

KITCHEN

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said. "On the MOHS scale, which is the scale of hardness to minerals, it is second only to diamond. It is very difficult to scratch and resistant to heat, so if you set down a hot pan, you're not ruining the countertop. It has an intrinsic beauty, it's practical and it's virtually indestructible."

Jeff Klein, controller with Architectural Stone in Troy, agrees.

"People like the durability, it's unique and now it's come down in price the last three years," Klein said. "The materials and supplies are cheaper, and we can pass that along. The demand has increased."

The granite countertop market exploded in the last few years. Mularoni believes granite countertops became more affordable when the price of diamonds declined. Granite is second only to diamonds in hardness, so diamond blades are used to cut granite.

That decline in diamond cost made the blades more affordable, thus the cost of manufacturing granite also fell and the process of cutting the granite shortened with the availability of more blades. "It made the availability go up geometrically, so the price went down," Mularoni said.

Homeowners also sought more natural themes in their homes, whether it was natural stone or materials. Granite prices can range from just under \$40 a square foot to \$70 a square foot, depending on the color. "The scarcity of a material also determines the price," Mularoni said.

Greens and golds are the two most popular colors, Mularoni said. "And 90 percent of our sales are for kitchen countertops," he said. About 70 percent of sales are for kitchen remodels with the remaining in new homes.

Customers should look at their slab before buying it, Kudzia-Serilla said.

"You get veins and varying blotches of color you won't get from other countertops," Kudzia-Serilla said.

"Sometimes people are never comfortable with that. They definitely want to look at their own slab. Every piece



Phil Mularoni in his showroom.

of slab is different. Each piece will be different. There's so many types of granite and marble, there's a huge range of colors. Customers look for lots of variations in granite, whether it is earth tones or the darker colors. "They like the blacks, browns and grays," Klein said. "These are popular with our customers."

A basic kitchen remodel can cost about \$5,000, but that can increase dramatically depending on the size of the kitchen. The cut of the granite also varies, depending on personal taste. Some like the waterfall look, as the granite looks thicker; others like a beveled edge. Ogee and bullnose are two of most popular edges, Kudzia-Serilla said. "An ogee edge is a little more formal than the straight edge, and the bullnose is a little more contemporary," she said.

Many new homes use granite. "It's a good-selling point," Kudzia-Serilla said. "It's kind of cool to see how many

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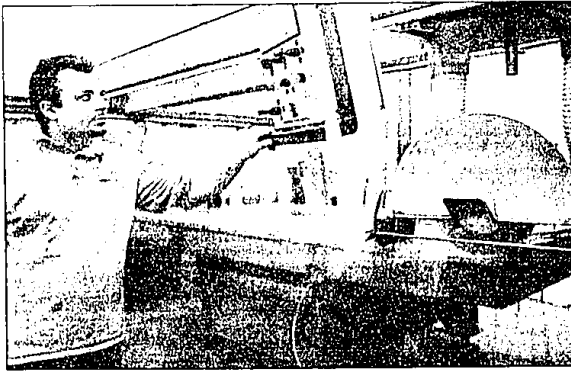
different ones they have. It's neat. You have a lot of different options if you want to do something different."

Granite also adds value to the home. "Most of the time if the house has it, it is mentioned right in the real estate ad," Mularoni said. "It's a luxury item. It's perceived as a luxury item and perceived as a practical item, so it's the best of both worlds."

Granite obtains its beauty as an igneous rock formed with magma. "When the surge of magma melt the boulder or minerals, it becomes part of the flow," Mularoni said.

O'Brien said kitchen remodels should cost about 10-15 percent of the home's value. Homes with minimum value of \$150,000 to \$180,000 can probably get the return on the granite investment. "If you have a home valued at \$350,000, you'd better put granite in," O'Brien said.

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Florin Hrenic, shop foreman, cuts through a piece of granite.

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preventing chips in the granite surface. The water also prolongs the life of the \$500 blade.

"He'll use templates to measure it up and determine the seam, cut it and get a matchup of the vein and get it ready to polish," said Thaddius Mackillop, the shop superintendent. "He'll get all the cuts in sequence. He tries to minimize the waste factor and determines where the seams are."

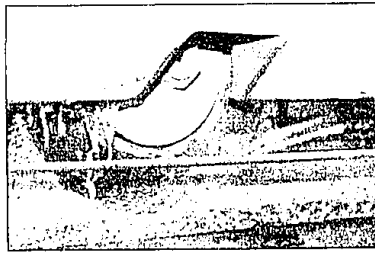
Across from Hrenic, Ketan Sompura, who came to the U.S. from India, operates a CNC (computerized numerical control) machine that cuts sink-holes in the counter, similar to a router.

Sompura inputs the coordinates of the sinkhole into the machine. A hole is bored into the granite, then the router blade continues running to the sink's outer edge, then the hole is cut and completed. The process takes about a half hour to cut a sink hole.

"The machine will do architectural design," Mackillop said. Nine different end cuts can be performed by the "router" bits, such as a quarter bevel, quarter bullnose or half bullnose. "This machine can do in two hours what two men can do in a 10-hour shift."

Some customers use granite remnants to do a bar, small bathroom sink or another small area.

On the other side of the shop, Ketan Sompura's uncle, Krishna Sompura, hand-polishes the sharp edges on another piece. "A saw can cut them, but when you have a shape or design with no seams, it has to be done by hand," Mackillop said. Small strips of backslashes sit nearby, while Ahmad Alsharhi runs shaping



A diamond saw blade is cooled by water as it rips through a piece of granite.

machines on smaller pieces. Faruk Karasuljic, who came from Bosnia, helps retrofit and repair machines as the mechanic on the machines.

Three common slabs are Baltic brown, uba tuba gold and verde butterfly. "We have probably 300 different kinds of granite marble," Mackillop said.

The slabs begin as a rough-edged piece of rock, but are hewn by craftsman from all over the world who work to create countertops of beauty and durability.

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