

FLOORING

Tiles enhance your home, but tread carefully



MIKE HOLMES
MAKE IT RIGHT

I love tile floors. Tile is incredibly durable and looks great when it's installed properly. It comes in every style and colour, so there's hardly a floor in the house where tile won't work, and there is no look it won't enhance. But you have to make sure your contractor knows what he's doing. Here are some things to keep in mind.

I had an e-mail from Sault Ste. Marie last week asking if a new ceramic tile floor can be installed on top of an old one, given that the existing tile floor is sound and there is space for an extra layer of flooring.

Technically speaking, with the right thinset mortar, you can. But why would you want to? I would never do it, or recommend you do it. You don't want to thicken the floor, not to mention add the weight of the extra tile on your structure. And how can you tell if your floor really is sound without removing that existing layer of tile and checking the subfloor?

Don't be tempted by the quick fix.

There are different types of floor tile and each needs to be handled differently. Ceramic, porcelain, slate, marble, limestone — they all have different properties and you need to know what they are or you won't be able to ensure your tile flooring will be problem free.

The most important difference is in porosity — how easily the tiles absorb water. Stone tiles, such as marble, slate and limestone, are very porous. Some green marbles are so porous they will actually warp like wood if they get wet. On the other hand, porcelain tile doesn't absorb water. Find out the porosity rating of your chosen tile; the more porous it is, the more you need to protect it from moisture.

There are other things to think about. For example, ceramic tile has a surface glaze baked on to a terra cotta-coloured tile; if you chip its surface, you'll see the terra cotta colour. With porcelain tile, the colour is solid throughout.

When laying tile, the first thing is to make sure the surface you're laying the tile on is stable. I like half-inch cement backer board as substrate, but good tilers will also use three-quarter-inch tongue-in-groove plywood. The important thing for any base is that it is firmly anchored to the wood underneath. A three-quarter-inch plywood substrate, for instance, should be glued, then screwed down every six inches, with screws that are long enough to grab the floor joists.

Those joists have to be sound as well. The rule of thumb is: The maximum flex of the substrate should be no greater than the span of the joist or studs, divided by 360. That equals about a half-inch when the span is 15 feet. For stone tile, the flex should be half that.

I always use a waterproof membrane between the substrate and the tile. These membranes are required under the building code in bathrooms and laundry rooms because if there's a leak, any excess water will be contained. More important, in a lot of homes, the structure underneath a tile floor isn't strong enough (minimum code again). The floor will flex, which will cause the tile and grout to crack. These membranes neutralize the movement between the substrate and the tile — they "uncouple" the tile from the floor below, which reduces cracking.

Make sure your tiler is using high-quality thinset of the type required for your situation. There are different types of thinset — white, modified, non-modified — and it is essential that the correct one is used or you'll have trouble.

After installation, the tile needs to dry for at least 24 hours and then be sealed before the grout is applied. Porous tiles must be sealed to protect them from water or other liquids, with two coats of high-quality sealer that can penetrate tile — not just sit on top. You have to seal this kind of tile before the grouting because otherwise it will absorb the grout and look stained. And you don't want the grout sealed. Grout needs to breathe so that, if water does somehow get in under the tile, it can dissipate.

The kind of grout that should be used depends on the width of the joints. For narrow joints (an eighth of an inch or less), your tiler should use unsanded grout. It is easier to push into the narrow grooves and provides a smoother finish. For wider joints, sanded grout is necessary; the added sand reduces shrinkage in wider joints.

Some tilers like epoxy grouts because they are waterproof, but I don't like them, and frankly, they are unnecessary if you use a waterproof membrane. They are expensive and hard to use, and you have to know how to handle them properly — they're really for commercial and industrial use.

Some handymen try to use epoxy grouts to replace old grout that has cracked and allowed water to seep in behind the tile. But because they are waterproof, they trap water and you have a worse mess than when you started.

Don't be tempted by the quick fix. Have your tiler rip out the tile, let the substrate dry, replace any water-damaged areas, use a waterproof membrane and, after sealing the tile, use a traditional grout. Then the job will be done right.

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'We didn't build it for resale'

LEDBURY from page G1

But it's been replaced by a model of sleek, stylish architecture that not only flies in the face of the super-sizing trend, but has opened up a whole new dialogue among the neighbours.

"People are talking about it at dinner parties; there are lots of raised eyebrows," says its architect, Richard Librach. "I think that's great. ... Those conversations usually only happen at the municipal [government] level."

Most people who have given him feedback are positive about the design, and some are asking wider cultural questions about why neighbourhoods look the way they do, and how homes get designed, he says.

"There's a sense that everything is compromised because it's not about anybody," Mr. Librach says. "Homes are being built for speculative future buyers, and so there's always the same compromises rather than an individual vision."

Mr. Librach's Ledbury House is the happy result of a close creative collaboration with his clients, Diane Dickin and Joe Dachuk, who decided to demolish their Fifties-vintage 1½-storey three-bedroom and its iconic white picket fence and replace them with a home tailored to their tastes and needs as empty-nesters who work at home.

"The real-estate market dictates design for many people," says Ms. Dickin, an early retiree from Bell Canada who now makes glass-bead jewellery. "But we didn't build it for resale."

Still, Ms. Dickin thinks individualism is going to become the new trend because baby boomers like her have said goodbye to their kids and want their homes tailored to an exact fit.

"The house is in marked contrast to the prevailing trend against personal expression," Mr. Librach says.

The Ledbury home's biggest departure from those around it is its size and what architects call "massing."

There's no attempt to cover the



whole lot with house; the second level is in pieces and set back so it doesn't loom; and there's no wasting space on rooms that don't get used.

"Bigger definitely isn't better," Mr. Librach says.

When builders get their hands on a tear-down, their first question is always "what's the biggest house we can build?" he says. "If your approach is, what's the smallest house we can build, you get to the things that are most important to you."

Says Ms. Dickin: "You isolate the things in your life that are most important and you purge the rest."

So the design process started with relaxed conversations about the couple's memories and pleasures.

Most people don't speak the visual language of architecture, so Mr. Librach sees part of his job as "drawing language out of them."

He got clues about how to shape and orient the house from Ms. Dickin's emphasis on enjoyment of the outdoors and having space from the neighbours. An L-shaped design with an inner courtyard garden overlooked by deep windows, and a master bedroom suite at ground level with a walkout were the result.

Mr. Dachuk reminisced fondly about childhood tree houses, the sense of an "away space," with the result that his study is a sort of tall eyrie. It has an opening overlooking the home's busiest space, the kitchen, and corner windows looking up Fairlawn and along Ledbury. It's separated from Ms. Dickin's study by a catwalk.

The two studies and their floating link, along with a bathroom and a small reading nook, constitute the whole second floor.

The hub of the house is the multi-purpose kitchen, which is dramatically high and airy, with two full storeys of head room and glazing on two sides, one leading to the garden, the other to the street.

"We didn't want a formal living room or dining room; we wanted a big, central, multi-purpose space," Ms. Dickin says.

A two-storey stone wall with a double-sided fireplace forms a par-



Top, the L-shaped home, whose second level is set back so it's unobtrusive. Above, the dining room. Left, the original house on the lot. Below, the kitchen.



Top, the home that once occupied the lot. Above, the kitchen.

"It's a reinterpretation or rethinking of that original palette of materials," Mr. Librach says.

The outdoor materials are used indoors as well, to create visual continuity, so there are stucco walls in the foyer and kitchen, the stone wall in the kitchen, and cedar ceilings that pass through windows to become canopies on the outside.

The floors are rich Brazilian cherry or tan-and-grey slate throughout the house. All the cabinetry in the kitchen and bathrooms is made from the same dark-brown-stained maple, and all the doors are birch wood framed in pine.

"It's neat, you don't need to hire an interior decorator when you continue the same theme through the house," Ms. Dickin says.

In her own study-workshop, she opted for window treatments involving deep pine surrounds encasing irregularly sized panes of glass, creating the look of abstract compositions rather than just windows.

Some time in the future she plans to set up a full workshop in the basement, which remains a no-go zone since the house proper has eaten up the budget for the moment.

One thing that makes an individualistic, architect-designed home anathema to the rebuild-and-flip set is that the design work continues to evolve after the clients have moved in.

"We live in an IKEA culture where people pick number 65 ... and that's the extent of the choice they have," Mr. Librach says. "It's unusual to devote the time and energy to buying one piece at a time, living with it, in an organic process."

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