

Will thin tiles be accepted in our market?

Following our extensive review of thin tile products launched last year at Cersaie (Tile Today issue 65 - Slim Line Tonic or the Thin Edge of the Wedge), we decided to garner opinion from a small number of key wholesalers and retailers, about the prospects for thin tile products in our market.

Laminam, Oxide Moro of porcelain fixed to the walls and the door, with 1m x 1m x 3mm fibreglass reinforced tile on the floor. These extra-light, extra-thin products can be adhered to virtually any

efore we examine the responses we received, it is worthwhile pointing out that while the majority of leading Italian and European manufacturers now produce thin tiles, the fact remains that it has taken several years for many of them to follow in the footsteps of Laminam, the company which first produced thin product.

There are a number of reasons for this delay, including a basic fear of the unknown, which made it difficult for industry personnel and consumers to accept that a 3 mm sheet of extruded porcelain could be as tough and versatile as a regular 9.5 mm version of the same tile.

Secondly, some importers have understandable concerns about the brittleness of large and expensive 3 m x 1 m x 3 mm slabs of porcelain, which could easily break in the wrong hands.

The other factor in the original equation related to design potential. In a market largely dominated by minimalist design trends, the initial product releases were inevitably fairly plain and the capacity to create something special was limited by a lack of tile fixers, who were familiar with the processes required to cut and install the product.

It has taken some time for manufacturers to realise that while the concept of thin tiles is a good idea, especially in a world where the consumption of less is deemed to be more, one of the real benefits associated with this advanced technology lay in producing conventional contemporary formats suitable for use in residential environments.

So while large sheets of Laminam and products manufactured by those who followed in their footsteps remain on the market, future use of these very large products could be partially confined to the cladding of internal and external walls, where a combination of the product's lightweight and inherent durability, will be appreciated by those who need to clad the facade of a building with an attractive and hard wearing surface finish.

During the five years that have elapsed since Cotto D'Este, Provenza and Kalebodur, using Laminam technology, launched the first thin products, it appears that tile manufacturers have realised that to market thin tiles effectively, it was necessary to produce a wider range of designs in more conventional formats including 300 x 300, 600 x 600 or 600 x 1200 mm. Consequently manufacturers have discovered a way of conventionally producing thin tiles on the same presses they use to make regular tiles.

To achieve this an additive is mixed with the clay, which allows manufacturers to press and fire thin tiles that look just like conventional tiles, but are easier to cut, lighter to lift, transport and install.

These products are perfect for use in many residential and commercial environments, where it is possible to tile over tile. If tolerances around door frames and architraves and appliances are favourable, it is possible to tile over existing tiles. This represents considerable savings in terms of handling costs, and the time spent removing old tiles and preparing smooth and flat wall and floor surfaces ready for tiling.







The next step

Total acceptance of thin tiles in our market depends on the level of commitment given to these products and their future development by the powers that be in Italy, Spain and China.

Significantly some of China's tile manufacturers are beginning to dabble in the art. Local calls for the weight of tiles to be reduced coincide with the aspirations of some leading ISO representatives who recognise the potential for physical wear and tear that is associated with lifting heavy boxes and the repetitive laying of large, heavy tiles.

It appears inevitable that something has to give and as manufacturers continue to improve the strength and design potential of their thin products it may be only a matter of time before thin tile products become mainstream in Australia and elsewhere.

These products can work and considerable savings can be made in terms of raw materials used in production processes, and the cost of refurbishing existing rooms.

Predicting how long will it take before they become mainstream, if they ever do, is a difficult task, but the wheels are in motion. The Del Conca Group in Italy have just invested EUR 4 million to modify its plant to produce Zelo, a new 5mm tile. The group expect this investment to" generate a turnover of 30 million EUR in 3 years." Marazzi has opened a new plant in Sassualo which is partially dedicated to production of thin tiles.

We present some thoughts from leading industry figures.

Mike Stokes, Managing Director, GNS Ceramics, NSW

"We are currently not importing thin tiles, but we are investigating several possibilities. I think specifiers and the industry at large needs to undergo an education process in relation to these products, as to how and where they can be used, and how they can be installed.

I realise the potential for use of these products, and accept that in principle thin tiles have potential in a number of areas, including external cladding."

Gino Salomone, Tiles Expo, WA

"We import from Cotto D'Este and we have familiarised ourselves with thin tiles over a period of time. When Cotto D'Este launched their 1 metre square fibreglass backed thin floor tiles, we decided to take the plunge and lay thin product over the top of the existing porcelain tiles in our architectural showroom. We left a tile out so that we could show specifiers how laying thin tiles can be laid, and to illustrate the savings that are possible in terms of time and materials. This experiment produced positive results.

Encouraged by this success, we laid thin product over existing tiles in our retail showroom and again left a tile out to demonstrate the benefits to home owners and builders.

As a consequence some new home buyers and renovators are buying thin tiles, and fixers and consumers are starting to appreciate the benefits."

Richard Mackenzie, Principal, Ocean & Merchant, NSW

"Technically and in principle thin tiles are a fantastic idea. Unfortunately when a new technology is specified some builders and tile fixers who are unfamiliar with the product factor in a high price to cover any unexpected risk or problem they may face. This can result in a sale being lost. Thin tiles have a great future but until the potential confers a concrete economic advantage many builders and tilers will reject the idea.

Basically, thin tiles represent a divergence between traditional floor tile concepts and the opportunity to create a new market segment, particularly in the refurbishment market. In time, as trade professionals learn about the product, there will be an acceptance and realisation of the product's potential."









Trent Spencer, Uptiles, QLD

"We are committed to promoting the advantages associated with use of thin tiles. We have ordered our first consignment from leading Spanish producer Tau. The material arrives at the end of April and 400 square metres will be installed by the time your magazine is published at the end of May. We are supplying and fixing Tau's Mythos product to walls and floors in an up-market residential development."

Jean Louis Lavoisier, Product Manager Laminam, Plastral, Pty Ltd

The introduction in the market place of a totally new material will always encounter various challenges at different stages of the specification cycle and Laminam has been no exception.

The enthusiasm shown by Architects and Designers alike would see the material specified in the first place only to be de-specified by the builder or installers who did not know how to handle or quote fearing unseen problems and overcharging.

To overcome these fears, Plastral continues to be very active in the initial training processes and offers on site support during laying.

Today, the last hurdles that came with the introduction of this new material have started to dissipate, with a number of laying teams in each state able to work with the Laminam® material without trepidation.

The acceptance in the market place is growing and after completing a number of very diverse projects successfully, we are starting to see Architects and Designers re-specifying the material.

Some of the tiling teams that took the early steps and priced accordingly, are now reaping the rewards by working with a product that is easy to handle and install in a very diverse range of applications; some of which were previously unseen in the tiling trade such as doors and furniture coverings, complete splashbacks and kitchen bench tops.

In comparison to most producers of thin tiles, Laminam's advantage is that it can offer a range of formats and thicknesses starting from 3mm, 7mm or 11mm x 3000mm x 1000mm slab to a 1000 x 1000 format or smaller. Although the smaller formats have similar needs to tiles, larger slabs need more attention to detail but offer new opportunities to Designers.

We can say that Plastral's involvement with the developer of the technology is starting to pay off and Laminam's 8 current collections and its continuous development of new finishes and textures is converting a number of past sceptics to switch to this exciting material when it is appropriate.

With the price of the material dropping, and new work safe laws regarding the maximum weight of tiles allowed on building sites looming on the horizon, I am looking forward to seeing more architects, developers, builders and tile layers taking on this new and exciting material and using it in innovative and imaginative

Naomi Abood, RAK Ceramics

RAK will launch a series of slim tiles in Australia during the second half of the year. The new series 'Lounge – Slim' is an exciting addition to our collection. We fully appreciate the benefits associated with energy and cost savings, and the fact that the product is easier to transport and warehouse.