

TILE: THEN AND NOW

An Exclusive Interview with Stone and Tile Expert Donato Pompo

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FACT: IN OUR DAY-TO-DAY LIVES WE ARE INUNDATED WITH INFORMATION AT EVERY TURN, MAKING IT CHALLENGING TO SEPARATE THE FACTS FROM THE OPINIONS, THEREFORE, MAKING A CORRECT DECISION SOMETIMES DIFFICULT OR IMPOSSIBLE.

Truth: With stiff competition and lower margins in fabrication and installation these days, it's more important than ever to do the job right the first time. Learning from hit or miss techniques is reserved for the homeowner tiling his floor or shower on the weekend—and not for us tradesmen. The truth is, we are professionals and cannot afford to compromise installation quality, profits or worse—client confidence.

The bottom line: Sketchy, inaccurate or middle of the road information just doesn't cut it in today's tough business environment.

Enter natural stone expert and consultant Donato Pompo, Founder and President of Ceramic Tile and Stone Consultants and The University of Ceramic Tile and Stone. As a multi published author with accreditations spanning the full spectrum from tile to natural stone, Donato Pompo, CTC, CMR, CSI, CDT, MBA comes to the table with over 35 years of experience in the ceramic tile and stone industry. His company Ceramic Tile and Stone Consultants, herein called CTaSC, has inspectors throughout North America and provides forensic investigation services and quality control services for products and installation methods which include writing specifications, training programs, testing, and on-site quality control inspection services. His online school The University of Tile and Stone, herein called UofCTS, offers certified training courses that are recognized as the defacto standard within the industry.

In Donato's world, there is no sketchy middle of the road information and no hit or miss techniques—only rock solid information and services that keep all subscribers and students ahead of the curve. Donato Pompo is the consummate role model within our industry and the go-to source for the successful stone and tile professional.

Q) Why did you create both CTaSC and UofCTS in 2002?

A) It was clear that there was a need for a more sophisticated and progressive consultant who could provide non-biased and realistic opinions and recommendations. There was also a need for someone who could offer a practical solution to providing affordable and convenient training to help the industry avoid problems. With the high growth of natural stone in North America, there was a shortage of qualified installers, and as a result, there were too many installation failures. Failures with tile and stone are very expensive to remediate, and regardless of who is at fault, everyone ends up paying in time, money or reputation. This is the worst kind of negative advertising for the industry, so I created CTaSC to offer consulting and forensic investigation services including laboratory testing. Typically when there is a failure, the fingers are pointing to each other and it is difficult to get a straight and



Private residence in Southwestern USA. French Beaufort limestone was adhered on the deck and Panther Sandstone was mechanically attached to the exterior walls. Bisazza Glass Tile was used in the water features. CTaSC provided installation specs and quality control services for the installation of these products.

accurate answer as to what caused the failure and how to properly remediate it. With my biochemistry education and extensive experience in the industry, I was able to offer superior and realistic conclusions and solutions.

"I also created UofCTS to provide meaningful online training courses that are conveniently available 24/7 at an affordable price. There is no traveling, no travel expenses, and no loss of income from missed work. The UofCTS online courses give our students the knowledge and the competence to avoid problems, which gives them confidence and credibility in the eyes of their customers."

Q) What materials and tools have significantly changed or improved tile installation since you started in the trade?

A) The installation of tile and stone has changed in many ways over the years. The adhered materials [tiles] that are being installed these days are, on the average, of a much larger size than those of yesteryear. Today with common sizes being 18x18 inch or 24x24 inch, it is more difficult to achieve full adhesive [thin-set] contact with these larger tiles, so installers have to use new techniques and processes to achieve full 95% contact as required by current industry standards. The thin-set adhesives have also changed a lot in terms of different levels of strength, flexibility and non-sag characteristics, as well as the rapid setting versions that are available. There are also a lot more membranes being used today, particularly crack isolation membranes to prevent cracks in concrete from telegraphing up through the stone and waterproof membranes to protect the stone and the



Applying thinset with a trowel. Note the Installer is troweling the thin-set adhesive in one direction to achieve full thin-set contact between tile and substrate. The UofCTS online ITS Verification course teaches installers these proper installation standards and methods.

building materials from water damage. There are also floor warming systems to keep the tile surface comfortable and to help heat the home, as well as sound control systems to keep sounds from adjacent living areas from being transmitted into adjoining apartments.

As far as mechanically anchored stone applications, this really hasn't changed much other than there are a lot more options in mechanical non-visible anchors with benefits such as ease of installation and superior long term strength.

Q) Is there any one material or device that represents significant improvement over old methods?

A) In the past, radiant floor heating was done

with hydronic tubing that was expensive and more involved to install. Today's electric floor warming systems can be installed easily with tile adhesives and come with thermostats that are also easy to install and use. Another noteworthy improvement in the industry has been the development of trench drains for shower applications that, rather than having an exposed drain in the center of the shower, the trench drain is installed at the back of the shower with provisions in the grate for inserting a tile so you don't see the drain. The grout joints around the insert are left open so the water can evacuate through those joints into the underlying trench drain.

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Q How has modern and boutique manufacturing resulted in a better product and raw material (the tile itself)? Any changes, there?

A If you are talking about ceramic tile in terms of manufacturing, the porcelain tile that is produced today does have a lot more built-in flexibility and allows for more tile customization. What has significantly changed in the ceramic tile world recently is the use of computerized ink jet technology, allowing glazed porcelain ceramic tiles to realistically look like various natural stones, real wood, and a whole host of other creative designs. As a plus, these ceramic tiles or panels are now being produced in dimensions as large 4' x 10' and as thin as 1/8" to 1/4". These dimensions do require a very precise and detailed "new style" of approach during the installation process.

Above: Adhering Panther Sandstone to a concrete retaining wall at the private residence featured on page 37. The installer is following proper adhesion methods as specified by CTaSC.

Below: Oaks Hill Mall, located in Thousand Oaks, CA. Premier Tile & Marble Company installed this elaborate design using various types and combinations of limestone tiles. CTaSC provided consulting services for Premier by reviewing architectural specifications and site conditions prior to the installation, and then providing the findings with recommendations to the mall developer.

Q Why is it beneficial for the newcomer as well as the seasoned tile setter to invest their time and money for your company's training: A broader skill set? Greater profitability? In other words—what's their takeaway?

A Everyone generally agrees that training is important, but often it isn't considered critical and gets pushed to the side during the hectic days of running a business. It is well documented that training is critical to the growth of a business or industry. Just as doctors, lawyers, accountants, policemen and architects are required to obtain continual education on an annual basis to maintain their credentials, it is also necessary for tile and stone industry professionals to do the same.

Over many years, standards have been created by industry consensus committees sharing their experiences to help avoid problems and ensure successful tile and stone installations. Unfortunately most installers learn on the job and don't have the opportunity to learn these standards. If installers do not know the standards, then how can they avoid those potential problems? That's why it is in everyone's best

interest (consumer, producer, architect, distributor and installer) to ensure that installers are familiar with the industry standards and that they stay current with them on an annual basis. The University of Ceramic Tile and Stone's "Tile Installer Thin-set Standards" (ITS) verification course teaches those standards and verifies that installers understand those standards. It does not, however, teach the mechanical skills for becoming an installer or guarantee that the person completing the course has the skills to do, or will do, good work.

For the installer, having themselves and their employees trained to learn the current industry standards will help them avoid very costly failures and delays that could cost them time, money and their reputation. Plus, having themselves and their employees ITS verified adds credibility in the eyes of their potential clients and demonstrates their commitment to quality, as well as differentiating them from other installers. With this added credibility, it allows them to charge more for their services because their clients will see the value and security of hiring a company that is committed to installing per industry standards.

For technical service and sales people in the industry who have elected to take the UofCTS courses to further their understanding of the basics of natural stone, they will learn the industry standards and sales techniques that are designed to give them the tools they need in order to increase sales. These courses not only prepare stone installers and fabricators with the knowledge of industry standards and how to assist clients with selecting natural stone—they also give the professional designers the knowledge of how to select and specify natural stone. This helps our industry folks gain important knowledge, confidence, and credibility in the eyes of their customers.

Q What methods and materials should modern tile installers be using to achieve perfect, trouble-free installations?

A It's my opinion that 99% of failures tend to be due to installer error. These failures have nothing to do with the materials they use, but are rather due to installers not following industry installation standards, methods and manufacturers' directions. They don't make these mistakes on purpose. They just don't know the

standards, so they can't follow them to avoid problems. Obviously installers need to have the experience and skill set to do good work, but they must also be detailed and quality minded so they take the time to do it right.

Using good quality installation products is also important and might help to compensate for some things that are overlooked during an installation. We always recommend that the installation products used are provided from a single source manufacturer and that the manufacturer of the installation products provide a labor and material warranty. Today most manufacturers of installation products offer 25 year labor and material warranties that cover the cost of the stone if their products fail. This, however, is not no-fault insurance. They require that you use their better installation products, and only their products, and precisely follow their directions as well as follow industry standards.

Q What makes your company unique or sets it apart from you competitors?

A We are a professional consulting company led by me and made up of accomplished ceramic tile consultants, stone consultants, ceramic tile and stone installers, architects, engineers and general contractors as well as construction scientists and other industry specialists. Although there are others who perform forensic inspections and consulting services, most do not have the experience or expertise that we do. We are very honest, professional, and progressive in our work. We rely on science to substantiate our opinions, and we always substantiate our opinions based on clear evidence, facts, and industry standards. Most all of our inspectors are master tile setters with years of experience.

Q Are there any details about the future of Ceramic Tile and Stone Consultants or The University of Ceramic Tile and Stone that you'd like to share with our readers?

A CTaSC is committed to the stone industry to help improve quality installations, and we will continue to develop training courses through the UofCTS to help members within our industry improve their abilities and performance towards creating quality installations. This is our gift and legacy to future generations. For more information visit www.uofcts.org and www.ctasc.com.

