

# Are decorative Cement Floor

## TILES making a comeback?

*When I first heard about this, let truth be told, I was a little skeptical. The picture in my mind was of that of the humble cement floors that we were so accustomed to until a decade back. What could be so special about it? Over the last few months, having visited few locations and discussed with several industry experts to corroborate this claim, my outlook has completely changed and I can never look at cement tiles the same way ever again.*

*While most people agree that they are definitely making a comeback, the question is 'Are they here to stay or is it just another passing trend especially in the Indian context?' It is true that cement tiles as paver blocks, mosaics or terrazzo are widely used; **Surfaces Reporter** will however discuss more about decorative cement tiles which are exclusive in their style and designs. We even hear that brand owners are copyrighting the custom handmade cement tile designs to retain their uniqueness!*

### What are Cement tiles?

Cement tiles as the name suggests are tiles made out of concrete or cement. The basic difference between them and ceramic tiles is that, cement tiles are not kiln dried or fired but derive their durability from the combination of finely dehydrated ground Portland cement layer and a more coarse layer of sand and Portland cement. The pigment layer is hydraulically pressed into the surface and becomes a part of the tile, not a glaze or paint layer on the surface of the tile.

They are made by hand one at a time using a mold and mineral pigments. The metal mold, containing the desired pattern is handmade from specific design drawings. The pigment composition is a mixture of high quality white Portland cement, marble powder, fine sand and natural mineral color pigments. After the mixtures have been poured into the moulds, artisans submerge them in a water bath, and allow them to cure for 21 days. The only advancement in today's manufacturing process includes using a hydraulic press to aid in the compression and elimination of moisture.

### History of Cement Tiles and its comeback. . .

Cement Tiles were widely used in the early 19th century Europe, Latin America. They gained great popularity in the 20th century and were considered high-end luxury flooring options due to their designs and colorful looks. They had a special mention being used luxuriously by master designers like *Antoni Gaudi* in several of his works. They can be seen in many iconic colonial architecture in India. By the mid 1920-1940s their popularity dimmed with the coming of new age materials. In the past few years, they have once again appeared to gain popularity amongst the architects and designers. In the Indian context too, the decorative or iconic designs of the cement tiles are seeing growing number of takers again. They have been used in the restoration projects of many important building across India.

We spoke to *Firdaus Variava, Director, Marketing & Sales; Bharat Floorings (Mumbai)*, one of the pioneers of cement floorings in India. Their range of *Heritage Tiles* has been used in many projects across India. **"We used to make these tiles in our company long ago after which we stopped making these designer tiles for quite a few decades. Then sometime back, for one of the Kala Ghoda Exhibitions, as part of their Heritage exhibition, we specifically made some of these Tiles again. They became very popular from**

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that exhibition. People expressed renewed interest in these tiles and we decided to start making them again and aptly called it our 'Heritage Tiles,' informs Mr. Variava.

It should also be noted that while the heritage or the old classic look of the cement tile is being preferred by many, what is most exciting is the 'modern twist' which is being given to the traditional tile. Just by changing the colour combinations to a renaissance style designs, one may be able to obtain a fresh design and contemporary look. The Tiles can also be used in various installation patterns to create interesting design layouts.

Each Cement tile is unique and are expected to have slight imperfections, which gives them character and depth. These tiles start looking even better as they age and this is something extraordinary about the product.

### Factors attributing to growth

Many people have cited varied reasons for the surging popularity of these Tiles in the International arena. Firstly, being handmade, each cement tile is unique and are expected to have slight imperfections, which gives them character and depth. None of the tiles are completely identical, which lends a special attribute to the interiors.

The tiles are popular for their variety of colour, the matt finishes as well as the silky finishes. Some designers believe that the age of minimalism is slowly changing to something more elaborate and personal and cement tiles in colourful patterns and designs are able to create that element. "One can choose the designs & colours you want and we custom make it for you. The designs are unique and personal which can essentially reflect your personal style," informs Mr. Variava. In addition to being a sustainable material, today's reinvented cement tiles inject modern geometric patterns, bright colors, and high craftsmanship into a space. And porcelain or glass, which are commonly used for tile making.

Lundy Wilder from Villa Lagoon Cement Tiles (USA) thinks that the growing popularity can be attributed to the Internet. Many American and other travelers have seen these tiles during their travels and only when they returned home they began to research cement tile. Even five years ago there was very little information available outside of a tile's home region. Now they are getting more frequent emails and calls from countries all

over the world. "With the Internet also facilitating the easy transfer of currency, low cost communication and access to sophisticated freight booking online it is possible to ship cement tile far from its homeland with ease."

## Application possibilities

Cement tiles can be applied to concrete surfaces, any common underlayment, wallboard or any appropriate surface. The tiles' colorful patterns, *durability and versatility* have been attracting the attention of architects and designers for large commercial projects such as restaurants and hotels. Although widely used as flooring material, they can also be used for walls and public areas.

It is also being used in standalone residences, corporate lobbies, schools and institutions, lifestyle boutiques, even supermarkets. People generally opt for one room done with the decorative cement tiles when it comes to residences in metros while it sees a wider application when it comes to two tier cities with larger residential areas.

## Points to consider before buying Cement floor tiles

It is advisable to buy your cement tiles from a reputed manufacturer only. Larger, modern manufacturers use electric-powered hydraulic presses that produce a consistently higher quality product. The higher pressure (1,500 PSI) permits a thicker pigment layer to be embedded in the cement layer, which produces a tile with a longer lifespan. The pigment layer is recommended to be 3-4 mm thick.

Another difference in manufacturing is the content of the pigments used. High quality producers use mineral-based pigments only. Non-mineral based pigments fade with age and normal wear. Another consideration is curing. Improper curing reduces quality. Tile should be cured for 2-4 weeks before installation.

## Downsides

"One drawback to cement tiles is the long lead-time for large orders," says Lundy Wilder of Villa Lagoon Cement tiles. "Since the tiles are made in small, family owned 'factories' and made one at a time, this limits the output. I predict the cost of hand made cement tile will rise as the demand increases. We charge more for in-stock than we do for custom orders where the client can wait the necessary 8 to 14 weeks. For custom orders, we can ship them directly to the client's project. In America everyone is in a hurry."

Another drawback with cement tiles is the issue with its *porosity*. Being porous by nature, some amount of care is needed to be taken at the curing time to get the best out of your tiles or they could get stained.

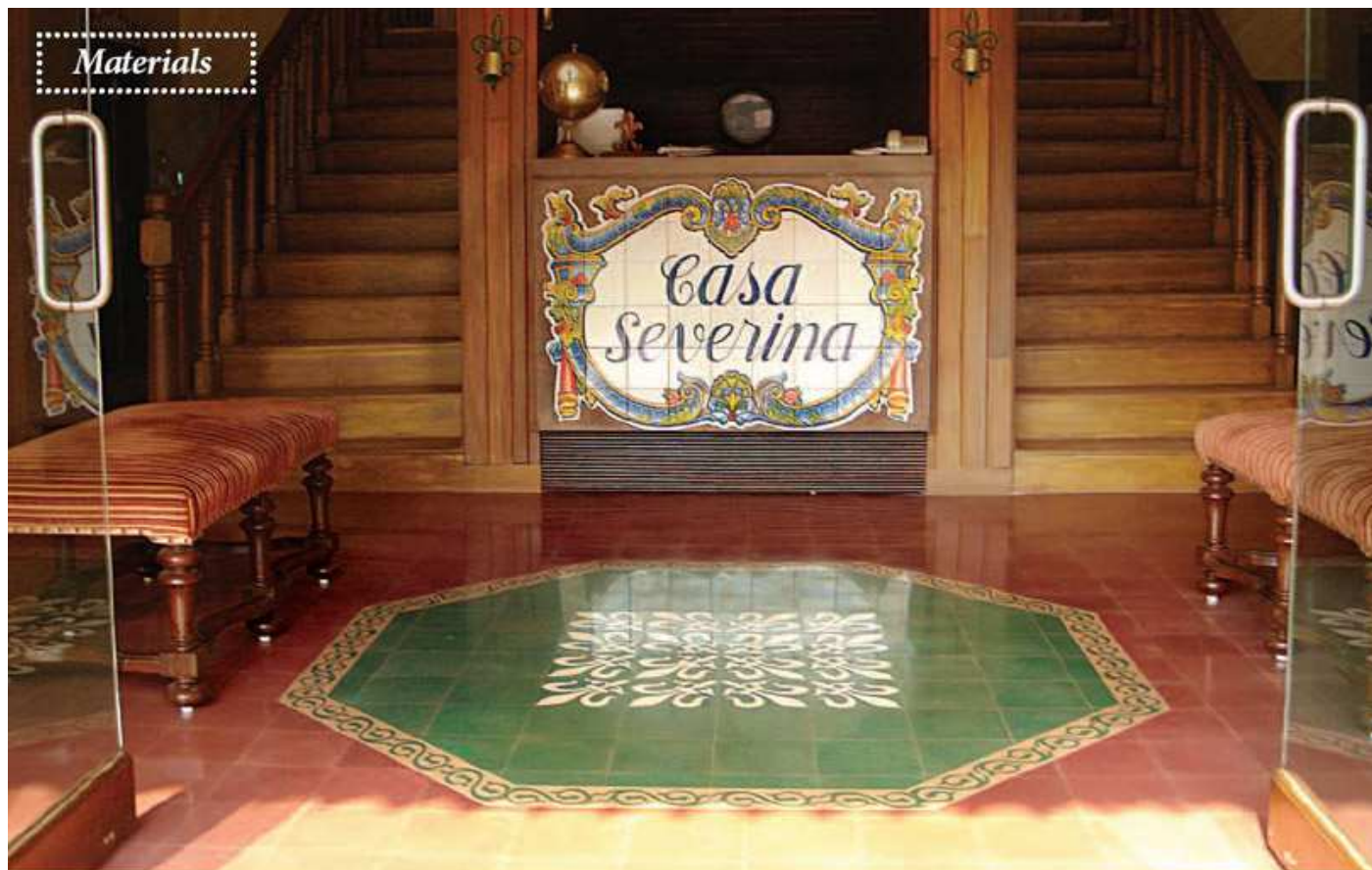
## Care & maintenance

The good thing however is that, staining can be avoided. It actually happens in the most initial stages or the construction phase when the tile is still getting cured.

Once it is installed, the staining usually doesn't happen. "We normally do tell people to take appropriate care at the installation stage. However, if it still gets stained, we can re-polish it to look new," asserts Mr. Variava. Never clean with harsh detergents, acid or alkaline, it will irreversibly damage the tile surface. The toughest stains can be smoothed out by scrubbing with a 'soft' abrasive used for cleaning utensils. Hard abrasives that can remove the finish and damage the pigment layer of the tile. At the installation stage, it is important that sealing is performed before grouting. Be aware that sealing in itself does not prevent excess grout from sticking to the surface. It is thus of paramount importance that any excess grout on the face of the tiles is wiped off immediately and meticulously.

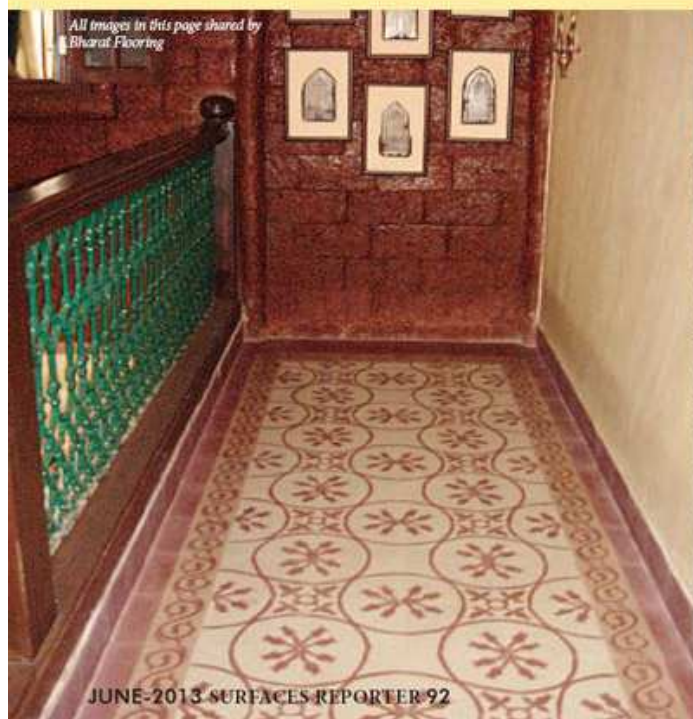
If sealing is taken care of, these tiles are very easy to maintain. One can easily clean it with just water. In fact, the lesser chemicals, the better. **Cement Tiles start looking even better as they age and this is something which is extraordinary about the product.** You can easily replace a defective tile with a fresh one. It is usually recommended to keep a few extra Tiles for this purpose.





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The interiors of *Casa Severina* (shown above), the well known boutique hotel at Calangute beach in Goa, were designed by *Aakruti Sinh*, the owner of the lovely restaurant *A Reverie*. This hotel is designed to offer privacy and a sublime spirit reminiscent of an inspired Batkar's mansion (Batkar - Portuguese word for landlord). Casa Severina is an architectural Endeavour, conforming to the orthodoxy yet refreshing & surreal... An attempt to re-incarnate a lost glory of vernacular heritage, ethos, culture & architecture. Bharat Floorings were called upon to design superlative Heritage floorings which would add the desired effect to the structure in terms of ambience and charm. Designs were created specially for the project to display its Fleur De Lis logo on the floor. Other areas used variations of existing designs, with carefully chosen colours.



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### BHARAT FLOORINGS GROUP



The Bharat Floorings Group is the leader in quality cement floorings - a reputation held for 90 years. In 1922 Bharat pioneered the cement tiles industry in India as part of the Swadeshi movement. Bharat Tiles make hand-made tiles, which can be customized according to your need. Another innovative service offered by the company, is the ability to design your own tile where customers can

provide pictures or drawings of their designs, and these are converted into the actual tile. The company manufactures plain vitrified tiles too, while their mosaic and chequered varieties have been a favourite when it comes to mass housing projects, where cheaper and sustainable varieties are more in demand.

*Firdaus Variava, Director- Sales and Marketing, Bharat Floorings, Mumbai; speaking about Cement tiles market, designs, price & projects.*

#### Market:

*Firdaus Variava* - The biggest market is for checkered Tiles and outdoor pavers but it is a high volume low value market. We cater to a small part of this segment. We mainly focus on the exclusive and high end Heritage Tiles and our competitors would be Italian Marble or high end imported designer Tiles from Italy and Spain.

#### Price range of Heritage Tiles:

*FV* - The range starts from Rs.100 a square foot. We probably sell the cheapest because anything which is handmade comes at around 400-500 sqft these days. Everything is handmade and there is a lot of manual intervention in the production process which makes it hard to scale up but at the same time also makes it our speciality so we continue to do so.

#### Sizes & Lead time

*FV* - The main heritage Tiles are available in sizes of 200X200mm, Terrazzo is available in 2 and 1/2ft by 2 and 1/2 ft. The time required depends upon the requirement. We have done quite a few five star hotels but it does take about 2-3 months to supply since they are all handmade.

#### Projects with Heritage Tiles

*FV* - We have recently done restoration projects for the Mumbai High Court, Yatch Club, and the Chief Magistrate's court. Apart from that we have done Pizza express here at Colaba, Pali Bhavan at Bandra. Taj Holiday Village and Radisson Blu in Goa have used it in their hotel lobbies.

#### Competition from ceramic tiles or porcelain tiles

*FV* - Ceramic Tiles have their own niche and we have our own. What our product does is to give a signature to a particular project, its exclusive.



## VILLA LAGOON CEMENT TILES, USA

*Lundy Wilder and Dave Perry share a passion for cement tile. Based on the US Gulf Coast, they serve clients world-wide. Villa Lagoon Tile is a non-fired green product, created using basic earth components and natural pigments. This type of tile is called Encaustic Cement Tile or Cuban Tile in the States and Mosaicos Hidraulicos in other parts of the world. The artisan manufacturing process has not changed since the 1850's. Sharing an interaction with Lundy Wilder:*

### S Designer cement tiles of today Vs. former counterpart:

*Lundy Wilder* - Buyers in large cities often prefer simple, modern or abstract patterns that reflect "clean lines" and contemporary design. Some small 'boutique' suppliers are meeting this need. On the other hand, a revived interest in Cuba has caused people to gain a new appreciation for highly ornamental and vivacious tile patterns. The very old French and Belgium tiles had a high degree of fine detail and few currently made designs are quite labor intensive. But a similar look can be achieved in a cost effective way as well.

### S Benefits of using cement tiles over other conventional materials?

*Lundy Wilder* - It is mostly aesthetics. Many people develop a passion for the hand made look and bright colors of cement tiles. The color variations lend a depth of richness. Of course, cement tiles can mimic some marble designs, which would certainly be out-of-range economically for most people. Villa Lagoon Tile is about to introduce a series of tiles based on floor patterns found in marble tiles in Italy. We are very excited about this as one can create a little bit of visual romance in a cost effective way.

### S Designs in Cement tiles:

*Lundy Wilder* - Certain geometric patterns, particularly in black/white/gray combinations originally date back to hundreds of years ago in marble, and over 100 years ago in cement tile but are appreciated by up-town city dwellers as modern and edgy designs. Our "Cubes" pattern tile is the best example.

### S Considering the porousness of cement, which applications are recommended?

*Lundy Wilder* - We at Villa Lagoon Tile have identified modern high-tech sealants that allow the use of cement tiles anywhere. I'd say the only non-recommended placement that I can think of would be a swim pool waterline tile as you never know who will be and what will be used to clean algae and with strong chemicals possibly. We recently had an architect who really wants to use our cement tile on the exterior of a 3 story office building in a zone which gets hard freezes. This might be an application where strong, thin, lighter weight vitreous porcelain tiles would serve them better. We love the freedom that cement tiles allow the designer to create their own patterns and color combinations. This attracts the most creative types and their projects are usually the most fun to work.

