



BROOKLYN NAVY YARD

As NYC's Factories Fade, One Keeps Churning Out Countertops

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By **Curbed Staff** | Jul 15, 2015, 3:35pm EDT

*Even though the city's golden age as an industrial powerhouse has long since ended, some factories remain. **Made in New York** profiles these holdouts, how they operate in the city, and where in the world their goods end up. First up: writer [Oriana Leckert](#) visits IceStone, a countertop-making outfit at the Brooklyn Navy Yard.*



[Factory photos by: Max Touhan]

Deep inside the massive, historic Brooklyn Navy Yard, in a repurposed 19th-century building where maritime plumbing systems were once fabricated, sits a 55,000-square-foot facility dedicated to IceStone.

In a city where rezoning and high costs have pushed out many manufacturers, this **local maker of countertops and other durable surfaces** has held out—a prime example of a business that **hasn't abandoned the five boroughs**.

Although Superstorm Sandy nearly shut down IceStone for good in 2012, the company hired a new CEO and updated several systems. It's now **churning out kitchen essentials**—which end up in places from Boston to Seattle—more smoothly than any other time in its history.



IceStone was founded in **2003** by Brooklyn-born entrepreneurs Miranda Magagnini and Peter Strugatz, who wanted both to **bring manufacturing jobs** to the borough and to

offer a **sustainably made product**—an alternative to those created with petrochemicals or via other environmentally destructive methods.



After Sandy, IceStone updated many of their machines. The new ones are mostly orange, and they were customized to be fully integrated with the older batch, which are almost all yellow.

"Most countertop materials are quarried or mined," said Sarah Corey, IceStone's former marketing director. "And in many cases, working conditions for miners and stone handlers is not regulated."



A slab of "Cobalt Ice."

Seventy percent of IceStone's goods, which mimic an ancient composite style called terrazzo, are made up of glass acquired from U.S.-based industrial recycling facilities. The company **diverts about a million pounds of glass** from the waste stream□which would ordinarily end up in dumps□each year.

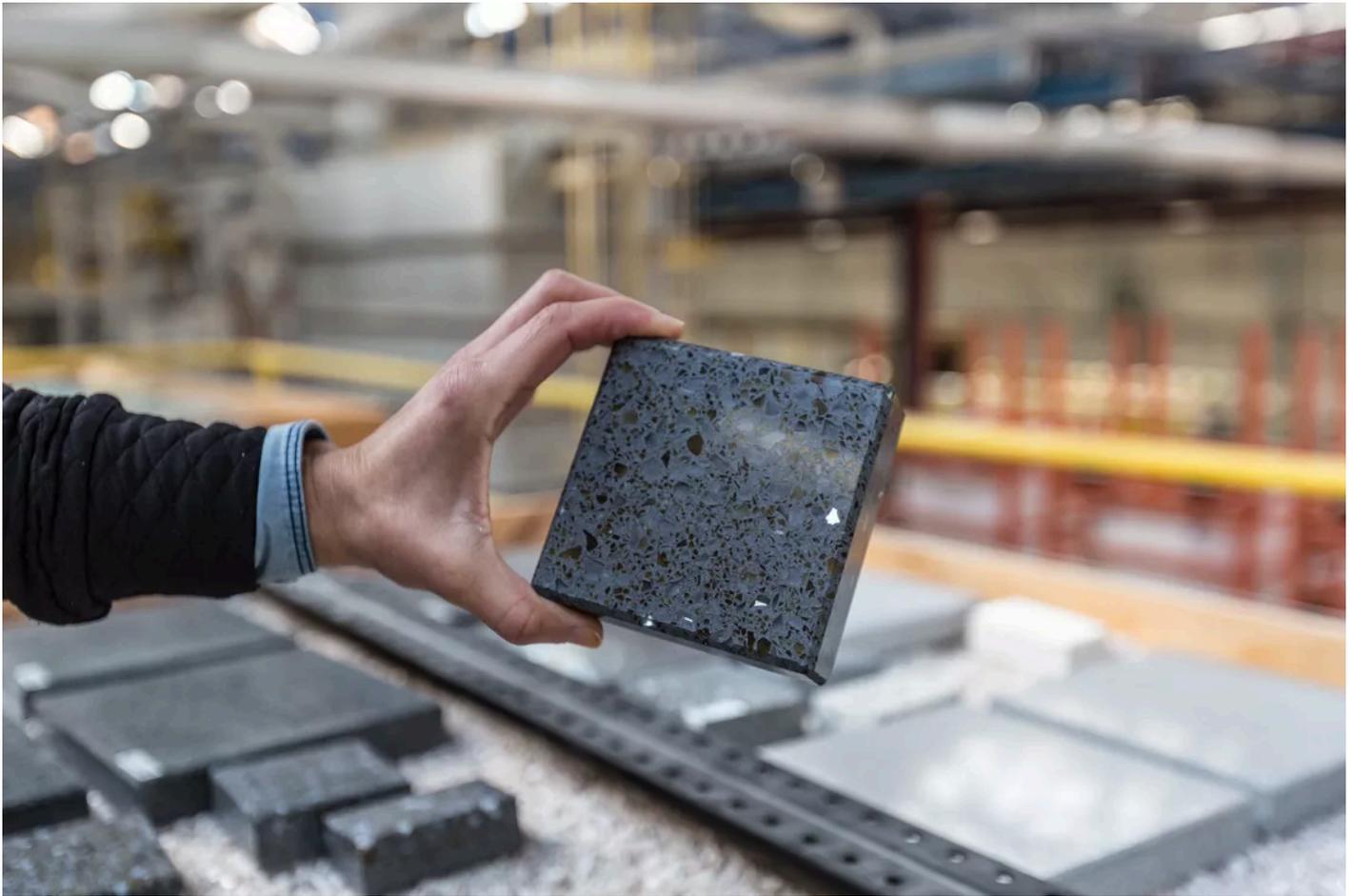


Dozens of "supersacks" of glass line one corner of the factory.

So how does IceStone make a slab that ends up on a counter? First, a **color** is selected. In the warehouse, glass pieces are sorted into supersacks by size and color, and IceStone has 16 different blends in their palate, from **Tuscan Sunset** (yellow concrete studded with red, yellow, and brown glass) to **Gotham Grey** (gray concrete dappled with clear glass and shards of mirror).

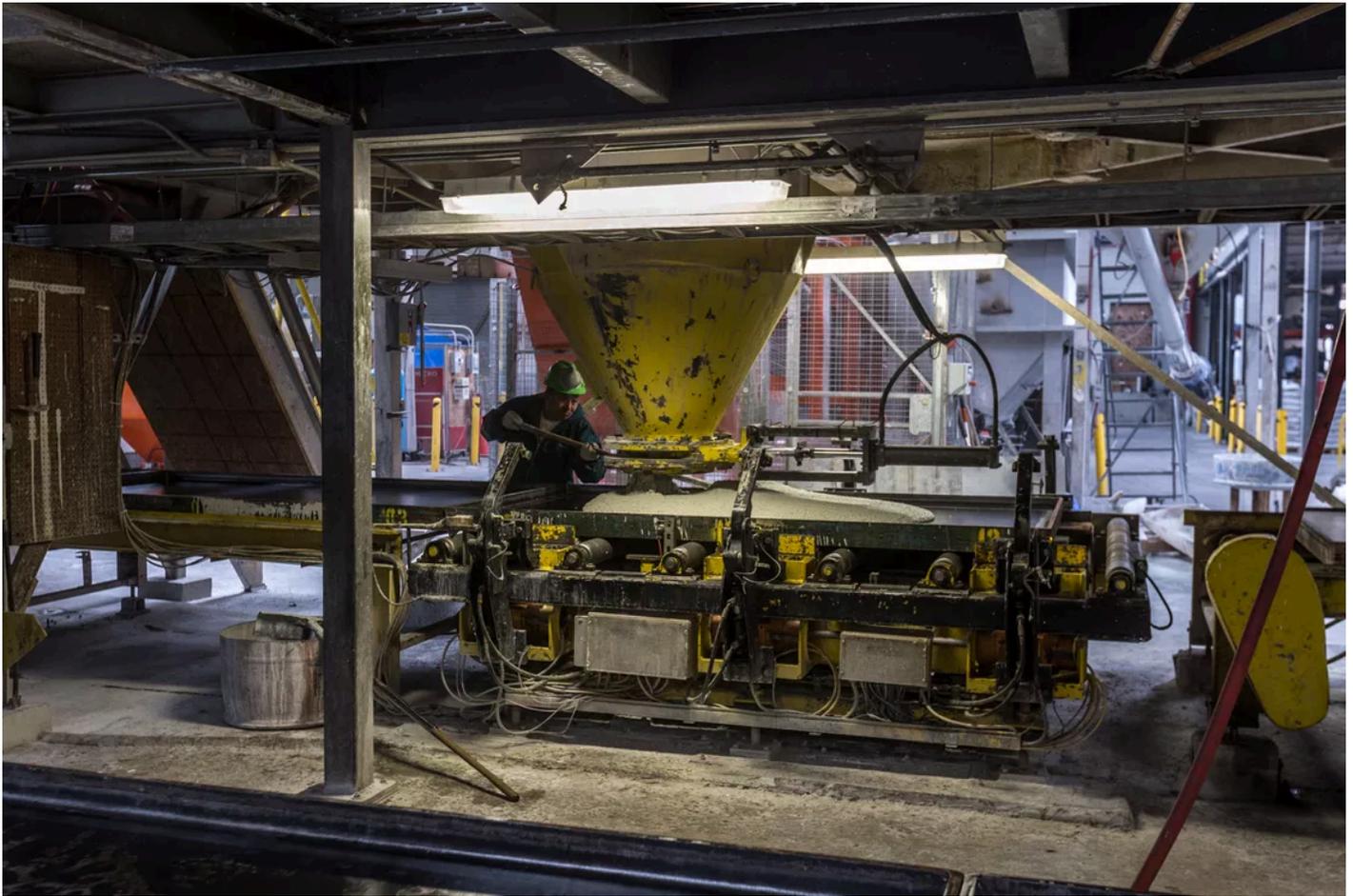


Only diehards could get this excited about countertop colors. "We think Gotham Grey is a perfect representation of the **mystery and sparkle and glamour** of the product," Corey said.



A tiny sample of Gotham Grey, IceStone's newest color.

The glass is then mixed with **concrete and pigment**. "It's very much like baking bread," said Corey. "You have all of your dry ingredients (glass) and your wet ingredients (concrete and water) coming together. The batch pours out with the **consistency of oatmeal or peanut butter.**"



Next, the slab goes into a **kiln** to bake. After that, a forklift lugs the cured slice to the calibrator, which **files and smooths** the edges, and then to the polisher, where the "face" is finally revealed. This is when IceStone staffers can tell whether everything worked. Did the colors mix properly? Is there an even distribution of glass? Check, and check.

After it's polished, any errors in the slab get patched. The patching team inspects every bit of the surface to **find and fill holes** where bits of glass have popped out.



The patching team at work.

Once the holes are filled, each slabs gets two coats of **stone sealer** before it leaves the factory. After all, it's got to be immune to spills.



A finished slab being sorted and readied for sale.

Incorporating recycled material into their products isn't the only way IceStone practices sustainability. All the **water** used to batch, calibrate, polish, and saw slabs is cleaned and pumped back into the factory's systems.



Part of IceStone's water filtration and recycling system.

The building is **lit only by the sun** for the majority of the year, and it uses steam to heat the factory and power the kilns, which cuts down on electricity usage.



The factory is filled with skylights and only needs to use electrical lighting during the shortest days of the year.

IceStone, which has won several environmental awards, even helps other companies go green□ installing their surfaces **contributes to a building's LEED certification**, and dozens of organizations, universities, government buildings, and retail establishments across the country have taken advantage. They've been recognized not only for their **ecotastic credentials** but also for **looking good**. Among other accolades, IceStone products have won the American Society of Interior Design's Bloom Award and Interior Design Magazine's Merit Award. They were on display at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum's 2010 Triennial exhibition, and are installed in the United States Green Building Council's headquarters in Washington, D.C.

IceStone's colorful countertops inhabit offices and homes nationwide, but its top brass cares a lot about where□ and how□ they're made. "Our workers, our customers, our neighbors in the Yard and beyond, are all affected by what we're doing here," Corey said. IceStone has also received accolades for superior employee treatment; the workforce is

nearly 50 percent Tibetan, and IceStone offers free ESL classes, multilingual signage in the factory, and translators during company-wide town hall meetings. In addition, new hires make 35 percent above the local living wage, and more than 40 percent of the management and board members are from minority groups.



The factory's break room has countertops and floors made of imperfect slabs, and employee portraits dot the walls.

It was, in fact, IceStone's employees who spearheaded the company's comeback after **Hurricane Sandy flooded the entire factory** in October 2012, destroying many of the machines. "I said, 'Game over,'" CEO Dal LaMagna told the *Times* in 2013. But "the workers said, 'We can do this.'" Six months after the storm, the waterlogged machines had been meticulously **taken apart, cleaned, and reassembled**. Those that were irreparably damaged had been replaced with more efficient versions, and the factory had resumed production.



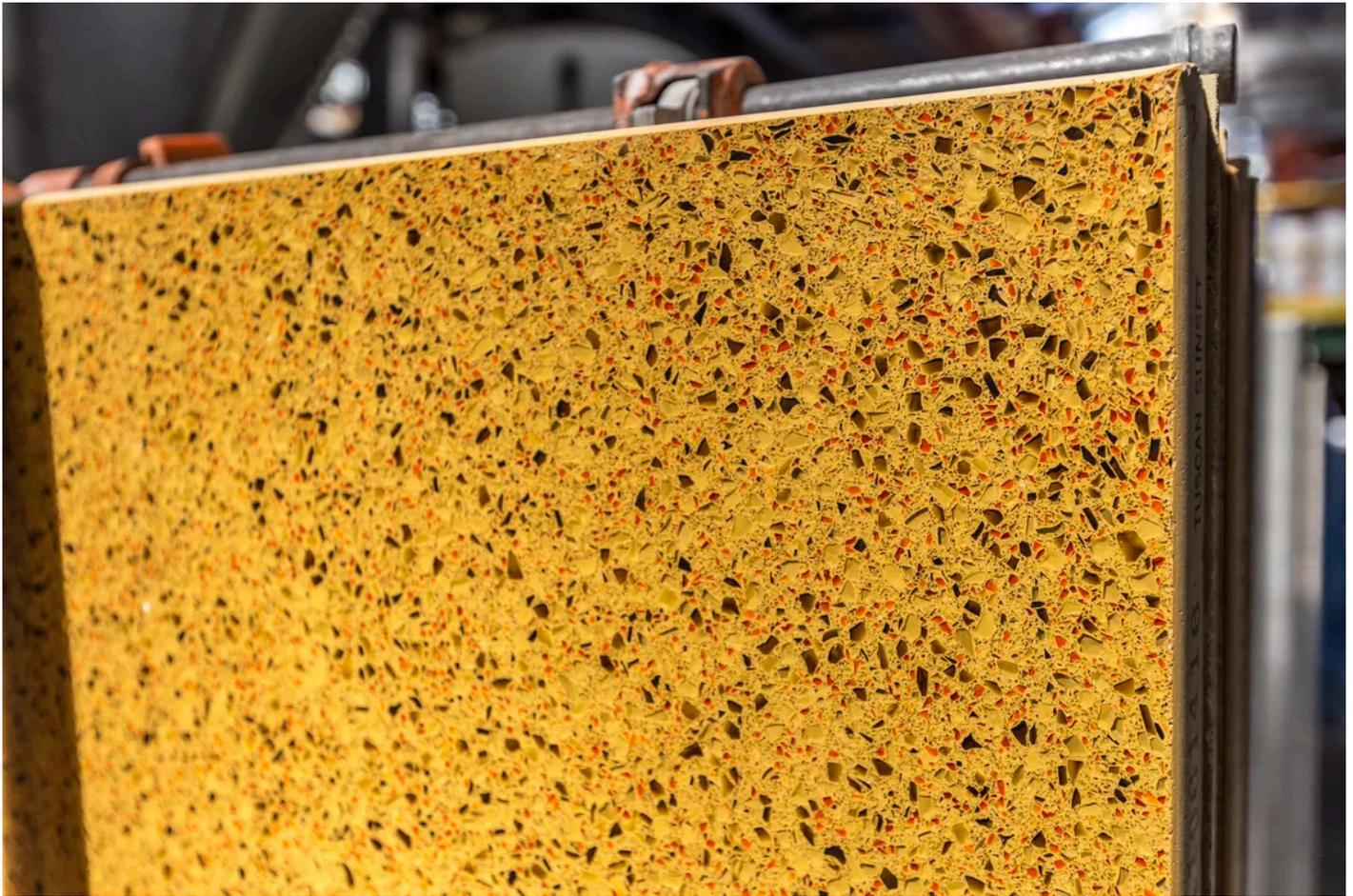
The polisher, which was flooded with more than five feet of water after Sandy.

"With Sandy came an opportunity, as we were cleaning and repairing and rebuilding, to expedite several needed updates," Corey said. In a particularly "Brooklyn" move, one of the ways IceStone brought in revenue during the renovation was to **carve out a half-dozen studios in unused corners of the factory**, which are still rented to artists today.

The majority of IceStone's clients are commercial, including office spaces, retail outlets, healthcare facilities, civic installations, and museums. The company has developed **custom colors for specific clients**, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Starbucks, **Tiffany & Co.**, and YouTube. IceStone countertops can also be found in Boston's Logan Airport, Whole Foods' bathrooms, Equinox locker rooms, and all throughout Bank of America's [Bryant Park skyscraper](#)—just to name a few.



Some of IceStone's custom colors: turquoise for Tiffany; red and pearl for Starbuck's; and grey and pearl for the Gates Foundation. See more slabs at **NASA headquarters**, Starbucks, and Nintendo's Seattle office. Their products are installed in private homes, too—including, by sheer coincidence, this author's parents' kitchen in Northern Virginia. Some of the colors, it should be noted, border on the zany. "Tucson Sunset is kind of a funny child of ours," Corey said. "It's very loud and flamboyant; it's not for every kitchen or bathroom."

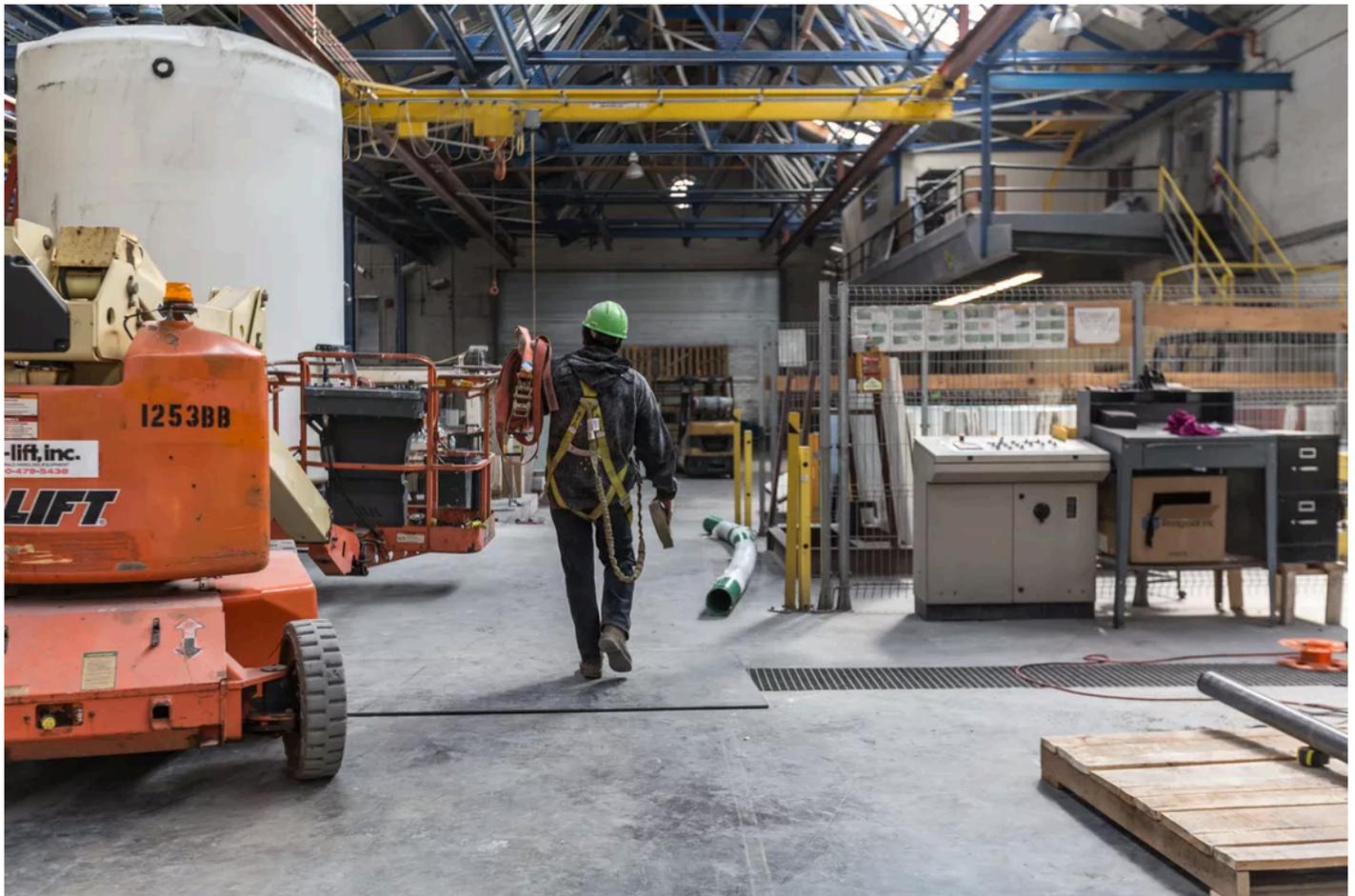


Back to business: although there are challenges to working in a historic Navy Yard factory—particularly heating and circulating air around the cavernous old space—the company has been able to work with Yard owners to make needed renovations, while keeping some of the **original architecture intact**, like the building's beautiful oculus windows.





IceStone employees, in a modern-day nod to the borough's rich-but-waning manufacturing history, show off their "**Brooklyn Made**" kudos from the chamber of commerce. (It sure helps that the borough is now deemed "cool" by worldwide audience.) "We've always been advocates of where we make our products," Corey said. "And these days, it holds **a lot of cachet** for our customers around the country."



□ Oriana is a writer, editor, and cultural hipstorian [sic]. She is the author of *Brooklyn Spaces: 50 Hubs of Culture & Creativity* (Monacelli, 2015) and creatrix of the website of the same name. Her writing has appeared on Slate, Atlas Obscura, Matador, CMJ, Brooklyn Based, Brokelyn, Greenpointers, and more. Follow her at [@orianabklyn](#).

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