

**Save Time and Money on
New Kitchen and Bathroom Counters
By Michael Geraghy**

When most people think about beautiful granite kitchen and bathroom counters, they picture them in multi-million dollar single family homes. Of course they're right. Granite is used extensively in the most expensive homes in Los Angeles and in other cities.

However, the world has changed, and so has the use of granite. You can sum up all of the reasons for this in one word: China. This 1.3 billion population country is best known for the low cost labor that has made it a leading exporter of clothing, toys, plastic parts and many other product categories that are labor intensive and assembly line production oriented. In addition, China possesses vast natural resources, including an abundance of granite.

The traditional method for installing granite is as follows. A customer finds a retailer, who in turn selects a stone cutter called a fabricator. The customer selects a color, and often spends a day or two with the fabricator visiting importers of the raw materials ("slab yards"). Once the raw materials are selected the fabricator goes to the home to take measurements. Next, he goes back to the slab yard to pick up the raw material which he takes to his shop where he then manufactures the counter tops that he will later install, usually in mid to high end single family home. The average installed cost is between \$70 and \$90 per square foot. The typical turn-around time is two to three weeks.

Save Over 50%?

There is a new method that is much more streamlined, and the result is that it cuts the cost of granite counter tops roughly in half, making them cost competitive with tile and other less desirable and less durable man-made materials. The stone is mined in very large pieces, but instead of being cut into slabs that are suitable for export; these large rocks are delivered to a nearby factory, where they are made into finished products. The importer warehouses these products, which eliminates all of the inefficiency and high cost of the local, one-at-a time fabrication process. Depending on the source and the application, the installed cost is between \$20 to \$40 per square foot and the turn-around time can be as little as 48 hours.

Advantages of Granite

Granite is a dense stone. It is heat and abrasion resistant. That means that you can put a hot pan on it and you can cut vegetables on it. Any apartment owner knows what happens when you try this with a plastic counter top.

Granite is extremely durable and low maintenance. If they are periodically resealed they will never need resurfacing and they don't have the problematic grout lines of tile. Although most homeowners ignore the instructions to seal the surface every six months, this is recommended for rental use. Sealing is easy. It takes only a few minutes and is much like polishing a wood table. Typically, after 30 minutes the surface is wiped dry with a clean cloth. Sealer can be purchased at Lowe's or Home Depot, and the containers come with printed instructions.

Increase Your Income!

These are big advantages, but they pale in comparison to the main reason why apartment owners are tearing out their old counter tops and installing granite: Everyone Loves Granite! It has the highest perceived value of any counter top material. Granite is a symbol of elegance and prestige. Many apartments that have been upgraded with granite counters have been re-leased at \$100 to \$200 more per month. With a typical installation cost of \$1,000 to \$2,000 per

apartment including bathroom vanities, a 100% return on the investment can be made in less than a year, with higher unit appeal and profitability afterwards. In addition, the entire value of the property is enhanced when the upgrading is complete.

The inescapable economic and marketing logic even has some property owners tearing out Formica-style counters that were installed as recently as a year ago.

How to Do It

How do you get started? That's easy, too. All you have to do is find a good source for these pre-manufactured products. Start with the yellow pages or on-line searches. You will want more than just a material source. Generally you will want the material supplier to handle the installation. Even if you want your own maintenance staff to do this, they will probably need training and when they get busy and you have vacant units that quickly need renovation, you will need back-up, and a supplier that will help you with the training. Granite installation requires experience and special tools, so make sure your source is prepared to meet your all of your installation requirements.

This break-through in granite cost is new, but you may want to start thinking about how you can take advantage of this development. *Written by Michael Geraghty, president of Natural Elegance, a granite importer. Michael can be reached at 818-890-4930 or by email at naturalelegance1@verizon.net. Be sure to stop by the Natural Elegance booth at the big AOA Trade Show and the Los Angeles Convention Center on October 18th. The new granite from China will be on display!*