

CIB PUBLIC RELATIONS

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SPANISH TILING – ANYTHING BUT SQUARE

Innovation and new technology have been the driving forces behind the success of the Spanish ceramic tile industry over the last decade. New production techniques and new designs have vastly increased the range of products available from this diverse and fast moving sector.

In the UK we have been relatively slow to catch on – historically one of the lowest per capita users of ceramic tile products. This situation is changing rapidly, with the UK now being the fastest growing market in Europe – a change that is largely due to the fact that tiles are finally moving out of their traditional bathroom and kitchen homes and being used in ways that reflect their performance and variety.

Although all ceramic tiles are fundamentally made of the same constituent materials (clay and water) the different manufacturing processes give products very different characteristics.

Relatively new to the market are porcelain tiles (also known as fully vitrified). Fired to a very high temperature, porcelain tiles have greater mechanical strength and are much less porous than traditional ceramic tiles. These characteristics make them ideal for flooring in high traffic areas or for use in access floor systems. As they can be manufactured in very large formats, porcelain tiles are increasingly used as external cladding, with many manufacturers now providing a complete system for building facades.

Porcelain tiles are often supplied unglazed, when the surface may be highly polished. The resulting tile has a constant colour through the whole tile body: it is therefore impossible to wear or damage the design and any surface abrasions can be polished off. Because of this durability, and because porcelain tiles can be designed to imitate the look of natural stone, they are increasingly being used as a high performance alternative.

While the technical aspects of manufacturing are constantly improving, the industry also invests heavily in design – employing designers from a range of backgrounds to contribute to the aesthetic appeal of the product range and experimenting with new techniques to translate concepts into groundbreaking product ranges.

All such experimentation is expensive, but the Spanish ceramic tile industry benefits from the input of the dedicated Research and Innovation Institute of Ceramic Design (ALICER), whose aim is to improve the quality and competitiveness of Spanish ceramics. One of the major contributions of this organization has been the input of expertise and research into new technologies and materials for the development of decorative processes in CAD-Cam and laser systems.

The result of this is clear to be seen in the very high quality surface designs available in contemporary ceramic tile products. In a slight quirk of fashion, the most up to date scanning and printing technology is often used to create ceramic tiles which imitate traditional natural stone products most faithfully.

High quality scanners are now regularly used to record the appearance of rare or costly natural stones. The resulting images are then printed onto the tile surface, so that the finished product is a totally faithful rendition of the colour and pattern (with as many irregularities as you choose) of the natural stone. The imitation is complete when fully rectified tiles are used, allowing the tiles to butt up and giving

a continuous surface unmarked by grouted joints. Once looked upon as a low cost alternative to natural stone, ceramic and porcelain tiles are increasingly seen as a first choice, higher performing product that just happens to be cheaper than a natural stone equivalent.

Such technology is not always used to hark back to the past, of course, and manufacturers are meeting a huge demand for contemporary design with enthusiasm. Many now employ designers from the worlds of fashion or textile design, secure in the knowledge that however flamboyant the concept, the industry will have the technology to produce it. The result is a plethora of colours, textures and shapes, pushing the boundaries of any previously held concept of ceramic tiling. Experimentation with different surface textures have led to tiles that resemble fabric, leather or metal in both look and feel, while innovative treatments including cut-outs, decorative details and mixed materials give the designer's creative flair huge freedom, while requiring no compromise on performance or quality.

All of this innovation is a far cry from the traditional square glazed tile that has dominated the UK market for so long. In order to help designers choose and specify products correctly from within the fast-changing range available, ASCER, the Spanish Ceramic Tile Manufacturers' Association has compiled a RIBA certified CPD presentation, which is available, free of charge on CD. To get hold of a copy, simply contact The Commercial Office of the Spanish Embassy on 020 7467 2389.

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Box-out information to include the tile of Spain logo and the following details:

For further information on Spanish ceramic tile products see www.spaintiles.info.

For a list of manufacturers and retailers supplying the UK market, contact The Commercial Office of the Spanish Embassy on 020 7467 2389.