

# leap of faith

Constructing this unusual award-winning kitchen meant overcoming numerous challenges, writes Gabrielle Chariton.

Below: Architect and builder Oliver Steele.



It's a kitchen like no other: polished concrete flooring, black cabinetry and austere lines create a semi-industrial aesthetic, which is then juxtaposed against a shimmering wall of gold leaf. Where you might expect to find laminate or even stone, there is instead a gleaming slab of concrete; formed, honed and polished onsite. There's not a bit of timber grain nor an inch of coloured glass to be seen.

Designed by architectural firm Bureau SRH and brought to life with precision and patience by Steele Associates Construction, the kitchen is part of a multi-million dollar home built in Sydney's eastern suburbs in 2010. At last year's HIA-NSW Housing Awards, the home was highly commended in the Custom Built House over \$2.5 million category, and the kitchen won the award for most innovative use of materials in a kitchen or bathroom.

Steele Associates Construction, headed by architect and builder Oliver Steele, specialises in design and build for high-end renovations and new

homes in the Sydney region. Oliver's meticulous approach and unique problem-solving skills made him the perfect choice for the construction of this highly unusual home, where complex design and unconventional material selection posed many interesting challenges throughout the build. 'Each one of [the architect's] ideas required prototyping and pioneering, and a fair bit of courage on our part,' he says.

Take the concrete floors and bench, for example. With sustainability in design and finish being one of Oliver's top priorities, he selected a Boral product called Envirocrete 60, which contains the highest recycled content of any concrete mix. When told that the Envirocrete couldn't be polished, Oliver asked why. 'It's never been done before,' he was told. 'Well, that's not a reason not to do it,' Oliver says. 'That means there are potential risks that need to be assessed, but it's no reason not to do it.'

So, after a bit of research, he took the risk, with spectacular results – the recycled materials in the concrete polished up into a delicate pattern of feather-soft greys. The imposing 200mm thick, cantilevered benchtop, formed onsite once the floors were completed, is the focal point of the kitchen – a triumph of engineering as well as design.

Behind the concrete bench, a free-standing bank of cupboards rises almost to the ceiling, finished in matte black chalkboard paint. 'We raised concerns about durability when chalkboard paint was proposed,' says Oliver. 'The clients were also very concerned. So we gave a sample panel to their two children, aged six and eight, for three months. It got extensive field testing and stood up pretty well.'

The flat, dark colour somehow makes the proportions of the grand cupboards less imposing, and Oliver says the structure now doubles as a giant chalkboard. 'You'll often go there and find some meaningful statement scrawled across the kitchen cupboards.'



## What's new in kitchens in 2012

**Natural stone:** 'People are using quite innovative stones in kitchens these days, such as basalt and limestone.' Oliver Steele warns that these materials can sometimes be difficult to maintain.

**Benchtops:** 'They're kind of like jeans waists, they go up and down with fashion. The chunky, thick benchtops have been all the rage for the last few years, and now a very fine benchtop is becoming more trendy.'

**Cabinetry:** 'Shark-nose handles, which is a root to the top of the drawer rather than a handle, are becoming popular. And we're doing a fair bit with different shaped cut-outs and recesses in doors and drawers to create handles, which also add to pattern and texture.'

**Sustainability:** 'The industry has a responsibility to use VOC-free or low-VOC substrate materials and finishing products. They're available and becoming cost-competitive. It's only economies of scale which are causing any higher prices.'

**Other green inclusions:** LED lighting, integrated compost bins and well-ventilated fridges.

And because of the grand scale of the cupboards, the clients wanted a rolling ladder installed for easier access. The challenge? 'It had to slide around right-angle corners and be stable and safe enough for daily use.' After countless hours 'researching, developing and prototyping', Oliver's team finally came up with a solution. Slim and unobtrusive, the ladder hangs neatly from a stainless steel rail and can be wheeled right around the cupboards, 90-degree corners and all.

## The imposing 200mm thick, cantilevered benchtop ... is the focal point of the kitchen

A solid six-millimetre sheet of bead-blasted stainless steel forms a benchtop within this section of the kitchen. Prior to installation it was laser-cut to allow the cooktop to be installed completely flush, creating an integrated finish.

Juxtaposed against this black and steel mass, the joinery along the rear wall of the room is finished in gold leaf – a startlingly luxurious finish which brings warmth to the otherwise stark, industrial

room. 'The gold leaf was applied by hand on each cupboard door by the joiner's mother in their factory and then fixed with polyurethane spray,' says Oliver. The result looks textured and crinkly, but is glass-smooth to touch.

Undoubtedly one of the reasons why the kitchen was applauded for its innovative use of materials is the successful amalgamation of creativity and practicality. In fact, this kitchen is just as functional and easy to maintain as a more traditionally-finished room would be. Oliver maintains that the polished concrete, with a premium penetrating sealer, is less likely to stain than many types of polished stone. The chalkboard paint simply wipes clean with a damp cloth and can be easily touched up if and when required, and the two-pack finish over the gold-leaf is robust and durable.

Overall, Oliver considers the ultimate achievement of the finished kitchen to be 'the way each element displays its own unique characteristics, which tell a story about all the thought and design and testing that went into it. While each piece has quite individual characteristics, they all work together to produce a unified finish.' ■