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SEPTEMBER 2026

TileLetter

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A DEFINING THEME FOR THE INDUSTRY

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FOR PORTLAND TILE CONTRACTOR

The magazine of the National Tile Contractors Association

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In Every Issue

BUSINESS

12 *Collaboration as competitive advantage: a defining theme for the industry*

22 *The case for domestic ceramic tile manufacturing: lessons learned from six years of global disruption*

NTCA MEMBERS

46 *Diverse skill set leads to solid business model for Portland tile contractor*

TECHNICAL

52 *Wrangling with specialized installation procedures? Turn to the* NTCA Reference Manual

58 *Ask the Experts*

Columns

ONE-TO-ONE

38 *The American dream: leading Florim USA into the future of tile innovation*

Feature

30 *Tapestry carved in stone: MAPEI's system solution supports the creation of a landmark of dialogue, design, and durability in Houston*

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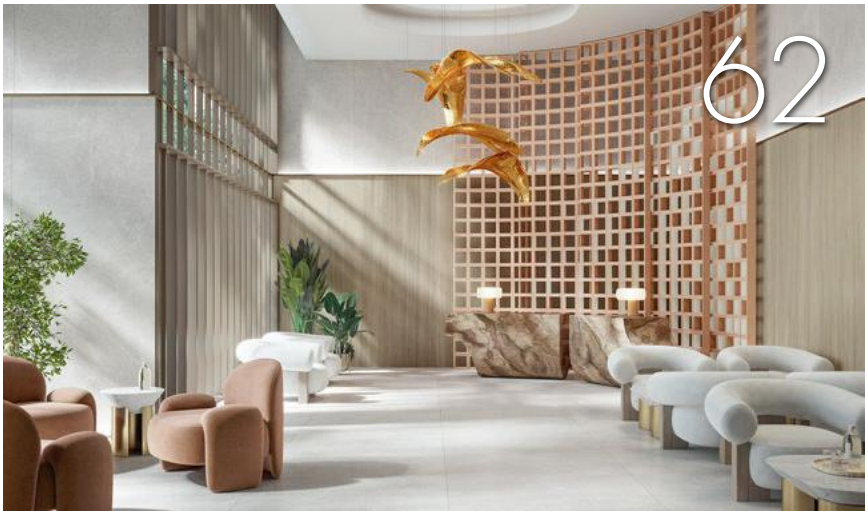
Departments

6 NTCA Training
8 Editor's Letter
10 President's Letter
62 Product Focus
68 News
71 Industry Supporters



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Meet the 2026 NTCA Training Team

Matt Welner
Training Department Manager

Randy Fleming

Chad Jones

Kate Koerber

Bill O'Connor

Amber Fox
Director of Strategic Initiatives

Anthony Oliver

Robb Roderick

Alex Smith

2026 NTCA Workshop Programs*

To confirm dates and for more information visit NTCATraining.com

SEPTEMBER

1 **Floor & Decor –** Mt Vernon, NY
8 **Avalon Flooring –** Cherry Hill, NJ
8 **Daltile –** Brooklyn, NY
9 **Daltile –** Mt. Vernon, NY
10 **Daltile –** Stoughton, MA
15 **James Hardie –** Dallas, TX
15 **Floor & Decor –** Paramus, NJ
15 **Floor & Decor –** Fresno, CA
16 **Daltile –** Torrance, CA
17 **Arizona Tile –** San Diego, CA
22 **Emser Tile –** Dallas, TX
22 **Daltile –** South Bend, IN
24 **MSI –** Milwaukee, WI
28 **Floor & Decor –** Schererville, IN
29 **Louisville Tile –** West Chester, OH
30 **Louisville Tile –** Louisville, KY

OCTOBER

1 **Louisville Tile –** Evansville, IN
5 **Daltile –** Wichita, KS
5 **Daltile –** Hartford, CT
6 **The Tile Shop –** Sterling Heights, MI
6 **Floor & Decor –** Syracuse, NY
7 **Louisville Tile –** Grand Rapids, MI
7 **Daltile –** Denver, CO
8 **Louisville Tile –** South Bend, IN
8 **Floor & Decor –** Timnath, CO
12 **Hanks Specialties –** Eau Claire, WI
13 **MSI –** Maple Grove, MN
13 **Floor & Decor –** Lexington, KY
13 **Floor & Decor –** Reno, NV
14 **Louisville Tile –** Fort Wayne, IN
14 **Daltile –** Livermore, CA
15 **Louisville Tile –** Fishers, IN
15 **Daltile –** Green Bay, WI
20 **Floor & Decor –** Manassas, VA
21 **Floor & Decor –** Murfreesboro, TN
27 **Floor & Decor –** Concord, NC

2026 NTCA Regional Programs*

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SEPTEMBER

3 **BPI –** Houston, TX
3 **Floor & Decor –** East Brunswick, NJ
10 **BPI –** Memphis, TN
10 **Floor & Decor –** Hyannis, MA
17 **Floor & Decor –** Lafayette, LA
17 **Floor & Decor –** Moorestown, NJ
24 **Crossville Studios –** Houston, TX
24 **Floor & Decor –** Greenville, SC
29 **Floor & Decor –** Danbury, CT

OCTOBER

1 **BPI –** Austin, TX
8 **Architessa –** Rockville, MD
8 **Floor & Decor –** Houston, TX
13 **Floor & Decor –** Elizabeth, NJ
15 **BPI –** Fort Worth, TX
22 **Daltile –** Philadelphia, PA
27 **Floor & Decor –** Boynton Beach, FL
29 **Floor & Decor –** North Charleston, SC

NTCA maintains an ongoing list of training events through an interactive map on its website. Check it out by scanning.

**Dates are subject to change*

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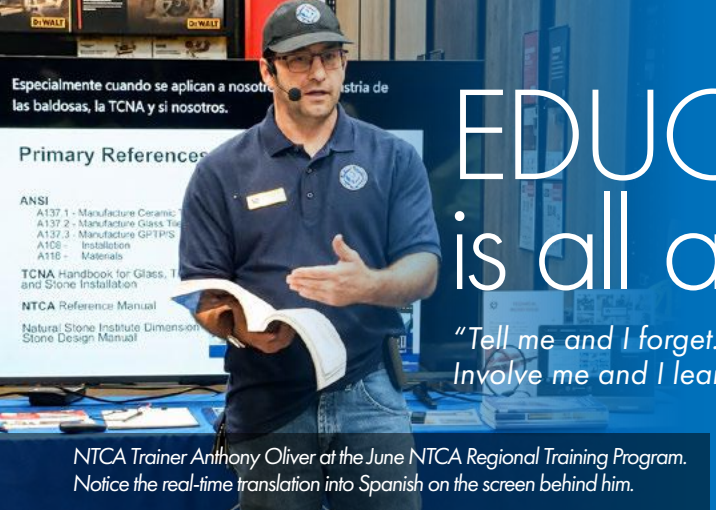

NTCA Trainer Anthony Oliver at the June NTCA Regional Training Program. Notice the real-time translation into Spanish on the screen behind him.

EDUCATION is all around!

"Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn."
– BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

Lesley Goddin

Before talking about the useful content in this issue, I want to share my impressions of two recent training programs that the NTCA Training Team brought to my town. The Substrate Preparation and Industry Standards for LFT Regional Training Program was hosted by Floor & Decor in June and the NTCA Workshop on Tile Technology: Membranes was held at Daltile in July.

I was IMPRESSED. I am regularly informed about the training events through biweekly meetings that include Amber Fox and Matt Welner, who head up the programs. But experiencing them in person was spectacular.

Both of these programs expertly imparted an immense amount of information. At the regional program, Anthony Oliver and Chad Jones conducted the classroom piece and guided the hands-on sessions, with demo assistance from MAPEI and LATICRETE. Engagement among the attendees was intense.

Oliver ran the workshop on Tile Technology: Membranes solo, teaching about installation scenarios with ease and the familiarity of personal experience, adding essential information about industry publications and how to use them. Reps from MAPEI, Proflex, Schluter, and wedi helped conduct the hands-on membrane segment, providing expert, real-world information.

Part of the classroom presentations touched on classes CTEF offers, the benefits of certification through the Certified Tile Installer exam and, of course, the advantages of being an NTCA member. To serve the third of the contractor community that are native Spanish speakers, classroom dialogue is translated in real time to Spanish on the PowerPoint.

The programs conclude with a raffle, which awards some attendees with great prizes—tile cutters, coolers, a karaoke system, setting materials—much to their delight!

We promote program schedules in every *TileLetter* and through our eNews and ProAngle e-newsletters. Find out more about the training events and where they are scheduled near you at www.NTCAtraining.com. Take this opportunity to expand your education.

That said, our content this month launches you into the fall season with inspiration and knowledge, starting with the cover feature on the exquisite Ismali Center. The project used MAPEI products to ensure enduring performance in this stunning space.

In our Technical section, CTEF's Scott Carothers guides you through specific sections of the *NTCA Reference Manual's* Chapter 9: Specialized Installation Procedures. Our Ask the Experts story explores the details of installing porcelain tile on a concrete slab deck.

The one-two punch in our Business section features Joe Lundgren's perspective on the strength of domestic tile production and supply, and NTCA Deputy Director Jeremy Sax's recap of his two Coverings panels that revealed the importance of communication and collaboration in commercial and residential projects. Learn more about the growing business of Portland tile contractor Erik Trexel with Level Plane Tile and Stone in our Members story, and about the growth of Florim USA in NTCA Executive Director Bart Bettiga's One-to-One interview with Rodolfo Panisi.

Hands-on membrane demo at the July Tile Technology: Membranes NTCA Workshop.

In his letter this month, NTCA President Rod Owen underscores the importance of continual learning in our trade, and the role the *NTCA Reference Manual* plays in that pursuit. And that brings us back to the beginning of this letter: NTCA provides a variety of learning, education, and training opportunities. (Don't forget our NTCA Webinars, which you can watch at your convenience, or the classes at NTCA University, which you can take at your leisure!) Make the most of them and supercharge your craft and your success.

God bless,

Lesley

Lesley
lesley@tile-assn.com

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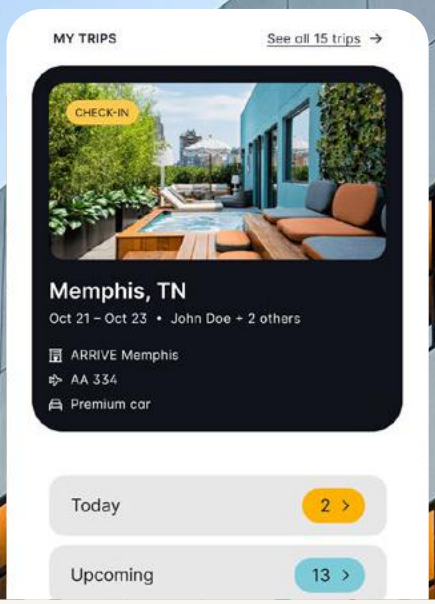

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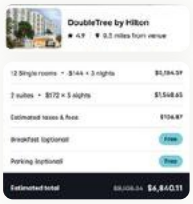

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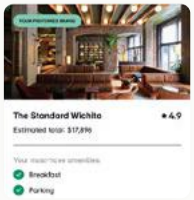

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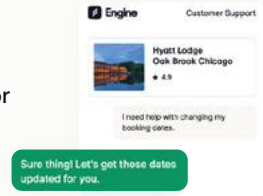

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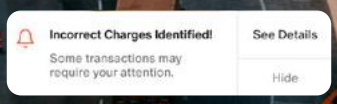

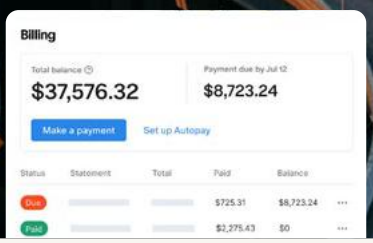

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Rod Owen

NEVER stop learning

Some people think our industry hasn't changed much over the years because we're still setting tile. In many ways, that's true. The fundamentals of good craftsmanship are timeless. But look a little closer, and you'll see an industry that continues to evolve through improved standards, better materials, specialized installation methods, larger tile formats, and new technologies that help us deliver a better finished product.

That's what makes this month's *TileLetter* theme—Specialized Installation Procedures—so important. As our industry evolves, so does the need to understand not just how to install tile, but *why* certain methods produce the best long-term results.

Not every installation is the same. Some projects require techniques and procedures that go well beyond everyday installations. Whether it's large-format tile, gauged porcelain tile panels, steam rooms, exterior applications, movement joints, or specialty waterproofing systems, successful installations require more than experience; they require knowledge.

Knowledge is what separates doing things the way we've always done them from doing them the right way.

One of the greatest accomplishments in the history of the National Tile Contractors Association has been the development and continued publication of the *NTCA Reference Manual.* It has become an indispensable resource for contractors, installers, architects, specifiers, and manufacturers alike. More than a book on a shelf, it's a practical guide built from years of industry expertise, technical knowledge, and proven best practices.

But a reference manual alone isn't enough.

Knowledge grows when it's shared. That's why I'm such a strong believer in NTCA Workshops and Regional Training programs. These events provide hands-on learning, direct access to industry experts, and opportunities to ask questions that simply can't be answered by reading alone. They also allow contractors to learn from one another's experiences, successes, and even mistakes. As I've said before, we don't grow in a silo.

If you've never attended one of these training events, I encourage you to make this the year you do. Visit www.NTCATraining.com for the schedule of an upcoming workshop or regional training event in your area. I think you'll walk away with ideas that make you a better installer, a better leader, and ultimately, a better business owner.

And while you're making plans, don't forget to register for Tile Solutions Plus (TSP) 2026, November 1–3 in Miami, Fla. TSP continues to be one of the premier educational and networking events in our industry. Every year I leave with new ideas, renewed friendships, and a greater appreciation for the people who continue moving our profession forward.

The best contractors I've met all have one thing in common: they remain students of the trade.

Let's continue learning, improving, and raising the standard for our industry.

As always,

Educate for Excellence.

Rod

Rod Owen
NTCA President
rod.owen@ccowen.us

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COLLABORATION as competitive ADVANTAGE:

A DEFINING THEME FOR THE INDUSTRY

By Jeremy Sax, NTCA Deputy Executive Director

At Coverings 2026 in Las Vegas, one message stood out above all others: collaboration is no longer optional; it is the defining factor of project success. In an industry facing labor shortages, compressed schedules, increasingly complex designs, and heightened customer expectations, the ability to work together effectively has become a true competitive advantage. Across both the commercial and residential sectors, the conversations made it clear that communication, trust, and proactive leadership set industry leaders apart from average contractors.

As the moderator of two key panel discussions, I had the unique opportunity to hear firsthand from general contractors, tile contractors, and design professionals about what is truly working—and what is not—on today's jobsites. While each segment of the industry faces its own challenges, the underlying principles of success remain remarkably consistent.

The commercial panel, "Building Strong Partnerships," brought together a diverse group of professionals representing general contractors, tile contractors, field leadership, and design.

Commercial reality: communication, risk, and accountability

The commercial panel, "Building Strong Partnerships," brought together a diverse group of professionals representing general contractors, tile contractors, field leadership, and design. The discussion quickly moved beyond theory and into the realities of jobsite execution, where timing, accountability, and communication can make or break a project.

"If there is an issue, attack it immediately," said Ken Ottinger, Director of Quality Assurance for Kitchell Contractors. "I would rather hear bad news early than good news too late."

Ken Ottinger (L), Director of Quality Assurance for Kitchell Contractors, is shown with Mike Gillett, Owner and CEO of Commercial Ceramics, Inc., an NTCA Five-Star Accredited Contractor. Gillett uses IPA Labs, through the Tile Council of North America (TCNA), to test the tile on his projects and ensure it meets ANSI A137.1 standards.

This statement captured the essence of the conversation. In commercial construction, communication delays eliminate options. When issues are raised early, teams can collaborate, adjust schedules, and protect both budget and quality. When issues are raised late, the project often enters a reactive mode, leading to conflict, change orders, and strained relationships.

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Panelists at a glance

Commercial Panelists:

- **Ken Ottinger**
  Director of Quality Assurance, Kitchell Contractors
- **Mike Gillett**
  Owner and CEO, Commercial Ceramics, Inc., and NTCA Five-Star Contractor
- **Ed Antonucci**
  General Superintendent, J.P. Phillips Inc.
- **Yumi Soto**
  Interior Designer and Principal, Visual Studio Plus

Residential Panelists:

- **Aaron Enfinger**
  COO, Cleary Co., and President, NARI
- **Martin Brookes**
  Director of Installation, Fireclay Tile, NTCA Past President and Chairman of the Board, and NTCA Five-Star Accredited Residential Tile Contractor
- **Dirk Sullivan**
  Owner and CEO, Hawthorne Tile, and NTCA Five-Star Accredited Residential Tile Contractor
- **Michelle Blemel**
  Designer and President, Amberleaf, Inc.

Panelist Yumi Soto, award-winning Interior Designer and Principal of Visual Studio Plus, inquired about who is responsible for inspecting the tile on every project to ensure the correct material was ordered, received, and is not broken.

Build relationships and formalize QC plans

Another powerful takeaway was the importance of building relationships outside of active projects. Ottinger said that in more than 30 years in the industry, only one tile contractor had invited him to visit their business. This insight underscores a missed opportunity. Relationships should not begin at bid time; they should be built well before a project ever breaks ground. Inviting a general contractor into your operation builds confidence, demonstrates professionalism, and creates a foundation of trust that carries into future work.

The panel also emphasized the need for tile contractors to implement a formal quality control plan on every project. This includes substrate evaluation, layout planning, movement joint strategy, documentation protocols, and closeout procedures. Quality is not something that should be assumed—it must be defined, communicated, and executed with consistency.

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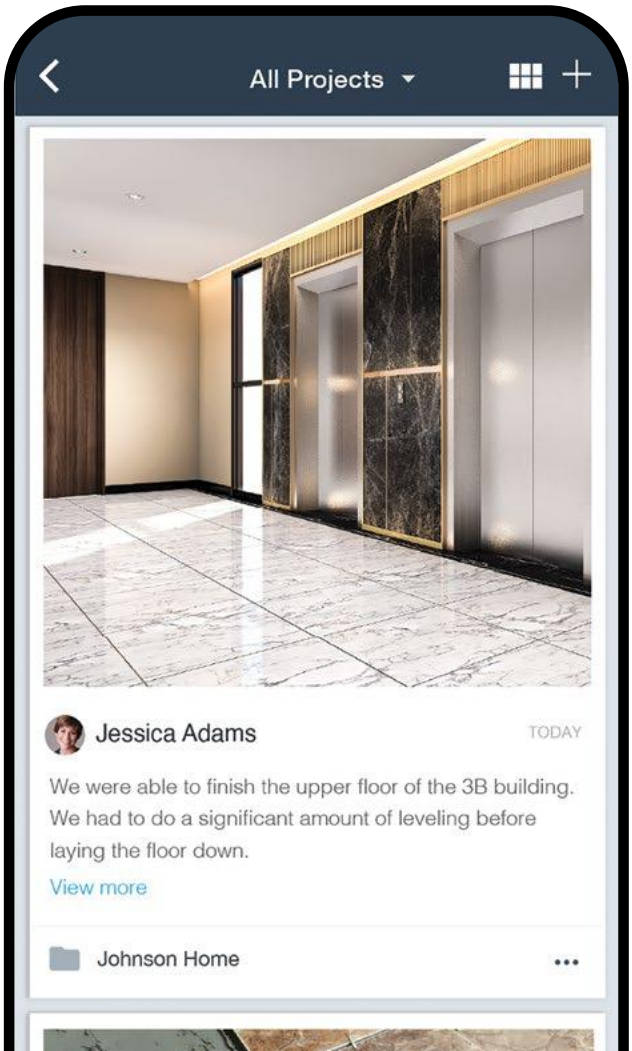

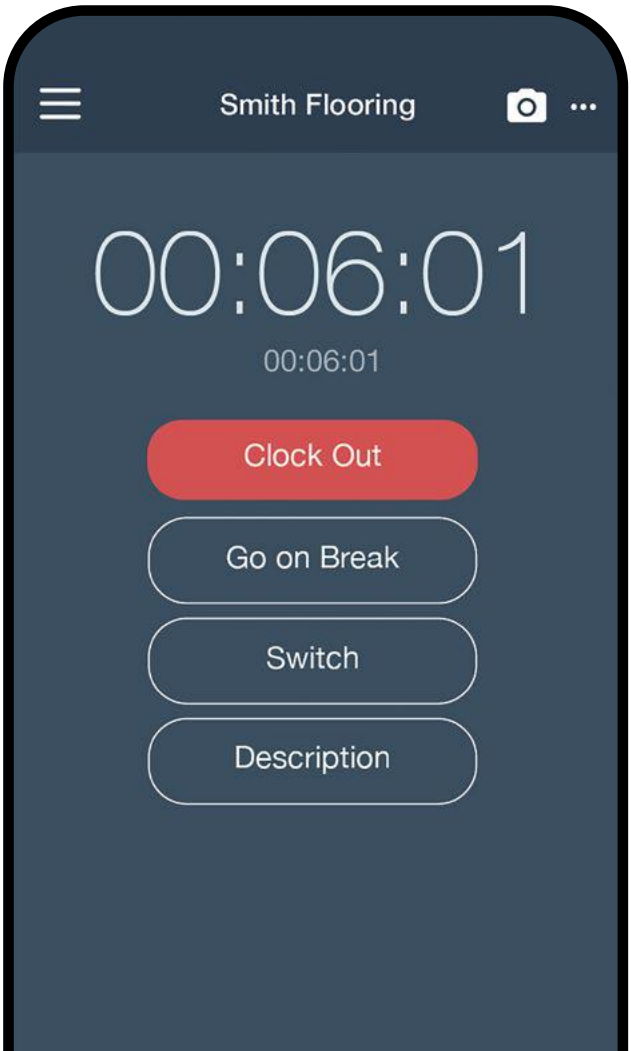

AN ALIGNOPS COMPANY

Professionalism reigns

Panelists reinforced that professionalism in the field still matters. Contractors who communicate clearly, remain solution-oriented, and understand the broader project goals become trusted partners. They are not viewed as just another subcontractor; they become an extension of the project team.

Panelist Yumi Soto, award-winning Interior Designer and Principal of Visual Studio Plus, inquired who, on the project, is responsible for inspecting the tile to ensure the correct material was ordered, received, and is not broken. Mike Gillett, CEO of Commercial Ceramic, Inc. and an NTCA Five-Star Accredited Commercial Tile Contractor, commented that his organization inspects all the tiles, including matching dye lots, as soon as the tile is received. In addition, Gillett uses IPA Labs, through the Tile Council of North America (TCNA), to test the tile on his projects and ensure the tile meets ANSI A137.1 standards.

To sum up, the commercial takeaways included:

- Address issues immediately.
- Build relationships before the project starts.
- Create a quality control plan
- Communicate early and often.

A distinguished panel of industry experts weighed in on the importance of collaboration in residential construction projects, where emotions, evolving preferences and high expectations fueled by social media and design trends are part of the process.

Residential complexity: expectations, design, and trust

The residential panel, "Collaborating for Success," explored a different environment—one driven by homeowner expectations, design intent, and personal investment in the finished product. Residential work often requires navigating emotions, evolving preferences, and high expectations fueled by social media and design trends.

There is no such thing as too much communication and documentation

This principle became a central theme of the discussion. In residential construction, assumptions can quickly turn into costly mistakes. Every decision—from material selection to layout to installation details—must be clearly documented and communicated. Documentation protects not only the contractor, but also the builder, designer, and ultimately the homeowner.

Aaron Enfinger, COO of Cleary Co. and NARI President, explained, "Connection, competence, and character are the three sides of trust when hiring a tile contractor."

Enfinger's framework for trust resonated deeply with the audience. Successful contractors are those who build strong relationships (connection), demonstrate technical expertise (competence), and consistently do the right thing (character). When all three are present,

Aaron Enfinger, COO of Cleary Co. and President of NARI, distilled how to gain trust as a tile contractor.

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trust is established—and trust drives repeat business.

Michelle Blemel, Designer and President of Amberleaf, Inc., offered a powerful example of proactive collaboration. She makes it a point to visit each jobsite at least once per week to ensure alignment between design intent and field execution. This level of involvement reduces miscommunication, strengthens relationships, and ultimately leads to a better finished product.

Another critical takeaway centered on pricing strategy. Residential contractors were encouraged to move beyond square-foot pricing and instead price the full project.

"True project value includes preparation, logistics, waterproofing, specialty details, risk, and customer management," said Martin Brookes, Director of Installation for Fireclay Tile and an NTCA Five-Star Accredited Residential Tile Contractor. "Contractors who fail to account for these elements often find themselves underpriced and overexposed."

In a nutshell, the residential takeaways included:

- Document everything.
- Align values with project partners.
- Focus on full-project pricing.
- Prioritize the customer experience.

Michelle Blemel, Designer and President for Amberleaf, Inc., visits each jobsite at least once per week to ensure alignment between design intent and field execution.

Where both worlds align

Despite the differences between commercial and residential work, the panels revealed a consistent set of principles that apply across the industry. Communication, documentation, and trust remain the foundation of successful projects.

Contractors who take ownership of communication—who raise issues early, document decisions thoroughly,

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"True project value includes preparation, logistics, waterproofing, specialty details, risk, and customer management," said Martin Brookes, Director of Installation for Fireclay Tile and an NTCA Five-Star Accredited Residential Tile Contractor.

Dirk Sullivan, Owner and CEO of Hawthorne Tile and an NTCA Five-Star Accredited Residential Tile Contractor, was part of the residential panel.

and approach challenges with a solutions mindset—position themselves as leaders in their industry. They are the contractors that general contractors, designers, and clients want to work with again.

In today's environment, collaboration is not just about being easy to work with; it is about being strategic. It is about understanding the entire project lifecycle, aligning with stakeholders, and delivering consistent, high-quality results.

Final lessons

The lessons from Coverings 2026 are clear: contractors who embrace collaboration, prioritize communication, and invest in relationships will lead the industry forward. At NTCA, we remain committed to equipping our members with the tools, education, and insights needed to succeed in an increasingly complex construction landscape. When the industry works together, everybody wins. TL

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The case for DOMESTIC CERAMIC TILE MANUFACTURING:

LESSONS LEARNED FROM SIX YEARS OF GLOBAL DISRUPTION

By Joe Lundgren, President, Joseph Lundgren Consulting

For decades, imported tile was often viewed primarily through the lens of price and design. However, from 2020 through 2026, the ceramic tile industry experienced a series of unprecedented disruptions that exposed the vulnerabilities of a global supply chain. The question is no longer simply "Where can I buy tile the cheapest?" but rather "Where can I reliably source tile when the next disruption occurs?"

Since 2020, the ceramic tile industry has faced:

- COVID-19 factory shutdowns
- Port congestion
- Container shortages
- Record ocean freight rates
- Energy crisis in Europe
- The Russia-Ukraine conflict
- Red Sea shipping disruptions
- Tariff uncertainty
- Inflationary pressures
- Labor shortages
- Middle East instability affecting fuel supplies and manufacturing

Each event highlighted a simple reality: the farther away your supply chain is, the more vulnerable it becomes. Following is a chronological overview of the major global disruptions affecting ceramic tile imports from 2020 to 2026 and their related impacts—many of which are still being felt.

At Wonder Porcelain in Lebanon, Tenn., raw materials are wet-ground into liquid slip. This slip is then spray-dried into fine powder and stored in automated silos that provide a continuous feed of material to the press.

YEAR	EVENT	IMPACT ON TILE INDUSTRY
2020	COVID-19	Factory shutdowns and shipping delays
2021	Container crisis	Historic-high freight costs
2022	Russia-Ukraine War	Surging energy costs
2023	Inflation and interest rates	Housing slowdown
2024	Red Sea disruptions	Longer transit times and higher costs
2025	Tariff uncertainty	Pricing volatility
2026	Middle East fuel disruptions	Threats to production hubs and shipping lanes

The strength of U.S. manufacturing

One of the most overlooked facts in our industry is that domestic manufacturers still represent the largest single source of ceramic tile consumed in the United States. According to the most recent Tile Council of North America (TCNA) market data, U.S.-manufactured tile represented approximately 27-29% of total U.S. consumption in 2024-2025, exceeding the market share of any individual importing country. Imports account for roughly 72% of consumption, while domestic manufacturers supply about 28%.

America's core manufacturing base

Furthermore, many of the U.S. factories have ownership in countries where ceramic tile is the centerpiece of construction and are leaders in both

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design and technology. This chart lists U.S. tile makers and their locations.

COMPANY	PARENT COMPANY/ OWNERSHIP COUNTRY	CITY	STATE
Crossville	AHF/U.S.	Crossville	Tennessee
Dal-Tile	Mohawk/U.S.	Muskogee	Oklahoma
Dal-Tile	Mohawk/U.S.	Dickson	Tennessee
Dal-Tile	Mohawk/U.S.	Sunnyvale	Texas
Dal-Tile	Mohawk/U.S.	Florence	Alabama
Del Conca	Del Conca/ Italy	Loudon	Tennessee
Florida Tile	Panaria Group/Italy	Lawrenceburg	Kentucky
Landmark	Gruppo Concorde/ Italy	Mt. Pleasant	Tennessee
Milestone	Florim/Italy	Clarksville	Tennessee
Portobello America	Portobello Grupo/Brazil	Baxter	Tennessee
Stonepeak	Iris Ceramica Group/Italy	Crossville	Tennessee
Wonder Porcelain	Marco Polo/ China	Lebanon	Tennessee

The true cost of imported tile

When I speak with distributors, dealers, and other industry professionals about domestic ceramic tile manufacturing, the conversation often begins with two perceived advantages of imported products: cost and design. Historically, there has been truth to both arguments. Imported tile has frequently offered attractive pricing, and many overseas manufacturers have invested heavily in design development and product innovation.

However, the events of the past six years have challenged many long-held assumptions about the economics of global sourcing. While imports remain an essential part of the U.S. ceramic tile market simply because domestic manufacturers do not have enough capacity to satisfy total demand, the question is no longer whether imported tile costs less on paper. The more important question is whether it still delivers the lowest total cost to serve the customer.

Conveyors deliver the powder to the press at Wonder Porcelain.

Using heat and pressure, the powder is converted into the unfired tile body.

Designs and patterns are added to the body via an inkjet printer.

The tile body then travels through the glazing line.

A balanced portfolio

For distributors and importers, the answer increasingly points toward the need for a balanced portfolio that includes both domestic and imported products. Companies that relied heavily on imports have experienced firsthand how difficult it can be to compete against organizations that have invested in strong domestic supply partnerships.

Too often, the comparison between imported and domestic products focuses only on the purchase price. What is frequently overlooked are the hidden costs and risks associated with global supply chains. These include geopolitical disruptions, ocean freight volatility, port congestion, container shortages, demurrage charges, currency fluctuations, tariffs, and unexpected supply interruptions.

An investment in domestic ceramic production

The state of Tennessee, where many U.S. tile makers are located, is partnering with TCNA and a consortium of domestic tile producers for a workforce development initiative to help staff the factories and build up the culture of ceramic production in the U.S. This could increase capacity and make domestic tile more competitive. To learn more, scan this QR code.

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The cost of deep inventory

In addition, imported products typically require larger safety stock positions and higher inventory carrying costs. Longer lead times force distributors to commit capital further in advance and increase the risk of forecasting errors. When demand shifts unexpectedly, inventory can quickly become either excessive or insufficient.

Domestic manufacturing offers advantages that are more difficult to quantify but can significantly impact profitability. Faster communication, shorter lead times, improved service levels, quicker problem resolution, and greater supply chain visibility all contribute to a more responsive business model.

The re-stocking speed advantage

Perhaps the most overlooked cost in any sourcing comparison is lost sales. A product that consistently arrives within two weeks may ultimately generate greater profitability than a lower-cost product that requires four months to replenish. When inventory is unavailable, customers often buy from competitors, or worse: purchase alternative products. Those lost opportunities rarely appear on a purchasing spreadsheet, but they have a direct impact on market share, customer loyalty, and long-term profitability.

As supply chains continue to evolve, the discussion should move beyond simple product cost comparisons. The true evaluation is not the cost of the tile itself, but the total cost of delivering that tile to the customer reliably, consistently, and profitably.

So, what does the future hold?

The future is unlikely to be disruption-free. Recent TCNA data continue to show imports representing over 70% of U.S. tile consumption, meaning the industry remains highly dependent on global supply chains.

The strategic question for distributors is not whether imports will remain important—they will. The question is whether their sourcing strategy provides enough balance between imported and domestic supply to protect their business from the next disruption.

So, your question now is probably, "What the hell should I do?"

The events of 2020-2026 have fundamentally changed the conversation around ceramic tile sourcing. Domestic manufacturing is no longer simply a patriotic choice or a regional preference. It has become a strategic business decision. The companies that thrive in the next decade may not be those that buy at the lowest cost, but those that build the most resilient supply chains.

For many distributors, dealers, contractors, and end users, that resilience will increasingly include ceramic tile manufactured in the United States. TL

Tile enters the kiln for firing at Wonder Porcelain.

The tile body is "cooked" in the kiln for a specified time and at a precise temperature.

The Qualitron machine provides automated visual inspection of fired tiles, with the ability to detect defects, assess shade and tone, and ensure the design is in proper register.

Automated guided vehicles (AGV) transport tiles and slabs in the factory, and RoboFloor, developed by System Ceramics in Italy, automatically handles, loads, and unloads fired tiles and large panels or slabs.

Packaging and palletizing are handled by automated technology.

RoboBoxes automate soaring, quality control, packaging, and palletizing of tiles.

Joe Lundgren is a globally-recognized product and marketing expert in the ceramic and stone industries, with deep expertise in business development, product management, and marketing strategy. He spent 27 years at Dal-Tile, a subsidiary of Mohawk Industries, serving most recently as Vice President of Marketing, overseeing the Daltile and American Olean brands, Mohawk ceramic products, and all home center channel programs. Lundgren led strategic planning, global sourcing, and joint ventures in China, Italy, and Mexico. He holds a BS from Pepperdine University and an MBA from La Verne University. Connect with him at joe@jlcconsult.com.

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MAPEI'S SYSTEM SOLUTION SUPPORTS THE CREATION OF A LANDMARK OF DIALOGUE, DESIGN, AND DURABILITY IN HOUSTON

The Ismaili Center Houston: By combining advanced substrate preparation, waterproofing, premium mortars, and high-performance grout, MAPEI helped bring one of Houston's most significant architectural projects to life.

The Ismaili Center Houston showcases the precision, durability, and craftsmanship made possible through MAPEI's complete system solution.

The Ismaili Center Houston is poised to become one of the city's most significant cultural and architectural landmarks. Commissioned by the late Ismaili spiritual leader Aga Khan IV and designed by architect Farshid Moussavi, the Ismaili Center Houston reflects a global network of Ismaili institutions that are dedicated to fostering dialogue, cultural exchange, and community engagement.

Set within landscaped gardens, the project blends contemporary engineering with design influences that are rooted in Islamic architectural traditions. Open-air gathering spaces, light-filled interiors, and intricate material detailing define a structure that was conceived as both a place of reflection and a hub for civic interaction.

As Moussavi noted in an interview that was published on the Harvard University Graduate School of Design's website, "What made this project especially rewarding was the close alignment between the aspirations of the client and architect. … We have tried to work with Islamic design philosophy…so that the building…would act as a symbol of dialogue."

Expansive project, intricate design, moisture challenges

Making the vision of the Ismaili Center Houston a reality required precision at every level. The building spans 150,000 sq. ft. and encompasses a library, social and exhibit halls, a black box theater, classrooms, administrative offices, and facilities for catered events. A 12,240-sq.-ft. prayer hall (known as a "Jamatkhana") accounts for 8% of the building's space.

Upon entering, visitors encounter a grand entry with a soaring staircase, then pass through a five-story atrium. The building radiates light; it pours in through the atrium and through pierced stone tiles, cascading down the staircase to welcome visitors.

The project's scope is expansive: 11 acres spanning interior and exterior installations, water features, and nine gardens, as well as an underground parking garage with room for 600+ vehicles. Houston's hot, humid climate and the site's proximity to the Buffalo Bayou River posed complications with moisture

The completed Ismaili Center Houston blends contemporary engineering with Islamic architectural influences, creating a landmark designed to foster dialogue, reflection, and community engagement.

management, long-term durability, and the desired aesthetic integrity.

"The campus is located 300 ft. from Buffalo Bayou and is 100 ft. above sea level," said Russ Himel, Project Manager and General Manager of the Tile and Terrazzo Division of NTCA member Camarata Masonry Systems, the tile and stone installer on the project.

"This was not a project where anything could fail," Himel continued. "Between the environmental exposure and the level of craftsmanship required, we needed a system we trusted completely."

Having partnered with MAPEI on previous high-profile installations, Camarata representatives turned again to their trusted partner for a fully integrated solution.

MAPEI system solution to the rescue

MAPEI worked closely with Himel to deliver a comprehensive system designed to support performance, longevity, and installation efficiency across the project.

"We began pre-planning the specifications in 2019 and finished the construction in August of 2025," stated Todd McDougal, MAPEI's Director of New Business Development, who has worked with Himel and Camarata for years. "We developed a specification for the building— which was not without challenges."

When asked to elaborate, Himel and McDougal immediately mentioned the eivans. "Eivan" is a Persian architectural term that describes a monumental, vaulted space, such as a grand entrance or veranda, in palaces and mosques.

The 49 eivans at the Ismaili Center Houston honor Aga Khan IV, the 49th Ismaili spiritual leader, with star-shaped blue-steel columns. Aga Khan IV initiated the massive building project but passed away before it could be completed. His son, His Highness Aga Khan V, is the current Ismaili spiritual leader and heads all Ismaili Centers worldwide.

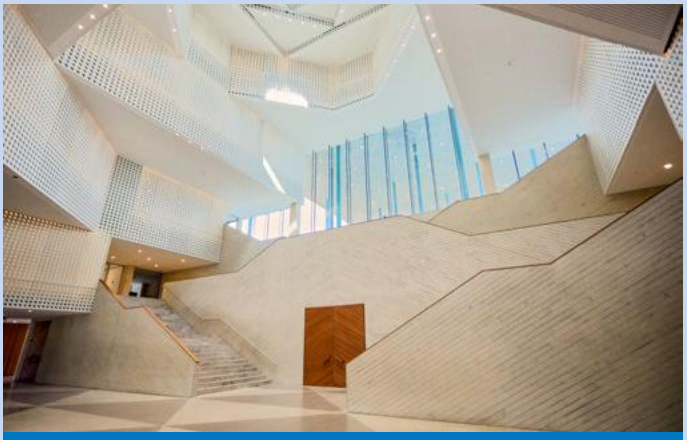
McDougal explained, "One of the aspects of the massive spec that required the most creative solution was for the north, east and west eivans located on the building's third-floor exterior."

It was crucial that the construction of the eivans be flawless from both a public-safety aspect and in tribute to the late leader. "We were worried about deflection and movement," Himel said. "Not only would the eivans be exposed to the extreme thermal cycling from the Bayou location, but they would also be exposed to extreme weather on occasion.

Mapelastic AquaDefense was applied as a fast-drying waterproofing and crack-isolation membrane to protect tile installations in moisture-exposed areas.

Installers from NTCA member Camarata Masonry Systems carefully positioned custom tile and stone, maintaining the tight tolerances required throughout the project.

Inspired by Persian architecture, the eivans feature striking blue-steel columns and custom tile installations engineered for long-term durability in exterior conditions.



Light-filled interior spaces showcase the beauty of expertly installed tile and stone while highlighting the project's exceptional craftsmanship.

Intricate architectural details throughout the Ismaili Center reflect the close collaboration among designers, installers, and MAPEI technical experts.

Houston gets hit by hurricanes, and these verandas would have to withstand the brute force of nature."

Himel and McDougal worked with MAPEI's Technical Services team to devise a solution: Mapelastic AquaDefense for crack suppression; Keraflex Super for the best possible bond; and pre-formed expansion joints every 8 ft. [2.44 m] instead of caulk to avoid potential cracks due to the "extreme, unusual, and prolonged thermal cycling experienced by the Bayou location," McDougal explained.

Once the eivans were specified, the rest fell into place. "The main slabs of stone on the building facade are mechanically fastened," Himel said. Materials included light-colored stone from Turkey, concrete panels for the atrium from Monterrey, Mexico, and tile for the kitchens and bathrooms from Italy. Also from Italy were the gray, white, light blue and dark blue panels for the eivans, 16 colors of stone in all, which were shipped to the States in huge slabs and waterjet-cut to the desired size in Houston. "Everything was Pantone-color-matched to the stone," Himel added.

The magnitude of expensive and unique ceramic tile and stone was daunting, but Himel and McDougal had done their homework and were prepared. With allowances as tight as those of the geometric patterns that were being installed, the Camarata crew got to work.

Installing the materials

MAPEI's Modified Mortar Bed, a polymer-modified thick-bed and render mortar, provided a stable and level substrate, allowing the installation team to achieve the precise tolerances that were required for the intricate tilework throughout the project. Mapelastic AquaDefense was applied as a fast-drying, crack-isolation and waterproofing membrane to protect interior spaces and exterior installations that are exposed to moisture and was also used in water features.

Interior and exterior tile installations were completed using Keraflex Super, a high-performance, polymer-modified mortar with superior bond strength, flexibility, and workability. Its extended open time and excellent transfer properties made it ideal for installing custom Moroccan mosaic tiles, ensuring full coverage even on complex surfaces.

The team grouted with Ultracolor Plus FA, a rapid-setting, fine-aggregate grout offering color consistency, reduced efflorescence, and enhanced durability. Its resistance to staining and its ease of maintenance made it ideal for both high-visibility interior areas and exterior applications.

"MAPEI's system solution allowed us to move efficiently while maintaining total confidence in the installation," Himel said. "From screeding and leveling to waterproofing and finishing, everything worked together seamlessly."

The MAPEI system was applied across a wide range of conditions. A 15-person crew from Camarata executed the tile installation and a separate 15-person crew erected the stone portion, navigating detailed layouts and complex geometries while maintaining consistency throughout the entire project.

The integration of MAPEI waterproofing and crack-isolation technologies was especially important in areas that are exposed to constant moisture. They helped to protect the structure and to preserve the integrity of the tile finishes.

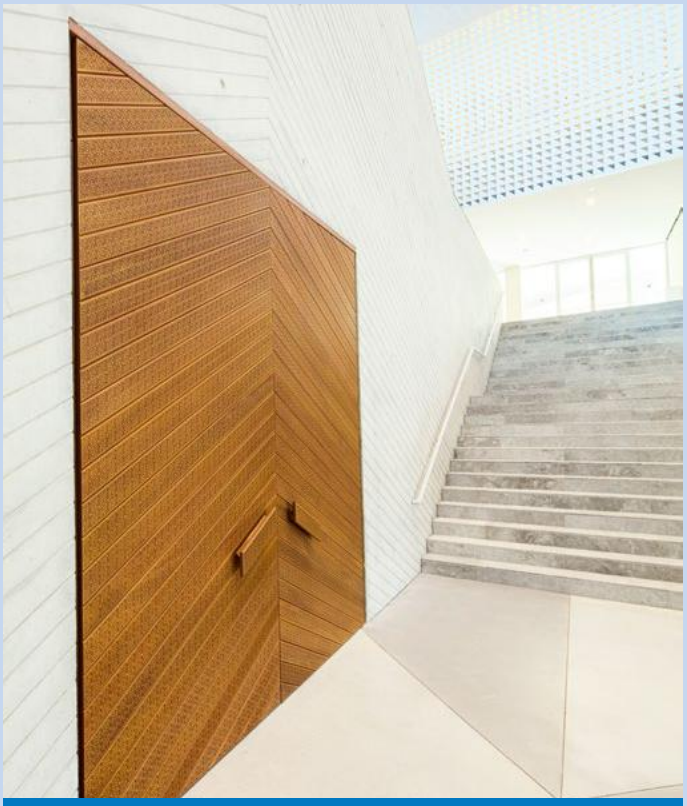
A foundation for the future

Beyond aesthetics, the project was driven by long-term performance and sustainability. Durable materials, moisture management, and system compatibility were essential to ensuring the structure's longevity in a demanding environment.

"The Ismaili Center Houston is a powerful example of what can be achieved when design ambition is matched with technical excellence," McDougal said. "By delivering a complete system—from substrate preparation to installation and finishing—we're helping ensure that this landmark will perform as beautifully as it looks for decades to come."

With its blend of cultural significance, architectural innovation, and technical precision, the Ismaili Center Houston stands as a testament to collaboration and craftsmanship. Through a fully integrated system approach, MAPEI helped bring this vision to life, supporting a project that was designed not only to endure, but to inspire. TL

MAPEI's Modified Mortar Bed created a smooth, stable substrate, allowing installers to achieve the precise tolerances required for the project's intricate tilework.



Precision installation and meticulous craftsmanship bring the building's intricate interior design to life, showcasing the seamless integration of form and function.

The team grouted with Ultracolor Plus FA, a rapid-setting, fine-aggregate grout offering color consistency, reduced efflorescence, and enhanced durability. Its resistance to staining and its ease of maintenance made it ideal for both high-visibility interior areas and exterior applications.

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ONE *to* ONE

RODOLFO PANISI

President and CEO of Florim USA

THE AMERICAN DREAM:

leading Florim USA into the future of tile innovation

In the One-to-One column, NTCA Executive Director Bart Bettiga interviews industry leaders about pertinent topics.

I recently visited with Rodolfo Panisi, President and CEO of Florim USA, to discuss the company's evolution, innovative product lines, and vision for the tile industry. Florim USA is part of the Florim Ceramica Group, which operates production sites in Modena and Mordano, Italy, and Clarksville, Tenn. Known worldwide for ceramic tile innovation and product excellence, the company was founded by Giovanni Lucchese in 1962 and entered the U.S. market as a manufacturer 25 years ago.

Continua+ technology produces larger panels and creates entry-level panels for MILE®stone's Pre-Fab line that are cut to size—reducing the amount of cutting needed on the jobsite—like this MILE®stone Terrazzo Allure 32" x 96" panel in Eggshell.

Can you walk us through your background and how you came to lead Florim USA?

I moved from Italy to the United States 25 years ago, and my first job was bringing beautiful Italian tile to the American market as part of a commercial company. I spent about 18 years with the Iris Group and was part of the startup of Stonepeak, where I eventually became CEO in 2008. I wanted to explore something new, so I moved into the countertop industry with Cambria. It was fascinating work, but when COVID hit, it brought me back to the tile industry. In 2020, I joined Florim USA, and since then, we've made significant investments in Clarksville to bring the facility to a state-of-the-art level.

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Meridio

MILE®stone's Travertine in Silver matte 48" x 96" wall panel and Roman 24" x 28" matte floor tile.

Tell us about Florim's parent company in Italy and how Florim USA came to be.

Florim Italy is one of the oldest companies in Italy. We just celebrated our 60-year anniversary, which is a significant milestone in the history of ceramic tile. The company has always been at the forefront of innovation, design, and sustainability—the three pillars that define Florim Ceramica. Our chairman, Lucchese, had a dream to produce tile here in the United States. In 2000, an opportunity came when a company called TileCera went up for sale, and Lucchese decided to invest in this facility and land in Clarksville, Tenn. That's where the American dream started for us.

Clarksville is strategically important from a logistics standpoint, correct?

Absolutely. Historically, Tennessee has been home to most U.S. tile manufacturers because of the clay needed to make tile. Additionally, Clarksville is close to major Midwestern and Southern markets, which represent the bulk of our business. The East and West Coast markets are more challenging for U.S. manufacturers to reach.

MILE®stone's 32" x 96" Farmhouse Living wall tile in Millstone is achieved using Continua+ technology, paired here with a 48" x 48" Slate porcelain tile for the floor.

Can you explain what the MILE®stone brand is and how it's different from other products you manufacture?

MILE®stone is a B2B brand we developed specifically for independent distributors, with no intention of going directly to consumers. We created it with independent distributors in North America, including Canada, in mind. An important distinction is that anything branded Florim is made in Italy, while anything branded MILE®stone is made here in our U.S. facility. This transparency makes it very easy for our clients to understand what they're getting. Beyond MILE®stone, we also do a lot of private label products for large clients who come to us with their own designs and specifications.

I know you're passionate about porcelain tile panels and slabs. Tell me about your investment in Pre-Fab panels using Continua+ technology: what market opportunity do you see?

I was one of the first to introduce porcelain panels to the U.S. market back in 2011 and 2012. I've always believed that porcelain panels are a game changer for our industry. They allow us to do residential and commercial projects in a beautiful and unique way. The technology today is amazing. In Europe and Asia, the product has exploded, but here in the U.S., growth is slower. The challenge is finding contractors capable of doing the work properly. Commercially, we have a good network of companies that can handle large panels, but residential work has been tougher. That's why we brought Continua+ technology to our Tennessee facility—not only to produce larger panels but also to create entry-level panels that are cut to size,

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Joining the ConsensusDocs Coalition gives NTCA members a meaningful voice in the industry, especially in shaping fair and balanced contracts that have a positive impact. NTCA members not only gain influence in developing best practice contracts but also benefit from a member discount on all ConsensusDocs products.

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EcoStone porcelain panel on the MILE®stone production line. The line offers cross-cut and vein-cut aesthetics.

reducing the amount of cutting needed on the jobsite.

What sizes are you cutting these panels to?

We're primarily cutting them to 32" x 96". Many bathrooms have traditional 30" x 60" bathtubs in a niche, but when homeowners remodel, they often remove the bathtub and install a walk-in shower. Four of our 32" x 96" panels do the job perfectly. We've also increased the thickness to 1/4" instead of the standard 6mm, which gives contractors flexibility to use familiar, traditional tools. They don't need to invest in specialized equipment.

So, these panels can be used on both floors and walls?

Correct. Because of the 1/4" thickness, the material works either way. We've also developed a 1/2" thick version in the same 32 "x 96" size for vanities, exterior countertops, and laundry areas. We even offer pre-made edges, so there's very little work needed on the jobsite. This makes the product much more contractor-friendly and eliminates the need for a separate fabricator.

MILE®stone's JEM porcelain panels, seen on the Tennessee production line, offer a stunning range of six types of marble in 48" x 48" and 48" x 110" formats, the latter with a bookmatch option.

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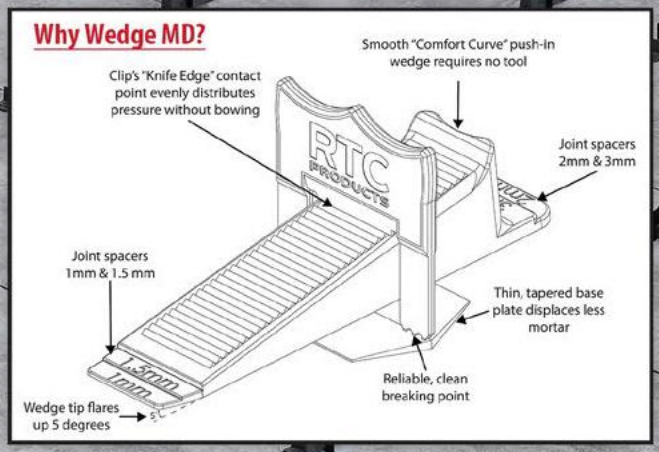

Wedge MD is the latest in lippage control technology.

The wedge features a Comfort Curve push point, and multi-thickness tips for easy joint clean out. The color coded clips have an articulating knife edge contact point that helps keep the wedges engaged fully without arcing providing more centered pressure. The base of the clip is an ultra thin V shape, which displaces the least amount of mortar possible to ensure a minimum bond coat thickness is obtained.

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  (Recommended for all installations, but required on polished and natural materials)

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- Eliminates Lippage
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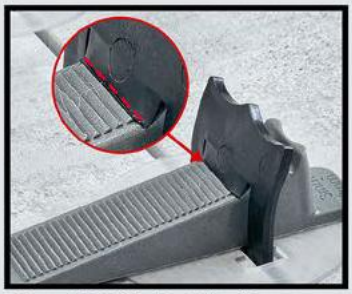

The clip's "Knife Edge" contact point evenly distributes pressure without bowing

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What technological advancements are you seeing in terms of finishes and aesthetics?

We've invested heavily in the newest technologies from our Italian corporate headquarters. The most talked-about innovation right now is 3D glazing technology. Previously, texture came from molds and digital print was separate. Now, everything is digital—both texture and image. This allows us to coordinate design with texture in ways that create amazing products. It's night and day compared to three years ago. This technology is especially important for our Continuum panels because you can create slate finishes, marble finishes, and contemporary looks with incredible realism.

This L-Shaped porcelain countertop from MILE®stone's Pre-Fab line comes in a standard 25.5" x 96" countertop dimension in 17 colors to easily coordinate with walls, floors, or exterior pavers.

Do you have R&D teams in Tennessee working on this, or are you leveraging expertise from Italy?

We have teams in Tennessee, but one key difference between Florim Italy and Florim USA is that we drive on U.S. design. We interact extensively with American designers and architectural firms. We breathe the U.S. market every day. While Italy develops products for worldwide markets—Germany, Asia, Italy, North America—we focus exclusively on North America. We're proud to say our products are driven by U.S. design preferences and trends.

You've created a truly innovative concept—a Design Advisory Council. Tell us about that.

The idea came from asking why all these materials always need to be designed in Italy or Spain. Why don't we give U.S. designers the ability to develop something and share their ideas? So, we called our clients, got them to nominate designers they work with, and brought eight to 10 designers here to our facility. We told them they had a blank canvas and asked, "What's your dream tile?" We gave them some parameters, and after three months, they came back with full collections and catalogs. They presented to our distributors, who voted on their favorite. We committed to making that winning collection real and unveiled it at Coverings, our major industry show.

What about the exterior porcelain market? Are you producing 2cm pavers?

Yes, we began producing pavers about six years ago. Our primary size is 24" x 24", but we also offer 24" x 48" and 12" x 48". It is a growing market. COVID drew more attention to outdoor living spaces, and many homeowners began remodeling their backyards. That momentum has created a snowball effect: when people see attractive outdoor spaces in their neighborhoods, they want something similar. It is much like what happened with quartz countertops. Today, we dedicate part of our production to outdoor products, and that segment becomes more important every year.

As we head into the rest of 2026, what's your outlook for Florim USA and the tile industry?

For U.S. manufacturers willing to invest and look for new markets, there's always opportunity. The market is in a pause situation right now: new construction is slow, remodeling isn't what it used to be, and the cost of living is making it difficult for families to finance renovations. But in 2008 to 2010, we started Stonepeak from scratch, and it rapidly became one of the best companies in the U.S. Being here in this market is the American dream—there are so many opportunities, and the tile industry is so young. I just see green. The future is smiling on us. TL

ONLINE LEARNING

NTCA University is a comprehensive online platform offering tile installation courses designed for individuals new to the industry or those seeking to refresh their skills. These courses are an excellent resource for training or apprenticeship programs, ensuring that learners are equipped with industry-standard methods and practices before applying their knowledge through hands-on or on-the-job learning. Additionally, these courses are beneficial for sales associates and professionals in other roles within the tile industry, providing valuable insights into the principles and processes of tile installation. NTCA University also features business courses tailored to small business owners. Accessible 24/7 via computer, tablet, or smartphone, NTCA University allows learners the flexibility to study at their convenience.

LEARN MORE

DIVERSE SKILL SET leads to SOLID BUSINESS MODEL

FOR PORTLAND TILE CONTRACTOR

By Lesley Goddin, Editorial Director and Senior Writer

LEVEL PLANE TILE AND STONE

Erik Trexel, Level Plane Tile and Stone (R.), with Dirk Sullivan, Hawthorne Tile

Erik Trexel of Level Plane Tile and Stone in Portland, Ore., had a rocky start to his company, but he had a boatload of skills to parlay into establishing a successful tile setting business.

The economy didn't give him a welcome reception in 2009. His tools were a truck, a tile saw, and a loan from his brother for his Construction Contractors Board (CCB) license, supercharged by his drive to create a career path for himself.

Aside from his tile prowess, Trexel brought a wide assortment of skills and experience to the table: more than a decade of involvement organizing events, creating art, teaching himself graphic design and marketing. He inherited creativity from his artist mom and an eye for detail from his perfectionist dad. Together with his Midwest work ethic—and a "healthy fear of failure"—he catapulted onto the path to "create something bigger than myself," he explained.

He poured himself into every job, even as he built his presence. "I made business cards, built a website, and put ads in local publications," he said. "I didn't know a lot about tile or the industry, just what I was taught as an apprentice for five years, but I tried my best. I didn't get very educated or aware of the industry until probably 2012 or so when I met William White of ARDEX who introduced me to some of the local tile players like Dirk Sullivan and Jason McDaniel.

Trexel designed and installed this piece for the owner of Kachka restaurant five years ago. He sourced the brass and commissioned a waterjet-cut brass inlay for the lettering, then finished the unique and challenging project with epoxy grout.

"I think my earnest drive, honesty, and detailed work are what set me apart," he added. "Once I started building a team, what set us apart was the culture. I've always had a talent for team building and networking."

Today, Level Plane does high-end residential jobs, primarily working as a subcontractor to general contractors. The company's work includes custom niches, miters, large format, some thin panels, mosaics, handmade tiles, zellige, and trendy designer tile. Level Plane also offers in-house design to its clients and a showroom for the designers with whom it works.

WHAT THEY SAY...

I tell every prospective member the same three things: If you are a business owner, you get your investment back with the vouchers. If you are a manager, you get your investment back through training and education events. If you are an installer, you get the knowledge, insight, and camaraderie of all those in this association that you would not get on your own. The ROI is a no-brainer.

Nathan Parsons, CEO
The Porcelain Slab Company
Rocky Mount, NC

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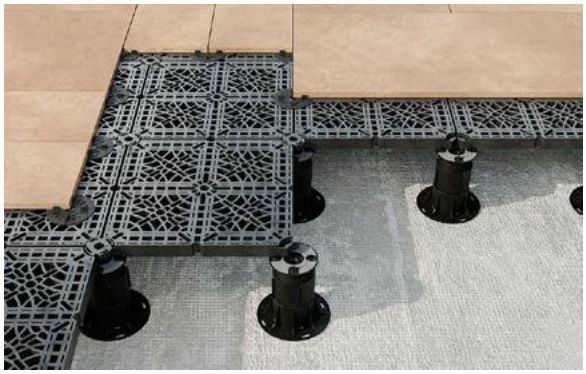

MAPEI's PP level Grid

MAPEI's PP level GRID System is used in combination with pedestals to offer an extra degree of stability, safety, and protection. In the unlikely event of pavers breaking, the grid will prevent anything from falling through. Further, the grids of the system are connected to each other through locking connectors, giving the system stability and strength. The use of PP level GRID System allows the installation of ceramic pavers, natural stone* and concrete pavers of different sizes. In addition, because the installation is free of the constraints of the pedestals underneath and because of movable head spacers, pavers can be placed on top of the grid in any pattern desired. Designed for use in residential and commercial applications, the PP level GRID System can be installed in combination with pedestals on terraces, balconies and roof decks. The system is also recyclable. The safety grids, connectors and head spacers may be removed and recycled at the end of their service life.

Scan for more information about MAPEI's PP level GRID System:

* Consult with the natural-stone manufacturer as to whether its products are suitable for heavy pedestrian traffic.

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This 2010 project captured the spirit of early video games for the Ground Kontrol arcade, designed by Jessica Helgerson. Trexel's largest project at the time, it involved a demanding layout, intricate details, new products, and a tight deadline. The owners' pattern was created and mounted by Daltile on 12" × 24" sheets, requiring meticulous installation that started with gridding out the pattern. Trexel completed all surface preparation himself, waterproofed the space, installed cement board, plumbed the walls, mastered epoxy grout, reached out for information on using new products, and led a small team through grouting. "I threw myself into the fire on this one and became a better installer and business owner as a result," he said.

NTCA

Around five years in, Trexel joined NTCA. The encouragement of his new peers helped bolster his company. He considers Sullivan to be a mentor of sorts, and attending trade shows gave Trexel access to more tile superstars.

"I had phone calls with Brad Denny, who I finally got to meet in person at Tile Solutions Plus last year," he said. "I have been to many trainings and networked with a lot of people. The NTCA has been very supportive in the growth of my company and my evolution as a tile installer to where my company is now." Trexel recently became an NTCA Ambassador for his region.

Trexel has one Certified Tile Installer (CTI) on staff: Dennis Lynch (CTI #788). Trexel recently chose to be listed on the CTI website, and is pursuing certification for the rest of his team. He has hosted two CTI tests at Level Plane's warehouse, and more are in the works—as are NTCA training programs.

Trexel takes his business to heart—for clients as well as employees. One of his biggest struggles has been "keeping

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Trexel participated in a recent tile competition at the Z Collection warehouse, hosted by Zee Coleman and Jason McDaniel. Competing against industry standouts like Robert Davis, Hawthorne Tile, Revive Surfaces, and Stoneman Construction, Trexel created a unique, complex entry. He utilized a Hotwire CNC foam cutter to shape his design, integrating LED lighting, a water feature with Illuminiche, and Ultimate Drains products. The piece featured intricate compound miters on the lampshade. Working solo, Trexel dedicated evenings and weekends over three months to master the layout and epoxy grouting. He described the experience as satisfying and expressed pride in both his inclusion and the final result.

Trexel teamed up with Jessica Helgerson again in 2022 on this challenging fireplace, working with GC Taylor Smith. Layout was a challenge since the designer didn't want any cut tiles. The box had to be exactly to the measurements of the tile. Trexel and his crew created templates to build things out and ensure they worked perfectly.

everyone happy and maintaining an environment that retains quality installers and a vibrant staff," he said.

"It's something that has to be paid attention to and worked on every day," he added. "Everyone has a choice to be a part of what we are doing, so I have to make it something special."

He also wrestles with pricing, trying to balance staying competitive to keep his crews busy with being profitable to pay them well and keep the business healthy. And he's worked to get good at scheduling, too. "Start dates are constantly changing, delays happen, and it's a daily struggle," he said.

That said, 2026 is shaping up as one of Trexel's biggest years. Four years ago, he became a licensed manufacturing partner of RodKat (dba Pacific Foam Custom Shower Solutions). Three years ago, Trexel's operations moved into a 10,000-sq.-ft. warehouse to build a new business model. This year, he opened a tile showroom and design studio alongside his tools and sundries store to work with GCs, tile installers, and the A&D community on design and procuring tile. Along with new staff and investment in new systems to stay organized and effective, this year the company has signed some of its largest contracts to date.

What lights Trexel up these days "is meeting and connecting with so many interesting and inspiring people, learning about how they live their lives and how they run their businesses," he said. He delights in sharing stories and experiences, finding commonalities, and building long-term friendships and relationships.

"I also love seeing the tile industry evolve and innovate to solve problems, make tile easier and more profitable," he said. "There are some truly bright people in the industry. It's always been fascinating but has only gotten more so as I get deeper into it. I also enjoy the many facets of the tile industry that you can explore and expand your business into, such as manufacturing, retail and distribution, design, showrooms, and tile sales." TL

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Wrangling with specialized installation procedures?

TURN TO THE *NTCA REFERENCE MANUAL*

By Scott Carothers, Academic Director, Ceramic Tile Education Foundation (CTEF)

The National Tile Contractors Association's *NTCA Reference Manual* contains a wealth of tile installation information that is helpful—and, many times, financially beneficial. NTCA members receive it as part of their annual dues, and non-members are encouraged to join to likewise reap this benefit. In either case, the crucial directive is to open the book and use the contained information in the daily operation of your business.

Numerous categories in the *NTCA Reference Manual* are helpful, but "Chapter 9, Specialized Installation Procedures," can assist the installer with jobsite conditions that often do not become problematic issues until after completion. Having this knowledge beforehand helps the installer ask questions and receive answers prior to installation, along with the option of saying "no" if the jobsite conditions are not up to industry standards.

Some of the specialized installation procedures covered in Chapter 9 include, but are not limited to:

- Mitering tile and stone precautions
- Thin-brick grouting
- Hot and cold weather tilings
- Using fast-setting mortars to reduce downtime in freezers or coolers
- Radiant heat for tile and stone installations
- Exterior installations like balconies, decks, and patios
- Pavers and GPTP pavers on pedestals
- Shower installations
- Steam rooms
- Submerged installations

We will look at three topics that seem simple enough but can get extremely expensive if the situation goes south.

Critical lighting

This topic is probably the most deceptive on this list. The tilework is complete and looks great…until the permanent lighting is installed. Then a problem becomes evident. Many times, it's a problem that may require replacement. However, replacing the tile on a substrate that was not properly prepared according to American National Standards Institute (ANSI) requirements will, most of the time, yield questionable results.

Critical lighting exacerbates the unevenness of the wall that did not meet the ANSI requirements for flatness. With the lights turned off, the tile looks great.

This section uses a combination of "Causes and Corrections, Tips for the Tile Contractor," a sample letter to the appropriate person, and pictorial examples of tilework that is unacceptable under certain lighting conditions.

When natural light or artificial light shines on walls and floors at an angle almost parallel to tile surfaces, normal and acceptable inconsistencies in the tilework are highlighted by shadows that exaggerate these conditions. This could be sunlight casting across the floor at sunrise/sunset or when the light source is at the intersection of the wall and ceiling. The corrections include following ANSI A108.02-4.2, which provides guidance on the flatness of the substrate depending on the tile size. As the tile size increases, the substrate flatness must also increase.

This chapter offers a "Tips for the Tile Contractor" section with excellent advice. For instance, it advises contractors to determine if the tile installation will

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A 1946 Hollywood-era landmark, renovated on a fast-track schedule across 139 guest bathrooms, each with an intricate black-and-white checkerboard floor and vintage-finished fixtures, with no room for a second attempt.

The crew used one membrane and one mortar per shower, with prefabricated benches and sloped trays replacing a built-up mud bed.

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INSTALLER: Division 9 Flooring and Finishes
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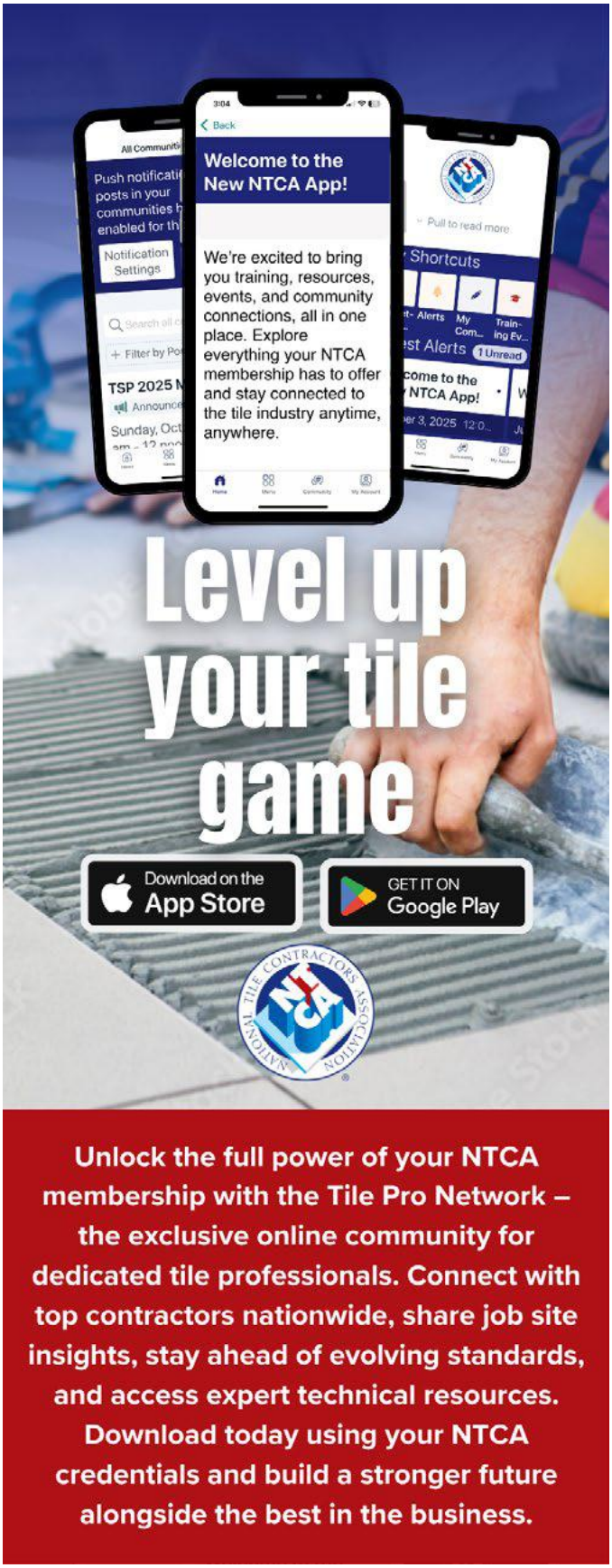

The use of lippage-control devices helps to bring the tile surface into plane (reducing lippage), but the devices were never intended to overcome inadequate substrate preparation.

be affected by the types of lighting in question, with suggestions to either visit the site or review the electrical drawings to determine the intended placement of the lighting in the areas to receive tile. It also recommends informing the general contractor, architect, and/or owner, in writing, of the anticipated problem.

Another tip is to have the permanent lighting installed before the tile installation or place your temporary lighting directly above the tile installation, and to provide a mockup with actual lighting, as noted in ANSI A108.02-2.2. Upon approval from the appropriate party, obtain a signed document acknowledging acceptance.

Lippage-control devices

This section in Chapter 9 states: "Lippage-control systems, primarily used with large format tiles, are specifically designed to help reduce lippage within the tile assembly." Here are some do's and don'ts from an extensive listing in the chapter:

DO's:

- Follow the manufacturer's directions.
- Complete proper substrate preparation to meet substrate tolerances before installing the tile.
- Always use an appropriately-sized notched trowel to achieve proper coverage and ensure corners and edges are fully supported with setting material.
- Use spacers or grid lines for establishing the grout joint width. Never use the lippage-control system as a tile spacer; it could pinch the tile edges and cause damage when removing. Always leave free space around the lippage-control strap/clip when installing.

DON'Ts

- Don't scratch tile or stone surfaces with dirty lippage-control devices. Be sure to use clean caps, wedges, rubber feet, or other accessories.

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Mike Audette, A1 Tile Installations, Fairhaven, Massachusetts has relied on Vortex® for years on both residential and commercial projects, from floors to walls. He especially appreciates the new "see-thru" **Vortex® Caps**, which make it easy to confirm proper installation, along with the **Vortex® Bases** (posts) that continue to break quickly and cleanly after the mortar cures.

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Some of these pebbles are flat while others are slightly rounded, but notice that the grout joints are significantly lower than the edge of the pebbles.

- Don't expect a lippage-control device to correct a poor installation.
- Don't move the lippage-control device after it has been placed. This will displace mortar and leave a void, potentially causing a failure in the tilework.

Be sure to consult this chapter to get the best results from lippage-control devices on your project.

Pebble shower floors

While the popular pebble mosaic trend continues to grow, the irregular shapes of river rock, marble, glass, and stone present challenges. Planning and mockups can be critical for success and the customer's approval. It is recommended that experienced professionals with a knowledge of these types of installations, materials, and proper drainage should tackle them. Chapter 9 states, "The surface of these mosaics can be flat or rounded, much like those found in nature. Because of the unique shape of these mosaics and the way they are mesh mounted, it can be very difficult to blend the sheets without exhibiting irregular grout lines or the grid of mosaic sheet lines from one sheet to the next. For this reason, a mockup is recommended for approval by the owner. When the mockup is not acceptable, some installers cut the mesh on which the mosaics are mounted, or frequently remove stones from the sheets, blending them by hand. Most would agree the result is better looking, but this process is very time consuming and costly."

This section in Chapter 9 also covers recommendations on using foam-based shower pans, slope suggestions to avoid incomplete draining of water from the pebbles, mortar selection and application, advantages of installing wall tile first when using pebbles, plus scribing and positioning of cut edges of the stones, as well as considerations for grouting, drying time, and pre-sealing.

In fact, the section reminds installers that grouting rounded pebble stones can be very tedious and time consuming. With grout joints varying from 1/16" to over 1/2", keeping the grout surface flat and consistent requires extensive experience to achieve an acceptable result. Since the joint width varies greatly, verify that the grout manufacturer will endorse this application.

This is another situation where a mockup is crucial. It shows the end user how the final assembly will appear and helps them understand that some water may be trapped behind a pebble and not be completely evacuated. A signed acknowledgement will be extremely helpful in the event of owner amnesia.

This review of Chapter 9 has barely scratched the surface of the available information. Using the *NTCA Reference Manual* to assist in day-to-day installation work can solve problems before they occur and save the installer a significant amount of time and money. TL

Lucas Hendrickson, Northwest Artisan Tile Company

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ASK THE EXPERTS

Ask the Experts Q&As are culled from member inquiries to NTCA's Technical Team. To become a member and make use of personal, targeted answers from NTCA's Technical Team to your installation questions, contact Jim Olson at jim@tile-assn.com.

Installing porcelain tile on a concrete slab deck

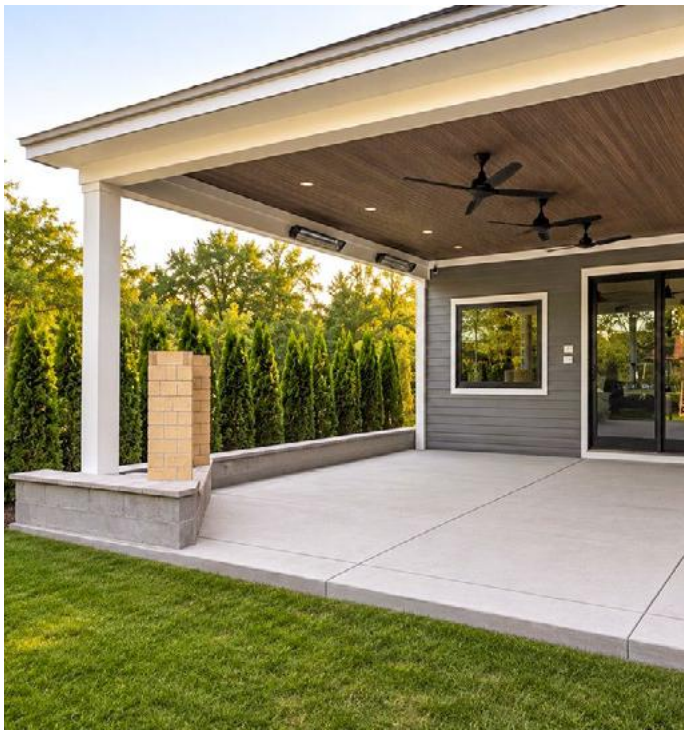
QUESTION

Can you give me some installation guidance on the following scenario? We are installing 1,100 sq. ft. of 4" x 8" porcelain tile on an 18-month-old slab concrete deck in Chicago. Do I need to install a membrane at all? Do the risers also need to have membranes?

ANSWER

Thank you for reaching out. Based on the information you've provided, there is not a blanket industry requirement that an exterior concrete slab receive a membrane simply because it is 18 months old. The decision to include a membrane should be based on the specific project conditions and the performance requirements of the assembly.

Since this project involves an exterior installation in Chicago, freeze/thaw conditions, moisture management, drainage, and movement accommodation are all critical considerations. Before proceeding, I would evaluate the slab for cracking, proper slope and drainage, existing control and construction joints, and any other conditions that could affect the long-term performance of the tile installation.



Following standards, ensuring proper slope, and consulting with the setting materials manufacturer are the best steps to ensure a flawless porcelain tile installation on a concrete slab deck.

***TCNA Handbook* standards:** The installation should comply with the movement accommodation joint requirements of TCNA EJ171 in the *TCNA Handbook for Ceramic, Glass and Stone Tile Installation.* Existing control joints, construction joints, cold joints, and expansion joints in the concrete must be honored through the tile assembly, and additional movement accommodation joints should be installed in accordance with EJ171, based on the size of the installation and the environmental exposure.

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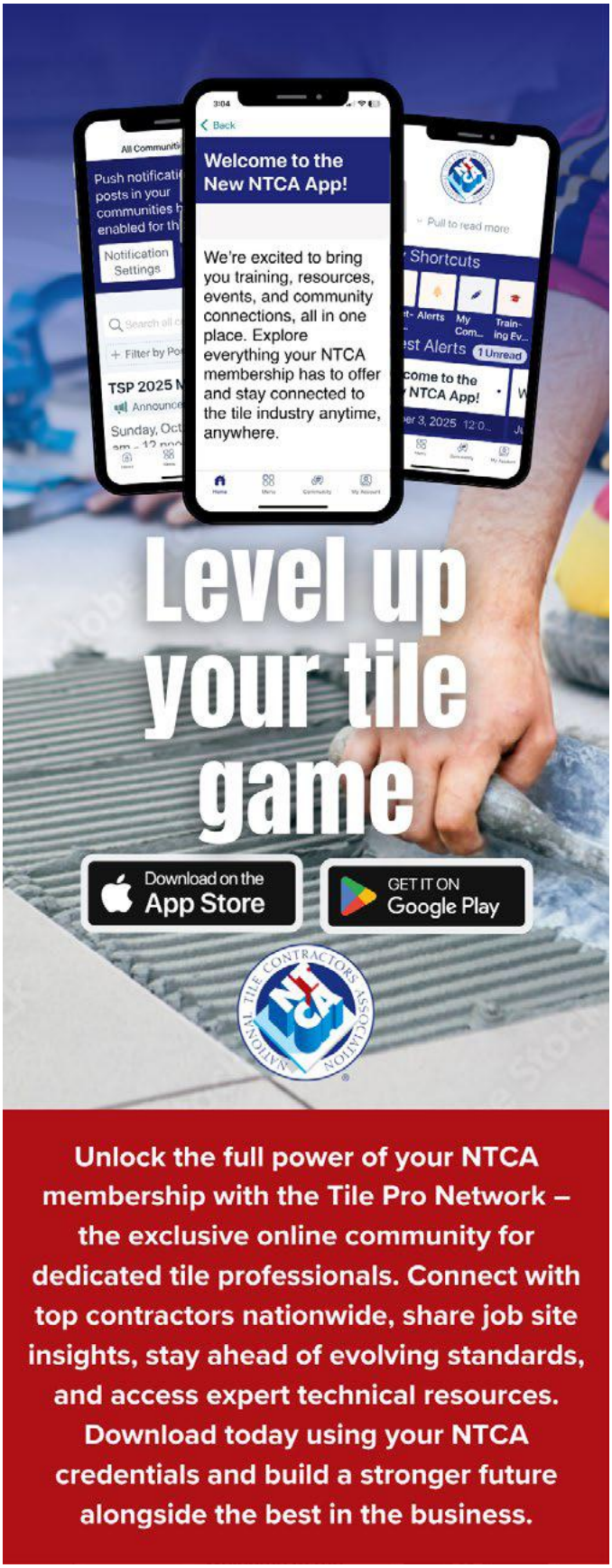

ANSI Manual: Another consideration is ANSI A108.20 Section 10.2, which recognizes that not all compressible membranes are appropriate where heavy rolling loads or concentrated point loads are anticipated. If a membrane is specified, the design professional or building owner should work with the tile, membrane, and setting material manufacturers to ensure the selected system is compatible with the intended service conditions and approved for exterior use.

Manufacturer's instructions: If a membrane is incorporated into the assembly, I would also recommend following the membrane manufacturer's installation instructions for all transitions (including the risers), providing specific detailing at changes in plane to maintain the intended performance of the system.

Not all membranes are rated for exterior applications. If a crack isolation, waterproofing, or uncoupling membrane is being considered, it is important to obtain a complete system recommendation from the membrane and setting material manufacturers to ensure the products are approved for the specific exterior application, environmental exposure, and expected service loads.

Slope: Because this is an exterior installation, I would also verify that the concrete has a proper slope away from the structure and that water will not be trapped beneath or behind the tile assembly. A membrane can help manage certain conditions, but it can also create problems if water is allowed to collect with no proper drainage path.

Consult the tech team at the setting material manufacturer: My strongest recommendation would be to contact your setting material and membrane manufacturer before moving forward. Review the project conditions with their technical services team and work together to develop a complete installation system that is appropriate for this specific application. Doing so helps ensure that all components are compatible, that the system is approved for the anticipated service conditions and exterior exposure, and that both you and the manufacturer are confident in the installation you are standing behind. Taking the time to obtain those recommendations in writing can provide valuable peace of mind and help avoid potential performance issues down the road. TL

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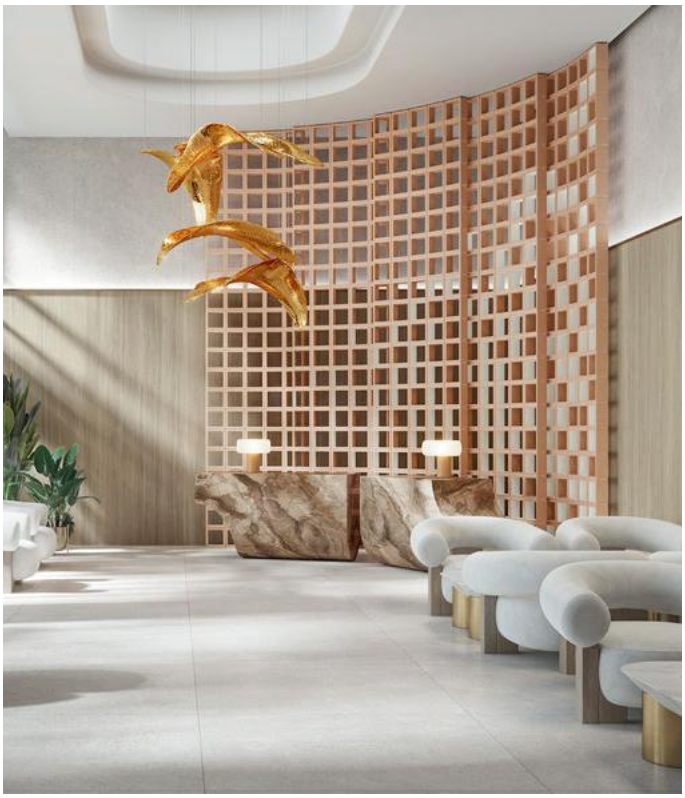


Durstone Lumina

Durstone's Lumina is a collection of modular ceramic lattice screens capable of shaping light, ventilation, and privacy that hearkens back to the tradition of Mediterranean architectural design. Lumina revives this element and reinterprets it through a collection of extruded stoneware designed for contemporary installations in a modular system that creates visual filters, space dividers, lightweight enclosures, and transitional elements capable of adding depth, privacy, and dynamism to spaces.

Portobello America DUAL

As part of its central "Living Home" theme at Coverings 2026, Portobello America unveiled the DUAL collection. Proudly Made in the USA, DUAL is a high-definition black and white porcelain system that transforms an essential palette into deep, architectural textures, bringing a bold, tactile character to contemporary living spaces. It features architectural reliefs, small formats, dynamic mosaics, finish contrast, and linen-like texture for application on walls and floors.

Ceramic Tile Hygiene Facts

Ceramic tile is one of the healthiest flooring choices available, all without compromising on artistic versatility.

HEALTHY HOME

ALLERGEN FREE
Ceramic's nonporous surface doesn't allow allergens in the environment such as dust, dirt, and pollen to penetrate.

NO PVC
Polyvinyl chloride is a resin found in some vinyl flooring that contains phthalates and organotins, both a concern among health experts.

NO FORMALDEHYDE Certain levels of formaldehyde can irritate asthma and other respiratory disorders. Ceramic tile does not contain formaldehyde.

BACTERIA-RESISTANT
Ceramic tile is inhospitable to the growth of bacteria.

NONTOXIC
Ceramic tile doesn't emit any toxic fumes when exposed to heat or fire.

NO VOCS
Volatile organic compounds are harmful gases that may cause various health concerns and are emitted by many non-ceramic flooring types.

HEALTHY CLEANING

EASY TO CLEAN
Wiping with some soap and water is all that's needed to clean up most messes — no harsh chemicals are necessary.

ANTIMICROBIAL
Options can suppress and even destroy harmful microorganisms, such as mold, fungi, bacteria, and viruses.

SCRATCH-RESISTANT
Dents, scrapes, and cuts often seen in other materials aren't the same danger for ceramic tile.

STAIN-RESISTANT
Your life is bound to see many messes—ceramic tile doesn't stain easily!

HEALTHY PLANET

LOWEST CARBON FOOTPRINT
Lowest global warming potential and lowest fossil fuel resource depletion in North America.

LOWEST LIFE CYCLE COST
Less replacement costs compared to other flooring materials.

RECYCLING
Pre- and post-consumer recycled options are available.

WHY TILE .COM

Healthy for your Family. Healthy for the Environment.

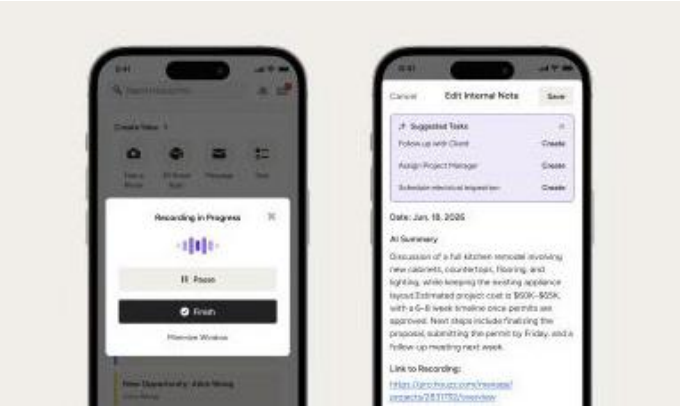
Download this free showroom poster of ceramic tile hygiene benefits ➤
at https://whytile.com/library/health-hygiene-and-cleanliness-benefits-poster/

GRABO Tools

GRABO has expanded its accessories ecosystem with two new products built to work in tandem with its electric vacuum lifters: the TILE VIBRATION attachment (shown) and the BORE MOUNT. Designed to improve speed, precision, and control on the jobsite, both additions help trade professionals tackle demanding applications with greater efficiency and confidence, from smoother tile installations to stable, hands-free drilling. The TILE VIBRATION attachment seamlessly settles thinset and mortar beneath flooring materials during installation. The BORE MOUNT helps achieve clean, accurate holes when drilling into hard, dense materials, creating a stable drilling platform on which to mount two GRABO tools.

Decocer TALYA

Inspired by the artisanal richness of zellige, TALYA draws on a craft heritage that forms part of the Mediterranean ceramic imagination. Available in 5cm x 15cm (nominal 2″ x 6″) and 10cm x 10cm (nominal 4″ x 4″) formats, the collection highlights the design versatility of small-format ceramics. The combination of shapes, colors, and laying patterns allows for the creation of surfaces with rhythm, depth, and a strong visual identity. TALYA's glossy glazes reflect light differently on each tile, revealing nuances and reflections that evolve throughout the day, bringing a dynamic presence of light to the surface.



Houzz Pro AI tools

Houzz, Inc. has a new suite of mobile documentation and communication tools within Houzz Pro, an all-in-one project management and design software that helps professionals win projects, collaborate with clients and teams, and run more efficient and profitable businesses. The new mobile capabilities enable pros to capture conversations, document site progress, communicate across language barriers, and stay productive, even in areas with no cellular or Wi-Fi connectivity. At the center of the update are new AI-powered documentation tools like note-taking, two-way video daily logs, translations for messages, and offline mode for working in areas with limited connectivity.

Lumina

DUAL

GRABO Tools

TALYA

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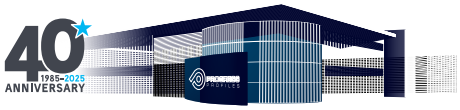

NATIONAL TILE CONTRACTORS ASSOCIATION

NTCA REFERENCE MANUAL

In conjunction with the NTCA Technical Committee members, industry allies, and ceramic tile contractors, distributors, and manufacturers, we produce the *NTCA Reference Manual*. One of the most highly-valued tile industry documents, this manual identifies recurring installation challenges, recognizes potential problems, and offers expert solutions. The *NTCA Reference Manual* is a comprehensive culmination of knowledge, research, and development that addresses common installation obstacles and issues in the tile and stone industry.

The *NTCA Reference Manual* is released annually and a **printed copy is mailed to all active members**. PDF and print are available by visiting the NTCA Online Store.

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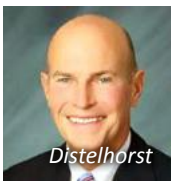
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Meta Platforms, Inc., and Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC)

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Tile of Spain

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Arto

Industry legend **Dave Gobis,** a third-generation tile setter and first Executive Director of the Ceramic Tile Education Foundation, passed away on July 8...The **Materials and Methods Standards Association (MMSA)** has officially opened a call for speakers for the 2026 MMSA Technical Conference, to be held in conjunction with Tile Solutions Plus November 1–3 in Miami, Fla. Sign-ups close on October 17, 2026...An **NAHB** analysis found that the expected phenomenon of older homeowners transitioning out of their homes or downsizing (aka "the silver tsunami") has stalled, limiting the expected wave of housing stock released and affecting the availability of homes for new buyers...**Gary Distelhorst,** former CEO of the Marble Institute of America (now the Natural Stone Institute) from 2002–2012, passed away on July 6...NTCA Chairman Sam Bruce and **Visalia Ceramic Tile** earned the Large Company of the Year Award from the Visalia Chamber of Commerce...**Meta Platforms, Inc., and Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC)** are partnering to launch an academy to train and create construction-ready career pathways for thousands of data center construction professionals. The program, dubbed America's Workforce Academy, is a $115 million investment, kicking off in Indiana, Ohio and Texas...Paul F. De Cock, President and COO of **Mohawk Industries, Inc.,** will succeed Jeffrey S. Lorberbaum as CEO of the company on September 30. Lorberbaum will continue to serve as Chairman of the Board...**Tile of Spain** has launched "The Grout Line" podcast series that invites architects, designers, trade professionals, homeowners, and tile enthusiasts to take a deep dive into the world of Spanish ceramics through insightful conversations with industry leaders. It is hosted by Tile of Spain USA Ceramic Tile Technical Spokesperson Ryan Fasan...**Tri-Co,** a premier commercial flooring contractor serving San Diego for 67 years, is expanding its operations across Orange County, Los Angeles, and the Inland Empire. Industry veteran Phil Bannan has joined as Regional Manager and will work alongside partners Jason Anderson, Mike Baker, and Miguel Burboa to lead growth across these new markets...**Arto** is expanding manufacturing of its Roman and Brick collections to Tucson, Ariz., into the showroom/warehouse that previously served at Sam Levinson Furniture. The tile company also plans an expanded, deep collection of curated hard surfaces at this location.

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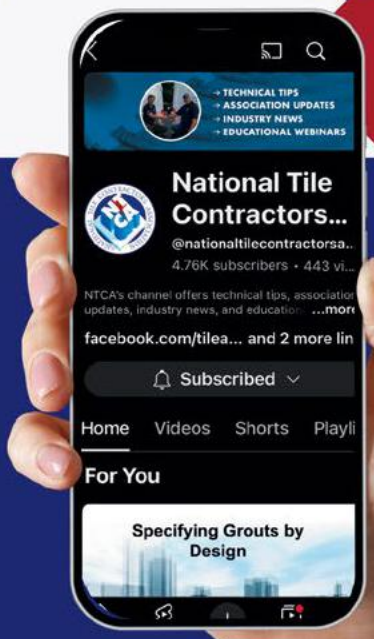

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