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A New Breed of Tiles Climbs the Walls

The latest home-decor trend: Tiles for living spaces beyond the bath

By HEIDI MITCHELL



Moris Moreno

Paint Schmaint: Hal Philipps used limestone tile in his Miami Beach, Fla., home behind his Louise Nevelson sculpture.

Tiles are moving into the living room and even the bedroom.

They are being used as accent walls and headboards, fireplace flues and partitions. In some instances, tiles are even taking the place of art, occupying entire walls with customized mosaics and 3-D panels.

The look is part of a backlash against years of minimalism in interior design. First came textured wallpaper and fabrics for walls and now tiles are becoming popular to add color and interest.

Advances in technology that allow laser cutting and printing, as well as rapid prototyping of dimensional tiles in small batches, have enabled designers to create



Inhabit Inc.

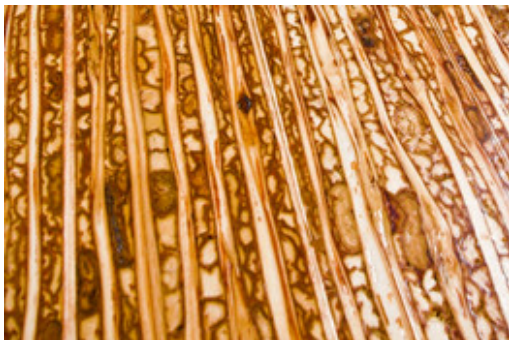
Indianapolis-based home-furnishings company Inhabit makes lightweight wall tiles, specifically for use in 'dry' rooms, like living rooms and bedrooms.



Wood tiles from Kirei USA

tiles that look like concrete "down to the stains," he says.

The U.S. ceramic-tile market grew 8.4% in the first quarter of 2013 over the same period last year, according to the Tile Council of North America, a trade association.



More wood tiles from Kirei USA

Because tiles can now be made quickly in many materials and cut thin for use on residential accent walls, dozens of companies are adding to the array of tile types available. Brooklyn, N.Y.-based Scott Daniel Strickstein, who trained as a sculptor, found a way to fuse metal with ceramic, two materials that he says were previously incompatible due to differing shrinkage rates when heated.

a wide range of styles at lower prices.

Retired banker Hal Philipps, 53 years old, fell in love with a limestone that had veins of rust running through it, but didn't know where it would go in his Miami Beach, Fla., apartment. Mishi Hosono of Koko Architecture + Design suggested they "paper" one 25-foot-long wall in the stone, fabricated into tiles, and put Mr. Philipps's 8-by-8-foot Louise Nevelson abstract sculpture in front of it.

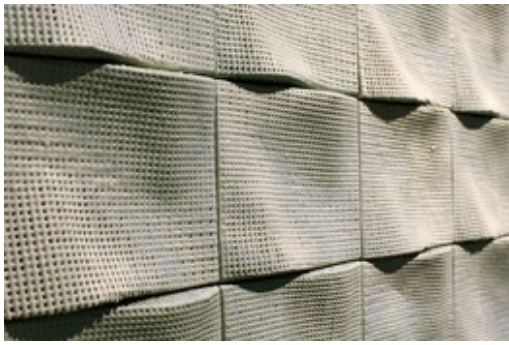
"I was like, are you crazy? I come from a contemporary art background, and art always goes on a white wall," Mr. Philipps recalls thinking.

But after seeing a rendering, Mr. Philipps went for it. "And now you could not have a better setting for that Nevelson," he says.

Koko Architecture partner Adam Weintraub also used tiles in Mr. Philipps's New York apartment, on an interior wall that framed a window into another room. That wall's edge-cut stone tiles, as opposed to natural edges, give "gravity, depth and warmth that you couldn't get from even wood," says Mr. Weintraub. In his own loft, Mr. Weintraub installed Spanish porcelain

"Now you see tile used on walls and headboards coming up more than ever," says Janet Arden, editor of TileDealer, a blog published by the Ceramic Tile Distributor Association, the international association of ceramic and related tile distributors based in Glen Ellyn, Ill. "You can get tiles that look like stone or wood and not every fifth tile looks the same as paper would ... It's not just that slick ceramic anymore," she says. Wood looks are the biggest sellers right now, Ms. Arden says, but high-definition laser-printed porcelain and textured styles are catching up.

His CMesh tiles, which made their debut in May, look like speakers dipped in paint, with an appealing cracking effect. Mr. Strickstein charges around \$350 per square foot, and says his tiles are sculptural



Scott Daniel Design

CMesh tiles from Scott Daniel Design fuse metal with ceramic.

installations. "In a small space, say 10 square feet, in a bedroom or entryway or somewhere intimate, it can liven up a space," he says.

Inspired by the centuries-old domed mosques in the Middle East, Eric Weil of custom-concrete design studio OSO Industries, along with architects Benjamin Sandell, Geoff Sosebee, and Brooklyn's Situ Studio, devised a system of three concrete triangle tiles and their mirrors that interlock into geometric patterns. Called Aperiodix, their tiles are created through a computer program titled Grasshopper, which can digitally map infinite, non-repeating patterns.

"We play with the geometry as we're planning, not only connecting corners and lines and dots, but also depth and elevation," says architect Aleksey Lukyanov, one of the creators at Situ Studios. Each concrete tile triangle is about 20 inches long, in order to keep the weight and heft down.

Tile on walls presents a challenge. Some designers complain that it is hard to align the edges. Others say tiles risk going out of style quickly. Heavy tiles won't work on insubstantial walls. Some architects say that using a lot of grout—in mosaics, for example—can increase chances of hard-to-remove staining. Tiles can look great on a ceiling, but gravity can take its toll; nails are essential, making installation tricky. Many interior designers, nonetheless, are excited at the possibilities these new tiles bring.



Some interior designers point to the renovation of Gio Ponti's 1961 Parco dei Principi Hotel in Sorrento, Italy, as inspiring the trend.

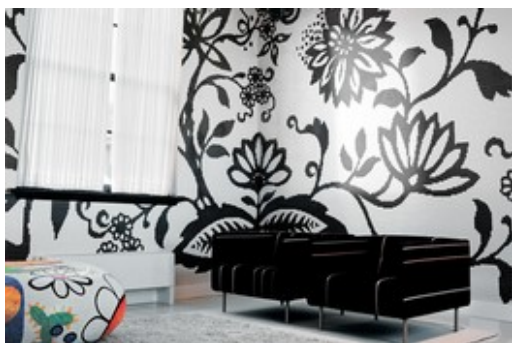
Katie Deedy, founder of Brooklyn, N.Y., wallpaper-design firm Grow House Grow, recently shifted much of her business to making custom encaustic tiles, a style of tile in which the color and geometric pattern come not from a glaze but from longer-lasting inlaid pigment.

She can produce batches of just a few tiles since each is handmade and hydraulically pressed by hand, unlike the two-roll minimum for her silk-screened wallpapers. "I've seen them on ceilings, on movable furniture, as headboards," she says. One hundred square feet of encaustic tiles cost just over \$3,100. Ms. Deedy's wallpapers run about \$600 for the same space. "But the

tile will last forever," she says.

In Florida, tiles have been used for flooring and exterior walls for generations—tiles, after all, retain cool temperatures. Even there, designers are finding new applications. Bobby Silverman, founder of Alsio Design, recently installed a fireplace flue with his Silver Versailles tiles, a sort of bubbled, 3-D ceramic surface. "There is something about having a surface that is reflective and complex, that seems to be visually engaging, that captures people's attention," Mr. Silverman says. One of his recent clients, Stacy Kalmanson, a lawyer near Orlando, agrees. "The fireplace is now like a work of art," Ms. Kalmanson says of the addition to her contemporary home.

One of the largest manufacturers of glass tiles, Bisazza, uses computers to translate any photograph into a glass-tile mosaic. The Vicenza, Italy, company recently



A pattern by Marcel Wanders in tiles by Bisazza

launched an app to allow clients to do the same on their own. It has also developed a particular grout for use in mosaics. About 25% of Bisazza's sales are now tile mosaics.

Bisazza recently joined with major designers to create mosaic-tile lines, such as Marcel Wanders's giant flower pattern he devised for a home in Amsterdam.

"We now create designs for a number of projects which use tile innovatively," says Mr. Wanders. "This could be in bedrooms, for instance, where flourish can be added

to walls, but also in other parts of the home."

A version of this article appeared August 21, 2013, on page D1 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Bath and Beyond: Tiles Find a Home in the Living Room.

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