

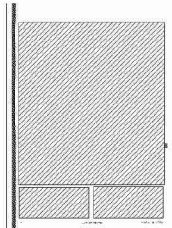
Wood, fabric and leather looks, intricate textures and glazes dominate the show. ■ By Darius Helm

COVERINGS 2008



Pure, a porcelain tile by Level, Marrazzi's new U.S. made brand.

Coverings, held this year in Orlando from April 29 to May 2, featured 1,200 exhibitors from over 50 countries showcasing cutting edge ceramic tile and stone design. About 35,000 attendees visited the trade show, down from nearly 37,000 at last year's show in Chicago but up nearly 4% from two years ago in Orlando. Next year's show will be in Chicago.



Despite the residential slowdown in the U.S. market and a big drop in imported tile over the last year, the ceramic tile exhibitors were out in full force with an incredible variety of products, proving more than ever before that ceramic and porcelain have limitless design possibilities.

DESIGN TRENDS

Today's ceramic and porcelain tile bear little resemblance to what the industry offered even a decade ago. Over the last few years, technological developments and bold design directions have transformed the tile business. Ten years ago, no one could have imagined tile that looks like leather, linen, oxidized metal plates and hardwood, never mind the convincing marble, granite, slate and travertine designs that are often indistinguishable from the real thing.

This year's offering reflected both ongoing long term trends as well as new and innovative design directions. Large format tiles continue to gain in popularity, as do rectified porcelain tiles. For the commercial market, there was plenty of unglazed through-body porcelain, with its high performance and strong maintenance profile, along with color-body glazed porcelains, high design tiles and stunning stone looks.

Stone looks were also strong in residential products, though the rustic, chipped look has largely vanished. Color palettes for residential products remain largely earth tone based, though there's a movement toward darker, richer tones like moody charcoals as well as toward undertones in more clarified colors. Plenty of the European manufacturers showcased tiles in rich, vivid hues, including oranges, greens and blues, but whether they'll gain traction in the conservative U.S. residential market is another matter.

Some of the most eye-catching ceramics came in the form of listellos, borders, accent pieces and mosaics, including metallic and glass inserts with the glint of gems and precious metals. Glass floor tiles were also attracting a lot of attention.

One clear trend is toward outdoor tiles, or collections of indoor/outdoor tiles with designs featuring different surface textures. There were more slip resistant tiles at the show than ever before. The movement toward outdoor tiles is driven by two trends—on the residential side, people are extending their living space to decks and poolsides, and even building outdoor kitchens, and, on both the residential and commercial sides, ceramic tile is increasingly competing against natural stone for slip resistant walkways, patios, and other outdoor applications. Slip resistant porcelain tile is often more durable than natural stone, and it's easier to handle and more affordable.

Part of the success of ceramics in outdoor applications has to do with the development of ingenious surface textures that meet ADA slip resistance standards while offering easier maintenance than rougher stone surfaces. Many of this year's offerings felt surprisingly smooth to the touch, yet they perform

perfectly well in wet, slippery conditions.

Perhaps the most stunning element at the Coverings show was the level of intricacy in surface texture and glazes, mostly from Italian and high end Spanish manufacturers. Metallic surfaces with machined microscopic patterns created dazzling effects, shifting with angles and the light, and similar but more subtle effects were achieved through the creative use of glazes to produce pindots or striations that meandered like gigantic fingerprints.

Those same glaze and surface technologies have led to a range of fabric and leather looks in both floor and wall tile, and it's starting to look like ceramic tile has achieved a major design milestone where any look can be convincingly executed. The only limitation is in the design itself.

Wood looks, developed in Europe several years ago, are also growing in popularity. There were more wood looks at this year's show than ever before, ranging from ultra realistic to more abstract interpretations. Wood look tiles are popular in the commercial market, particularly in hospitality, where performance and maintenance issues are a barrier to the use of real hardwood, and they're also finding a market in the residential sector.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE SHOW

One of the most riveting collections at the show was offered by Tennessee based **Crossville**. Painstakingly designed by Barbara Schirmeister, Modern Mythology is an 83 SKU collection of natural stone mosaics, moldings, rosettes and other decorative trim elements. The collection includes seven designs—Triton, Minotaur, Unicorn, Pegasus, Muse, Electra, Siren and Triton—with a full range of brick mosaics, single stone mosaics, rosettes and a range of borders, including flower and braid designs that mix both cut and tumbled natural stone mosaics. Centaur and Oracle feature brick, square and random mosaics, as well as braid borders and rosettes, Phoenix is a range of mixed stone mosaics, and Griffin and Labyrinth are wall tile designs with stone pieces in multiple heights.

Also new at Crossville was Echo Glass, a collection of floor and wall tile. Echo Glass comes in clear, frosted and iridescent looks and features 30% to 50% recycled content, both post industrial and post consumer. The tiles range in size from 2"x4" down to 1"x1", plus listellos.

Plan is Crossville's collection of rectified through-body porcelain for indoor and outdoor use. The collection, in five colors, allows designs to flow through the portal, connecting interiors to the outside.

Marazzi USA came out with Soho, a floor and wall tile collection made of glazed color-body porcelain with a basalt look. Floor tiles range from 12"x24" to 24"x48" and feature a lightly speckled design in dark anthracite gray,

medium gray, brown and a cool beige. Then there's i Porfidi di Marazzi, a through-body porcelain with a slip resistant surface for both indoor and outdoor use. The collection comes in three colors—anthracite gray, burnt red and a rusty green—and there's a lot of color play in the tiles along with suggestions of crystal and mineral deposits. The line was inspired by porphyry volcanic rock.

New for Marazzi's **Ragno USA** division was Revision, a rectified color-body porcelain with a hardwood design, in the same dimensions as Soho. But what really makes Revision special is a remarkable finish application that makes it look like a waxed wood floor. The glaze gives the impression of subtle streaked variations, giving it a soft hand-finished and timeworn look. Revision comes in five colors, including a rich brown, a pale brown, an off-white, a deep near-black and a vivid orange red.

Marazzi also introduced a new brand called **Level**, designed with the firm's Italian expertise and produced in the U.S. Level came out with three introductory stone look designs. Pure is a rustic stone look in 13" square and 20" square tiles, as well as 6 1/2"x6 1/2" field tiles, bullnose, and both square and brick mesh-mounted mosaic tiles. Then there's Wwave, a stone look with broad veins curving through it. A nice touch is the glaze application, which overlays the stone pattern with a ribbed fingerprint design when it catches the light. Just is a travertine design with wavy striations for a dramatic look and it comes in 20" squares and 1"x1" mesh-mounted mosaics with metal inserts. All three Level designs are color-body porcelain.

Florida Tile, a division of Italy's Panaria Group, came out with a range of ceramic and natural stone tiles, including Renaissance, a vivid fractured marble design in 12"x12" and 18"x18" porcelain field tiles. Of the four earth tone colors, the medium brown is particularly eye-catching.

On the stone side, Florida Tile introduced a travertine small plank design using real Mexican travertine, as well as Pietra Art Tumbled Marble, a line of Turkish marble tiles ranging from 3"x6" and 4"x4" to a 12" square decorative mosaic.

Floor Gres, a division of Italy's **Florim**, showcased several new products, including an environmentally friendly through-body porcelain called Ecotech, with post industrial content as high as 100%, depending on the color. The recycled content en-

hances the design of the product with a speckled look from aggregated material, including mica. Another product, Mattech, achieves a similar sparkle with embedded steel particles. Mattech comes in a range of sizes up to 24"x24".

Cerim, also part of Florim, unveiled 100% Pietra Riciclata, a porcelain tile for both floors and walls made from 100% recycled stone, and the collection includes a traditional cobblestone fan design. **Rex**, another Florim division, came out with a product called Horn. The design comes in three colors and the mid-brown perfectly captures the look of real horn.

GranitiFiandre, which focuses on the commercial and high end residential market, showcased several products, and the most eye-catching was Luminar, first introduced last fall in gold, silver and bronze and expanded at the show with black and white versions. Luminar, a 24" square glazed porcelain tile of minutely and precisely etched concentric circles, is a perfect illustration of cutting edge Italian technology.

Nihon, a new line, is all about subtle sophistication. The rectified porcelain design, which comes in medium brown, soft beige, dusty gray and near-black, has a design that contains aspects of distressed wood grain but also conveys a sense of flowing water and even stone. It comes in squares and rectangles ranging from 24"x24" down to 4"x24" plank looks. Another noteworthy design is Earth Naturals, a through-body glazed porcelain in a fractured grid line design that creates the impression of woven fibers and stalks, with the added touch of a matte finish background with the overlaid design in a higher gloss level.

StonePeak, a division of GranitiFiandre that manufactures in Tennessee, debuted two notable products. One is the Touch Collection of color-body porcelain leather look tiles in 12"x24" and 24"x24" edged in white textured stitches. Touch comes in six colors—Tangerine, Ice, Chocolate, Snow, Dune and Ink. The American Collection of stone look color-body porcelain comes in two colors, each with a lot of textured variation. Arizona comes in rich sandstone colors dominated by a rusty brown, while Alaska is more dark and smoky.

Brazil's **Eliane** showed a dramatic new line called Neolithic, a porcelain tile glazed with "fire-melted" metals. The glittering striated metal design comes in silver and bronze with coordinating non-metallic tiles of white, chestnut brown and black. Sizes range from 20"x20" to 4"x4" and mosaics.

Also new from Eliane was the stone look Materia series of large format glazed porcelain tiles, available both rectified and non-rectified. The moody designs, which come in amber, dark gray, gray and iron, include a range of accent pieces as well as decorative tiles with both retro and classic designs.

Porcelanite Lamosa, a recent merging of two large Mexican producers, is now one of the top ceramic tile companies

in the world. Its most impressive product line at the show was the Maya Collection of porcelain tiles designed to capture the look of natural stone from the Yucatan area. Notable designs in the collection includes Ticul, a veined stone look in a warm earthy orange, and Conchuela, a fossilated stone look in lighter earth tones.

Vitromex, another Mexican headquartered firm, offers two brands: Vitromex produces ceramic floor and wall tile, while Artemis makes glazed porcelain tile. Vitromex introductions included Lucca, a reddened terracotta look in 13"x13" tiles, Trentino, a travertine look for floor and wall tiles in two shades of beige in sizes up to an 18" square, and Dafni, a rustic tile in three earth tones. Dafni comes in 18" square tiles and 13"x18" wall tiles.

Artemis introduced two stone look porcelain designs. Mercury comes in three earth tones for a convincing stone look, while Linfa conveys the soft translucent look of veined marble. Both come in sizes up to 20"x20", along with mesh-mounted mosaics.

Spain's **Venus** introduced a range of products, including Avenue, a stone look with a subtly dimpled texture for slip resistance. In the darker tones, Avenue has an overall weathered metal look. An even more industrial metal look is available in Iron. Both are rectified polished porcelain in sizes up to 24"x24".

Porcelanosa, one of Spain's top manufacturers, came out with the India Collection of medium and dark brown stone looks with a lustrous honed finish, and the Yute Collection has a woven fabric look. Porcelanosa also introduced a range of wood looks in 8"x47" and 7"x26" plank lengths. The best of the bunch are Toscano Wenge, a medium brown wood look with vivid graining, and Tavola Grigio, a character grade hardwood look in a trendy darker, cooler brown.

Orchid Porcelain, which manufactures in Colombia, displayed a great looking new product called Etch, with a design reminiscent of weathered concrete, but with more depth and character than a lot of the concrete looks out there. It comes in five colors ranging from dusty yellow brown and ocher to a bitter earthy green. Chisel is a dynamic slate look in three rich earth tone colors along with a paler cool beige. Both lines come in 18"x18" tiles, along with smaller square and rectangular tiles, mosaics and other accent pieces.

Atlas Concorde came out with several lines, including a rectified color-body porcelain called Tune that has a surface texture of small scale etched striations flowing through the tile in a soft curve. It comes in nine colors, including a range of browns—the darkest is the most dramatic—as well as burnt red and ocher. Tune comes in a range of sizes, including large formats like 24"x24" and 18"x36".

Spanish producer **Tau Ceramica** new products included Linnox from its Tau Materia line. Linnox is a woven look porcelain tile in 12"x24" and 24"x24" formats and six soft colors including ash, mother of pearl, graphite and stone. Also new is Iron, a glazed porcelain with a striated metallic design that looks like rain. Iron comes in 18" squares, both rectified and non-rectified, and in 18"x36" rectified tiles, and it exceeds ADA slip resistance standards.

Oceanside Glasstile showcased Mandala, a collection sourced from Europe that includes natural stone, handmade ceramics and porcelain in formats including mosaics and small tiles. Mandala is designed for walls and floors, and can also be used outdoors. Oceanside offers both floor and wall glass tiles, though as yet there are no glass tile standards. The Tile Council of North America is currently working on developing glass standards.

Nuheat was also at Coverings, showcasing its floor warming systems. Only 1/8" thick, the system, which works like an electric blanket, comes in mats of various sizes and is installed between thinset layers. Nuheat also offers a cable system, which offers added flexibility during the installation process, and it is ideally suited for wet environments like showers and saunas.

A significant innovation was presented by **Specialty Construction Brands** in the form of Grout Boost, a liquid grout additive that replaces water in the formulation to offer enhanced stain resistance to water and oil based stains. Grout Boost can be used with grout from any producer and it won't change the color of the grout—and unlike a sealer, which protects the surface, this stain resistance goes all the way through.

Grout Boost also makes installation faster and easier, since the sealing takes place at the same time as the tile installation, rather than the next day, when the grout has dried. ■

TORNADO VICTIMS RECEIVE RAPID SUPPORT

Three tornadoes hit Suffolk, Virginia on Monday night, April 28, just as Coverings was getting started, destroying homes, businesses and cars, and injuring 200. No lives were lost. The next morning, three trailers full of ceramic tile, granite, marble, travertine and setting materials left the Coverings convention, headed for Virginia to help in the rebuilding effort—thanks to Coverings, Tile Partners for Humanity and a nonprofit organization called God's Pit Crew. At the close of the show, two more God's Pit Crew trailers were loaded and trucked out.

Tile Partners for Humanity, headed up by Allyson Fertitta Venugopal, was created in December 2002 to distribute donated tile for rebuilding projects, largely through Habitat for Humanity. Tile Partners also coordinates with professionals who either set tile for free or teach installation methods to volunteers. Through the end of last year, the organization had provided tile for over 600 homes.

The material from the Coverings show was provided by individual exhibitors, and most of it was excess material to cover product damaged in transit. Coverings is one of the largest supporters of Tile Partners for Humanity, though the organization also solicits individual donations from tile companies. Next month, Tile Partners will begin its annual fundraising campaign.

As the show was winding down, multiple tornadoes bore down on Arkansas and Missouri. Tile Partners will be helping those communities too, through Arkansas' Armful of Help.