

Producers See Green In Colored Concrete Work

Artesia Ready Mix, Central Concrete, Colony Materials, Greene's Ready Mixed, Pine Hill Concrete Mix, Riefler Inc., Shamrock Materials, Tanner-United Metro and Western Mobile representatives access integral links between pigments, promotion and profits.

By Nick Paris

Even though construction remains slow in some regions, ready-mix producers from around the country report that the use of integrally colored concrete is on the rise. They credit this to greater awareness of the material among architects and builders and the increased emphasis on decorative surfaces and rich colors found in contemporary architectural styles. In particular, the growing popularity of pattern-stamped concrete has made specifiers more aware of colored concrete and provided many finishers with the experience they need to tackle and promote colored jobs.

Ready-mix producers also credit increased use of integrally colored mixes to the ease of handling pigments. Some had avoided colored mixes because pigments were difficult to work with. Recent innovations have enabled trucks and drivers to stay cleaner and more productive. And, by reducing the cost of handling pigments, colored concrete has become more profitable and attractive to many producers.

Perhaps the most important reason for the growth of integrally colored concrete is a change of attitude: instead of selling plain concrete as a commodity, producers believe value-added products and services are the key to competing in the 90's. These companies seek profitable niches as a way to expand markets. By promoting color along with special mix designs, fibrous mixes, and other specialties, they are making more money on each batch. "The bottom line," according to one producer, "is that I make more profit on a load of colored concrete than on a load of gray concrete."



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Phoenix-based Tanner companies' TPAC Division supplied architectural precast for the new Phoenix City Hall. The project entailed close matching of panels with integrally colored, cast-in-place concrete supplied by Tanner's United Metro Materials Division. Huntcor, Inc. was the general contractor on the job, which opened earlier this year. (Photo: Rupp Aerial for Huntcor)

Promotion

Simple things can make a big difference in promoting colored concrete, according to Jeff Lattanza, sales manager at Colony Materials, Inc., Santa Fe, NM. "You have to let customers know that color is available," he says. "I advertise colored concrete on our price list and our invoices include a little note reminding customers that 35 colors are available."

At Greene's Ready Mixed Concrete Co. in Los Angeles, sales-counter personnel are trained to look for opportunities to sell color. "We know our regular customers," notes General Manager John French. "When we get walk-in or C.O.D. business, it's often a do-it-yourself job. We take a customer's order and then ask, "What color do you want?"

"Many people haven't thought about buying color until we suggest it". Like most ready-mix producers, he makes sure Green's staff has color cards and samples to show customers. Riefler, Inc., Buffalo, NY, has gone one step further, building a display area outside its office. "In a lot of cases, contractors send homeowners to our facility where we can show them stamped patterns and all the colors that are available," explains Bill Haas, sales manager. He has also helped some of his customers set up display areas at locations visible from major streets. "When people drive by, the color catches their eyes and hopefully we can sell a job from it," Haas says. In addition, Riefler promotes colored concrete at local building shows, featuring samples and photos of local projects. Additionally, it builds awareness of its capabilities by using the material at model "Parade" homes in new subdivisions.

"We'll work with the builders to provide colored concrete for a sidewalk or other flatwork. During a parade, a lot of people who go through homes appreciate colored concrete because it's different - and everybody wants something a little different in their home," Haas adds. Riefler posts a sign at its model-home flatwork installations and enjoys further exposure with listings in home show publicity materials.



Pine Hill Concrete Mix Customer, Broad Spectrum Concrete, blends new integrally colored, patterned stamped flatwork and steps with vintage masonry.

Shows are an effective way of reaching the residential market. But to promote colored concrete to non-residential users, Ed Dvorak recommends a more direct approach. As general manager for Western Mobile New Mexico, Inc., Albuquerque, he is planning a series of sales presentations in cooperation with a representative from his pigment supplier. "When the rep comes to town, we have him hit architects, engineers, city and highway departments, and other specifiers to promote color. We are also planning lunchtime programs to give some instruction to our contractors."

Market Opportunities

Producers emphasize the importance of developing a colored-concrete marketing plan based upon local market needs. Regional characteristics influence how colored concrete is used. As a community, notes Colony Materials' Lattanza, "Santa Fe is always going to be real good for colored concrete. People like to match sidewalks and even floors with adobe. They like to hide retaining walls with colored concrete to blend into the environment." In nearby Albuquerque, Dvorak says state officials are cognizant of the natural environment and have opted for tinted mixes on a new bypass to match the black lava flows of the area.

That mindset is mirrored across the continent: historic districts in New York City use specialty colored concrete

you match traditional blue-stone sidewalks, for example, while widespread use of buff-colored flatwork reinforces the unique character of Williamsburg, VA.

Marketing opportunities are also stimulated by changing laws and regulations. At Artesia Ready Mix Concrete, Inc., in Los Angeles, Office Manager Ron Talsma cites new environmental laws requiring service stations to install double-wall tanks. This has resulted in stations tearing out old tanks and subsequently replacing pavements. "Operators usually go with black concrete because it doesn't show the oil and fuel drippings or tire stains," Talsma says. In other communities, new regulations require underground electrical conduit to be encased in red flowable fill. That way, according to Greene's French, "When they dig into the trench and come across red fill, they know they're dealing with high voltage." His firm does extensive business providing colored fill to local refineries.

The presence of certain contractors in a community also leads to marketing opportunities. Several customers at Central Concrete in San Jose, Calif., for example, are progressive tilt-up concrete contractors. "We've been involved in many buildings that are colored and then sandblasted," says Kelly Idiart, quality control manager. "We've got quite a reputation for being able to supply special jobs and have them come out as designed." His willingness to meet the critical needs of tilt-up construction enabled him to provide concrete for a recent project where two different colors were used in the same panels.

While residential driveways and commercial-building entrances make up the bulk of colored concrete sales, producers should be alert for larger projects that may warrant additional promotion. Colony Materials recently provided colored concrete for the cart paths at two new golf courses, and Riefler is involved in urban redevelopment projects using integrally colored mixes in the streetscape.

Such jobs may require a long-term approach to convert designers and developers, submit samples for approval and provide additional techni-



Northern California's Central Concrete applied its usual tight quality control in delivering integrally colored mixes for the Echelon Building in Pal Alto, a recent tilt-up job with general contractor Devcon. (Photo: Davis Colors)

cal support. In the case of the new Phoenix City hall complex, designers opted for both precast and cast-in-place colored concrete. According to Vice President Michael Kohout of project supplier, Tanner Companies-United Metro Materials Division, "We went through several mix designs in order to get exactly what the architect desired. Then we had to do full scale site mockups before the architect and the city decided on a particular sand-blasted finish."

CREATING LEVERAGE

Working with end users in this manner spurs demand for colored concrete. To get orders, however, ready mix producers must also build relationships with contractors to secure their colored-concrete business. In each community, select ready-mix operators develop reputations as the best suppliers of colored concrete. The keys to their success include actively going after colored concrete business, providing consistently high quality products, and delivering excellent service. Steve Talty at Pine Hill Concrete Mix Corp., Buffalo, NY, fosters a win-win attitude with his customers: "We make a good profit on colored concrete, but the material also gives the contractor something to sell and make a little extra money."

Similarly, Burt Lockwood of Shamrock Materials, Inc., Petaluma, Calif., believes everybody can make money with colored concrete. His salesmen make joint calls with contractors in the San Francisco Bay area. When calling on developers, he explains the benefits of colored concrete. "I try to show them how it can improve their projects so they can

earn more income from their properties," he says. "Color is very profitable as long as it's done right and you minimize callbacks."

To reduce the potential for problems on the job, he sends a brochure describing the proper finishing techniques with each load. "We also talk to the contractors to make sure they know how to apply and cure colored slabs," Lockwood says. "Once they understand it though, colored concrete is profitable for them as well."

Riefler Inc. uses another innovative strategy to make colored concrete profitable for its customers. Haas says his firm owns an assortment of tools for pattern-stamped flatwork. "Not all contractors can invest in stamping tools. But with us, they can rent tools very economically when buying colored mixes. We go out and spend the day with their crews, showing them how to use stamps, handle release agents, and cure colored slabs. When contractors sell a stamped job, they remember the help they got from us and call us for their colored concrete."

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While dry-shake or dust-on pigments may be necessary for intense colors and special treatments, most ready-mix producers prefer jobs with integral-color orders. Integral coloring works easily with air-entrained mixes, which are often specified for flatwork, and offer a full depth monolith to ease effects of potential chipping and surface defects.

The advantages of integral coloring are enhanced by the recent improvements in material handling. For example, pigments are now available

in special bags which can be added to the mix without opening, weighing, or pouring. The bags reduce airborne dust and, since they disintegrate in the mixer, eliminate the need to dispose of empty sacks. As Rick Brewer, purchasing agent at Greene's Concrete, sees it: "You can just throw the new disintegrating bags of pigment into the truck."

Packaging improvements are important because integral color can increase the overall demand for ready-mix concrete. Under present economic circumstances, designers and building owners are looking for cost effective ways to improve the appearance of their properties. Colored concrete pavements with patterned-stamped, exposed aggregate or even simple broomed finishes are a beautiful and affordable alternative to brick pavers and other hardscape materials. Integrally-colored buildings and structural components can blend into their natural environment and provide a durable, low-maintenance finish.

Central Concrete's Idiart speaks for ready-mix producers throughout the country when predicting a bright future for colored concrete: "We have seen quite an increase in demand for the material over the last 10 years as workmanship and product quality have been greatly improved. People can count on the consistency of the finished product and that, by itself, has sold a lot of architects and others on using color in concrete. Every job they see with color that was done properly is kind of an advertisement for colored concrete."

-- Nick Paris is President of Davis Colors, Los Angeles, manufacturer of pigments for integrally colored concrete