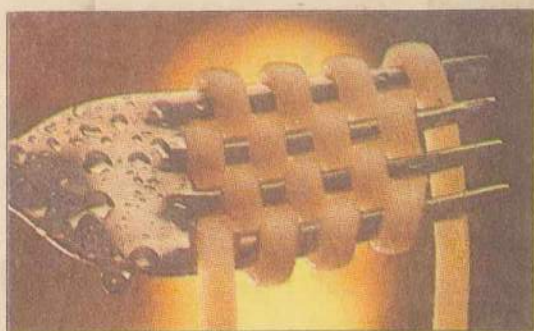


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Tile takes shape as art, and you can stand on its merits



By Victoria Lautman
Tribune photos by Bob Fila

Genuine innovations are afoot, or underfoot, because of some enterprising Chicagoans who are taking their cutting edge to vinyl and rubber tile.

Those lowly, durable materials chiefly associated with school corridors, bowling alleys, fast-food emporiums and other unpretentious milieus are edging into the design world as stylish and creative alternatives to industrial carpeting and expensive hardwood. Cheap, easy to maintain and surprisingly versatile in the right hands, the tile can turn an ordinary room into a unique environment.

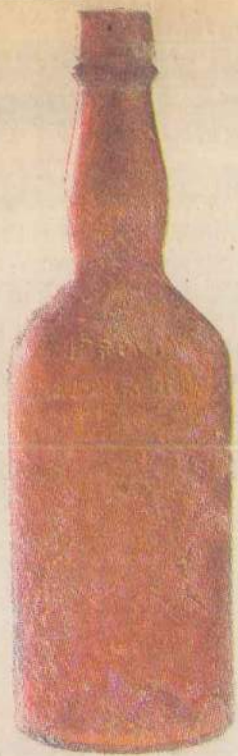
We're all familiar with the vinyl-tiled "checkerboards" or highly textured linoleum favored by architects and developers in the last decade, but this is something new on the creative horizon: inlaid designs, hand-carved from 12-inch-square, flexible tiles that harken to fine craftsmanship rather than mass production. Because each floor is individually designed, it can be styled to anyone's taste, furniture and accessories.

"Having something creative show up in every single surface of one's home is a growing interest, and I think the direction is clear: People want art in their lives in an everyday way, not just as framed objects hanging on their walls," said Robert U. Brown, senior vice president of Knapp Communications, which publishes a variety of home magazines and conducts many surveys on design-related subjects.

cutting
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In balance

Work vs. home
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other trade-offs



▲ Artist Eric Ceputis: "To me, the real issue is how to use these common materials and not have the project come out looking like a currency exchange."

▲ Zuleyka Benitez with her in-laid floor at the Luna Park Cafe: "It took me about 40 hours to cut out the pieces ... the total cost for materials was about \$300."



▲ Architect Peter Landon with his wife, Linda Patinkin: "My wife and I wanted a real hands-on, Arts-and-Crafts approach to the details of the house."

their lives in an everyday way, not just as framed objects hanging on their walls," said Robert U. Brown, senior vice president of Knapp Communications, which publishes a variety of home magazines and conducts many surveys on design-related subjects. "These days people are much more willing to hire craftspeople to work in their homes to get that personal, unique look. First we saw all the special wall treatments; now it's the floors."

Because of this burgeoning interest in artistic surfaces, familiar materials, such as Formica, are being re-examined for their design potential.

Vinyl and rubber tiles passed the test (and are virtually interchangeable for floor inlays), but don't try to substitute that old standby, linoleum. "Linoleum comes on rolls 12 feet wide, and it's much thinner and flimsier than the vinyl and rubber tiles," explained Mary Riley, manager of the Tile Outlet, 2434 W. Fullerton Ave., where business has increased dramatically in the last three years. "Besides, linoleum is only printed with a pattern on its surface, while vinyl and rubber have the pattern running all the way through. They just wear much better and come in a wide selection of colors and patterns. That's why they're favored for this sort of floor."

Architect Peter Landon created a variety of inlaid floors in wood and ceramic before using rubber for the kitchen of his own home—a geometric pattern inspired by such early modern architectural masters as Adolph Loos and Otto Wagner.

"My wife and I wanted a real hands-on, Arts-and-Crafts approach to the details of the house," he said, standing in the customized kitchen with its ceramic mosaic highlights.

The floor, in shades of green, yellow, orange, blue, gray and black, took "one intense day to install, and my knees were mush by midnight. But an inlaid rubber floor is a really great money-saving, creative opportunity, particularly for younger clients who like the look of a ceramic tile floor, which is much more expensive. I can buy rubber factory 'seconds' for 50 to 60 cents apiece [compared to twice that for 'firsts'], which is a lot cheaper than other floor coverings. And when it gets dirty, it doesn't look so bad you have to clean it every 15 minutes."

For Parisian-trained artist Eric Ceputis, using rubber and vinyl for a commissioned floor last year was a challenge because "to me, the real issue is how to use these common materials and not have the project