



Patricia Arquiola for Mutina

CEMENT TILES FOR THE PRESENT

Paula Agius

When I walk into a house and see floors covered in traditional patterned cement tiles, I am full of nostalgia and memories of Saturday afternoon tea at my grandmother's. Every room had cement tiles in different colours and patterns that changed from room to room: pink, brown, red, yellow, all in one tile. They were colours you wouldn't normally use together, but in a tile they worked, and altogether, they were appealing (and still are). The method of laying them with an elaborate border and central pattern created the effect of a permanent carpet.

Today, these tiles are trending yet again. Whereas only a few years ago they would be ripped out and replaced with something contemporary when old houses were done up for new use, now they are carefully polished and, if they have to be, lifted out one by one, cleaned, re-laid and polished. Missing tiles are made to order and replaced.

The increased demand means that the workshops which make these tiles are newly busy. They are also cooperating with customers on the creation of new patterns and combinations of colours which some very pleasing results. The designs are turned into a pattern which is in turn used to make the brass template that is used to make the tiles. And the tiles themselves are now made in different shapes, too, not just the standard 20cm square. There are different geometric shapes: hexagons, diamonds, and triangles. Interior designers and architects are also moving away from the traditional layout of using a border on the periphery of block of patterned tiles.



Andrea Falkner for Paola Navone

The Italian architectural firm Grooppo renovated a 19th-century house and defined each room with a different flooring pattern, mainly using blocks of colour in a hexagon shaped tile. Interior designer Paola Navona combined a random array of black, white and grey hexagon-shaped tiles with reclaimed wood flooring, defining the dining room in the vast room that was once part of a farmhouse.

Even ceramic tile manufacturers are producing high end patterned tiles that are evidently inspired by the traditional patterned cement tiles. The fact that they are ceramic and not cement allows them to be used on walls in kitchens and bathrooms, and they are also more practical for kitchen floors generally as cement tiles can be too absorbent in the first years and soak up stains.

Cement tiles are often wrongly called encaustic tiles, but encaustic tiles are something quite different, though they were patterned too. They came before cement tiles, which were a 19th-century invention. Encaustic tiles were made of pigmented clay and fired in a kiln. They were hugely popular in Europe, Latin America and the USA. But production of cement tiles could only begin after the development of Portland cement and the hydraulic press. They were first made in the south of France near the country's first Portland cement factory, and the Maltese names for the process of making them are clearly corruptions of the French. Old houses in the south of France used these tiles, and they were also used extensively in French-influenced North Africa, particularly in Algeria, which was French, and in Tunisia.

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T&F TILES



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France was the epicentre of decorative tile design, and French colonies elsewhere than North Africa also used these tiles: Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos were heavily influenced by French design. The Saigon Central Post Office in Vietnam was design by Gustav Eiffel, he of the world-famous symbol of Paris, and the floor is a mosaic of different patterns with the same colour palette.

Popham Design in Morocco still makes encaustic tiles using traditional methods and contemporary designs, with a vast array of pigments. The Italian ceramic tile company Mutina have collaborated with designer and architect Patricia Urquiola to reinvent the 'cement' tile (these tiles are ceramic) and have come up with a collection called Azulej, which is actually and rather confusingly the Portuguese word for patterned encaustic tiles. The entire collection is in white, grey and black, with 27 patterns that are a reinterpretation of the traditional hydraulic cement tiles. The base colours used allow the different patterns to complement each other while creating a unique composition.

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