

The industry's leading tile installation magazine

DECEMBER 2025

# TileLetter

## The SPIRAL

**A new icon in the  
Manhattan skyline  
soars with MAPEI's  
innovative solutions**

**New Fort Wainwright  
Recreation Centers  
SHOWCASE FLOORING DESIGNS**

**THE  
PORTFOLIO  
ISSUE**

**Shower  
installation,  
REDEFINED:  
Welch Tile's WTS puts  
a new spin on  
shower fabrication  
and installation**

The magazine of the National Tile Contractors Association

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# New, faster-setting **Keraflex® Membrane Mortar**



The *Keraflex* family expands with *Keraflex Membrane Mortar*, which is designed for use with uncoupling, crack-isolation, sound-reduction and waterproofing membranes.

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- Faster-setting

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MAPEI USA





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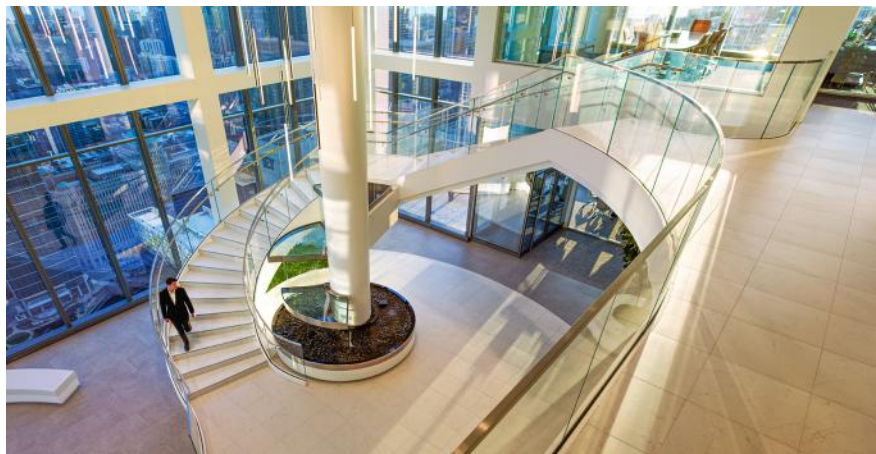
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# TileLetter

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NTCA would not be possible without the dedicated service of our volunteer board and committee members, and regional and state directors. You can find information and a continually-updated list of NTCA Five-Star Accredited Contractors and NTCA Members at [www.tile-assn.com](http://www.tile-assn.com) – click on Find a Tile Contractor, a Five-Star Accredited Contractor or a Tile Consultant.

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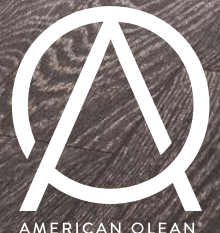


REDEFINING SPACES

# ONE TILE AT A TIME.



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AMERICAN OLEAN

Photo features **Studio Haven™ Honey** on the wall with **Debonair Estate™ Parchment** on the floor.

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## Meet the 2026 NTCA Training Team



**Matt Weiner**  
Training Department  
Manager



**Randy Fleming**



**Chad Jones**



**Kate Koerber**



**Bill O'Connor**



**Amber Fox**  
Director of Strategic  
Initiatives



**Anthony Oliver**



**Robb Roderick**



**Alex Smith**

## 2026 NTCA Workshop Programs \*

To confirm dates and for more information visit [NTCATraining.com](http://NTCATraining.com)

### JANUARY

- 13 **Daltile** – Birmingham, AL
- 13 **Floor & Decor** – Bridgeton, MO
- 13 **Floor & Decor** – Augusta, GA
- 14 **Daltile** – Springfield, MO
- 14 **Floor & Decor** – Savannah, GA
- 15 **Floor & Decor** – Tulsa, OK
- 15 **Daltile** – Jacksonville, FL
- 20 **Floor & Decor** – Tampa, FL
- 20 **TBD** – Houston, TX
- 20 **Daltile** – Irvine, CA
- 20 **Floor & Decor** – Daytona Beach, FL
- 21 **Daltile** – Corpus Christi, TX
- 21 **Floor & Decor** – Coral Springs, FL

- 22 **Daltile** – McAllen, TX
- 22 **Floor & Decor** – Glendale, AZ
- 22 **Daltile** – Doral, FL
- 27 **Floor & Decor** – Riviera Beach, FL
- 27 **Floor & Decor** – Miami Gardens, FL
- 28 **Daltile** – Pompano Beach, FL
- 28 **Floor & Decor** – West Palm Beach, FL
- 28 **Floor & Decor** – Denton, TX
- 29 **D&B** – Doral, FL
- 29 **Floor & Decor** – Orlando, FL
- 29 **Daltile** – Shreveport, LA

### FEBRUARY

- 3 **Daltile** – Seminole, FL

- 10 **Daltile** – Virginia Beach, VA
- 10 **Floor & Decor** – Georgetown, TX
- 11 **Daltile** – Dulles, VA
- 12 **Floor & Decor** – Parkville, MD
- 17 **Daltile** – Wilmington, NC
- 17 **Daltile** – Phoenix, AZ
- 17 **Daltile** – Redding, CA
- 18 **TBD** – San Diego, CA
- 18 **Arizona Tile** – Roseville, CA
- 19 **TBD** – Dunwoody, GA
- 19 **Daltile** – Los Angeles, CA
- 19 **Floor & Decor** – San Leandro, CA
- 24 **Daltile** – Pittsburgh, PA

## 2026 NTCA Regional Programs \*

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### JANUARY

- 15 **Floor & Decor** – Memphis, TN
- 15 **Floor & Decor** – Roswell, GA
- 21 **Floor & Decor** – Dallas, TX
- 22 **Floor & Decor** – Fort Myers, FL
- 27 **Floor & Decor** – Boynton Beach, FL
- 29 **Daltile** – Houston, TX

### FEBRUARY

- 5 **Floor & Decor** – Cedar Park, TX
- 5 **Daltile** – Atlanta, GA
- 11 **Floor & Decor** – Live Oak, TX
- 12 **Floor & Decor** – Conyers, GA
- 17 **Floor & Decor** – Charlotte, NC
- 19 **Floor & Decor** – El Paso, TX
- 26 **Best Tile of NC, LLC** – Greensboro, NC
- 26 **Floor & Decor** – Phoenix, AZ



NTCA maintains an ongoing list of training events through an interactive map on its website. Check it out by visiting [www.NTCATraining.com](http://www.NTCATraining.com).

*\*Dates are subject to change*



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# Stop and look around

*"This is your time here to do what you will do."*

– JOHN MELLENCAMP



Lesley Goddin

I'm writing this letter, listening to the wind whistling outside my window, and pondering how quickly we've gone from summer to fall to the cusp of winter. As Ferris Bueller said, "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."

As we near the holidays and end of the year, we have an opportunity to reflect on the last 365 days. I hope you'll take the chance to indeed "stop and look around"—at your life, your family, friends, work, and everything you hold dear. Breathe it in, enjoy it, treasure it. We all know how the grind can gradually erode our time with loved ones, creative pursuits, passion, or our own self-care if we're not careful. To quote John Mellencamp, "Your life is now."

This special Portfolio issue has a different approach from our usual *TileLetter* content: taking a "look around" at projects primarily from Five-Star Accredited Contractors who won special awards at Coverings. The videos shown at the awards ceremony in Orlando went by pretty fast, so this issue gives you a chance to linger over these stellar projects. You'll marvel at the complexity your fellow NTCA member contractors grappled with and how they invoked their skills and creativity to overcome obstacles, delays, and other challenges.

Our cover features a stunning new addition to the

Manhattan skyline—The Spiral—and how MAPEI materials added to the success of the project. In this month's One-to-One story, NTCA Executive Director Bart Bettiga talks with interior designer Alena Capra to learn more about her business and upcoming tile trends for 2026. Our Business section is a story from PlanHub on how to win more bids and an invitation to a recorded webinar for more information.

We also take a little deeper dive into the Welch Tile Solutions (WTS) system of pre-fabricated showers, which are cost-effective, fast, ergonomically beneficial for the installation team, and reduce waste. Flip over to this story for some photos of past projects that shine through the ingenuity of WTS.

This brings us to our season of lights and joyful holidays. May you be invigorated by celebration and rest, and renewed to embrace the coming new year with creativity, verve, and resolve to make it your best year yet!

God bless,

Lesley  
lesley@tile-assn.com



A network diagram with various icons connected by lines. The icons include a speech bubble, gears, a smartphone, a laptop, a web browser (WWW), a mail icon (@), and the number 4. The background is split into a teal upper-left section and a green lower-right section.

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Rod Owen

## A GLIMPSE INTO THE FUTURE: Reflections from Cersaie 2025

It's hard to believe we're already in December. Thanksgiving came and went in a blink, and now Christmas and New Year's are closing in fast. Between job sites, family gatherings, and year-end planning, it's a good reminder to take a breath and enjoy the moment.

Over the past several months, we've been walking through our Ten Essential Business Acumen Skills: So far, we've covered Financial, Market, Technological, Leadership, Strategic, Negotiation, and Risk Management. This month, we were set to dive into Problem-Solving Acumen, but I'd like to take a quick pause from our series to share a recent experience that's worth reflecting on.

At the end of September, members of your NTCA Executive Committee had the opportunity to attend Cersaie 2025 in Bologna, Italy, one of the largest and most influential tile and stone exhibitions in the world. The show was incredible, full of design innovation, cutting-edge materials and tools, but what really caught my attention was the global conversation happening behind the scenes.

Leaders from across the industry came together to discuss labor, and more specifically, what the future of labor looks like in light of emerging technology and AI. One topic that drew a lot of interest was the use of exoskeletons: wearable mechanical systems that assist with lifting, bending, and repetitive motions. The idea is to reduce strain on the body, extend careers, prevent injuries, and even lower insurance costs. Some countries are already using these systems, and early feedback is encouraging.

It's exciting to see how technology can not only make us more productive but also protect our people. As these tools evolve, every bit of acumen we've talked about this year, from Strategic to Technological to Risk Management, will play a role in how we adapt and lead through change.



I've said it before and I'll say it again: to stay at the forefront of this industry, you have to stay involved. Not everyone can hop on a plane to Italy for Cersaie, and that's understandable, but there are plenty of opportunities right here at home to stay connected and inspired. National events like Coverings or Tile Solutions Plus, and regional gatherings such as NTCA Workshops and Regional Training Programs, all provide hands-on ways to learn, network, and see the latest innovations up close. These are the places where ideas are shared, relationships are built, and the future of our trade takes shape.

Enjoy this holiday season, take time to rest, recharge, and celebrate with those who matter most. Then, when we return in January, we'll pick back up with our Business Acumen Series and dive into Problem-Solving Acumen.

Until then, stay sharp, stay engaged, and as always, Educate for Excellence!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Rod'.

Rod Owen  
NTCA President  
rod.owen@ccowen.us



# Building Dignity: Accessible Design Meets Innovation in Chicago's Dream Home



*Chicago, Illinois* — In the city's Wrightwood neighborhood, a remarkable new residence is redefining what inclusive housing can be. Developed by Envision Unlimited, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, this custom-built home was created specifically for aging adults with physical and cognitive challenges. Featuring six private bedrooms, shared living spaces, and a serene, enclosed garden, the home blends warmth, accessibility, and practicality.

## Purpose-Driven Design

The project goal was clear: to build a fully ADA-compliant group home that allowed residents to age in place safely and independently. The design team emphasized barrier-free navigation, functional bathroom layouts, and thoughtful details that made the space feel personal and dignified. Schluter®-Systems was brought on to ensure the shower systems met both code and comfort expectations.

## Technical Excellence Through Collaboration

Creating a curbless shower that meets ADA requirements involves more than removing a threshold. It requires precise slope control, coordinated subfloor preparation, and close collaboration between trades. Schluter worked directly with Susan Turner of JLK Architects throughout the design and construction process.

Heidi Guthrie, Architectural Regional Manager at Schluter, provided detailed guidance on achieving the required quarter-inch per foot slope. Each shower was built with **KERDI-SHOWER-LTS** prefabricated sloped trays paired with **KERDI-LINE-VARIO** linear drains, which can be cut to size onsite. The low-profile system delivered sleek, curbless entries that met ADA guidelines while maintaining a contemporary aesthetic.

*“Every element of these showers was designed for accessibility without sacrificing beauty.”* — Heidi Guthrie, Schluter-Systems

## System Integration and Finishing Details

Installers used **KERDI** bonded waterproofing membrane with **SHOWERPROFILE-WS** splashguards designed for curbless applications. Finishing details included **QUADEC** and **JOLLY** edge-protection profiles in satin anodized aluminum. Each bathroom featured a **KERDI-BOARD-SN** prefabricated niche for convenient storage. Throughout the residence, **DITRA** uncoupling and waterproofing membrane safeguarded tile floors from substrate movement to prevent cracking.

## A Model for Inclusive Design

The finished home is a model for inclusive design in residential care. The curbless showers are fully ADA-compliant and built for years of daily use, while the materials and installation methods reflect the collaboration behind the project. Chicago now has a home that proves accessibility and elegance can coexist beautifully, one detail at a time.

## Schluter® Products Used

### KERDI-SHOWER-LTS

Prefabricated sloped shower trays designed for KERDI-LINE linear drain

**KERDI-LINE-VARIO** Variable length linear drain for tiled showers

**SHOWERPROFILE-WS** Profile that forms a splashguard in curbless showers





THE **LARGEST** SELECTION.  
THE **HIGHEST** STANDARDS.

Photo features **Contempee™ Jasmine** on the backsplash with  
**Purevana Mineral Surfaces® Elemis** on the countertop.



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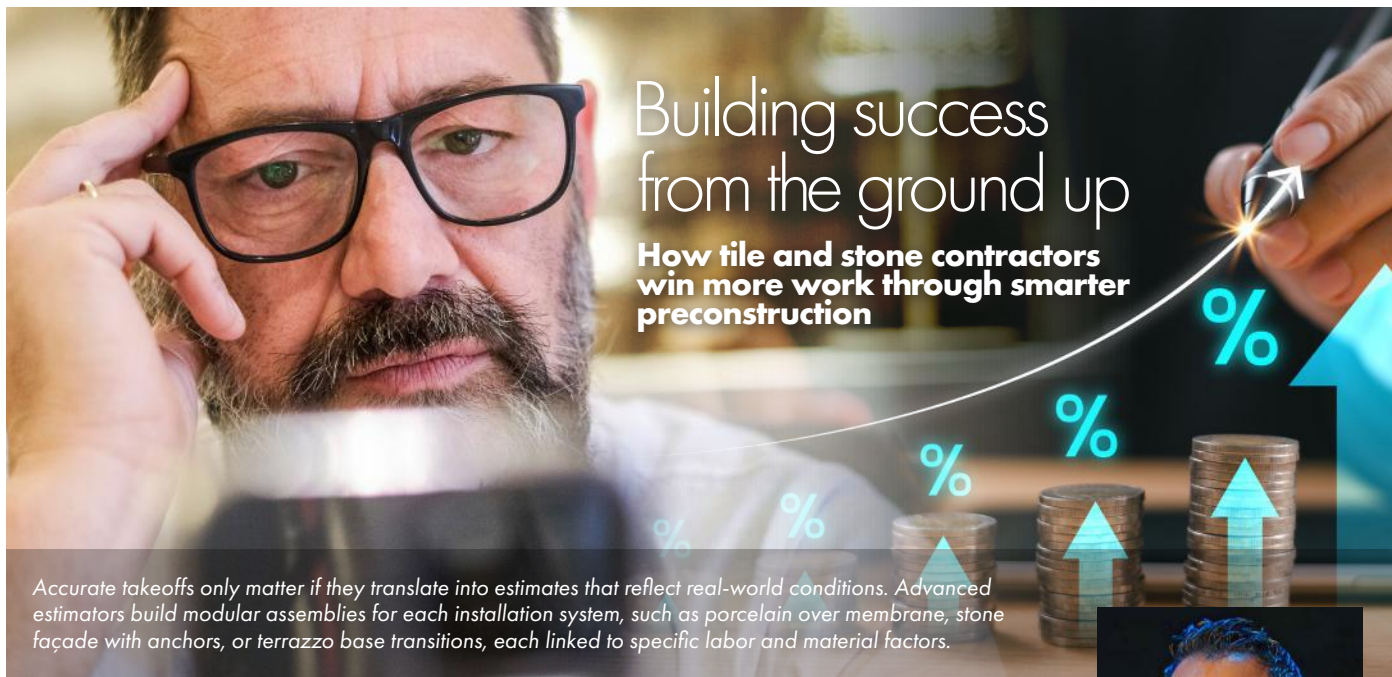




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# Building success from the ground up

**How tile and stone contractors win more work through smarter preconstruction**

*Accurate takeoffs only matter if they translate into estimates that reflect real-world conditions. Advanced estimators build modular assemblies for each installation system, such as porcelain over membrane, stone façade with anchors, or terrazzo base transitions, each linked to specific labor and material factors.*



Sourabh Dhawan, MBA,  
Senior Product Marketing  
Manager, PlanHub

**F**or seasoned tile and stone professionals, mastery of the craft is a given. What separates consistently profitable contractors from the rest isn't just how they set tile—it's also how they manage preconstruction.

From nurturing relationships and interpreting complex plan sets to refining takeoffs and strategic bid follow-up, high-performing contractors treat each step as an integrated system. The payoff is sharper accuracy, better margins, and partnerships that keep crews busy year-round.

## Relationships built on responsiveness and insight

GCs notice more than price. Responsiveness, attention to detail, and clear communication are what earn the second and third invitation to bid. Long-term success comes from staying visible with key GCs and suppliers by sharing insights during design development, proposing alternatives when availability or lead times shift, and showing up as a problem solver rather than focusing only on price.

Modern networking and communication tools make it easier to organize contact lists, track correspondence, and follow up systematically. Recording response rates and bid history reveals which relationships yield awards, rewards, bids, and, therefore, where to focus your time.

## Targeting projects strategically, not opportunistically

Veterans don't chase every lead. They weigh complexity, material handling, and labor availability

against potential profit. Project-intelligence data helps contractors understand competition, market saturation, and schedules. Scope-based filters let estimators zero in on opportunities that specifically include tile, stone, terrazzo, or waterproofing, cutting out noise and aligning pursuits with capacity.

This turns bidding from reactive to proactive. It allows contractors to anticipate peaks, prepare crews in advance, and balance volume with value. The result is more predictable workloads and a steadier revenue stream throughout the year.

## Advanced takeoff: turning measurement into insight

Most contractors have moved beyond manual takeoffs, but for advanced firms, digital measurement is now a source of strategic intelligence, not just quantities. The strongest workflows go beyond square-foot counts to create a live picture of install effort and risk.



# Mapeguard<sup>®</sup> Drain

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NEW!

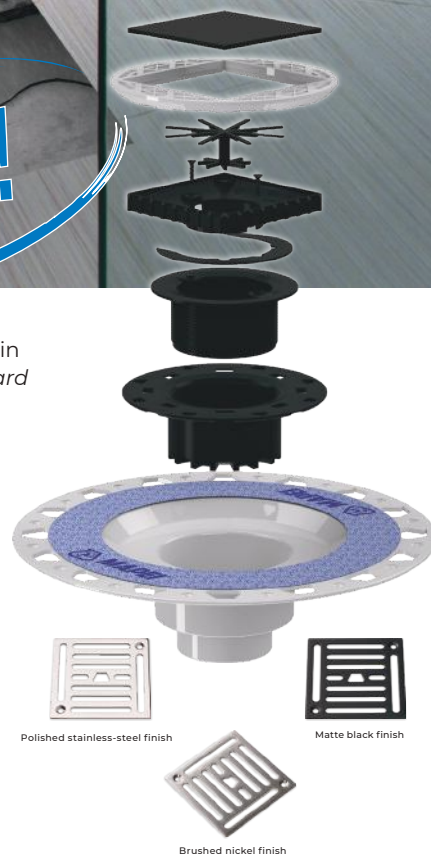
MAPEI's Mapeguard Drain System, featuring the Mapeguard Drain floor drain with an integrated bonding flange, allows contractors to install the Mapeguard Drain, float the shower base, waterproof, flood-test, tile and grout in one day. Here's how the system fast-tracks your shower installation:

- Float the shower base with *Planislope™ RS*
- Waterproof using *Mapelastic® Turbo* and flood-test after 3 to 4 hours
- Tile and grout

Mapeguard Drain's unique design promotes evenness between drain and tile height. Use of all premium products as a system will qualify for a lifetime warranty.

MAPEI's Mapeguard Drain System – the name says it all. It offers the quality you trust with enhanced speed, adding up to greater productivity and warranted protection on your next waterproofing installation.

For more details, visit [www.mapei.us](http://www.mapei.us).



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## INDUSTRY PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

**Keraflex® Membrane Mortar**

Premium, Extra Smooth, Large-and-Heavy-Tile  
Mortar with Polymer for Membranes

**MAPEI's Keraflex Membrane Mortar** is a highly versatile, nonsag/nonslump, large-and-heavy-tile mortar and thin-set mortar for installing uncoupling, waterproofing, floor-heating and sound-reduction membranes and for tile and stone installations on floors, walls and countertops. This polymer-modified mortar has unique performance-enhancing additives that result in excellent adhesion to the substrate and tile, and resistance to freeze/thaw environments. It is formulated with Easy Glide Technology™ for ease of application, and it has a consistency that allows adjustability when used with lippage control systems.

**Keraflex Membrane Mortar** is designed for use as a mortar over and, when appropriate, under uncoupling, crack-isolation, sound-reduction and waterproofing membranes.

For more information about MAPEI's Keraflex® Membrane Mortar, scan to visit or contact your local sales representative.



*Modern networking and communication tools make it easier to organize contact lists, track correspondence, and follow up systematically.*

With digital takeoff, users can segment measurements by area or substrate to forecast labor hours and staging across different zones. They can also track and manage revised plan versions so measurements stay current as drawings evolve, which is crucial when tile layouts or finishes change mid-bid. Predefined measurement assemblies, such as wall tile with waterproofing and trim, automatically generate related quantities to ensure no materials are overlooked when data flows into an estimate.

Color-coding and layering tools help visualize finishes, slopes, and transitions across an entire plan, making potential conflicts or omissions easy to spot before they become costly. Because takeoff data can be exported for comparison against historical productivity benchmarks, estimators can flag layouts likely to slow crews or require adjusted labor factors.

This level of precision turns takeoff into a powerful modeling process that unites measurement, sequencing, and labor forecasting in one cohesive workflow, helping contractors bid confidently and protect margins.

**Estimating with precision and flexibility**

Accurate takeoffs only matter if they translate into estimates that reflect real-world conditions. Advanced estimators build modular assemblies for each installation system, such as porcelain over membrane, stone façade with anchors, or terrazzo base transitions, each linked to specific labor and material factors. They apply different markups for risk since night work, tight phasing, or remote sites often warrant distinct profit targets.

Cost libraries aligned to current supplier pricing keep numbers grounded in reality, especially for imported stone or epoxy grout systems with volatile costs. Integrated variables produce proposals that are both competitive and defensible—the balance that only a disciplined estimating process can deliver.



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*A well-organized proposal communicates scope comprehension and reduces GC uncertainty. Structured bid documents that spell out inclusions, alternates, and exceptions minimize post-bid clarifications.*

### Supplier integration and real-time coordination

Tile and stone work lives or dies by supplier coordination. The best contractors collaborate with distributors and fabricators early, sharing digital quantity summaries and annotated plan sheets. This two-way exchange eliminates redundant takeoffs and anchors pricing to real availability. Suppliers appreciate the clarity; contractors gain accuracy and stronger relationships.

Many firms also track supplier responsiveness and pricing trends over time to guide material choices and assess bid risk, turning supplier data into another layer of competitive intelligence that directly supports better project decisions.

### Bid presentation as a competitive advantage

By bid day, qualified subcontractors cluster within a tight price range. What differentiates the winner is clarity and professionalism. A well-organized proposal communicates scope comprehension and reduces GC uncertainty. Structured bid documents that spell out inclusions, alternates, and exceptions minimize post-bid clarifications.

Digital submission ensures delivery confirmation, enables quick addendum responses, and logs revisions for accountability. Being first with a clean, complete proposal often carries as much weight as being lowest.

### Post-bid analysis and continuous optimization

Top performers analyze every outcome. Tracking win rates by GC, project type, and bid size shows where you're most competitive and where margins erode. Comparing estimated costs to actuals reveals productivity trends and informs pricing. Proactive follow-ups with GCs keep communication open; many award decisions hinge on relationships strengthened in the quiet period after bid day.

### Conclusion: turning experience into edge

Veteran tile and stone contractors already deliver precision on the jobsite. The next edge lies in mastering the same precision before the job starts. From relationship tracking to digital plan analysis, from supplier collaboration to structured bid management, today's technology helps teams work smarter without sacrificing craftsmanship.

All-in-one construction bidding platforms, like PlanHub, bring these best practices together in one connected ecosystem. Here's how these platforms can give tile contractors an edge:

- **Networking and discovery:** Connect with thousands of GCs for a steady flow of well-matched opportunities.
- **Takeoff and estimation:** Support advanced workflows such as segmented measurements, assemblies, and seamless data transfer from takeoff to cost modeling.
- **Bid and messaging:** Centralize GC and supplier communication so every detail is traceable from invitation to award.
- **Dashboards:** Monitor activity and results to refine relationships and strategy over time.

For those who have mastered the art of installation, platforms like PlanHub can help master the business of preconstruction, turning experience into efficiency and efficiency into long-term profitability. **TL**

*Sourabh Dhawan, MBA, is a technology and marketing strategist with 18 years of experience in the preconstruction bidding and SaaS industry. He has led initiatives in product marketing, strategic partnerships, and digital innovation, helping shape how contractors, suppliers, and project stakeholders connect and collaborate online. Dhawan specializes in bridging technology, market insight, and user experience to drive growth in construction technology. He holds an MBA in Technology and Innovation from Toronto Metropolitan University and is based in Ontario, Canada.*

*PlanHub is an all-in-one cloud platform that helps commercial construction professionals grow their businesses by expanding their network, improving workflows, and making collaboration easier. From discovering new bid opportunities to building winning proposals, PlanHub supports contractors and suppliers throughout the entire preconstruction process.*

*Learn more at [planhub.com](https://planhub.com), and scan about Mastering Tile Takeoffs with this so-named webinar that took place at the end of October:*







National Tile Contractors Association

# Tom Ade Ceramic Tile Scholarship Program 2026



## Now accepting applications

NTCA is now accepting applications for the NTCA Tom Ade Ceramic Tile Scholarship. This scholarship is open to the children or grandchildren of NTCA contractor members. Recipients may apply scholarship to the college, vocational school, or technical school of their choice.

**APPLICATIONS DUE  
JANUARY 15, 2026**

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application available at  
[www.tile-assn.com/  
page/NTCA-Tom-Ade-  
Scholarship](http://www.tile-assn.com/page/NTCA-Tom-Ade-Scholarship)

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# The SPIRAL

**A new icon in the Manhattan skyline soars with MAPEI's innovative solutions**



*The Spiral rises above Manhattan's Hudson Yards, showcasing innovation, sustainability, and modern design — brought to life with MAPEI's high-performance installation solutions.*  
*Photo: Bjarke Ingels Group*





*The Spiral's striking entrance welcomes visitors to Manhattan's newest architectural icon, brought to life with MAPEI's high-performance tile, mortar, and grout solutions throughout the project. Photo: Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG)*

**S**tanding at 1,031' tall (314 m2) and spanning 66 stories, The Spiral is an architectural marvel and a defining feature of New York City's Hudson Yards. Developed by Tishman Speyer and designed by the renowned Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG), The Spiral's cascading outdoor terraces create a striking, interconnected ribbon of green space that extends from the base to the pinnacle of the tower. This forward-thinking design reflects a commitment to sustainability and human-centric workspaces, offering employees access to fresh air, natural light, and panoramic views of the city skyline.

A project of this magnitude required construction materials of the highest quality to meet the demanding aesthetic and performance requirements. MAPEI, a global leader in construction solutions, played a vital role in bringing The Spiral to life. MAPEI's extensive product range was used throughout the building, including the lobby, amenities spaces, bathrooms, and feature walls, ensuring durability, sustainability, and visual excellence.

### **MAPEI's contribution to The Spiral**

The Spiral represents the future of workplace environments, with seamless indoor-outdoor integration that prioritizes occupant wellbeing. Ensuring the longevity and resilience of such a groundbreaking design required expert craftsmanship and high-performance building materials. MAPEI partnered with Garcia Marble & Tile, a leading installation contractor, to deliver superior flooring and surface solutions throughout the tower. The project was supported by Daltile in Maspeth, Queens, as the dealer, with MAPEI Sales Representative Darin Shocker overseeing the process. MAPEI's involvement spanned multiple phases, utilizing a comprehensive suite of products designed to meet the unique demands of the project.



*Pallets of MAPEI materials ready for delivery — part of the massive supply effort that kept The Spiral's construction on schedule, which included an opening order of 8,000 bags of 4 to 1 Mud Bed Mix, 1,500 pails of Planicrete AC, and 300 bags of Ultracolor Plus FA among other products, for the lobby alone. Photo: Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG)*

MAPEI Ultralite S2 lightweight mortar provided excellent adhesion and flexibility, ideal for the large-format tiles used in key areas. To create a stable and level foundation, the crew used 4 to 1 Mud Bed Mix mixed with Planicrete AC. As a pre-blended mixture of finely-graded sand and portland cement used for thick-bed mortar installations, 4 to 1 Mud Bed Mix flattens and levels an existing substrate before the installation of tile and stone. Mixed with this mortar to ensure superior bond strength and durability was Planicrete AC, a one-component, concentrated, liquid latex admixture used to enhance the performance of cementitious repair mortars, plasters, stuccos, and toppings.

Mapelastic AquaDefense is a high-performance, premixed, advanced liquid-rubber, extremely quick-drying waterproofing and crack-isolation membrane for installation under ceramic tile or stone in residential, commercial, and industrial environments. It was used extensively in this project in wet areas, especially in the



*Crew members install 4 to 1 Mud Bed Mix enhanced with Planicrete AC, creating a stable, level foundation with superior bond strength and long-term durability for The Spiral's flooring installations. Photo: Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG)*

bathrooms, to prevent moisture infiltration and protect the integrity of the structure.

For tile installations throughout the building, Ultracolor Plus FA grout was chosen for its fast-setting properties and stain resistance, ensuring a seamless and low-maintenance finish. Ultracolor Plus FA is an ultra-premium, fine-aggregate, fast-setting, polymer-modified, color-consistent, non-shrinking, efflorescence-free grout. Mapesil T Plus specialized silicone sealant—which exceeds both ASTM and ANSI standards—was used to provide long-lasting elasticity and movement accommodation in high-traffic and moisture-prone areas. These solutions collectively contributed to a project that not only met but exceeded industry standards for durability, performance, and sustainability.

Tackling a 1.2 million-sq.-ft. (111 484 m2) project takes mad coordination and logistical skills.

“The scope of this project was massive,” explained



Shocker. “Just the lobby alone used approximately 19,000 bags (24 trucks) of our 4 to 1 Mud Bed Mix. The opening order got them started with 8,000 bags of 4 to 1, 500 pails of Planicrete AC, and 300 bags of Ultracolor Plus FA. At one point, for a long period of this project, the contractor was going through eight pallets a week of Ultralite S2—which is not produced in our New Jersey plant—so we had to make sure we had it shipped up here from Virginia. The contractor did not have enough room to store all this material in their warehouse or on the project, so we had to stay ahead of them.”

### Overcoming challenges with MAPEI's expertise

Large-scale projects like The Spiral present numerous logistical and material supply challenges, especially in a city as dynamic as New York. However, MAPEI's supply chain expertise ensured a steady and timely delivery of materials, keeping construction on track despite global raw-material shortages.

Shocker reflected on the project's execution: “The Spiral is a landmark achievement in modern architecture, and we are proud to have played a role in its construction.

This project demanded innovative solutions, and MAPEI delivered with our advanced product technologies. Our ability to consistently supply high-quality materials, even amid industry-wide shortages, was a testament to our team's dedication and logistical expertise.”

A significant milestone in the construction of The Spiral was Garcia Marble & Tile's decision to transition from a competitor's products to MAPEI solutions. After experiencing the superior performance and reliability of MAPEI materials, Garcia Marble & Tile has since continued to specify MAPEI for its large-scale New York City projects, reinforcing MAPEI's reputation as a trusted partner in the construction industry.

### A sustainable future for Manhattan's skyline

Sustainability was a central focus in the design and construction of The Spiral. The integration of green terraces throughout the building not only enhances occupant wellbeing but also contributes to environmental responsibility by reducing heat-island effects and promoting natural air purification. The building's irrigation system, designed by Bosch, conserves approximately 4.5



An installer applies MAPEI Ultralite S2 lightweight mortar, delivering exceptional adhesion and flexibility for the large-format tiles featured throughout The Spiral. Photo: Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG)



“The scope of this project was massive,” explained Darin Shocker, MAPEI's Sales Representative. “At one point for a long period of this project, the contractor was going through eight pallets a week of Ultralite S2 ...The contractor did not have enough room to store all this material in their warehouse or on the project, so we had to stay ahead of them.” Photo: Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG)



An installer applies MAPEI's Ultracolor Plus FA grout, selected for its fast-setting, stain-resistant formula that delivers a durable, color-consistent, and low-maintenance finish throughout The Spiral. Photo: Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG)



*The Spiral's impressive lobby features seamless, expansive floors, made possible by MAPEI's advanced setting products for precision and performance. Photo: Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG)*

million gallons (17 million liters) of water annually, further underscoring its commitment to sustainability.

MAPEI's environmentally-friendly products aligned seamlessly with The Spiral's green building initiatives. Many of the materials used in the project feature low-VOC emissions, contributing to healthier indoor air quality. Additionally, MAPEI's advanced adhesives, mortars, and grouts were formulated to enhance the durability

of the installed materials, reducing the need for future replacements and minimizing waste.

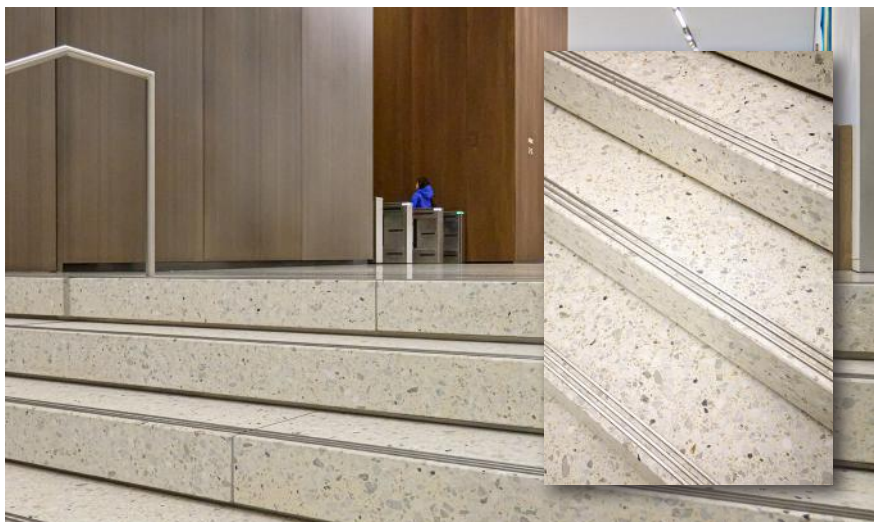
### **The crown jewel of Hudson Yards: a monument to innovation and excellence**

The successful completion of The Spiral represents a significant achievement in modern construction. Its bold design, combined with state-of-the-art materials

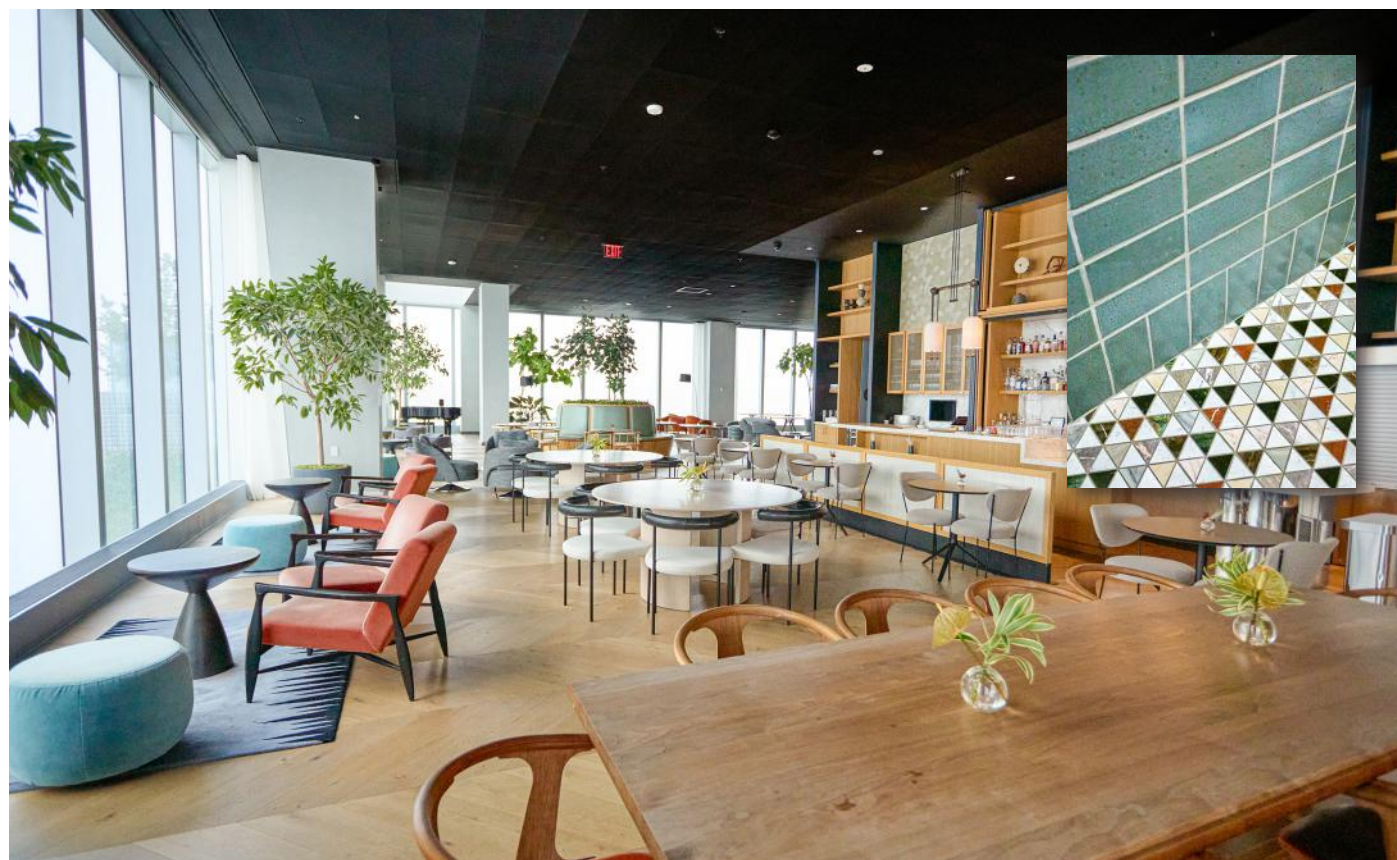


and engineering, positions it as a premier workplace destination in New York City. MAPEI's involvement in the project highlights the company's expertise in delivering high-performance construction solutions that align with architectural vision, sustainability goals, and long-term durability.

As businesses and industry leaders move into The Spiral, they will experience firsthand the benefits of a workspace designed with wellbeing, innovation, and sustainability in mind. Thanks to the collaboration between MAPEI, Garcia Marble & Tile, and Tishman Speyer, The Spiral stands as a testament to what is possible when visionary design meets world-class construction expertise. **TL**



*For the lobby's high-traffic stairways, crews used MAPEI's advanced setting materials to ensure strong adhesion, stability, and long-lasting performance under heavy use. Photos: Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG)*



*MAPEI's setting material was used for the flooring throughout the building. Plus, in wet areas — such as public restrooms in The Spiral's many restaurants — crews first installed Mapelastic AquaDefense, providing fast-drying, high-performance waterproofing and crack protection beneath the tile installations (see inset). Photos: Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG)*

# ONE *to* ONE



## ALENA CAPRA

Alena Capra is a highly-respected designer and for the past several years has been commissioned as the official spokesperson of Coverings. Photo: Darryl Nobles.

**AWARD-WINNING**  
Designer  
**AND**  
Spokesperson  
**FOR COVERINGS**



*In the One-to-One column, NTCA Executive Director Bart Bettiga interviews industry leaders about pertinent topics.*



Capra is the host of SoFlo Home Project, which airs Saturday mornings at 11:30 a.m. on Local10.com. Photo: Alena Capra

In an engaging conversation with Alena Capra, a seasoned designer and host of South Florida's *SoFlo Home Project* TV show, we explored her journey in the design industry, current trends in tile and stone, and her experiences with the National Tile Contractors Association. Alena's passion for design and her extensive knowledge of the tile industry make her a valuable voice in the field.

Capra was the recipient of the *Kitchen & Bath Business (KBB)* magazine's 2024 Person of the Year Award. KBB is the official publication of the National Kitchen and Bath Association (NKBA) and Kitchen and Bath Industry Show (KBIS). She is a highly-respected designer and for the past several years has been commissioned as the official spokesperson of Coverings.



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**Stone Installation**  
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Large-format pieces that mimic natural stone, and more prominent textures with a focus on warm, organic colors and subtle patterns are two trends Capra sees emerging. She also is eager for a continued focus on smaller formats and unique shapes that allow for more creativity in design. Photo: Darryl Nobles.

**Welcome, Alena! It's great to have you here. Let's start by discussing your journey. Can you share how you got started in design and the evolution of Alena Capra Designs?**

Thank you, Bart! It's wonderful to be here. I began my design career over 22 years ago at Expo Design Center, where I first learned about tile and kitchen and bath design. When they closed in 2009, I launched my own company. Initially, I focused on kitchens and baths, but over the years, I expanded to full interiors, allowing me to design entire homes. While most of my projects are in Fort Lauderdale, I also engage in speaking engagements and trade shows, which has broadened my reach.



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## ■ ONE-TO-ONE

### **It sounds like you've had quite a journey! Do you primarily focus on residential design, or do you also venture into commercial projects?**

Most of my work is residential, but I do enjoy commercial projects, especially those that allow for creative themes, like a boutique or a dance studio. I also offer consulting services, which lets me work with a broader range of clients.

### **You mentioned your busy schedule. Do you work alone, or do you have a team?**

I keep my firm small, typically working with one or two other designers. I enjoy being hands-on with my projects and maintaining close relationships with my clients. While I sometimes consider scaling up, I find that keeping my business manageable allows me to explore other opportunities in the industry.

### **Speaking of opportunities, you host the SoFlo Home Project. Can you tell us more about the**

### **show and how it has impacted your business?**

Absolutely! The show has been a fantastic platform for showcasing design trends and educating homeowners. We film weekly and cover a variety of topics, from design tips to tours of historic homes. It has significantly increased my visibility in the industry and has allowed me to connect with other professionals and homeowners alike.

(Scan for more information on the SoFlo Home Project. - Ed.)



### **That's impressive! With your experience, what design trends are you currently seeing in the tile industry?**

We're seeing a resurgence of natural materials, particularly travertine and earthy tones. The technology behind tile has advanced, allowing for large-format pieces that mimic natural stone beautifully. Textures are also becoming more prominent, with a focus on warm, organic colors and subtle patterns.

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Capra says a collaboration between tile and furniture industries is on the horizon. Photo: Darryl Nobles.

**Are there any specific trends you've noticed for outdoor spaces, particularly in South Florida?**

The integration of indoor and outdoor spaces is becoming increasingly popular. Homeowners are using thicker porcelain pavers for patios and decks, creating seamless transitions. I've also seen a rise in creative mosaic artistry in pools, which adds a unique touch to outdoor designs.

**It sounds like the tile industry is evolving rapidly. How do you balance your design work with the technical aspects of tile installation?**

It's all about communication and planning. I work closely with general contractors and tile installers to ensure that everyone is on the same page. I often meet with them on-site to discuss specific details, like grout color and cut placement, which are crucial for achieving the desired outcome.

**Grout is indeed an integral part of tile design. How do you approach selecting grout for your projects?**

Grout selection is essential. I keep a variety of grout color charts in my office to ensure I find the perfect match for each project. I believe that the right grout can enhance the overall look of the tile installation, so I'm very particular about it.

**As we look ahead, what do you envision for the future of tile design?**

I hope to see more collaboration between the tile and furniture industries. The potential for porcelain furniture is exciting, and



I believe it could lead to innovative designs that integrate seamlessly into homes. Additionally, I'd love to see a continued focus on smaller formats and unique shapes that allow for more creativity in design.

**Thank you, Alena, for sharing your insights and experiences. It's clear that your passion for design and the tile industry is driving innovation and creativity. We look forward to seeing your contributions in the upcoming Coverings event and beyond.**

Thank you, Bart! I'm excited to be part of the industry and can't wait to see what the future holds. **TL**



*Capra, pictured here at the KBIS Next Stage, has been involved with NKBA and KBIS over the years. This year she received the Kitchen & Bath Business magazine's (KBB) 2024 Person of the Year Award. KBB is the official publication of the National Kitchen and Bath Association (NKBA) and Kitchen and Bath Industry Show (KBIS). Photo: Emerald/KBIS*



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Penny tile accents, wood-look 3D illusion tile cubes and shadow boxes were used around the sinks and mirrors. **TEC® 3N1® Performance Mortar** was chosen for its outstanding vertical grab.

**N**early 8,000 soldiers and their families live at Fort Wainwright adjacent to Fairbanks, Alaska. As the Fort grew, so did the demand for high-quality indoor recreation spaces. This led to the construction of two state-of-the-art facilities, the Aquatic Center and the Community Center. Commercial Contractors Inc. (CCI) was selected to handle the extensive flooring installations for both facilities. Designers chose porcelain tile for the nine-lane pool, splash pad and zero-depth/water play pool, locker rooms, and the many bathrooms in the new facilities. With 35,000 sq. ft. of complex porcelain tile designs and nearly 6,000 sq. ft. of other flooring surfaces, all installed in just six months, this project showcases CCI's expertise in handling large-scale, high-performance flooring projects in the challenging Alaskan climate.

### Striking tile designs

The vision for the Aquatic Center was to create a visually striking yet highly functional space suitable for both family recreation and competitive swimming. McCool Carlson & Green, a prestigious design firm, incorporated an array of Daltile® products in wood-look, white, and blue tones to craft dynamic patterns across the pool decks, surrounding walls, locker rooms, and restrooms.

Though the designs utilized the same white penny rounds, 12"x36" abstract 3D large-format wall tile, wood-look 8"x48" planks, and wood-look 12"x12" 3D illusion cubes throughout the Aquatic Center, the variety of layouts meant that tile preparation requirements varied through the facility.

### Substrate challenges

One of the project's most significant substrate preparation challenges stemmed from tile thickness variations and unexpected elevation discrepancies. Specifically, CCI had to manage the transition from the thicker wood-look planks to the thinner penny round tiles around the pool. Also, the pool contractor's concrete pour left the nine-lane pool walls 1.5" higher than planned, requiring CCI to adjust the slope for the pool surround and drains, while still ensuring ADA compliance at the doors.

CCI relied on **TEC® Fast-Set Deep Patch**, a product designed for deep fills and ramping up to 5", to effectively manage these elevation challenges. Drying to a walkable surface in about an hour, the product allowed CCI to move quickly to level the rest of the pool deck with **TEC® Level Set® 400 HF Self-Leveling Underlayment**. Level Set 400 HF is tile-ready in just 2-3 hours after pouring





Due to the harsh Alaska temperatures and high heat and humidity inside the Aquatic Center, CCI applied **TEC® Hydraflex™ Waterproofing Crack Isolation Membrane** to all floors and walls, safeguarding against moisture damage and temperature-induced cracking.

or pumping. This fast-drying, high-flow self-leveler streamlined installation labor and time.

For Fort Wainwright's harsh winters—which can reach -60°F—coupled with the high heat and humidity inside the Aquatic Center, waterproofing and protection against cracks was essential. CCI applied **TEC® Hydraflex™ Waterproofing Crack Isolation Membrane** to all floors and walls, safeguarding against moisture damage and temperature-induced cracking. Dry in as little as one hour, Hydraflex allows tile installation to begin the same day.

### Precision tile installation

With so many tile types and layouts to manage around curves and corners, CCI strategically matched select TEC® mortars to each challenge. **TEC® Ultimate 6 Plus Polymer Modified Mortar** was used to install the large-format tiles on the walls in the pool area, locker rooms, and bathrooms. CCI also used it for the pool deck penny round tiles. Ultimate 6 Plus is easy-to-use for floors or walls and has excellent non-sag and non-slump properties. These outstanding properties made the product shine, especially for installing the challenging textured 12"x36" abstract wall tiles in the pool area. Ultimate 6 Plus saved CCI valuable project time by ensuring a strong bond and



Designed for both aesthetics and durability, the Aquatic Center locker rooms showcase expertly-installed accents and wood-look tiles. CCI selected **TEC® Full Flex® Premium Thin Set Mortar** for these areas for its wide range of applications and excellent bonding.



delivering extended open time and pot life. Another key time-saving advantage of Ultimate 6 Plus is that installers do not have to back butter the tile, though cupping and other tile concerns led CCI to back butter on this project.

CCI Owner and Vice President Justin O'Farrell noted, "We especially appreciated Ultimate 6 Plus's time-saving properties for this project, given the amount of tile, number of configurations, and timeline of just six months to complete both facilities."

In the locker rooms, penny tiles accent the walls and create shadow boxes around sink mirrors. For this setting challenge, **TEC® 3N1® Performance Mortar** was chosen for its outstanding vertical grab. The remaining floor tiles—including 8"x48" wood-look planks across the pool decks, locker rooms, and restrooms—were set with **TEC® Full Flex® Premium Thin Set Mortar**, a polymer-modified mortar long trusted for its wide range of applications and excellent bonding.

CCI grouted all the tile with **TEC® Power Grout® Ultimate Performance Grout** in both the Aquatic Center and the Community Center. Power Grout is stain-proof\* and creates strong grout joints that are color-consistent, free from efflorescence, and resistant to shrinking and cracking. In the high-traffic and high-moisture environment of the Aquatic Center, Power Grout will ensure the tile installation long maintains its function and beauty. To further protect the tile, **TEC Accucolor 100® 100% Silicone Sealant** was used to fill all control joints. It has flexible, long-lasting and water-resistant properties that prevent water damage and minimize tile/grout cracks due to tile movement.



Photo Credit: Fort Wainwright MWR Marketing  
Thoughtful design meets durable TEC installation products at the Fort Wainwright Aquatic Center—built to withstand Alaska's demanding climate while preserving beauty, comfort, and safety for families.

## Flooring for generations to come

The completion of Fort Wainwright's Aquatic and Community Centers represents a significant achievement in precision planning and execution of large-scale flooring projects. Despite the challenges posed by the many flooring areas, tile types and layouts, elevation challenges, extreme climate conditions, and tight deadlines, CCI successfully delivered beautiful porcelain tile and other flooring installations for both state-of-the-art recreation facilities. The seamless coordination between design, preparation, and execution showcases CCI's expertise and commitment to quality craftsmanship, ensuring that these recreation spaces will serve military personnel and their families for generations to come. **TL**

\*Power Grout is stain-proof to most common water based stains when cleaned immediately. The prolonged exposure of any stain will increase the likelihood of permanent staining or discoloration of the grout surface.

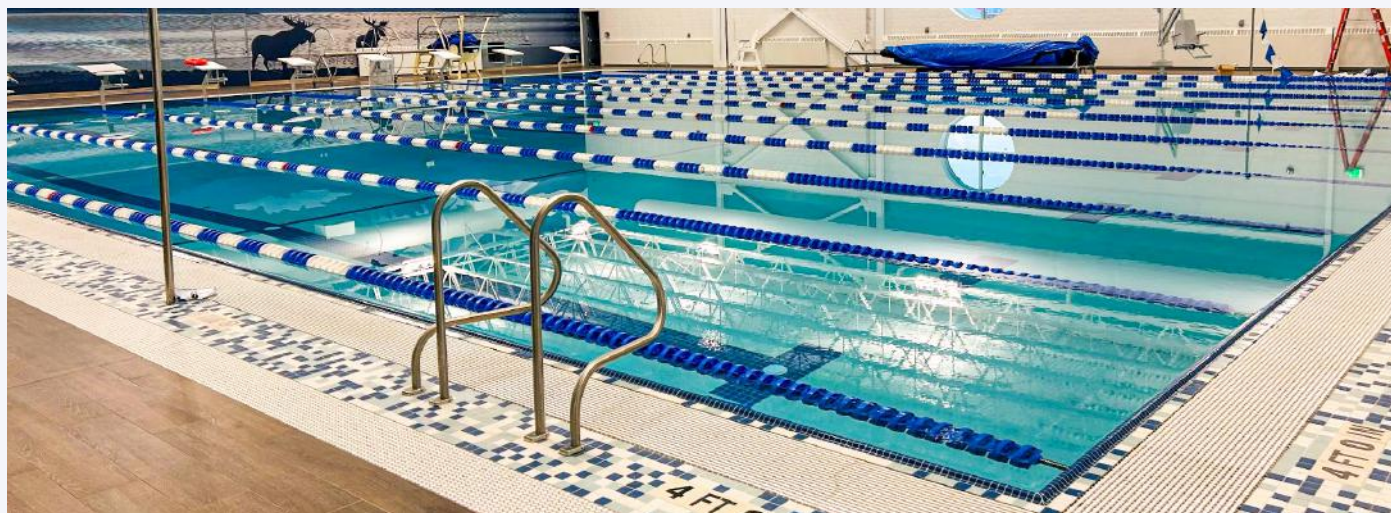


Photo Credit: Fort Wainwright MWR Marketing  
The striking white, blue and wood-look porcelain tile patterns add a dynamic energy to Fort Wainwright's new Aquatic Center.



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# EXPLORING THE POWER OF COLOR

*Exploring the power of color: Daltile's "Colorology" webinar highlights emerging design trends*

By Elena Grant, *TileLetter* Publisher

**C**olor is more than a design element, it's an experience. That message rang out loud and clear during the NTCA Webinar "Colorology," presented by Daltile. Featuring Hilary Frank, VP of Commercial Sales & Business Development, and Elizabeth Melancon, National A&D Sales Manager for Daltile, the webinar offered an inspiring, data-backed exploration of color's role in transforming space and mood.

## **A trend-focused dive into color psychology**

Elizabeth Melancon kicked things off with a deep dive into emerging color and product trends as we look ahead in 2025. Drawing from Gensler research and global workforce studies, Melancon highlighted how color and materials are being used to reimagine workplace and wellness design. Designers are looking to craft environments that inspire, comfort, and restore as a response to burnout, hybrid work shifts, and the craving for spaces that feel personal and emotionally supportive.

Melancon outlined five core trend categories:

- **Regen-Era** or **Time to Recharge** focuses on personal well-being and rejecting the hustle culture. It's depicted by soft and soothing atmospheres with muted colors and materials including travertine and limestone.
- **Organic Tactility** promotes a mood of physical safety,

and brings a peaceful and restorative vibe. This trend features gentle and organic shapes lacking harsh edges, fluted textures, and natural finishes. Materials like stones and clays with carved textures and terracotta that are fresh and timeless bring it to life.



*Daltile's new "Colorology" initiative is an innovative program designed to help designers use color with intention.*



- **Heritage Remix** combines a blend of nostalgia and modernity, reflecting storytelling through design. This trend is about living in the past with the present and rewriting our own traditions. It's a celebration of the home with classic materials like wood, natural stone, and traditional patterns.
- The **Indulge** trend encourages treating yourself by using products that bring joy and satisfaction. It celebrates healthy indulgence and glamour through sensual color and texture. Materials with striking visuals and heavy veining reflect the maximalist style of this trend, which balances wellbeing with a touch of luxury in everyday life.
- **Brutalist Chic** embraces a utilitarian charm where the raw untamed spirit of architecture meets the refined elegance of modern design, creating spaces that are not just lived in but experienced. In this trend, unadorned and uncluttered space can inspire inner calm, honesty, and promote a sense of clarity. It's a modern interpretation of brutalism with materials like cement and board-formed concrete.
- The **Playful Vibes** trend celebrates joy and carefreeness, transferring spaces into optimistic, creativity-stimulating havens, and offers an escape from modern stress. These emotionally-rewarding environments boost performance with vibrant palettes of bold colors, interesting shapes, and glossy finishes. From tactile materials to moody hues, Melancon painted a picture of design that connects emotionally and psychologically with users.



*In Colorology, within your wall and tile options, you have Coordination or Pairing with your Base Floor Colors. Coordinating complements without being identical. Pairing falls within the same color family with slight variations.*

## Introducing Colorology: A Daltile innovation

Hilary Frank followed with an in-depth look at Daltile's new "Colorology" initiative, an innovative program that helps designers use color with intention. Instead of seeing tile as an isolated finish, Colorology maps how hues across product lines coordinate and pair, making it easier than ever to create cohesive and expressive spaces.

Frank demonstrated how color families (white, taupe, blue, marigold, and more) appear across collections, and how Colorology simplifies matching tones that are technically in different series. She emphasized the strength of Daltile's color offering, not just in range, but in usability: "We've created a way to show the broad range of color that's available. This helps weave in those key design trends into an interior space in a way that many other building products cannot," said Frank.

## A versatile tool for designers and installers alike

The webinar also spotlighted Daltile's accessible sampling system, design consultation services, and plans to further expand Colorology tools online. Whether you're a designer specifying for a major project or an installer helping a client choose finishes, this tool is set to become a game-changer.

To explore these ideas further or revisit the discussion, scan to check out the full webinar. **TL**



*Pure is the epitome of timelessness, fused with a modern spin. Pair the dual shades of Frost White and Black to create a classic checkerboard design, or take the minimalist approach with one of the monochromatic colors.*

# ASK THE EXPERTS

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*A hollow sound means there's a void beneath part of the tile.*

## QUESTION

We installed 24"x24" porcelain tile in a hotel lobby using a thin-set mortar over a concrete slab. After completion, the owner noticed a few areas that sound hollow when tapped. The tiles look fine—no cracks or movement—but they're concerned this indicates a problem. What causes this?

## ANSWER

Hollow-sounding tiles are a common concern and don't always indicate a failure. A hollow sound simply means there's a void beneath part of the tile—usually due to variations in slab flatness or incomplete mortar coverage—not necessarily that the tile is loose or debonded.



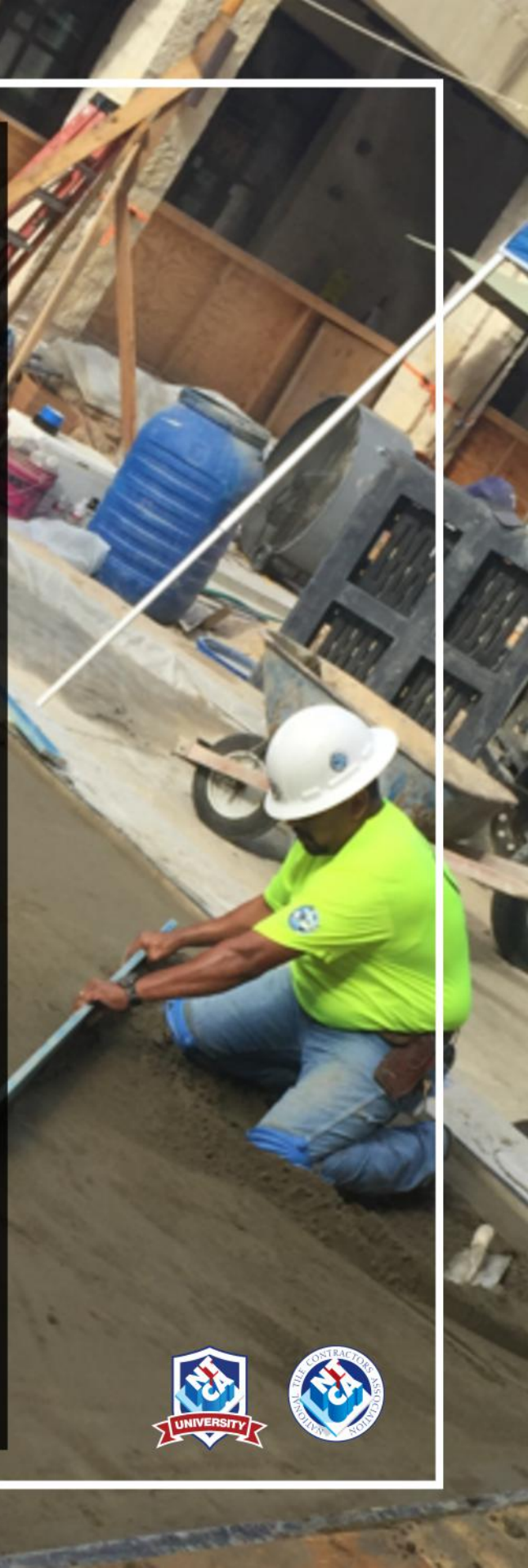
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The ANSI A108.02.4 standard requires concrete substrates to be flat within 1/8" in 10' for tile installations using the thin-set method. If those tolerances aren't met before setting begins, it can be difficult to achieve full contact between the tile and mortar. Even with a strong bond, small air pockets can create a hollow sound when tapped.

Here are some important steps to help prevent this on future projects:

- Check and correct slab flatness before starting. Low areas can be filled or leveled using materials specifically designed for this purpose: patch, flowable hydraulic cementitious underlayment (aka, self-leveling underlayment, or SLU).
- Use proper troweling techniques—directional troweling and back-buttering large-format tile helps ensure full coverage, transfer and bond.
- Verify coverage during installation by periodically lifting a tile. For all floors in a dry area, ANSI A108.5.2.2.3 requires 80% coverage or as "specified in the contract documents, whichever is greater."

If there's uncertainty about the cause or extent of a hollow-sounding condition, NTCA recommends contacting a qualified independent tile consultant to perform an on-site evaluation. Find NTCA Consultant Members on the NTCA website here:



While hollow sounds may be unsettling, they do not automatically mean the installation is failing. Proper substrate preparation and adherence to ANSI and TCNA standards remain the best prevention and protection for successful installations.

## QUESTION

Do you have a link or any information available regarding preventive maintenance measures for all types of tile and stone so I can educate my clients? My interest includes, but is not limited to, quartz, quartzite, marble, porcelain, ceramic, glass, and all natural stones. I am looking for guidance on how to keep these materials clean and well-maintained for years after installation.

## ANSWER

Thank you for reaching out with your question about cleaning and maintaining tile/stone/glass to keep them looking new for years to come.

The first thing I would like to point out can be found on page 46 of the *2025 TCNA Handbook*: "All tile installation

(especially exterior installations, which include the movement joint sealant) requires periodic inspection and maintenance by the owner. Consult material manufacturer and maintenance product manufacturer for recommended procedures."

This statement is important for the homeowner/building owner to understand because it points out that it is their responsibility to either do their own inspection or schedule an inspection with a tile professional like yourself. This may also be an additional revenue source for your company.

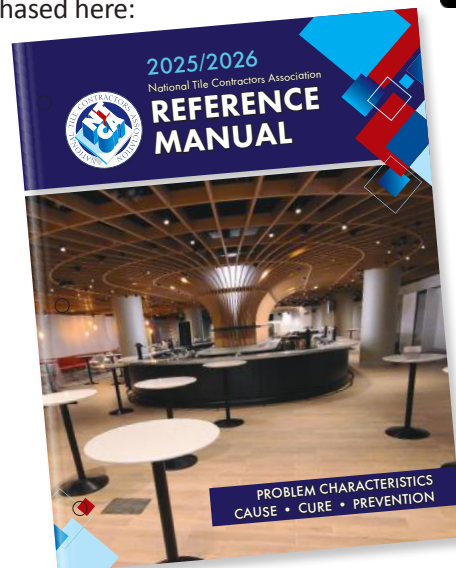
Page 46 also talks about protecting new tile work and the visual inspection of tile work.

ANSI A108.01.4.4 states: "After completion and cleaning, the obligation of the tile contractor ceases as to damage or injury which may be done to the tile work by others."

I think the most practical information I can share with you would be Chapter 11 of the *2025/2026 NTCA Reference Manual*, which includes:

- Tile installation care and maintenance
- Care and maintenance sealers
- Recommendations for exterior tile maintenance
- Recommendations for interior and exterior maintenance of polished porcelain tiles
- Maintenance of textured/glazed porcelain tiles
- Grout haze on textured/glazed porcelain
- Grout haze on polished porcelain
- Care and maintenance helpful hints
- Care and maintenance problem-solving

If you need an additional copy of the *NTCA Reference Manual*, it can be purchased here:







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# Five-Star Contractors' technical, logistical, and scheduling prowess gain Grand Prize honors

By Scott Carothers,  
CTEF Academic Director



Our Technical story this month explores the methods and standards that helped Brekhuis Tile & Stone in Denver, Colo., and Premier Tile & Marble Co., in Gardena, Calif., achieve precision installations that earned them Five-Star Grand Prize honors for Residential and Large Commercial, respectively.

This feature presents an overview of each project, followed by further exploration of the technical aspects by Scott Carothers. All 2025 TCNA Handbook details are courtesy of the Tile Council of North America.—Lesley Goddin



## Brekhuis Tile & Stone: Residential Grand Prize Gaylord Street Residence

“Intricate” and “challenging” are two words used by Brekhuis Tile & Stone to describe this project. The primary bathroom required extensive floor prep prior to the installation of 900 sq. ft. of carefully-sorted 12”x24” Breccia Fiore marble, including flattening the plywood subfloor with belt sanders and applying the appropriate MAPEI bond-enhancing primer and Ultraplan Easy flowable hydraulic cement underlayment (FHCU) to ensure a flat substrate. KERDI-BOARD provided a stable base for the shower walls, enhanced with the Schluter KERDI waterproofing system, and PMP EZ Mix deck mud was used for the shower pan. Dry layouts and daily approvals from the builder and designer ensured the desired pattern and aesthetic flow.

Meticulous preparation and execution were needed for the steam shower and dry sauna in the basement, so Brekhuis again turned to the KERDI waterproofing system for the walls, ceiling, and benches and used EZ Mix for the shower pan. Both were tiled with X-Tone Blue Roma gauged porcelain tile panels (GPTP) and 47”x47” large-format tiles that required skilled cutting to vein match at all plane changes. The dry sauna features 4”x16” black porcelain tiles behind cedar slat walls, enhancing the wood

aesthetic. In the steam shower, tiles were grouted with LATICRETE PERMACOLOR and sealed with LATASIL silicone sealant for waterproofing and movement accommodation. Precise layouts and cutting techniques ensured seamless vein matching, elevating the overall design.

The foyer’s stone tile installation showcases a custom stone carpet design made of Breccia Capriaia, Breccia Vino, Graniello Greige, and Serpeggiante, featuring intricate inlays with offset semicircles. A second medallion includes a Breccia Vino center with brass inlay details that were retrofitted with anchoring legs to ensure a secure bond to the mortar. The complex layout required precise coordination between the installer, superintendent, and fabrication shop. The entire process took three to four weeks of dedicated work. The end result showcases the beauty of stone and the skill of the installation team.

Unfortunately, due to the owner’s wishes, no images of this incredible project could be shared.

## Technical details

The Gaylord project posed challenges in the design, fabrication, and installation of the tile used. This beautiful installation was the culmination of many hours of planning the finest details to yield a stellar residential project.

**Jobsite issues:** There were numerous issues with the existing structure in this remodel that had to be overcome prior to the tile installation. The removal of existing material required significant floor prep using MAPEI Mapecem Quickpatch in some areas. For areas needing a deeper fill, Primer T and Ultraplan Easy Flowable Hydraulic Cement Underlayment were used. The existing



plywood floors were primed with MAPEI ECO Prim Grip followed by Mapeguard UM uncoupling membrane to support the intricate tile and stone installations.

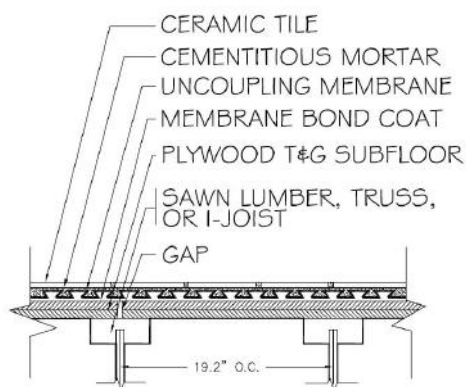
**Mockups:** The complexity of the foyer's stone pattern required a dry lay of the entire floor for approval from the owner and designer. The wide variation in the 900 sq. ft. of Breccia Fiore marble in the master shower and bathroom required sorting through multiple crates of product to find enough stone to complete the installation to the owner's satisfaction.

**Scheduling:** Planning for the project started well in advance of the actual installation. The stone foyer floor, fireplace surround, sinks, and tubs were designed and fabricated in the Brekhus shop. Delivering these items and the other tile products created logistical problems since the entire home was going through a landscaping renewal. Getting to the house was one issue; getting inside was another.

**Specifications:** All floors were installed using TCNA Handbook method F148. The shower walls included Schluter KERDI-BOARD with an integrated bonding flange drain.

#### F148-25

- Joists max. 19.2" o.c./Plywood Subfloor
- Uncoupling Membrane
- Ceramic Tile



All floors were installed using TCNA Handbook method F148.

**Installation:** The steam shower also used Schluter Systems' design for residential steam showers. It was covered with GPTP using meticulous care to match the marbleized veining in the pattern from wall to wall and up the front of the seat, across the seat, and up the adjacent wall.

The foyer inlay included brass strips as part of the pattern. Brekhus engineered an anchoring system in-house to ensure that the brass stayed in place.

The three-to-four-week duration of the project did not include the significant amount of time spent on designing,

planning, and fabricating. The foyer alone required three weeks to solve all the complexities of the many parts needed for the floor in order to deliver an unforgettable conclusion and customer satisfaction.



#### Premier Tile & Marble Co.: Large Commercial Grand Prize LA Clippers Intuit Dome

In 2022, tile installation began at the new LA Clippers Intuit Dome, starting with extensive floor and wall preparation to level the concrete substrates. After



The tile and stone installations contributed significantly to the cutting-edge, visually-striking design of what is now considered the most technologically-advanced arena in the world.



This project was just under \$12.7 million. This included installation of over 300,000 sq. ft. of tile and stone that was completed in 20 months with between 45 and 60 workers.



*"The project's owner, Mr. Steve Ballmer, did not want customers to wait in line to use the restroom," said Andrew Games, Premier Project Manager. "Therefore, the Intuit Dome has massive amounts of restrooms so nobody needs to wait. Every restroom received tile!"*

bringing surfaces within tolerance, LATICRETE HYDRO BAN waterproofing was applied, followed by flood testing and the start of tile installation—over 300,000 sq. ft. of floor tile with base, and wall tile that included ceramic, porcelain, glass, and stone tiles in sizes ranging from 1/2"x1/2" up to 5'x10' GPTP. Custom mosaic patterns of basketball players now adorn many club areas.

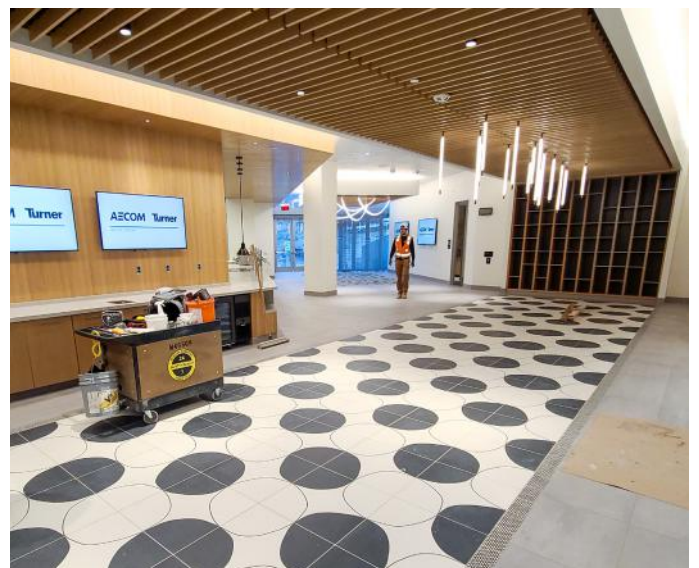
Key installations included:

- The Clippers' team hydrotherapy room, with 48"x48" wall tiles and penny rounds on the floor.
- Custom murals and mosaic artwork featuring basketball player motifs in clubs and the arena's main intersection, as well as on the exterior.
- Over 20,000 sq. ft. of GPTP wainscot on Level 1 corridors.
- Tile in all restrooms, as well as clubs, coaches' restrooms/showers, the children's play area, employee dining, visitor restroom/showers, suites, locker rooms, drinking fountains, breakrooms, concessions, and elevators.

*"The project's owner, Mr. Steve Ballmer, did not want customers to wait in line to use the restroom," said Andrew Games, Premier Tile Project Manager. "Therefore,*



*Custom murals and mosaic artwork feature basketball player motifs in clubs and the arena's main intersection, and on the exterior.*

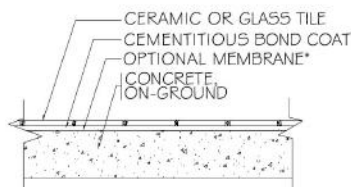


*Working with the architect and other trades, Premier developed a plan to push the other trades to stay on schedule and allow Premier to finish on time.*



**F113-25**

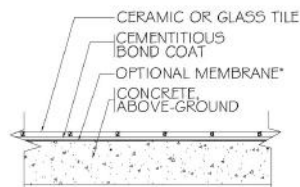
- On-Ground Concrete
- Ceramic Tile, Glass Tile



\*USE OF A MEMBRANE IS OPTIONAL.  
SEE MEMBRANE OPTIONS.

**F113A-25**

- Above-Ground Concrete
- Ceramic Tile, Glass Tile

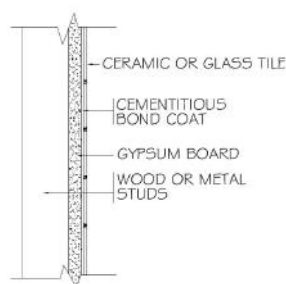


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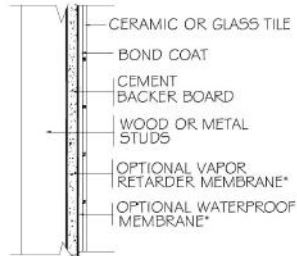
The majority of the floor tile was installed using TCNA Handbook method F113 (direct bond on-ground) and F113A (direct bond above-ground).

**W243-25**

- Wood or Metal Studs
- Gypsum Board
- Cementitious Bond Coat
- Ceramic Tile, Glass Tile

**W244C-25**

- Wood or Metal Studs
- Cement Backer Board
- Ceramic Tile, Glass Tile



\*USE OF A MEMBRANE IS OPTIONAL.  
SEE MEMBRANE OPTIONS.

Walls followed TCNA Handbook methods WW244C (cement backer board with cementitious bond coat) or W243 (gypsum board with cementitious bond coat).

the Intuit Dome has massive amounts of restrooms, so nobody needs to wait. Every restroom received tile!”

To meet the summer 2024 deadline, the Premier Tile team pushed for weekly coordination meetings starting in December 2023, helping drive other subcontractors to stay on track, much to the appreciation of the general contractor. Their leadership was key in ensuring on-time completion.

LATICRETE setting materials were chosen for their durability and performance for all tile work.

“LATICRETE setting materials were used in the new Clippers Intuit Dome to provide a quality tile installation that will last for a lifetime!” Games said.

The tile installations contributed significantly to the cutting-edge, visually-striking design of what is now considered the most technologically-advanced arena in the world.

## Technical details

The work that Premier Tile and Marble performed in the arena is almost unbelievable in both size and scope. This project was just under \$12.7 million and included

installation of over 300,000 sq. ft. of tile and stone, completed in 20 months with between 45 and 60 workers.

**Jobsite issues:** Premier had to overcome significant issues on the job. This included bush hammering and grinding an average of 1/2” from the recently poured concrete floors over a substantial area under numerous change orders. This alone took between four and five months to complete.

On one level, the restroom floors were very rough and out of tolerance by 1-3/8”. After the prep work was finalized, the substrates were modified to meet the ANSI required tolerance of 1/8” in 10’ for large-format tile and 1/4” in 10’ for smaller-format tile by using LATICRETE NXT patch.

Forty-six of the suites had been mistakenly coated with curing compound that had to be ground off to provide an adequate bond for the dry-set mortars used to set the tile.

In February 2023, heavy rains pummeled the area, flooding the arena interior. The affected areas on the lower levels included gypsum board walls that were prepped and ready for tile. The drywall contractor had to remove and replace these areas, which required change orders for Premier to again prep the walls for tile.

**Shower trench drains:** Premier discovered a design flaw in the detail of the shower trench drains that required the plumber to drill holes in every drain to allow weep water to escape. This modification had to be completed prior to Premier beginning their work.

**Mockups:** Due to the complexity of the layouts involved, Premier met weekly with the architect/designer to provide dry mockups, seeking signed approval prior to commencing the tile installation.

**Scheduling:** At the mid-point of the project, Premier realized that the undertaking would not be completed as scheduled in July of 2024. Working with the architect and other trades, Premier developed a plan to push the other trades to stay on schedule and allow Premier to finish on time.

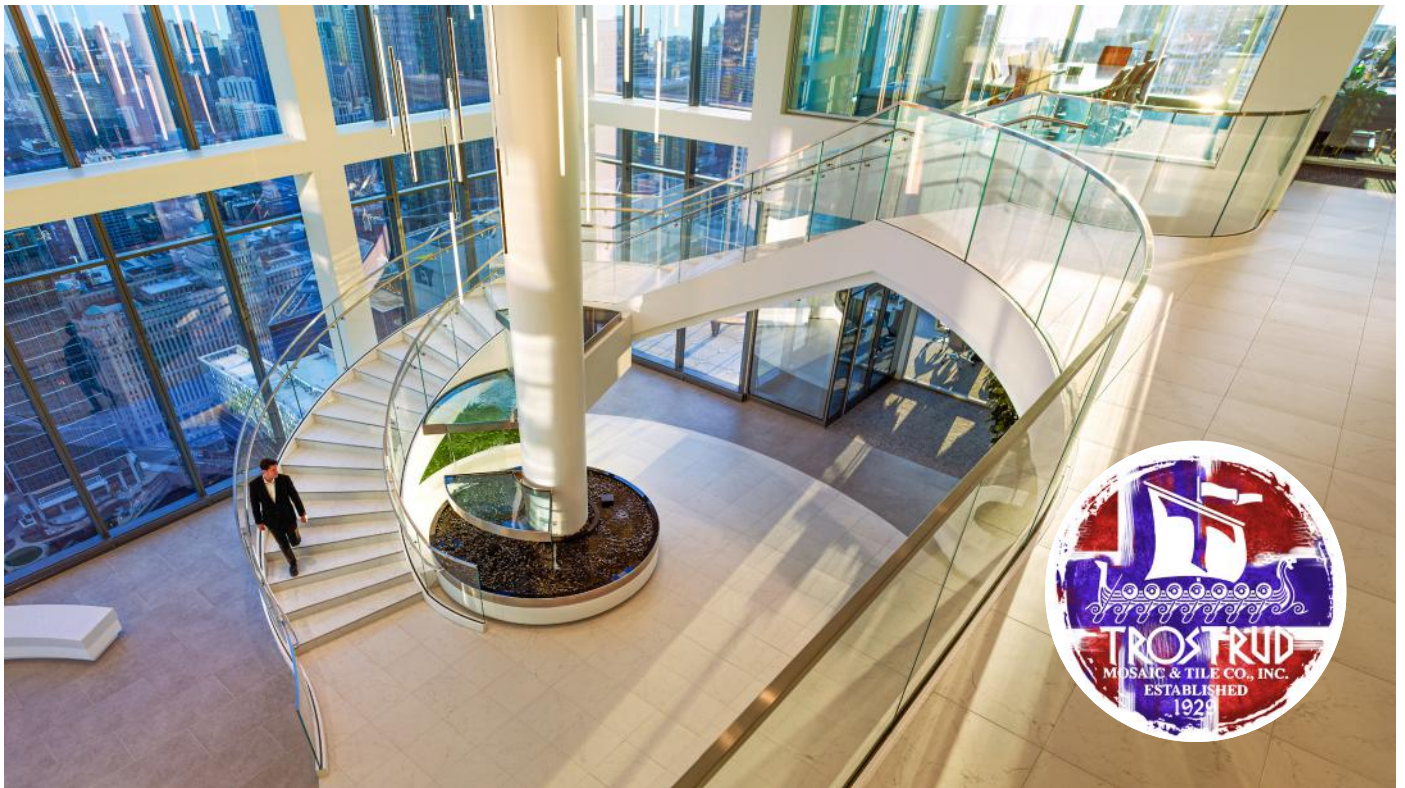
**Specifications:** The majority of the floor tile was installed using the *Tile Council of North America (TCNA) Handbook* method F113 (direct bond on-ground) and F113A (direct bond above-ground), whereas the walls followed WW244C (cement backer board with cementitious bond coat) or W243 (gypsum board with cementitious bond coat).

As with many large-volume projects that include many subcontractors, Premier did not enjoy the luxury of having designated work areas as directed by ANSI A108.02-4.3. Nevertheless, they pulled it off and completed the project on schedule. **TL**

# TRADING-FIRM AND CASINO PROJECTS SHINE FOR Trostrud and David Allen Company

By Lesley Goddin, Editorial Director and Senior Writer

**T**hese two spotlights focus on excellence in commercial projects. Trostrud Mosaic and Tile Company of Wood Dale, Ill., won the Commercial Grand Prize for the Headlands Technologies relocation, and David Allen Company nabbed the Large Commercial Achievement of Excellence for an expansive casino project. Let's take a closer look at these award-winning projects and the contractors that brought them to life.



The freestanding radius staircase—spanning 6' with treads varying from 13" to 18" in width—is a centerpiece. Each tread and riser was fully tiled, demanding exact field adjustments to maintain alignment across the curve.

## **Trostrud Mosaic and Tile Company: Commercial Grand Prize**

Reflecting on the Headland Technologies Relocation Project, Project Manager Todd C. Tollakson said despite the wide array of challenges, the resulting installation is "one of the most elegant installations I have ever been part of." He added, "The prep, layout, and installation

requirements—aligning radius cuts, stair heights, and floor pads to soffit reflections—made this job exceptionally complex."

Indeed, prep was the first major trial: achieving the 1/8" in 10' flatness standard, critical for large-format tile. Floor height variations exceeded 2" in some areas, making self-leveling unfeasible for much of the space. Instead,





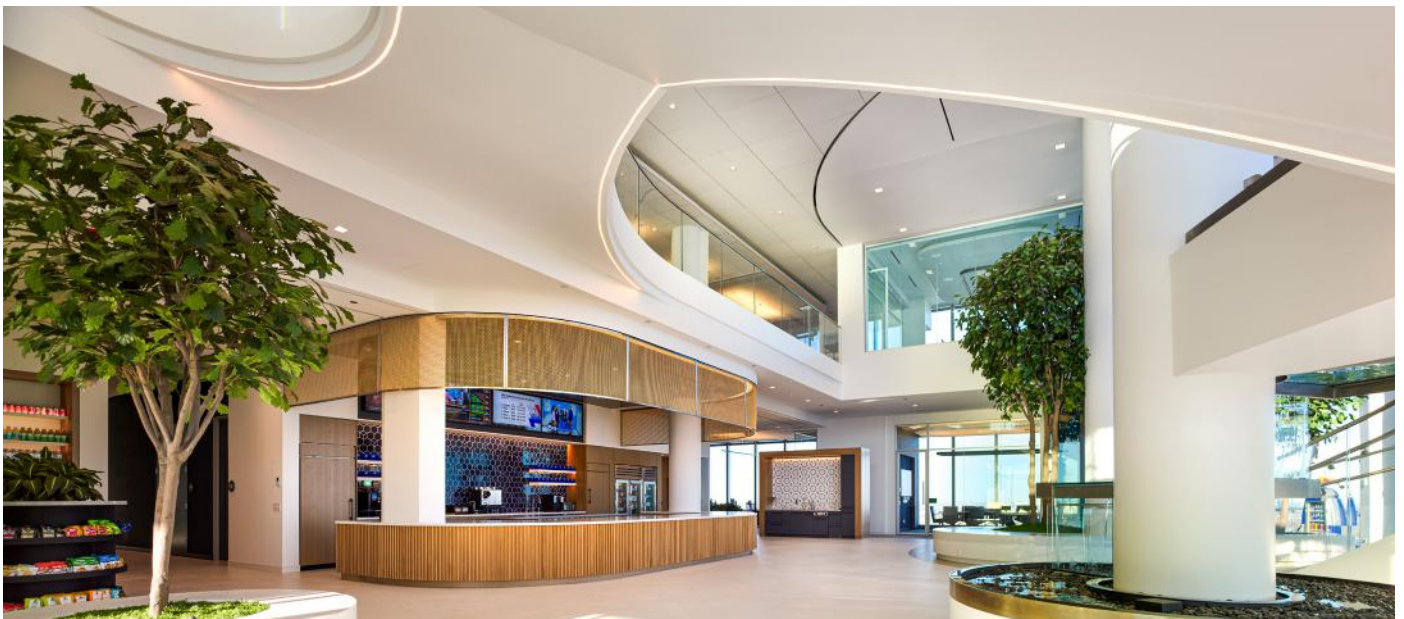
The cafe includes a full-height 1" hexagon mosaic backsplash, while 30' away, the atrium showcases a two-sided feature wall clad in full-height 1"x1" hexagon marble mosaic.

the crew used trowel-applied patching, establishing elevation points from reception through the 120' corridor to the open atrium and freestanding staircase. Trostrud connected these points with screeds, creating a gradual, flat ramp while maintaining elevation transitions at elevator sills, glass partitions, and connecting corridors. Similar precision was required in the atrium to meet the staircase and ensure ADA compliance.

Reception areas featured three radius-cornered floor pads using accent-colored tile, requiring tight radius cuts and alignment with ceiling soffit reflections. The freestanding radius staircase—spanning 6' with treads varying from 13" to 18" in width—was a centerpiece. Each tread and riser was fully tiled, demanding exact field adjustments to maintain alignment across the curve.

The four unisex restrooms were the only areas suited to self-leveling. These feature interlocking hexagon marble mosaic floors, with 3"x12" handcrafted wainscoting topped by a quarter-round trim. The cafe includes a full-height 1" hexagon mosaic backsplash, while 30' away, the atrium showcases a two-sided feature wall clad in full-height 1"x1" hexagon marble mosaic.

In total, the project required 1,731 man-hours and stands out for its technical demands and meticulous detail. "I'm extremely proud of the finished product and grateful to Derek Lauderdale (Foreman) and Tony Reiter (Gaffer) for their leadership and craftsmanship throughout the installation," Tollakson said.



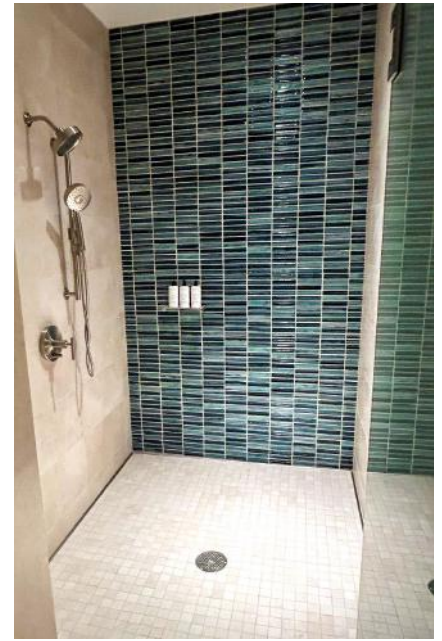
Project Manager Todd C. Tollakson said despite the wide array of challenges, the resulting installation is "one of the most elegant installations I have ever been part of."





**David Allen Company:  
Large Commercial  
Achievement of Excellence**

This monumental casino project spanned 350-plus hotel rooms, a pool, spa, theater, restaurants, and a casino. Each area features a full kitchen, bar, support areas, and restrooms, along with numerous large-scale patron restrooms throughout the facility. A special twist is that this project needed to be completed on a severely compressed schedule.



*Finishes included granite, marble, quartz, zellige tile, encaustic-look tile, thin brick, book-matched GPTP, numbered glass mosaics, 35,000+ sq. ft. of industrial epoxy-set quarry tile, and 13,500+ sq. ft. of terrazzo featuring a waterjet-cut "wave" pattern.*

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For more information on MAPEI's Profiles and Trims line, please scan:



*Crews tiled the pool deck in just five days after the concrete pour, using a rapid-curing epoxy vapor barrier.*

Installation of over 133,000 sq. ft. of premium finishes included granite, marble, quartz, zellige tile, encaustic-look tile, thin brick, book-matched GTP, numbered glass mosaics, 35,000+ sq. ft. of industrial epoxy-set quarry tile, and 13,500+ sq. ft. of terrazzo featuring a waterjet-cut "wave" pattern.

Executed between April and November 2024, the project delivered over \$5.5 million of work in just seven months—under a schedule compressed by four months.

Accomplishing this lofty goal required up to 60 craftspeople on-site, directed by a CTI superintendent, general superintendent, and multiple foremen, all working long shifts with limited downtime.

The Operations Team used multiple software programs to keep the project on schedule, to ascertain products were matched with their destination locations, and to keep pace with design or material changes. These included:

- **On-Screen Takeoff**, which created a 2,721-line Excel workbook.
- **Autodesk**, which managed GC project documentation.
- **Measure Square**, which was used for shop drawings and room-by-room installation scheduling by SKU.
- **Procore**, which enabled real-time field updates and design changes.
- **Spectrum and Plexxis**, which handled accounting and billing.



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*Every surface receiving tile, stone, or terrazzo was surveyed for substrate suitability. Many required correction—especially in repurposed shopping mall areas with damaged concrete.*

Every surface receiving tile, stone, or terrazzo was surveyed for substrate suitability. Many required correction—especially in repurposed shopping mall areas with damaged concrete. Over four truckloads of flowable mortar were used to bring slabs into tolerance. These prep tasks, although not in the original scope or schedule, were essential and consumed early schedule time.

Crews tiled the pool deck in just five days after the

concrete pour, using a rapid-curing epoxy vapor barrier. Hotel floors required sealing and additional prep due to unsealed Gypcrete and elevation variations.

Despite constant design changes and substrate challenges, the team completed over 100 field work orders, and was consistently praised by the GC, owner, and design team for its expertise, problem-solving, and commitment to quality execution. **TL**



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# Shower installation REDEFINED:

## Welch Tile's WTS puts a new spin on shower fabrication and installation

By Lesley Goddin, Editorial Director and Senior Writer

Dan Welch, owner of NTCA Five-Star Accredited Contractor company Welch Tile, launched the Welch Tile Solutions (WTS) tiled shower system to address economic downturns and skilled labor shortages in the tile industry. Development began in 2019-2020 and the system was formally established in 2021.

This prefabricated shower pan and wall panel system offers time and cost savings, reduces installer strain, and ensures high-quality, waterproof results. WTS is highly flexible, accommodating various tile types, drain locations, and shower wall designs. The system even allows for on-site variations in drain locations.

Modules are assembled by a team of 8-10 people in-house (with expansion plans on the horizon). To facilitate the process and make it easier on installers' bodies, WTS also features an innovative adjustable work table that improves ergonomics for installers, allowing them to maintain peak performance. Project components are situated at a waist-high height during fabrication, reducing the amount of time installers are on their knees.

Since development, the WTS system was used for 150 shower bases and linear drains constructed at Welch for the Canopy Hotel in Grand Rapids, Mich. These were installed on-site, with Welch's commercial teams finishing the shower walls, bathroom floors, and vanity walls in all rooms.



Modules are assembled by a team of 8-10 people in-house, making it more ergonomic for installers and eliminating the need for installers to spend long hours on their knees.





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*The Canopy Hotel in Grand Rapids, Mich., features WTS in 150 shower bases and linear drains*

Megan Garvey, director of Human Resources and Marketing for Welch Tile, said, “With a condensed schedule and so much tile throughout this project, Welch had to come up with a plan to do things differently, keeping all standards and requirements in mind.”

Some of the innovative approaches include:

- It was the first time ever using GPS to locate drain locations
- Welch fabricated rigid templates and provided them to framers to ensure the rough openings were framed properly.
- Water tests were performed at the shop. The county plumbing inspector was present for a set of water tests and was impressed by the validity and process of the watertight shower base.
- Rooms were self-leveled before installing bases to establish a level substrate.

And in 2024, *TileLetter* reported on the 242 showers installed with WTS at Michigan’s Grand Traverse Resort and Spa Hotel. Scan for the story.

Currently, two large projects are in



*Welch fabricated rigid templates and provided them to framers to ensure the rough openings were framed properly.*



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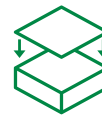


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the works: a hotel renovation and a new dormitory for a local college, consisting of 635 tile showers. To date, WTS installed showers are nearing the 1,500 mark.

Garvey outlined the many advantages of her company's system.

- **Flexibility in tile, drain location, wall design:** Welch can put the drain in any location that it needs to be. It essentially can and will accommodate any tile selection. The company advises on suggestions and best practice and has a designer on staff that can help optimize design.
- **Transportation:** The way Welch packages for transport protects the tile and the shower, yet it is easy to unpack and produces minimal waste.
- **Speed:** WTS reduces on-site install time by 90%. With WTS, a standard-size shower can be fully installed in 3-4 hours on-site.
- **Durability:** WTS offers the same durability as a high-quality traditional install. In some cases the quality is even superior, due to modules being constructed in an environment that controls lights, water, temperature, and humidity, which are not always controllable on a jobsite.
- **Cost:** A basic 3'x5' shower with mid-level tile selections is cost-effective and comparable to others. Upgraded tile selections, overall size, expanded height, niche, bench, or add-ons would add to the cost, as they would in a traditional install. WTS offers greater sustainability as there is very minimal waste.
- **Ergonomic benefits for workers yield peak results:** The work space for fabricating WTS modules reduces the time installers are on their knees during the installation of tiles on the modules. The same high-quality products are used in WTS fabrication as in the company's high-end residential department; only the process differs. By embracing lean manufacturing principles and 5S methodologies, Welch supports employees in being as efficient as possible. There is less bending, stooping, carrying heavy objects, and workstations are designed to keep people in place while installing. Plus, custom hydraulic tilt tables allow the installers to bring the walls to them to install on.
- **Added leverage in obtaining tile specifications and projects:** Being able to produce and install tiled showers in a different location is a game-changer on projects. The ability to offer commercial and

manufacturing solutions ensures a high-quality install and more tile specified and installed on projects.

Two recent projects include the 239 showers at the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel in Battle Creek, Mich., and the Dearborn Inn renovation. Welch collaborated with fellow NTCA member Artisan Tile, Inc. on the Dearborn Inn project to complete 103 showers at the historic Michigan inn.

### Dearborn Inn renovation

WTS had a hand in the renovation of the iconic 290,000-sq.-ft. Dearborn Inn, originally opened in 1931. This village-like hotel paid homage to Henry and Edsel Ford and was one of the first airport hotels in the country, accommodating travelers through the adjacent Ford Airport.

Welch partnered with fellow NTCA member Artisan Tile, Inc., of Brighton, Mich., on the project to complete over 103 showers on this historic renovation.

"As industry partners, we have supported and shared in WTS' endeavors to strengthen our trade," said Jennifer Panning, President of Artisan Tile.

She said her company's biggest challenge is how to train, motivate, and retain people, while increasing market share with "the highest quality standards," and meeting scheduling demands and owner expectations. The WTS system helps alleviate some of those challenges.

For the upscale Dearborn Inn Autograph Collection Hotel project, which encompassed 243 guest rooms, quality was the goal, but elaborate design and installation



Artisan Tile, Inc. of Brighton, Mich., partnered with WTS for 103 of the rooms in the Dearborn Inn Autograph Collection Hotel.





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*The WTS team customized the walls to fit the specific solid surface flange on the base of the showers in the DoubleTree by Hilton Battle Creek.*

“Artisan brought WTS to the construction team,” Panning said. “The construction manager, owner, and design team reviewed and agreed to allow Artisan to install WTS.”

WTS streamlined the installation process in 103 of those rooms, which were especially challenging due to 21 unique room types that “created a lot of front end work” for Artisan, Panning added. This renovation “brought design gaps to the forefront, allowing the entire construction crews to make corrections in the framing stages—a win for all!,” she said.

### **DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel**

The WTS system was part of the \$75 million transformation of the McCalmly Hotel Plaza into the 16-story DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Battle Creek in 2024.

Garvey explained that the base was design-specified

for solid surface, but the team customized the walls to fit the specific flange on the base. The result was a spate of 239 showers (and some tile surrounds) completed using WTS.

Welch has built its reputation on excellence and innovation, and the opportunities that WTS provides are proof positive of that. Garvey said many of Welch’s internal discussions focus on benefitting the industry as a whole.

“One of our goals is to ensure that more tile is installed overall,” she said. “This solution is a way to make sure tile stays relevant and other non-tile items are not taking over tile’s market share. We want to be a part of elevating our industry!”

Get more information on the WTS system here:





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# CAREFUL ATTENTION to DETAIL and INDUSTRY STANDARDS Spells Success for Winning Projects

By Lesley Goddin, Editorial Director and Senior Writer



In our Artisan section this month, we explore two Five-Star Award winning projects that brought craftsmanship and tile artistry to a new level.

Rinaldi Tile & Marble received the NTCA Five-Star Community Impact Award for its 12,500-sq.-ft. Watsonville Brllante project of community-fabricated mosaics, which took five years and nine phases to complete. You first got a look at this project in the October 2024 *TileLetter* cover feature. Scan here for the original feature, and read on to discover a little more about the award-winning aspects of this project.



Vallefuoco Contractors received the Residential Achievement of Excellence Award for its “Planes, Drains, and Dry-Lay Reveals” primary-bath project, which involved masterful management of two waterjet-cut marble mosaics for seamless installation. The project encompassed other hurdles that this Five-Star Contractor adeptly handled to produce a stunning outcome.

## Rinaldi Tile & Marble: Community Impact Award



Watsonville Brllante is a 12,500-sq.-ft. community-created mosaic that spans the Civic Plaza parking garage in Watsonville, Calif., with imagery that celebrates the cultural heritage of the city. It was completed over five years in nine phases, each

six months apart. Eighty percent of the mosaics in this community-empowerment project were designed and fabricated by local youth using donated materials from local contractor Rinaldi Tile and Marble and nearby tile maker Fireclay Tile. The project was guided by local artist and teacher Kathleen Crocetti. Despite non-standard sizes and formats, the final installation reads beautifully and is built to last for generations—showcasing what’s



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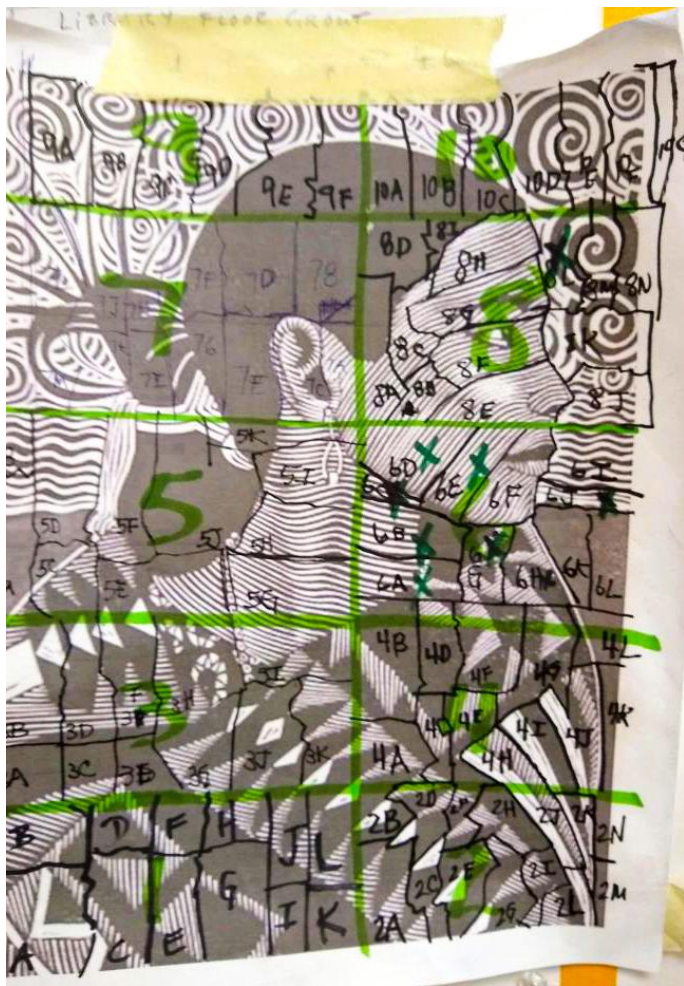
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During preconstruction, the Rinaldi team collaborated closely with the lead designer to understand design priorities and develop a plan to break down the large 40'x60' and 20'x60' murals into transportable, installable sections without compromising visual continuity.

possible with thoughtful planning, collaboration, and skilled craftsmanship.

This project was anything but standard. Tile sizes ranged from 1/4"x1/4" to 6"x12", and thicknesses varied from 1/4" to 3/8". Rinaldi had to wrestle with irregular grout joints that were grouped right next to each other, and irregularities in materials donated by the community. Plus, there were packaging and transportation details to contend with.

During preconstruction, the Rinaldi team collaborated closely with the lead designer to understand design priorities and develop a plan to break down the large 40'x60' and 20'x60' murals into transportable, installable sections without compromising visual continuity. The mosaics were assembled using clear face tape (rated for 50 lbs./sq.ft.), allowing for visibility of the design while ensuring strong bond during transport and dry lay. An



Crews installed the sections with polymer-modified LATICRETE thinset applied with a 1/4"x1/4" notched trowel directly onto liquid-applied waterproofing. Managing coverage requirements of larger, thicker tiles and adjacent small tiles that needed tight grout joints was a major challenge.

unexpected benefit: the tape slowed thinset drying, allowing for easier joint cleaning.

Each mosaic section was mounted on 4'x8' plywood, creating 60 irregular puzzle pieces across the six garage levels. An installation map was supplied for every floor on-site, and installers dry-laid the mosaics, marking 24"x24" grids on both the wall substrate and face tape. They worked with the designer to cut large sections into manageable 2'x2' pieces—avoiding cuts through key visual elements like facial features.

Crews installed the sections with polymer-modified LATICRETE thinset applied with a 1/4"x1/4" notched trowel directly onto liquid-applied waterproofing. Managing the mix of thick and thin tiles was challenging. Larger tiles needed full thinset coverage, but adjacent small tiles with tight grout joints couldn't handle overflow. In many cases, compromise was inevitable.



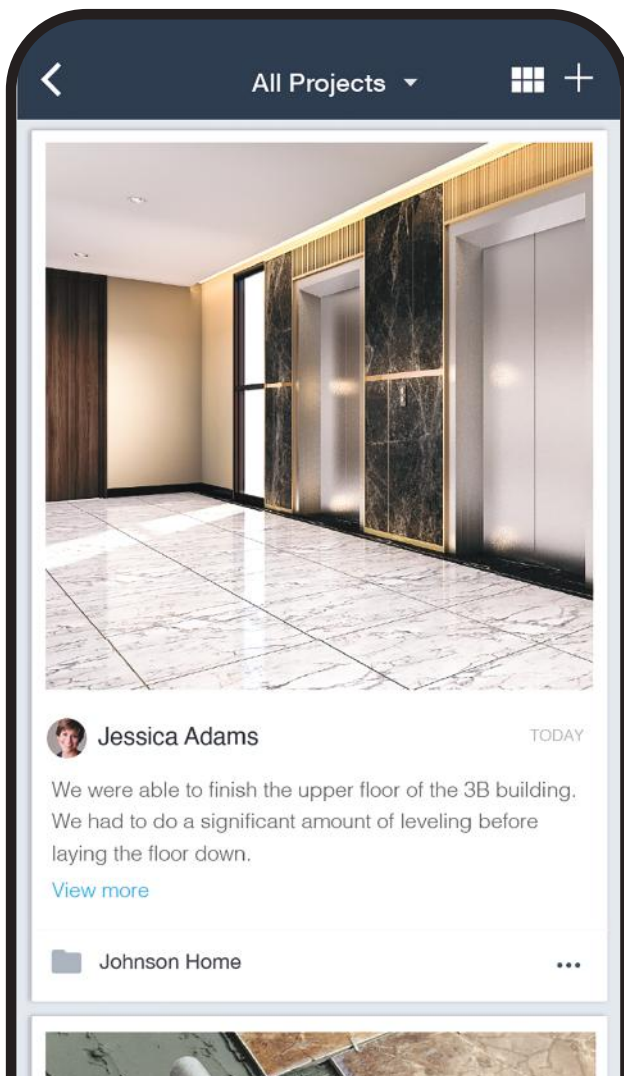
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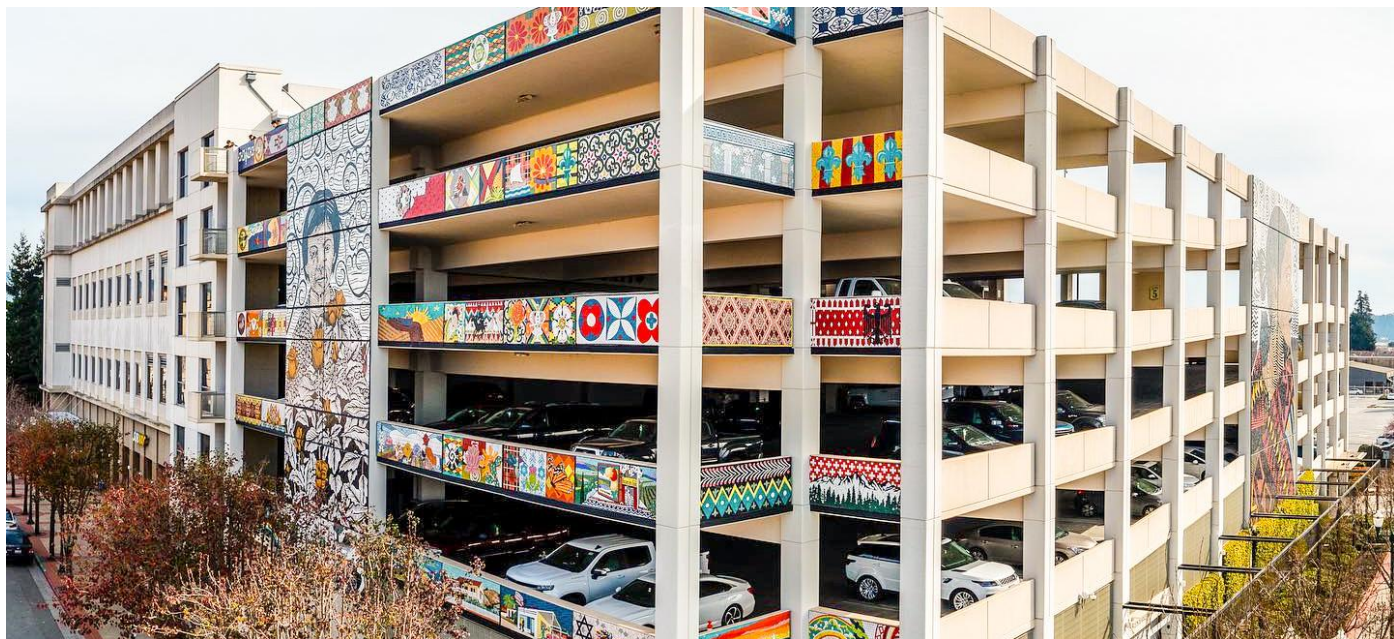
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The project took five years to complete, in nine phases, each six months apart. Eighty percent of the mosaics were designed and fabricated by local youth using donated materials from local contractor Rinaldi Tile and Marble and local tile maker Fireclay Tile. The project was guided by local artist and teacher Kathleen Crocetti.

On standard installs, face tape is removed the next day. But for this project, the day after installation, the team had to peel it back carefully, one square foot at a time. A secondary crew handled this delicate process, benefiting from the slower cure time of the thinset and allowing

loose tiles to be easily reset. Over time, the crew adapted, reducing tape-related issues, taking time and care with grouting, which helped to pull the project together. The result is a community-powered homage to the history of the area and a feat of installation excellence.



When the clear plastic-face mosaic sheet sample of the shower floor mosaic arrived, Vallefucoco discovered that it was not malleable and the long perpendicular pieces had either no joints or joints spaced between 1/32"-1/16".

### Vallefucoco Contractors LLC: Residential Achievement of Excellence



The cleverly-named “Planes, Drains, and Dry-Lay Reveals” project involved tiling a primary bath entirely in two interlocking waterjet-cut marble mosaics. Brought in early by the builder, Vallefucoco Contractors, LLC of Rockville, Md., encountered several challenges requiring technical problem-solving and adherence to industry standards.

The coordinating—but diverse—waterjet-cut mosaics would cover all surfaces. Both were sourced from Architessa—one from the distributor’s proprietary line—and another from New Ravenna.

Vallefucoco requested a mounted sample sheet of the shower floor tile, but the sheet revealed an obstacle. “When the clear plastic-face mosaic sheet arrived, we discovered that it was not malleable and the long perpendicular pieces had either no joints or joints





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spaced between 1/32"-1/16"," said Gianna Vallefucoco, Co-Owner of the contracting company. "The sheet's rigidity would not conform to multi-directional sloping of 1/4" per foot to the existing center drain. Given the unbending tile, we sought flexibility elsewhere. Our options were to cut into the shower floor pattern for multiple slopes, to change the tile selection, or to reconfigure drain placement and type."

The clients were committed to their tile choice and a continuous pattern, but trusted Vallefucoco's guidance. Ultimately, the plumber relocated the drain to the back of the shower, and Vallefucoco switched to a 60" Schluter KERDI-LINE drain, allowing for a one-directional slope. To reduce future maintenance and meet ANSI A108.01-3.6.4 standards, Vallefucoco switched out mosaics on horizontal surfaces with marble slabs sloped to the drain.

Before installing Schluter DITRA, Vallefucoco confirmed that the main floor substrate met the ANSI A108.1B flatness requirement of <1/8" variation in 10'. While the floor passed inspection, one wall area revealed bumps over 1/8" within a 12" span. To meet tolerances and maintain schedule, the Vallefucoco crew demoed and reframed the wall, rather than wait for the GC's carpenters.

Still fighting against the clock, Vallefucoco met the final hurdle when wrapping the mosaics seamlessly around multiple vertical planes with complex angles—five out-corners and 13 in-corners.



The sheet was too rigid to conform to multi-directional sloping of 1/4" per foot to the existing center drain. The solution? The plumber relocated the drain to the back of the shower, and Vallefucoco switched to a 60" Schluter KERDI-LINE drain, which allowed for a one-directional slope. To reduce future maintenance and meet ANSI A108.01-3.6.4 standards, they switched out mosaics on horizontal surfaces with marble slabs sloped to the drain.



Fighting against the clock, Vallefucoco met its final hurdle when wrapping the mosaics seamlessly around multiple vertical planes with complex angles—five out-corners and 13 in-corners.

"To make the sheets connect seamlessly across planes proved troublesome because wall angles ranged from right angles to obtuse angles of over 140 degrees," Vallefucoco said. "This resulted in unexpected breakage of tiny pieces in the early cutting and handling phase. Per ANSI A108.02.4.3.3, we had to ensure smooth cut edges, without flaking or jagged pieces. Because some pieces were only 1/4" wide and highly delicate, handling and easing edges was challenging, especially at corners."

Two factors supported Vallefucoco's success:

- Following TCNA's *Natural Stone Tile Selection and Installation Guide*, Vallefucoco had ordered ample overage to account for breakage and variation.
- Vallefucoco performed a two-phase dry lay. First the contractor inspected all 1,019 sheets—still on cardboard mounting—for damage, chips, consistency, and color variation. Second, crews carefully removed, laid out, and marked them for interlocking placement across planes as a final dry lay. "The two-part process revealed which tiny pieces were optimized for corners, and allowed consistent shade variation while minimizing further breakage during cutting and handling," Vallefucoco said.

"We overcame the installation obstacles by relying on *TCNA Handbook* guidelines, methods, and ANSI standards, and through planning and patience," she concluded, noting how essential these resources were in crafting this complex installation. **TL**



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## *TCNA Handbook* and ANSI Standards

ANSI A137.2



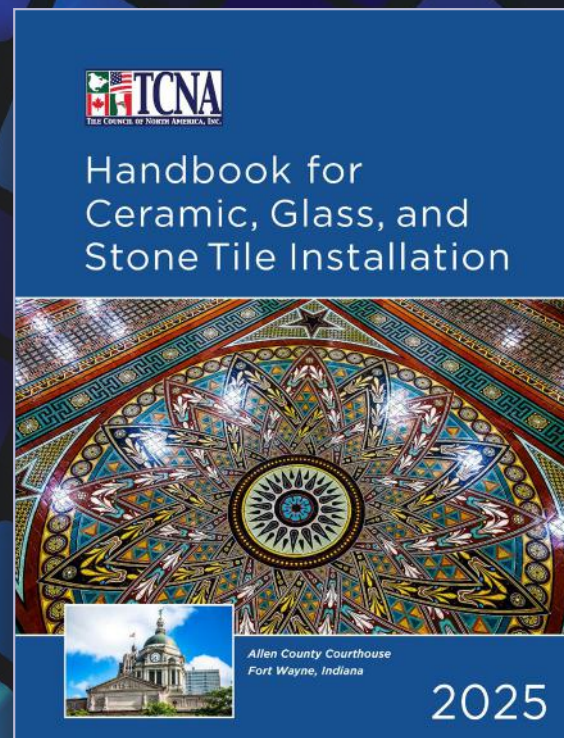
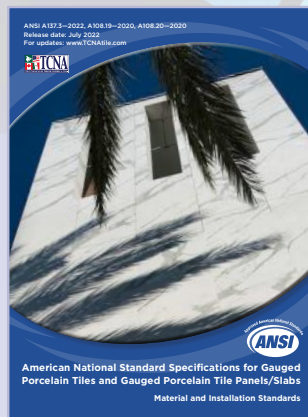
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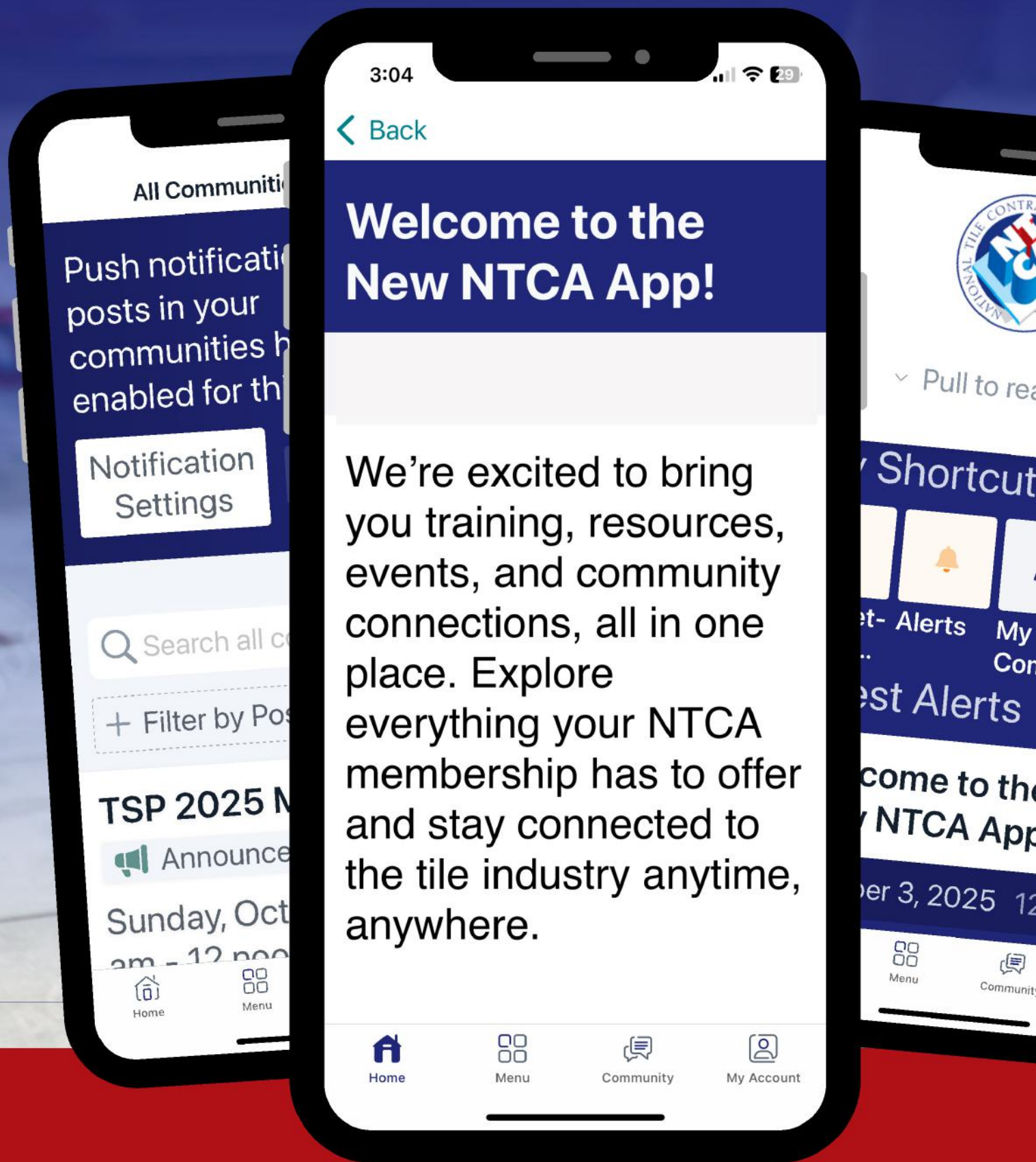


# ONLINE LEARNING

NTCA University is a comprehensive online platform offering tile installation courses designed for individuals new to the industry or those seeking to refresh their skills. These courses are an excellent resource for training or apprenticeship programs, ensuring that learners are equipped with industry-standard methods and practices before applying their knowledge through hands-on or on-the-job learning. Additionally, these courses are beneficial for sales associates and professionals in other roles within the tile industry, providing valuable insights into the principles and processes of tile installation. NTCA University also features business courses tailored to small business owners. Accessible 24/7 via computer, tablet, or smartphone, NTCA University allows learners the flexibility to study at their convenience.

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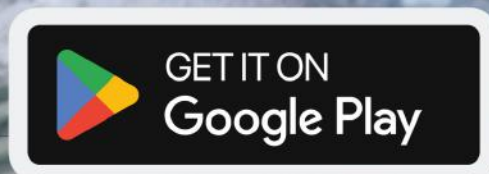
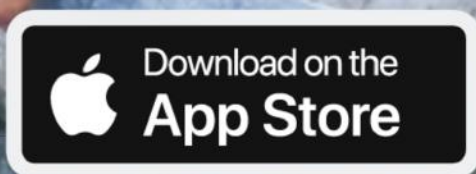


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