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REAL ESTATE | DESIGN

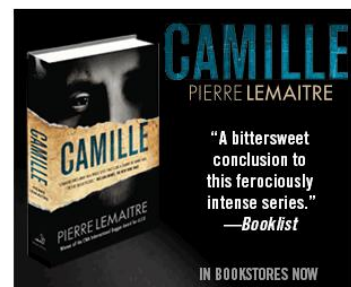
The Complete A-Z Guide to Tiles: 26 Ways to Go Beyond Beige

No home renovator wants to get stuck with a lousy tile decision, but that doesn't mean the only choice is basic, boring beige. Here, an alphabetical survey of the new tile landscape, from arabesque to zellige



A

is for Arabesque



1 of 26
A IS FOR ARABESQUE | The intricate geometric patterns of Islamic art, here recreated in stone mosaic, work in Mediterranean-style homes, or as a foil to contemporary design. Villa d'Oro Tiles, about 16-by-18 inches, from \$38 ...

By [DAVID SOKOL](#)
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4 COMMENTS

WHEN IT COMES to choosing tiles for our homes, anything that isn't utterly safe rarely makes it past the welcome mat. If you get tired of that murky purple wall paint your daughter talked you into during her goth phase, you can put a different coat over it. If last year's trendy Op-Art wallpaper starts giving you mysterious headaches, peel it off. Tile, on the other hand, feels more labor-intensive, more expensive, more permanent. Which is why tiles bring out our most risk-averse tendencies, leading even relatively daring renovators and home decorators to select materials like those found in classic English bathrooms and French patisseries. "Mosaic floors and square- and subway-tiled walls just never feel dated," said Atlanta-based interior designer Suzanne Kasler.

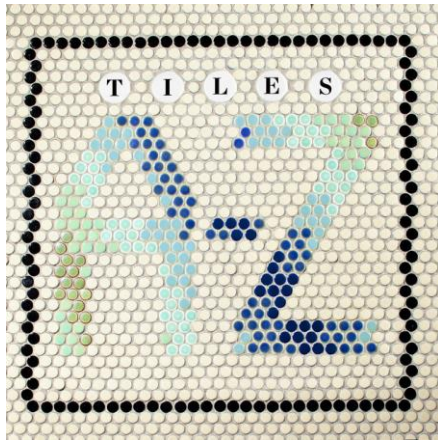
Yet—thanks largely to technology—the range of tile designs has exploded to the point where it's time to reconsider the risks involved. Digital printing, which entered the manufacturing mainstream 15 years ago, has improved so much recently that tilemakers are introducing faux wood grains, ersatz stone veining and trompe l'oeil fossil patterns realistic enough to warrant double takes. And while waterjet cutting dates even farther back, new machines can produce much more intricate relief patterns than before, ranging from dramatically jutting waves to surfaces that resemble piqué cotton.

Los Angeles architect Linda Brettler, whose residential clients have included "Boardwalk Empire" creator Terence Winter, takes a maximalist approach, using as many motifs as there are surfaces. If you look at classic tiled spaces like the Alhambra or an alcazar, she noted, it's

the combination of tiles that makes them so heady.” She has outfitted her own master bathroom with custom lavender field tiles, a deeply veined marble rail cap, two Art Deco-style borders and half a dozen other patterns.

A more entry-level experiment: Insert a few exuberantly patterned tiles into a field of quieter ones, or try a contemporary take on neutral palettes, such as the monochromatic glass field tiles from Ann Sacks—a maker otherwise known for bold designs.

To help you make sense of the brave new tile world, here’s an A-Z survey—from arabesque to zellige—of emerging trends, as well as a few novel interpretations of classic tiles.



2-inch Round Tiles, \$3 per square foot, Susan Jablon, 607-748-2302; Penny Tiles, from \$9 per 12-by-12-inch sheet (approx.), mosaictilesupplies.com

ILLUSTRATION: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, PROP STYLING BY RYAN MESINA

CLAD TO MEET YOU // EXPERT WAYS TO MIX THE A-Z ELEMENTS

D+G

Combine complex and plainer patterns



This diamond pattern can quickly become too much of a good thing, overwhelming a bathroom if used on more than an accent wall or shower enclosure. Los Angeles architect Linda Brettler recommends tiling a neighboring wall or the floor in glass squares that pick up a neutral color in the pattern. “The uniformity and scale would work well with the busy pattern,” she said.

PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, STYLING BY ANNE CARDENAS

U+V

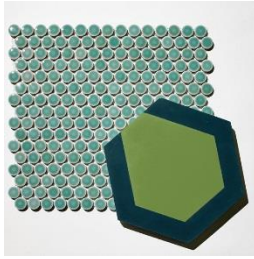
Offset textural effects with smooth tiles



You shouldn’t be afraid of textured tiles, said Simon Rawlings, creative director of London’s David Collins Studio. Paired with a sleeker but still patterned surface—the smaller tile here digitally simulates the appearance of marble—a sculptural tile like the larger tile shown here will be able to shine without being overwhelming.

PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, STYLING BY ANNE CARDENAS

H+P



Consider playing with scale

The hex and penny tiles complement each other for a number of reasons: The larger size of the former offers visual relief from the intricate penny tiles, yet both are roughly the same shape. Try mixing an all-penny kitchen floor with a backsplash in the hex design. The glossy and matte finishes will also pair well, said New York designer Sara Gilbane.

PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, STYLING BY ANNE CARDENAS

W+N



Embrace a narrative found in nature

Pairings can be driven by other factors besides pure aesthetics: You can also work with a theme. Here, Tsao & McKown architect Zack McKown advised laying a watercolor-inspired design next to a dark-hued limestone tile. Not only are they formally complementary, they also stand in for earth and water, telling a coastal story.

PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, STYLING BY ANNE CARDENAS

MORE TIPS

Go beyond walls and floors. Mr. Rawlings recommends furniture applications: Tiling a dining table can add more visual interest than a wood or stone slab can muster.

Broaden the border. Showstopper tiles often come with equally bold price tags. To get the look without breaking the bank, Ms. Brettler suggests framing these ornamental tiles with plainer styles, for a medallion-like effect.

Consider wear and tear. Some uses will test tiles' mettle more than others. Ms. Gilbane likes cement and porcelain materials for the toughest parts of the home.

Go big in small spaces. Using a single tile pattern on a wall from floor-to-ceiling can make a huge statement. Ms. Kasler recommends saving these immersive gestures for discreet spaces like powder rooms.
