

HOME REMODELING

# Flat-out solid

## Tile still a good option for upgrades in rooms around the house

**Q:** *We just bought a real “fixer upper” which means we will be remodeling just about every room, starting with the kitchen and bathrooms. We really like the classy look of the tile we’ve seen in the showrooms we’ve visited, but don’t know where it would be appropriate to install tile, or if other products might be more practical or economical.*

**Alan Barber**  
Sacramento

**A:** Nothing compares to tile for style and versatility, no matter how modest or upscale your home, says Richard Baratta, owner of Baratta Tile in Carmichael.

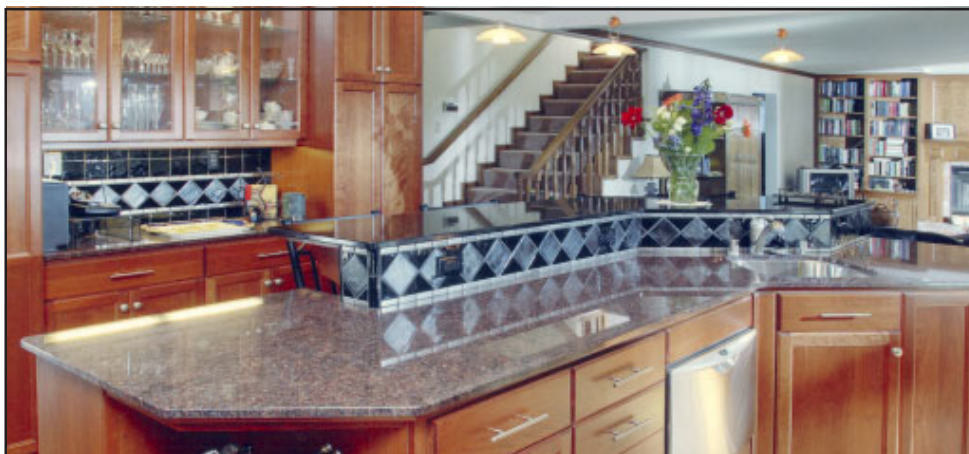
It comes in a vast range of colors, shapes, sizes and materials, can be applied on floors, walls and counters and—possibly the best attribute of all—provides nearly unlimited design possibilities because it can be combined with other kinds of tile as well as other types of building material to customize a home.

“You don’t have to throw a lot of money at a project to end up with an expensive designer look,” Baratta says. “We can form patterns with different shapes, sizes and colors of inexpensive tile, randomly mix old and/or new colored tiles, accent basic tile with a few special decorative tiles or trim pieces or create a focal point to make any area look special.”

However, tile show rooms can be overwhelming even to construction professionals, because the options are endless, says Baratta. That’s why it helps to have a basic understanding of the different types of tile and installation methods and a budget in mind before choosing tile for your home.

**Kitchens**

Tile on the kitchen deck has been losing favor for years now as granite and other solid surfaces without grout



Dave Adams

**Gloss-black porcelain and brushed stainless-steel tiles were used for backsplashes in the kitchen.**

lines have become more available and affordable, Baratta says.

“This leaves the backsplash as an empty canvas waiting for the artistic touch that reflects your personality,” Baratta says. “Since the kitchen backsplash is the one tile area in your house that everyone will see, be sure to put some thought into it.”

Most backsplashes can be installed using any of the backer boards available although it may be necessary to use the mortar and wire method when applying different tiles of more than one thickness.

“The first thing to decide before going shopping is whether your tile will be the focal point or background for the overall look of your kitchen,” Baratta advises. “Stand back as far away from your kitchen as you can and decide what it is that you want to stand out, or blend in.”

From there, you need to decide which patterns and colors will fit into the overall style of your kitchen and home, he says. A vignette that looks spectacular in the showroom may not look so good in your kitchen, especially if it is small.

Designing for small kitchens presents certain challenges because of the limited space. The most common mistakes made in small kitchens are a bad layout that projects an unbalanced look, too much pattern or using too many different types of tile within a small space, he says.

“Proper design elements in a small kitchen include a balanced look that flows well along the entire the length of

the counter, a pattern that fits into the space, a focal point that stands out without overwhelming, use of contrasting colors that complement each other or colors that blend together but still keep their identity.”

**Bathrooms**

“I love to design tile in bathrooms because there are so many surfaces to work with,” Baratta says. “Whether a bathroom is small or large, each project presents both opportunities and challenges that are unique to each room.

“Ernest Batchelder, the great Arts and Craft tile maker of the early 1900s, was fond of saying that no two tiles are the same, and it is still true today,” he says.

“The best thing about my job is getting the chance to give every project its own pleasing personality and seeing my clients smile when they walk into the room.”

Baratta protects cabinets with plastic before setting tile countertops with the mortar and wire installation method above. He uses the same method when setting shower stalls, setting tile on shower floors after it has been “hot mopped” with tar to help make it watertight.

“Some people use backer board under countertops and around showers and tub surrounds, but I never do because cabinets and wall framing are rarely level or plumb and the seams in backer board could cause cracking or leaking if not properly treated,” he says.

Another way to make a bathroom special is to install a heating mat under

the tile. Baratta uses the Nuheat brand which adds about \$300 to the cost of a tile floor installation for a small standard mat, up to about \$700 for a custom mat that covers the whole room.

### Tile floors

Tile has long been popular for flooring because it is attractive, durable, water resistant and easy to clean.

These days, homeowners have an incredible array of materials, sizes, colors, patterns and textures to choose from.

Floor tiles range in size from 12 by 12 inch (or even larger 16- 18- or 24-inch pavers) to tiny mosaic tiles sold on webbed backing.

Tile is also ideal for floors with moisture problems or installed below grade because tile and grout are porous. This allows excess moisture to evaporate into the air, whereas it can damage vinyl and wood flooring.

### Tile over a concrete subfloor

The concrete slab must be clean for the tile to adhere properly. If it has been painted, stained or sealed, it must be scuffed up with sandpaper or a grinder before installing tile.

Tile can be glued directly to concrete using any one of the floor thinset products available.

“The best ones are the flex mortars, which help prevent cracking” says Baratta. “If you have cracks in your slab there are anti-fracture products available. We use Ditra to install marble and limestone tiles and EasyMat for tile and slate.”

### Tile over a wood subfloor

If setting tile over a raised foundation, it’s important to make sure it is strong enough to support the extra weight of tile. If not, it may be necessary to reinforce the subfloor to prevent it from sagging.

“Tile should never be set directly to wood because it expands and contracts and will cause the tile to crack or lose its bond,” says Baratta.

Depending on your height restrictions, either ¼” or ½” backer board should be glued down to the wood subfloor with thinset (a cheap brand is OK here) to take out any voids, he says. Next, the backer board should be nailed or screwed down.

“If you are going to install a soft stone such as marble, limestone or travertine,



**Metal tiles, such as these made of copper, are frequently used for accents and combined with stone, ceramic and porcelain tiles,** you should also use an anti-fracture mat on top of the backer board for a worry-free installation,” he advises.

### Tile over vinyl or linoleum

If your vinyl or linoleum flooring is firmly glued in place directly over concrete or wood, you may set tile directly to it by cleaning it well, scuffing it up to enhance adhesion, then applying the tile with a good thinset like VersaBond, he says.

“If your original flooring is installed over particle board, some tile setters nail backer board over the top of it before setting new tile on it, but I don’t recommend it because the flex in particle board could cause cracking,” says Baratta.

“Particle board should be pulled up before installing the backer board and tile,” he says. “However, it can be quite the ordeal if the particle board is over-stapled, glued down or run under the cabinets. If that’s the case, I’d urge you to consider covering it with another kind of flooring — maybe a vinyl or laminate that resembles tile.”

### Fireplaces

A lot of older homes have unattractive or odd colored brick or stone fireplaces that make the house look passé, especially if they are ceiling height and dominate the room, Baratta says.

“You’d be amazed at what a dramatic

change refacing a drab, dated fireplace with beautiful tile can make. If the brick or stone is flat, large tile or stone tiles can be thinsetted right to the bricks. If the surface is irregular, it will have to be floated with mortar before tiling,” he explains.

Finally, it’s important to remember that you do not have to make your decisions alone because most showrooms have in house designers there to help you, he says.

“If you still find yourself unsure, don’t hesitate ask your tile contractor for suggestions about anything from design to ways to save money,” Baratta concludes. “After all, he’s the one who makes the magic happen.”

## Installing Tile

There are three ways to install tile, depending on the surface to be tiled. Remodeling usually presents greater challenges than installing tile in new construction because pre-existing conditions often dictate some methods over others, Baratta says

The three different tile installation methods are described below:

**Mortar and Wire Reinforcement** is the most traditional, time consuming and costly method because it involves the most steps.

1. The area to be tiled is covered with waterproof paper.
2. Wire is stretched over the entire surface.
3. A layer of mortar (a mixture of sand, cement and lime or clay) is applied and allowed to harden.
4. A layer of “thinset” is applied to the mortar.
5. Tile is set.
6. The tile is left to cure at least overnight
7. Grout is mixed and applied.

**Backer board**, or premade sheets of mortar, saves time and money by eliminating the wire step and the time required for wet mortar to harden. Common name brands include WonderBoard, Hardy Backer and Wedi Board.

**Thinset/Glue/Mastic**, or gluing tile directly to the surface, is the least expensive method is to set tile.