctive statement than a vent hood constructed from stone.

Adding remarkable height and scale to the room, their multifaceted character and flair are unparalleled when it comes to defining that specific style. These massive hoods of stone are the perfect complement when it comes to the portrayal of motifs from English Manor and French Country to Mediterranean Villa.

With today’s trend of incorporating professional style ranges in private residences, the venting systems are becoming larger and more powerful. Considering the amount of space dedicated to this functional mammoth, it is important that it be attractive. The task of transforming this practical workhorse into a piece of art may not be as difficult you may think. Space allocation will play a part in the styles that may be considered. Small rooms with low ceilings are not suitable for the larger manufactured models, but with a little ingenuity and clever design, custom vent hoods can be constructed to fit almost any setting. If you are in the process of building, and a vent hood is not featured on your blueprints, speak with your architect or builder right away. If you are in the midst of redesigning an existing home, sharpen your pencil and go to work. These luxurious architectural wonders are definitely not an afterthought. Your architect or builder will determine ahead of time the placement and size requirement necessary to meet building code. With these
specifications in hand and your ideas regarding color and design, you can begin the shopping process. Choices include structures carved from solid stone, pre-fabricated cast stone, Scagliola and custom-built sub-structures clad with stone tile.

Vent hoods of solid stone are extremely heavy and somewhat expensive, but their hand-carved detail and velvety shadows reflect an authentic natural beauty. Ornate corbels frequently grace either side, creating the illusion that the massive structure rests upon them. Choosing a substantial hood such as this dictates that its location be one of primary focus. It may become necessary to reinforce the wall, ensuring that it is capable of handling the excessive weight associated with a structure of this magnitude.

Custom built hoods consist of a sub-structure overlaid with stone tiles. Costs are often less than a carved or pre-fabricated structure overlaid with stone tiles. Costs are usually less than a carved or pre-fabricated structure. To begin the shopping process. Choices regarding color and design, you can often less than a carved or pre-fabricated structure.

It may become necessary to reinforce the wall, ensuring that it is capable of handling the excessive weight associated with a structure of this magnitude.

As with any large-scale feature, the ability exists to style a staircase through the incorporation of specific materials. Touches of formality can be generated through the use of black and white treads and risers. The stairs are further complemented by the soft rippling sounds of water sliding down their aged tile faces. They whisper secrets of an ancient past. Stone fountains, incorporating plinths, bowls and coping in carved stone, emulate the rich earthy palettes of these wonderfully aged landmarks. These towering fountains are composed of two major parts, an upright wall and a basin. Their vertical construction permits the use of a variety of sizes. These layouts provide the offering innumerable combinations. The wall may be clad with aged tiles or a sleek slab of polished stone. The patterned sheet of stone captures the exotic mystery of Asia. Fountain walls embellished by elaborate and intricate designs, featuring picture frame formats, serve as perimeters for intricate webs of mosaic or small-format stone. These layers provide the backdrop for icons from which the water originates. Such features may include something as simple as a half-bowl embedded into the face of the tower or a drooling lion’s head. Depending on the size, pattern and texture of the stone, characteristics enhance the effect. Compositions may portray any number of styles.

The uses for natural stone in architecture are virtually endless. Prices range from the affordable to extravagant. Do not be quick to dismiss the addition of magnifi-

cent focal points in and about your home. There are the details that create a home meant to be passed down from generation to generation. So go ahead, start dreaming.

To learn more, look for the author’s books “STONE” and “THE STYLE” (Harry N. Abrams Inc. publishers - New York).

These books are available through the Marble Institute of America bookstore. Visit www.marble-institute.com for information on ordering.
In New York City and other centers of commerce in the 1980s, granite was king of the office building construction world. Put a granite façade on a building and you had striking colors and a shimmering surface that looked like a million dollars...and it pretty much lasted forever. The look did not go unnoticed for long among the people who design residential interiors, particularly kitchens and baths. Some got the idea that the sensational look, coupled with the durability and affordability of granite, would be something to behold on kitchen counters—and the granite boom was soon underway.

Jack Seiders of Architectural Granite and Marble of Austin, Texas has spent more than 30 years in the stone business and has seen the evolution of granite from basically a commercial building material to a component that has won the hearts and minds of consumers around the world. “It’s the big change of my lifetime in this industry,” says Seiders. Originally, the price of granite was considered too expensive for wide-ranging applications in the consumer marketplace, but today new sources of supply, coupled with advances in technology, have made granite and other natural stones highly competitive with virtually all other surfaces.

New technology enables stone quarriers to extract granite from the ground faster and at a lower cost. With new computer-driven equipment, fabricators are cutting and polishing quicker and more precisely than ever. In the early days of the granite countertop boom, most of the granite blocks were shipped to Italy for fabrication regardless of where they were quarried. “The Italian companies basically produced all of the stone working equipment. They are the standard for the stone working industry. We used to source all of the stone materials we bought from Italy because they were the only people in the world who had the sophisticated machinery.”

“Now that machinery has, for the most part, been exported to the countries from which the material originates; we are able to source from a wide array of countries directly—from Brazil, China, India, Italy, as well as, the United States,” Seiders said. From a technical point of view, that served to level the playing field from a raw material standpoint, especially from the aspect of uniform thickness and proper application of polish. “So, really what you find is just the difference in the colors of granite,” Seiders said. “That’s the only difference.”

Does that mean that all granite is created equal? “No, there are literally hundreds of varieties of granite in the North American market. It is important,” Seiders explained, “to know the actual type of granite and work with a vendor that knows the product he is selling.”

There are really two prime categories of granite. One is basic and the other is exotic. Basic granites are usually lower priced and uniform in color. Exotics typically have a flow to material, similar to marble, with striking and different...
We recently had a granite countertop installed by a big box store. We opted to do our own plumbing and sink installation, though, and they told us to use a plumber’s putty that has now discolored the granite around the sink (as though it were very wet). They suggested we contact you to see what might take this saturated look out of the granite. Any ideas?

Plumbers’ Putty is oil-based and should never be used with natural stones, however, Plumbers’ Putty stains are fairly straightforward to correct. First, remove the fixture and all of the putty. Then apply a poultice (you can get poulticing powder from a local stone shop, or order it from some of the stone tool catalogs) hydrated with either acetone or mineral spirits. Apply the poultice to the surface of the stone where the stain entered the stone, as to draw the stain backwards along the same path it entered. This may take three to five iterations, but you should notice improvement each time. When the stain is fully eradicated, reinstall the fixture using a non-staining elastomeric sealant.

I have spilled super glue on my granite counters. Any way of cleaning it without taking off the polish?

Make sure it is granite. If it is, you should be able to shave it off with a razor blade. We use super glue to make repairs all of the time and shave off the excess. If it is not real granite, the razor could scratch it. If it is real granite, it should be harder than the steel and not scratch the stone.

What is the Mohs’ hardness of granite?

Actually, there wouldn’t be a Mohs’ hardness for granite. Mohs’ Scale, developed in 1812 by the German/Austrian mineralogist Friedrich Mohs, is scale of relative hardness of minerals, not stones. Mohs used ten common minerals, and ranked them numerically by their scratch resistance. His original scale, from softest to hardest, was 1 Talc, 2 Gypsum, 3 Calcite, 4 Fluorite, 5 Apatite, 6 Feldspar, 7 Quartz, 8 Topaz, 9 Corundum, and 10 Diamond. It is a relative scale, as opposed to a linear or absolute scale. Therefore, we cannot say that feldspar is twice as hard as calcite due to their numbers on the scale. We can only say that it is harder than apatite, which is harder than fluorite, which is harder than calcite. Granite, like all dimension stone types, is a heterogeneous material and includes minerals of varying hardnesses. The majority of the stone’s composition would likely be feldspar and quartz, which are 6 and 7 respectively on Mohs’ scale. The other minerals within the stone could be anywhere from 3 to 9 on Mohs’ scale.

What is the process for manufacturing tumbled stone? I am currently considering putting tumbled marble tiles in my kitchen as a backsplash and am curious as to the process of stones becoming “tumbled”.

A true tumbled surface would be achieved by placing the tiles (also done with cobbles) into a rotating drum, with sand, or slightly coarser medium, and allowing them to “tumble”. This process breaks off many of the corners and distresses the edges, giving the tiles a “worn” look. There may be products marketed a tumbled finish which are produced by more regular means, somewhat like a bush hammer, but they would look a bit different.
When you really get down to it, it's attention to the little things that spells the difference between the ordinary and the extraordinary when it comes to kitchen and bath design and execution. That's why the selection of the edge profile is so important on granite and other natural stone countertops in the home.

With today's high-tech edge profiling machines, there are virtually unlimited types of standard and custom edge designs available for the consumer. But, surprisingly, only a handful of edge profiles are selected. Simplicity seems to be the norm. One major stone fabricator said that 90 percent of the edges produced in its shop is just a simple case edge.
In my grandma's kitchen, we always sat at the kitchen table to have our cocoa and toast when we were lucky enough to stay over with her. We also "helped" with baking and played games or pretended to cook while she prepared supper. Her kitchen table was freestanding, but tucked to one side of the kitchen, with built-in banquette seating on two parallel benches, under which sat the ever-attentive dog, eager for anything we dropped (with the exception of the cursed peas that even the dog wouldn’t eat).

Some things have changed, some are remarkably similar, but the desire for a cozy spot to sit for casual meals or snacks continues to be a prime concern when planning kitchens.

Back then, we certainly loved the social aspects of cooking and the kitchen, but for the most part, that still meant Grandma cooked while the rest of us socialized. Today, major changes include the shift to multiple cooks, to a greater variety of activities that the kitchen eating space may be used for, and often to a space that is larger and more open to adjacent spaces.

Time shortages have lead to greater demand for efficiency, which has increased interest in casual eating as close as possible to the prep area. Sometimes this space may be the primary place to eat, socialize and accomplish other daily tasks such as reading the mail or doing homework.

Although we all know kitchens are getting bigger, we are often faced with space challenges. While clients may not start out thinking this way, at least some built-in components can help save space, which is making them a great opportunity for designers. Following are some thoughts on today's built-in eating spaces.

**Questions to ask**

Most households will dine in a variety of ways and places, depending on the time of day and the schedules, ages and abilities of the family members. All of this will influence the design of the kitchen eating area.

Its location must be considered, as well. Will people eating at this space have a view of the sunset or will they look right at the kitchen mess? Will this space allow for easy traffic and work flow in and around the kitchen? Will this be the defining line between kitchen prep and the adjacent Great Room? Would the family like to view a TV, listen to music or access a computer from the eating space? Would they like to face each other or line up next to each other to snack or}

Dining In: Design Tips for the Eat-in Kitchen

[Image of Mary Jo Peterson, CKD, CBD, CAPS]
Clearances
As for space allowances needed for eating and traffic flow around the table, the kitchen planning book has great information. Given that a seated diner takes up about 28” beyond the edge of the eating counter or table, the NKBA guidelines specify that a minimum of 36” may allow for a person to edge past the seated diner and that amount increases to 44” to allow a person to walk past, with 60” allowing clearance for a person using a wheelchair.
As for space at the table or counter, 30” wide by 18” deep is the preferred allowance. For a high chair, a minimum of four square feet is recommended. Knee space below the table will be impacted by the height of the table, with 18” recommended at table height, 15” at standard counter height (36”), and 12” at standard bar height (42”).

Do the math, include room for serving dishes, and you can get an estimate of the size of the table needed to accommodate whatever number of people. Or, consult the book Human Dimension and Interior Space by Julius Panero and Martin Zelnik, which offers excellent standards for interiors. According to the authors, a round table 36” in diameter can seat four people for a light snack, and a minimum of 48” will accommodate full place settings for four.

Solutions
Adding up all the recommended space allowances, the sum can seem to be bigger than the space available. And yet we frequently hear clients say that they want to be sure there is comfortable walking clearance around the eating area. Obviously, these clearances must sometimes be compromised, and this is where design options come in. Working with the users’ preferences and parameters of the actual space available, these standards often have to be prioritized and then met or compromised to fit the family.

Building in any aspect of the eating area can help by eliminating at least some of the needed space for walkways, which may be why these ideas have increased so much in recent years. Our office has made good use of pull-out tables in the smallest of galley kitchens so that casual meals can take place by bringing in a chair and when done, the table is retracted and traffic flow restored. This works well as it also doubles as a lowered work surface in the kitchen.

A pull-out table can also work well located off the back side of an island where traffic would be interrupted by a permanent table, or where storage has been created across the back of the island, leaving no knee space. A table or built-in snack bar can be located on the back of the island or peninsula. The snack bar may be at counter height so it can function as prep surface or eating bar as needed.

When the kitchen mess is an issue, raising the table or snack bar can help block that view from the adjoining space. This is a great opportunity for unusual shapes or contrasting materials, such as glass, as it helps to transition from prep to social space. Standard table height takes the most space, but offers comfort for the greatest variety of users, and can double as a baking center or chopping surface, as it falls at the proper height for many cooks.
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