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Tile Gains Footing All Over



If you've been keeping an eye on the ground beneath your feet, you may have noticed an explosion of pattern. It can be seen in public spaces like the Manhattan restaurant L'Amico, designed by Crème; and the Hotel Van Zandt in Austin, Tex., designed by Mark Zeff. And in private spaces, too, like the New York apartment of the actors Naomi Watts and Liev Schreiber, designed by Ashe & Leandro and featured earlier this year in Architectural Digest.

What all these spaces have in common is flooring made from encaustic cement tile, a material that has been produced in a multitude of colors and patterns since the 19th century, but which was relatively uncommon in the United States until a few years ago. Now its striking look and chalky matte texture are catching on, and a growing number of manufacturers are giving the product a contemporary update.

Caitlin and Samuel Dowe-Sandes, an American couple who founded the cement tile company Popham Design in 2007, recalled the moment they discovered the material after moving to Morocco. "We were instantly taken with the medium and the possibilities," Ms. Dowe-Sandes said. "The U.S. doesn't have the same history with the product that Europe does, where you sometimes see 150-year-old cement tile floors."

After buying a house in Marrakesh, they began designing their own cement tiles for a renovation and had a realization: "If we think these are so cool," Ms. Dowe-Sandes said, "maybe other people will also."



They were right. “It has been taking off, especially in the U.S.,” she said, and sales have been growing by about 40 percent a year. The company opened its first independent boutique in Paris last year; in the United States, Popham’s products are available through Ann Sacks, and Popham is in the early stages of planning an American outpost.

Among Popham’s fans is David Neff, 40, a Brooklyn-based architect. After he and his brothers bought a weekend house in Quogue, N.Y., last fall, he put patterned cement tile at the top of his renovation wish list. “Popham Design has about 100 patterns and 100 colors, and it’s made to order, so you can assign any color to any pattern,” Mr. Neff said. “I spent days staying up until 4 or 5 a.m., playing with different patterns and color combinations on my computer.”

He also liked the tile’s texture. “There’s a trend away from glossy, shiny surfaces, and toward matte surfaces, and this fits right in,” he said. “It feels nice on the feet, and has a little more grip.”

Mr. Neff used eight patterns to cover the kitchen backsplash, a fireplace surround and the floors and accent walls in three full bathrooms and a half-bath, spending about \$20 to \$25 a square foot. “I could have done simple white subway tile for a fraction of that, but I did the math and figured I’d be spending an additional \$12,000 that would really take the house to another level,” he said. “It’s one of the places I decided to splurge, to give the house more character.”



Popham is just one of many companies offering cement tile to American consumers. Others include Cement Tile Shop, Clé, Exquisite Surfaces, Granada Tile, Mosaic House, Villa Lagoon Tile and Waterworks. And as more companies seek to develop patterns of their own, the designer pile-on has been fierce.

Clé has introduced a line featuring patterns by artists and designers like Erica Tanov, Gachot and Smink Things. Ann Sacks has developed a line with Martyn Lawrence Bullard, a designer whose clients include Elton John and Tommy Hilfiger. And the hugely popular design firm Commune, whose projects include Ace Hotels in Los Angeles and Palm Springs, Calif., introduced one collection with Exquisite Surfaces and has a second in the works.

As Roman Alonso, a founder of Commune, explained: “Cement tile communicates something completely different than ceramic tile: It’s a vibe that’s more Mediterranean. We like it a lot because you can also use it indoor-outdoor” — with kitchens flowing seamlessly into outdoor patios.

But simply getting your hands on it doesn’t guarantee a beautiful floor. Cement tile is a very different product from ceramic tile, said Deborah Osburn, who founded Clé in Sausalito, Calif., four years ago, and sells the tile for about \$10 to \$30 a square foot. It’s made in a different way, and has to be handled in a different way — a point that contractors who haven’t encountered it before may not understand.



Ceramic tile usually has a layer of glaze on top and is impervious after being fired at a high temperature in a kiln. Cement tile is cured at room temperature, not fired, and the colored layer on top, usually about an eighth of an inch thick, is porous.

It's critical that cement tile be sealed after installation, much as marble countertops are, and kept clean until then. "One consideration we deal with constantly," Ms. Osburn said, "is inexperienced contractors who'll slap the grout all over the tile, which can stain the surface."

And even after it's sealed, she continued, cement tile will develop a patina, a change that some homeowners appreciate more than others. For those who don't, the tiles can be sanded and resealed, a process similar to refinishing a hardwood floor.

Erna Akuginow, 66, and Geoffrey Haines-Stiles, 67, saw for themselves how installation can go awry after they and their architect chose cement tile for their kitchen during the renovation of their Jersey City loft last year. The tile, from the Cement Tile Shop, set them back about \$4,300 (or about \$15 a square foot).



“You need an installer who’s familiar with it,” said Ms. Akuginow, who produces science documentaries with Mr. Haines-Stiles. “Our guys were not.” When they were done, the new floor looked “gloppy,” she said.

Hoping it wasn’t ruined, they had the installers return, strip the floor and reapply the sealer. This fixed the problem. Now Ms. Akuginow and Mr. Haines-Stiles couldn’t be happier with their choice. “We like the look of it: It’s modern, but not too shiny or glitzy,” Ms. Akuginow said, adding that it’s also comfortable underfoot.

“I’ve lived in a lot of different houses, and had a lot of different things on the floor,” she said, including wood and granite, but no other material has been as pleasing.

A word of warning: For homeowners concerned about resale value, boldly patterned or colored cement tile may not be the best choice, said Tony Sargent, an associate broker at CORE real estate.

“As a creative person, I want to say, ‘It’s really cool,’ ” Mr. Sargent said. “But as a broker, I want to say, ‘Be cautious, and use it in a way that it could be changed at a reasonable cost’ ” — in a small, well-defined space, for example, like a powder room or a foyer.

Mr. Sargent said the material has been turning up in Brooklyn townhouses, and that he has worked with buyers who found it charming. But not everyone has that reaction.

“Buyers are either going to love it or hate it,” he said. “And if they hate it, you’re done.”