

CIB PUBLIC RELATIONS

Project: Feature for Building Products

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THE TILE REVOLUTION

If you thought ceramic tiles were just for bathrooms and kitchens, think again. The new generation of porcelain products are extending the range of this traditional material, and offering specifiers a plethora of new options. Javier Soriano, Head of Foreign Trade Promotion at ASCER; the Association of Spanish Tile Manufacturers takes a quick look at what's about.

Porcelain (or fully vitrified) tiles are relatively new version of traditional ceramic material. They are characterized by the fact that they are fired at a much higher temperature than other ceramic tiles, producing a tile that is stronger and less porous. The effect of this difference is what gives the products such a diversity of use.

The strength of porcelain tiles makes them ideal for flooring – even in the most challenging and high traffic areas. Because the surface of the tile is very strong it does not have to be glazed: just like natural stone the surface can be polished to give a medium or high sheen finish. Since the tile has the same texture and colour throughout, there can be no wear of the surface appearance, which is easily repolished if necessary.

This characteristic makes porcelain a high performance equivalent to natural stone, but with one significant advantage. Many natural stones such as marble or limestone are porous and therefore susceptible to staining: once stained there is little remedial action possible as the stain spreads through the body of the tile. Porcelain tiles simply do not have this problem – which makes them a very low maintenance option for entertainment areas and receptions that have heavy wear but need to keep their looks.

The aesthetic design of modern porcelain products is helping to challenge the stranglehold of natural stone products for high-prestige areas. Faithful imitations of a full range of natural stone are possible, producing effects that are almost impossible to distinguish from their inspiration. Fully rectified tiles (with completely right-angled edges) help the illusion as the tiles can be laid directly against each other without the traditional grout line between tiles.

Having said all that, there is an argument to say that porcelain products will not really have grown up until colours, textures and designs that celebrate the flexibility and huge range of decorative possibilities of the material in its own right are exploited more fully. Not surprisingly, the UK is rather behind in the exploration of such possibilities, but with the dynamism of the continental manufacturers it cannot be long before building owners and designers become more adventurous.

It is not just in the prestigious, high profile reception areas that porcelain tiles can come into their own. As the UK gradually accepts that carpet is not necessarily the epitome of style and comfort, so ceramic tiles of all descriptions are gaining ground. In the UK, where access floors are an almost ubiquitous feature of office buildings the development of a

system using porcelain tiles is a welcome addition. Access floors are possible because of the mechanical strength of large format porcelain tiles, making the construction of a floor system a practical option.

For external environments it is the frost-resistant characteristic that is most appealing. All porcelain tiles, because of their extremely low water content, are inherently frost resistant, allowing designers to provide a visual continuity from interior to exterior by the use of the same flooring material. The weather-proof nature of the product has also allowed the development of building facades made entirely of porcelain tiles: many tile manufacturers now provide complete cladding systems and such facades are a common sight in continental Europe.

Ceramic tiles are not complicated either to specify or install. However, it is important that the different characteristics of the individual types of tile are considered as their performance varies. This is most critical when it comes to the application process. Traditional tiling adhesives rely on the porosity of the ceramic tile to form a bond so are simply not appropriate for porcelain tiles. The adhesives industry has responded with a range of products developed specifically to meet this need, but the specifier needs to check that the right products are being used.

All these technologies have been fully explored in continental Europe where countries such as Spain and Italy have a long tradition of ceramic tile use. However, there is a steady rise in the quantity of ceramic tiles being imported into the UK and we see this as evidence that British designers are beginning to understand the advantages of this hugely diverse group of products. The development of porcelain tiles is just one more contribution to this process, but one that allows tiles to be specified with even greater freedom.

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