



INTERIOR DESIGN

Everything's coming up tiled

Bold and graphic tile is covering surfaces everywhere

By [Diana Budds](#) | Mar 27, 2020, 2:00pm EDT

About 12 years ago, Los Angeles-based architect Barbara Bestor was hired to design a new outpost of Intelligentsia Coffee, in Silver Lake. She ended up creating a neighborhood icon and an internet phenomenon thanks in part to the blue-and-white tile that sweeps from the outdoor seating area into the cafe and right up the sides of the counters. This defining feature of the space, which has become a popular backdrop for Instagrams (interestingly, the cafe opened well before Instagram existed) was inspired by cafes in Havana and a restaurant dating from the 1950s that she visited in Istanbul. The rest of the cafe is covered in plywood, inspired by Donald Judd; the idea was to use sparse design elements in the space to highlight the baristas at the counters.

“You couldn’t put a shock-of-the-new in the neighborhood [back then], and I was trying to think of something that you couldn’t quite tell if it was new or old,” Bestor says. “I guess that was one of the first times someone was doing a new thing with tile, because it became a meme on Instagram!”

Tile is one of the world’s oldest and most beloved materials. It’s trendy now, sure—but it has been for thousands of years. It just surfaces in different ways, regionally and historically: the mosaics of ancient Mesopotamia; the intricate geometric patterns of Moorish [zellige](#) tile; New York City’s classic white subway tile; [Pewabic](#)’s inky, iridescent glazes. Recently, bold, graphic applications have become more popular as designers and DIYers seek ways to add individuality and tactility to interiors. In a [maximalist design moment](#), tile makes the ultimate statement.

Intelligentsia’s blue-and-white tile (center) is emblematic of the bold, graphic patterns popular today.



Granada Tile's encaustic tile was used throughout the Torrance, California, restaurant Madre.

"In a world where we're interested in wallpaper and things that make the environment sort of more specific and special to who's inhabiting it, it allows you to have more personality," Bestor says. "I call it 'atmospheres.' We design atmospheres. A lot of architects design space, not atmosphere. Like, the minimalist architect is always about the light."

The impact tile can achieve in a space, as opposed to other materials, is particularly appealing now because of the [rising amount of time people spend looking at screens](#), according to Rosalie Wild, principal designer at Heath Ceramics.

"It's not just pattern; it's also a durable material that has a function," she says. "As people's lives are more and more digital, I think things that have a pleasing materiality to them are more and more important in our spaces. I think there are instances where someone in the past might have used wallpaper, and they're looking to tile because it has a tactile quality to it."

Cement tile, also known as encaustic tile, is one variety that's receiving renewed attention from designers and manufacturers. (The Moroccan-inspired [Fixa pattern from Granada Tile](#) Bestor used in Intelligentsia is encaustic tile.) Encaustic tiles get their color from the material they're made from, as opposed to glazes applied on top, and because the color is in the material itself, these tiles are incredibly durable and the vibrant hues won't fade over time. To fabricate tile, the clay or cement body is dyed through with pigment, then the pattern is cut out and molded together. This tile-making technique has been used since the middle ages, and designers today are rediscovering it.

"People always have their eyes and ears open for possible revivals," says Melanie Stephens, who [cofounded Granada Tile](#) with her husband, Marcos Cajina. "Just like in fashion, everything keeps coming back in some form or another. ... My theory, which isn't proven, is that cement tiles didn't have a brand name associated with them. There were lots and lots of companies that made ceramic tiles, but they weren't gigantic and they didn't have brand recognition. Cement tile by itself doesn't sound sexy. I think it was only as people tried to say, well, this is really an art form, and it's beautiful [that it was revived]."

Earlier this year, [Granada Tile released a new line](#), developed in collaboration with interior designer Taryn Bone, of [encaustic tile with abstract patterns](#).

"What we've seen is people are gravitating less to really complicated design and more to simpler geometrics, even just things that look like line drawings with two colors," Stephens says. "It's very simple lines, yet when you start to put it together you can do umpteen configurations and it looks totally different. Again, it's that sort of beauty of playing with something until it feels right."