

PORCELAIN STEPS UP — AND OUT

Let us celebrate a surface material that in this country, at least, is perhaps underutilized and misunderstood.

It's porcelain tile, and the more it reveals itself, the more you may wonder why it hasn't been a consistent go-to selection for use in the home.

To be sure, some purists gravitate to the real thing -- stone or wood -- for their countertop or flooring choices. Other modernists may even prefer the stark aesthetic of concrete. And those who aren't afraid of brazen color may opt for fashion-forward hues like apple green glass, tangerine quartz or hot pink glazed ceramic.

But guess what? Porcelain is a great pretender. It can mimic the likes of marble, wood, even fabric. It also offers other unique looks with amazing textural and format range, as well as wonderfully nuanced palettes. And the price is right, with an average entry of \$5 to \$10 per square foot, although there's a considerable price range, just as there is with natural stone and other tiles.

Although high-style porcelain tiles get good press in design magazines, there's still a bit of confusion about what the material is. In fact, it is technically a ceramic tile. Porcelain tile is composed of clays and minerals, namely, feldspar. A full-body tile, porcelain offers through-and-through color, not just a surface coating. Powdery pigments can be added to create depth, perhaps even metallic sprinkles for a shimmery sheen. The surface can be polished or glazed.

What sets porcelain tile apart is its water absorption -- 0.5 percent or less. So in spite of its fragile-sounding name, porcelain tile is not as delicate as a dainty teacup. Not only is it sturdy, it's tougher than granite. Because of the reduced porosity, most porcelain is frost resistant, so it can be used even outdoors in climates where freezing is an issue. In Europe, porcelain tile is not uncommonly used to clad buildings; a recent product development is porcelain lap siding. Porcelain photovoltaic tile integrates solar cells for roof installations.

If that's not enough, as a natural product the medium is eco-friendly, and a good number of Italian, Spanish and American manufacturers are doing their best to recycle when they can -- both pre- and post-production.

In addition to its naturally hygienic properties (porcelain tile resists mold, mildew and bacteria), antimicrobial features can actually be added to the



production process. A limestone-look porcelain will not be stained by red wine or mustard, etched by lemon, or fade in the sun. Best of all, porcelain tile is easy to maintain and keep clean.

Thanks to some eye-popping introductions at recent design trade shows in the U.S., Spain and Italy, it's clear that porcelain is the hot design medium. And the coolest thing about it is that it offers designers plenty of creative inspiration due to ever-evolving technology. Yet as high-definition digital printing allows the most realistic graphics and textures, many manufacturers still strive to produce a tile that looks like it's hand-made.

There are an amazing array of styles to suit all tastes, from traditional to contemporary, for paving and cladding well beyond the kitchen and bath. Much of the explosion in design is a result of super-thin tile (as slim as 3 millimeters) in larger, almost slab-like formats. This allows application over existing flooring, which results in huge savings in remodeling costs.

The tiniest mosaics called "tesserae" (now mostly set on sheets at least one square foot for easier installation) have graduated to larger grids, while subway tiles have morphed down to skinny "listello" applications or substantial rectangles, and a range of shapes like honeycomb, fish scale and octagons give a boost to the imagination.

So, too, has texture. Lively surface variations lend a tactile experience that can be smooth as silk to craggy as a cheese grater. In porcelain, there are linen, burlap, lace and damask fabric lookalikes; leather, smoothed and embossed; skins such as crocodile and ostrich; and even woods. Early wood-alikes now are even more detailed, with different species depicted, au naturel or with a "stained" finish, some with rough-sawn surfaces that resemble just-cut lumber.

Mockability, of course, has for some time extended to stones such

as marble, granite and slate. But earlier examples were not as convincing as those introduced today. Ink-jet printing has tweaked the process, and the best examples no longer look like bad pictures of marble or slate, but emulate the veining, markings and subtleties of color, hone or polish exceedingly well. Ditto for pock-marked concrete and steel pretenders, a delight for those who favor urban industrial chic.

Much of the desire to perfect stone and wood looks is due to the organic trends so embraced in home design. The fact that most porcelain tile is suitable for outdoor use has opened the door to a true continuity from the indoors to decks, terraces and around swimming pools.

Nature themes also show up in patterns, with flowers and foliage ever-popular motifs. A French manufacturer, K1s recently introduced a striking tile, whose sprinkling of small leaves startle not only because their apple green hue pops against a stark white stucco-like background, but because they actually are 3-D.

Large-scale florals continue to evolve, in a tone-on-tone, gloss-on-matte depiction that's engaging but not as in-your-face as full-out color. Digital technology also produces superb large-scale graphics. Whether it's uber-sized fish and octopi from the Italian company Ceramica Sant'Agostino or zebras and elephants from Settecento's Dunes collection, a feature wall reads like art, possibly as a gigantic etching or line drawing. Also from Settecento: black and white urban landscapes, one punctuated with red buses, the other with yellow cabs.

For those who prefer more linear patterns, there are plenty of geometric shapes, sometimes in fetching op-art looks, boldest in simple black and white.

The range in formats, scale, finishes and hues that porcelain tiles offer today encourages thinking outside the box. In fact, some of the most sophisticated installations combine different scales and even shapes, contrasting honed and high gloss in a monochromatic color scheme. The neutral gray and chocolate tones seem most fresh, in tune with fashion runways, especially those that complement the grainy, weathered lighter woods currently popular in home design.

From edgy to elegant, subdued to sassy, whatever surfaces you choose, porcelain tile has most design bases covered.