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Structural Erosion Control

Whether poured or built, a retaining wall has to work well and look good.

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Although they're usually built for utilitarian reasons, retaining walls often surround prime parcels of real estate. The occupants of high-end condos or prestigious business complexes don't want views of massive slabs of rough concrete—the likes of which are often seen around maximum security prisons. With that in mind, contractors and retaining wall manufacturers alike strive to create walls of both strength and beauty.

Creative Concrete

A simple poured concrete wall retains soil, but it's not what one would call "scenic." For a more pleasing appearance, contractors call upon San Clemente, CA's Boulderscape, which covers the wall with shotcrete and then sculpts it to look like natural stone. In many cases, viewers have no idea they're looking at a manufactured product; Boulderscape also creates zoo enclosures that satisfy even the pickiest rock-climbing creatures.

Human beings are wowed by Boulderscape, too. When Carlsbad, CA's Baldwin Construction was called in to repair a wall next to a new Wal-Mart in Corona, CA, Boulderscape gave the wall a timeless look.

"This was actually a repair to an existing MSE [mechanically stabilized earth] wall that was failing," explains President Jim Baldwin. "It had moved about a foot. We built a new concrete wall in front of it, using 300 80-foot-long tie-back anchors run through the wall."

As hydrostatic pressure was believed to have caused the demise of the previous wall, Baldwin installed 45 hydroaugers to drain water out of the hillside. "The augers are permanent, installed 45 feet into the slope, so the soil will drain and the wall doesn't suffer hydrostatic pressure."

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The 22-foot-high, 1,160-foot-long replacement wall took five months to complete.

“The structural concrete part of the wall is 12 inches thick,” Baldwin continues. “Boulderscape crews put on 2 to 6 inches more concrete, then carve it as they go, and then come back and color it. There’s real artistry in it—it now looks like real rock. We never put up mechanically stabilized earth structures; we just pour on concrete walls and Boulderscape does the finish.”

He adds that Boulderscape can create computer-generated samples to help customers envision what the finished wall will look like. “We use them all the time. As for our client, Wal-Mart is thrilled, and the City of Corona likes it, too. Boulderscape is really good at what they do. Their work is very visual and very realistic.”

What You MSE Is What You Get

Mechanically stabilized earth walls may be concrete, albeit in smaller doses. Instead of a large pour of liquid concrete that needs to cure, MSE systems are already “pre-cured” and ready to set up. The likely ancestors of these systems—dry-set or mortared stone walls—long ago served erosion control purposes, but their components were of inconsistent size and volume, they were very labor-intensive, and they were ineffective or useless after a certain height was attained.



Photo: AIS Construction
Pre-construction slope stabilization

However, with all its failings, stone had one thing going for it—it was “natural,” looking much like the surrounding landscape, and people admired it, as it gave them a sense of permanence and solidity. It’s no wonder that many manufacturers of MSE components give their systems stonelike facades.

For example, WestBlock Systems of Tacoma, WA, offers four styles of retaining walls. SahaleeStone, a multicolored block, is available in three sizes and features six faces and three setback settings. These blocks have handholds for ease of installation. Stonewall, a gray, one-sized block, contains a notched channel and is secured with rugged nylon pins, which allows workers to guide the block into place. GravityStone Modular, which works well in a tight residential site, can build structures up to 12 feet tall without geogrid reinforcement. GravityStone MSE, also called “Fat Face,” is a larger version for commercial applications and for walls up to 25 feet.

Soil Retention Products of Carlsbad, CA, also offers a variety of products, including the Verdura retaining wall system. Although it does not simulate a rock face, Verdura’s semicircular gray concrete block allows property owners to plant vegetation inside the block, adding beauty as well as extra soil retention. In time, many installations become lush and totally green—passersby might have no idea that solid Verdura is quietly doing its job in the background. The company’s Candura segmental retaining wall system, a gray, pebble-textured, slightly curved block, creates structures that almost appear to have been “woven.” Candura is also plantable, if desired. As it’s a four-part product system (block, capstone, cornerstone, and stake), Candura’s design allows it to incorporate stairs and seating surfaces. [Next Page >](#)

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