

It's a joy to witness and hear good news about restaurants opening all over the country. After months of uncertainty, worries, and horrible news that forcefully affected our livelihood, restaurant openings represent the return of social life that we are all longing for—a spark of light at the end of the tunnel. So, we called it "a new normal," a condition that we keep guessing and assessing within the restaurant industry. We have survived, and now we begin to move forward. As we want to go back to the way life was a few months ago, we acknowledge that an era has ended, and new ways of living are emerging.

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When we look deeper into predictions of upcoming rules and regulations, trends, and views from a lot of restaurateurs, FOSTERING SAFETY (1) is undoubtedly the new normal. Protecting patrons and employees from the spread of illnesses is essential to gaining and maintaining customer trust, along with service that promotes safety. The physical environment must take cleanliness and the cleanability factor to the next level even more than social distancing; a practice that will eventually be relaxed.

Across the industry, quick service restaurants, fast-casual, and fine dining establishments are assessing the condition of their dining rooms and kitchens. They have started to formulate necessary changes and create maintenance plans to mitigate the spread of viruses and bacteria on all surfaces. Since flooring and walls represent the canvas of the whole dining experience, it is crucial to completely understand the features and characteristics of the material, especially those that promote safety through cleanability and sanitary criteria. Here are some considerations that will help you strategize next steps in selecting the materials for the floor and walls in the "new normal." between the surface and the body. Many glazed tiles (in traditional production) require an engobe layer so that the subsequent glaze can be received without distortion.

"See Safe" is the New Requirement

Nation's Restaurant News reported that consumers not only want "to 'be safe,' they also want to 'see safe.' (2)." But what does "see safe" mean when it comes to floor or wall finishes?

Seeing safe might mean questioning the materials we walk on, touch, and sit near during restaurant visits. Is that carpet in the dining room floor harboring bacteria or germs due to its absorptive nature? Are those cracks (3) in exposed concrete floors cleanable, or just a safe harbor for dirt and grime? Satisfying the need for "feel safe" psychologically is the new requirement during the material specification process, beyond supporting the specific design intent.

There are two categories of flooring/wall visual appearance that are popular in restaurant design in recent years: continuous and tiled look.

Concrete has been wildly popular in restaurant design to represent continuous aesthetics. The cracks, bumps, and inconsistent nature of this material express a warm, honest feeling. Although sealing, waxing, and coating help with the ease of maintenance and cleanability, current sociocultural development might not meet the 'see safe' standard. In contrast, a certain tiled look is preferred by some concepts to showcase a sense of order, rhythm, and pattern that represent the "feel safe" clean and orderly look psychologically.

Fortunately, with advancements in tile technology, the contrast between continuous and tiled look has been bridged. Largeformat tiles with superb manufacturing technology can provide a similar feel of concrete warmth while offering significantly increased options for flooring and wall expression. For concepts that require that warmth of a continuous concrete look, the use of "clean concrete patterned" tile will express "see safe." Choosing a large format tile, with a length or width of 15" or greater, further supports a continuous concrete look while reducing grout joints.

Tile's Inherent Performance Qualities

A polished, sealed, or stained concrete floor has different considerations in terms of its cleanability. A concrete floor can be damaged by anything other than neutral cleaners (4) during maintenance and cleaning. In contrast, porcelain tile can be cleaned using over 450 sanitizing products listed by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as of May 4, 2020 (5), with a few exceptions. All types of concrete floors will crack over time (6), and heavy traffic areas require maintenance such as secondary floor coverings, re-sealing, waxing, and top dressings (7)(8). Concrete stains if not cleaned quickly, and absorbs microbes, dirt, and other liquids over time (8). Concrete also reacts negatively to many cleaning and sanitizing products due to its porous nature.

Porcelain tiles, more than any other flooring product, provide the ability for a restaurant brand or individual location to maintain cleanability without compromising design of the space. When properly installed, porcelain tile provides a floor system superior to carpet, wood, LVT, and concrete (stained, polished, exposed) finishes, in the area of maintenance and cleaning. Tile's superiority in terms of maintenance is due to its dense composition, which makes it naturally resistant to all surface contaminants, including many microbes. Porcelain tile has extremely low permeability—less than one half of one percent (>0.50%) (9), resulting in a surface naturally more resistant. This natural resistance not only includes resistance to dirt and contaminants, but microbes, molds, and bacteria as well. The impervious nature of porcelain tiles creates a surface inhospitable to microbes (10), and creates a surface that is easy to clean without fear of damage when using high heat, moisture, or strong chemicals.

Today, there are even porcelain tiles that incorporate new technology allowing the tiles to continuously eliminate bacteria on its surface (11). Tile is also a naturally "green" product, automatically contributing to a healthier indoor environment. It is produced from ingredients that do not off-gas, nor contain any volatile organic compounds (VOCs). Tile does not absorb or emit anything unexpected, is naturally flame resistant, color fast and non-fading, and provides an expected lifespan of 50 years (12).

Proper Grouting Method

It is important to note that proper grout selection is also vital when creating a built environment that is more easily cleaned and sanitized. Traditional cementitious grout is porous and prone to staining, even after sealing. Porosity and staining can be greatly reduced by choosing a 100% solids epoxy grout whenever possible. A 100% solids epoxy will increase the cleanability of the grouted area, much like selecting porcelain tile over carpet or concrete increases the cleanability of that area of use. The TCNA states that unlike traditional cementitious grout, 100% solids epoxy "made from epoxy resins...is extremely hard, durable, nearly stain proof...and exceptionally easy to clean (13)."

Conclusion

The new normal might not be here yet. However, we are all aware that obvious changes, such as FOSTERING SAFETY, are on the horizon. We ought to be ready. During a recent webinar, JLL/Big Red Rooster provided insight that 9 out of 10 consumers are expecting meaningful change from brands specific to their physical environment. It is our responsibility as restaurant owners, operators, visionaries, specifiers, product suppliers, and distributors to get ready and strategize this change by enriching ourselves with meaningful information in order to make thoughtful decisions.

Flooring and wall surfaces play a significant role in providing safety measures, especially in the dining establishment. Clean and sanitary floor and wall surfaces represent a safe restaurant operation as a TRUSTED place to gather, socialize, and nourish our body and mind. As much as it may appear as a "new normal" requirement, a responsible choice of floor and wall and surfaces will FOSTER SAFETY, an achievable gesture promoting progress to bring humanity to the forefront.

About Tobias Harris, CCO, TDC NYC

Tobias' 20+ years of leadership in Human to Environment Interaction design demonstrate his proven expertise in brand narrative curation and experiential design for global brands. His unique approach to creating a memorable physical and emotional brand experience is based on his deep love of the art of living life, where aspiration is balanced with reality to achieve greatness.

His passion has led to success stories for major national and international companies and retailers such as Coca-Cola, Hilton Worldwide, Samsung, Serta, Target, 5/3 Bank, McDonald's, KFC, Chick-Fil-A, Pizza Hut, Busch Worlds of Discovery-Dubai, and Hershey Chocolate World.

The love for food culture has naturally led Tobias to have a personal passion in restaurant and foodservice. He extended his love by creating Huit Group, a restaurant creativity lab that has birthed several start-up concepts under their wing. The sensitivity to restaurant and foodservice business has made him a better designer that understands every aspect of the restaurant/food service practice that needs to be considered in the design and its process.

Tobias is a board member of RDI New York Chapter. His inspiring speaking engagement for Sim Varejo 2017 - Popai Brasil as well as the Food and Wine Classic mark his accomplishment as an industry leader, visionary expert, and trendsetter.

About Deirdre Schuth, Doug Salatino, and Creative Materials Corporation

Creative Materials Corporation supplies surface materials such as tile, resilient flooring, pavers and setting materials to the commercial construction industry. Creative Materials guides architecture firms, developers, and corporate multi-unit brands through product specification and the successful supply of materials to each and every project. Creative Materials adds value to client's projects by offering an unique combination of product sourcing capabilities, nationwide supply chain solutions, and excellence in service. For more information, visit www.creativematerialscorp.com.

Doug and Deirdre have over 27 years combined experience in assisting multi-unit brand clients with building strategic surface material supply chain programs. Doug's favorite part of the past 15 years has been working with so many interesting people at the brands and forging relationships with them that go beyond business. Deirdre loves working with brands because no two are ever the same – each brand is unique, requiring unique solutions. Every day has a new and exciting challenge to solve!

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