

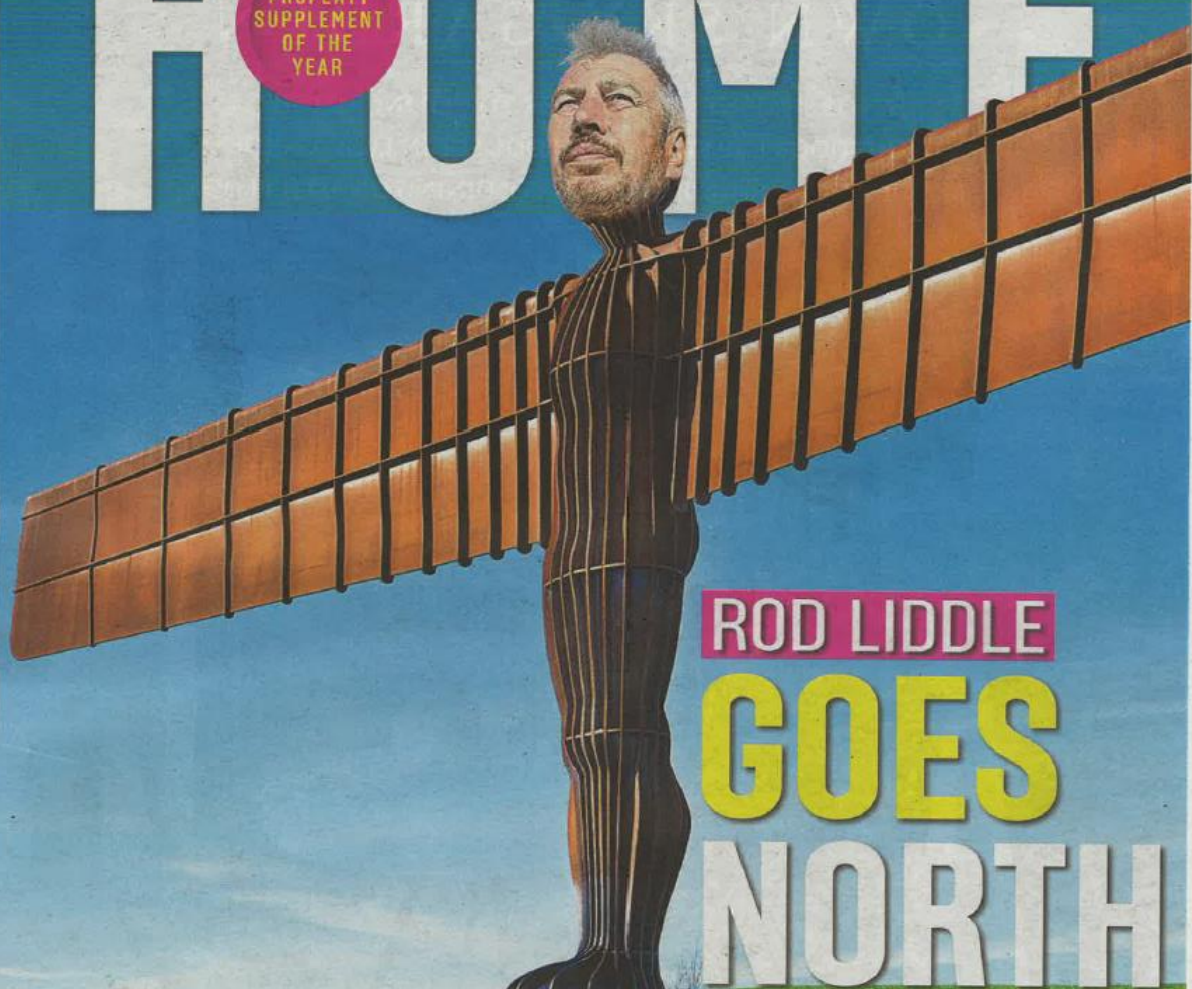
SECTION 6

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

HOME

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YEAR



ROD LIDDLE
GOES
NORTH

But can he persuade his wife to
move to Middlesbrough? p16

BOB MARLEY'S LOVER SELLS UP IN CORNWALL SHUSH! INSIDE
THE QUIETEST HOUSE IN BRITAIN NEW ROUTES FOR SMART
OVERSEAS BUYS 29 OF THE BRIGHTEST AND BEST LIGHTS

First it was distressed timber. Then came exposed brick. Now, the latest rugged material to be fetishised by interior designers is concrete. For years, it's been cherished only by a fringe of modern architects, and reviled by a public scarred by memories of 1960s brutalism, but the middle classes are suddenly going gaga for big grey slabs.

Even high-end developers are tarting up their luxury flats with a material that was once synonymous with drab council estates — though the surfaces are glossed and buffed to a rich sheen, speckled with glass, or board-marked to give a wood-grain effect. Concrete can be acid-etched, jack-hammered or grit-blasted, tinted, mottled, matt or glazed. In architecture, meanwhile, bright glass boxes are being ditched in favour of brooding, monumental fortresses. The Outhouse, a gallery-like lair on a Gloucestershire hillside, with textured concrete interiors, earned its architects, Loyn & Co, a nomination for this year's Stirling prize.

"In Japan, it has long been viewed as a luxury material," says Dara Huang, founder of the Design Haus Liberty architectural practice in Clerkenwell, east

London. "For them, getting a beautiful concrete finish is an art — they're so meticulous. When I was there, I couldn't help but touch the concrete surfaces. The architect Tadao Ando, if he wasn't happy with a surface when he touched it, would knock the wall down and start again."

"In the UK, people think of it as a poor cheap material found in garages. But to pour concrete and make it nice and smooth is not easy — that's why it's now viewed as a luxury. Ando has just opened his first residential building in New York, and it's all concrete. In London, the new Nobu Hotel in Shoreditch has exposed concrete walls and ceilings. And now my wealthy clients are saying, 'I want that.'"

Huang thinks concrete's new-found popularity is part of the backlash against bling: many clients no longer want Swarovski crystals and gold headboards. These days, she says, it's all about honesty. "It has integrity, strength and presence. It's grounding." The trend coincides with our never-ending love affair with grey, according to Leah Townsend, the interior designer for the southwest London building firm BTL Property, although she's branching out into slabs with mustard-yellow tints.

Concrete also has environmental cred: it retains heat in winter and stays cool in summer, says Chris Loyn, founder of Loyn & Co. It's also ideal for an airtight Passivhaus or watertight earth shelter.

Concrete is shedding its drab image and finding a place in the hearts of the smart set, says **Hugh Graham**

Back in the mix

Instead of cement, which isn't green, many concretes now use GGRS, a substitute made from recycled furnace slag ash, says Roger Zogolovitch, founder of the boutique developer Solidspace. And if you leave concrete exposed, "it saves you miles upon miles of plasterboard", he adds.

Exposed concrete is practical, too, according to Piers Smerin, co-founder of Eldridge Smerin architects, whose Red Bridge House, in East Sussex, has striped concrete interiors in a sea of shades. "Kids can get their handprints on it, vacuum cleaners can scrape against the wall. There's no sound coming through the walls."

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Cementing its reputation Far left, concrete etched with ferns at the Outhouse, by Loyn & Co. Left, textured concrete at Green Orchard, by Paul Archer Design. Above, Stormy Castle, also by Loyn & Co. Right, acid-washed concrete panels at Lighthouse 65, by AR Design Studio



Be careful, though, cautions James Carter-Brown, head of residential building at Knight Frank estate agency. If you're planning a concrete cinema room, for instance, you'll need to include plenty of soft furnishings to soften the acoustics. And you'll want more downlights, because concrete absorbs light. You'll also have to plan how to conceal your services and cables before the concrete is poured – power sockets fixed to the surface will spoil that pristine finish.

It's tricky to get the look just right. There's no such thing as designer Farrow & Ball concrete that you can buy ready-made – it mostly starts off the same, a mix of cement, aggregate and sand. The final aesthetic is down to how it's produced and finished.

To make an exposed concrete wall, a specialist crew have to build a frame, or "formwork". After putting up the reinforcement bars, they erect shutters on either side, tie them together and pour in the concrete. It is left to cure for a set number of days, after which they pull the shutters off and seal it.

The shutters can be lined in different materials to create interesting effects on the finished concrete: flat metal for a smooth surface, plywood planks for woody textures. "You have to dry it at the right rate, so it doesn't crack," Smerin says. "Keep it at the right temperature and judge when to take the formwork

down. It's like taking a cake out of a tin – leave it in too long and the cake sticks to the surfaces. When you take the formwork down, it's a moment of elation or head-in-hands time. It can be brilliant or a disaster."

Because concrete has been out of fashion for so long, there is a dearth of skilled contractors who can do it well, says Kieran Gaffney, director of the Edinburgh architects Konishi Gaffney. "The more unusual and beautiful finishes involving complex shuttering or acid etching are simply beyond contemporary construction skills."

Concrete floors are easier to get right: a growing number of specialist companies can do them. For worktops and sinks, Loyn recommends Concrete Carrot, in Penarth (concretecarrot.co.uk). For walls, if you don't want to risk disaster, buy precast concrete panels or faux concrete plaster finishes (for the latter, try Cafe Crimmings, cafeccrimmings.co.uk).

If your heart is set on the genuine crafted look, with exposed concrete walls, ask to see examples of your contractor's work. Zogolovitch swears by David Bennett (concretebennett.com). "We call him Dr Concrete," he says. "I'm a concrete brute man. I like it rough and raw. Others want it smooth."

"There's a high craft side to it – the more precision you want, the more expensive it can get. People who like concrete can get quite obsessed."

