What Concrete Floor Finish Do I Need?

TECHNICAL GUIDE 01 | CHOOSING THE RIGHT EXPOSED CONCRETE FINISH

How to choose the right finish

Start with the use—not the aesthetic.

- What will happen on the floor? Foot traffic, forklifts, pallet movement, wet processes, oils, chemicals, or food handling?
- What matters most? Appearance, cleanability, stain resistance, abrasion resistance, downtime, or initial budget?
- Is the slab new or existing? What is known about finishing methods, curing, repairs, moisture, and prior coatings?
- How much variation is acceptable? Does the owner expect uniform color and aggregate exposure?
- Who will maintain the floor, and what cleaning equipment and products will they use?

Polished, Sealed, Grind and Seal- aren't they the same?

Although polished concrete, grind and seal, and sealed concrete can have similar appearances, they are fundamentally different finishes. **Mechanically polished concrete** achieves its appearance and sheen through a series of progressively finer grinding and polishing steps that refine the concrete itself. A densifier is typically applied to increase surface hardness, and a penetrating stain protector may be used, but the finished surface is primarily the concrete rather than a topical coating.

Grind and seal involves mechanically grinding the concrete to achieve the desired appearance or aggregate exposure, then applying a topical sealer, such as epoxy or acrylic, that provides the final sheen and a degree of surface protection.

Sealed or densified concrete generally requires less mechanical refinement and focuses on reducing dusting, hardening the surface, or providing basic protection through penetrating or topical products. The most important distinction is **how the finish is achieved and maintained**: polished concrete relies on mechanical refinement, while grind and seal relies on a topical product that may wear and require reapplication. These differences affect appearance, durability, maintenance, and long-term cost.

What Concrete Finish is Best?

Will your floor be exposed to frequent aggressive chemicals, thermal shock, persistent wet service, or demanding sanitation?

YES → **Evaluate a purpose-designed resinous system outside the four finishes in this guide.**

NO

Is the goal a refined, decorative concrete appearance with long-term mechanical wear performance?

YES → **Polished Concrete.** Confirm slab quality, desired aggregate exposure, appearance tolerance, and maintenance plan.

NO

Is moderate stain and penetration protection needed?

YES

Will there be ongoing forklift traffic or increase water exposure?

YES → **Grind and Seal: Epoxy**
Confirm slab quality and relative humidity.

NO → **Grind and Seal: Acrylic**
Confirm slab quality.

NO → **Polished Concrete to a low grit or Densify**
Confirm slab quality, expectations for sheen and aggreagte exposure, staining, and existing slab defects.

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System Overview

System	Process	Use and benefit	When not to use
Polished Concrete	Progressive mechanical refinement of the concrete surface	High traffic or decorative areas. Indefinite life expectancy. Hard and Durable surface. No chemical resistance.	Not a good choice when the floor will experience frequent aggressive chemical spills, where a uniform color or aggregate exposure is required, or where the existing slab has extensive patches or inconsistent finishing that the owner will not accept visually.
Grind & Seal: Epoxy	Mechanical grinding followed by a thin, clear, epoxy coating	Warehouse, manufacturing. Lifespan varies by environment. Provides some chemical and penetrative resistance. Will amber the floor.	Avoid when UV exposure or color stability is important (standard clear epoxies can amber), when moisture conditions exceed the selected product's limits, or where heavy abrasion, hot tires, thermal shock, or chemical exposure exceed the performance of a thin-film system.
Grind & Seal: Acrylic	Mechanical grinding followed by an acrylic coating	Warehouse, manufacturing. Lifespan varies by environment. Provides light penetrative resistance until spills can be cleaned.	Avoid where sustained forklift abrasion, frequent wet cleaning, standing liquids, aggressive chemicals, or long-term resistance to oil and staining are critical. Acrylic films can wear and need renewal.
Sealed / densified concrete	Cleaning or limited preparation, plus penetrating densifier and/or sealer	Hardens the concrete and dustproofs the surface. Good for warehousing.	Not appropriate when a decorative, uniformly exposed aggregate finish is expected; when significant stain or chemical protection is needed; or when the existing slab is badly worn, contaminated, or needs substantial repair. Densifiers reduce dusting but do not create a waterproof or chemical-resistant barrier.

These are general distinctions, not guarantees. Moisture, traffic, contaminants, substrate quality, and manufacturer requirements can change the recommendation.

Frequently asked questions

If it shines, is it polished?

No. Topical coatings and guards can create sheen. Ask what process produced the finish and whether a film-forming product provides the final surface.

Does grinding automatically mean polished concrete?

No. Grinding can be one step in polishing, surface preparation for a coating, or part of a grind-and-seal system.

Can a grind-and-seal floor look like polished concrete?

Yes, sometimes. Similar initial appearance does not make the systems equivalent in wear, repair, maintenance, or lifecycle costs.

Which system is cheapest?

There is no universal answer. Compare the full scope: slab preparation, repair, desired exposure, product selection, installation time, access, protection, and long-term maintenance. On a new slab, Clean and Densify is the low end and Polishing is the top tier.

Can either system hide cracks and patches?

Neither inherently hides concrete defects. Grinding can expose repairs; clear finishes can emphasize color differences. Review repair appearance and expectations before work begins.

References and further reading

ASCC Concrete Polishing Council (CPC), Polished Concrete Technical Documents: https://ascconline.org/Polishing/Technical

See the CPC Appearance Chart, Aggregate Exposure Chart, and CPC position statements on slab protection, subcontract coordination, surface density, and repairs. For project-specific criteria, consult current manufacturer technical data and applicable project specifications. The ACI 310.1-20 specification is a separately available paid resource and is not reproduced here.

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