

## Shape: think outside the square

When the Romans brought the art of mosaic production and installation to Britain they also introduced the practice of making floor tiles from local clays. These materials were installed in local villas, bathhouses and temples.

In medieval Britain craftsmen developed the art of decorating inlaid tiles which were made and installed onsite by travelling tradesmen who journeyed from one project to another. According to Hans Van Lemmen the author of *Tiles in Architecture*, "None of the early medieval tilers have emerged by name, and their anonymity is indicative of the medieval attitude towards the arts, whereby the product mattered far more than the individual who made it."

Intricate geometric designs were popular. Typically, these



Square formats have always been popular, however early tilemakers frequently favoured special shapes.

**Photo 1** features a section of a pavement laid in the King's Chapel near Salisbury in England between 1240 and 1244. It can now be seen in the British Museum. The medieval tilers who made and laid this complex pavement used inlaid tiles of various shapes.

**Photo 2** depicts a hexagonal maiolica floor tile made in Capua, Southern Italy in the 15th century, which depicts a craftsman at work.

**Photo 3** is a modern hexagonal design by Verso. Opposite we feature a number of ancient tile designs which still influence modern design precepts. Page 3 highlights some of the new shapes that are available in contemporary tile.





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**Photo 4** illustrates a late 15th century four tile design which would have sat comfortably along side any of Cerdisa's 6/600 series of floor tiles which were popular around the world in the early 1970s. The design is attributed to the Della Robbia workshop. Square shapes gained greater popularity when designs began to cover more than one tile.

**Photo 5** focuses on an octagonal tile and tozzetti, a combination which is still popular in parts of Europe. These early 16th century Maiolica tiles were made for the private studiolo of Isabella d'Este at her palace in Mantua.

**Photo 6** - special architectural ceramic shapes have been designed for centuries. This novel 11 x 21 cm dates back to the 14th century.

**Photo 7** - interesting 15th century shapes and design from Siena which could be mass produced today using digital inkjet technology.

**Photo 8** - an amazing 3-dimensional design produced in Nuremburg in 16th century on a 18 x 27.5 cm rectangular format.

products were installed in abbeys, churches, palaces and the homes of the landed gentry. Around this time, the first two-coloured inlaid tiles appeared. The prime manufacturing technique involved use of a wooden stamp which was used to impress a design into the green, moist body of the tile, which was covered with a lead glaze and fired. Incredibly, some handmade cottos and


small wall tiles are still produced using these ancient techniques.

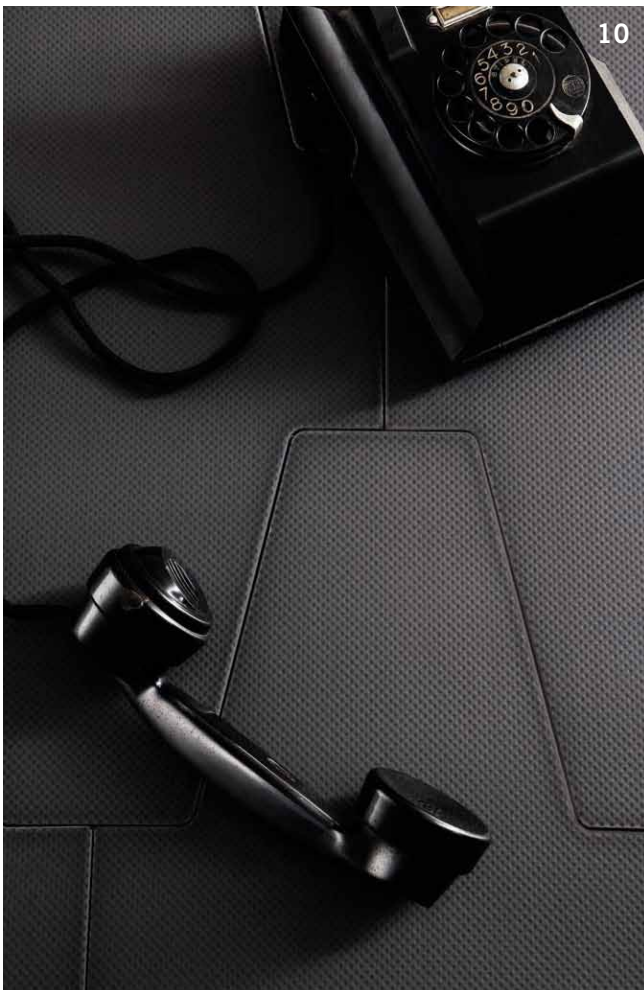
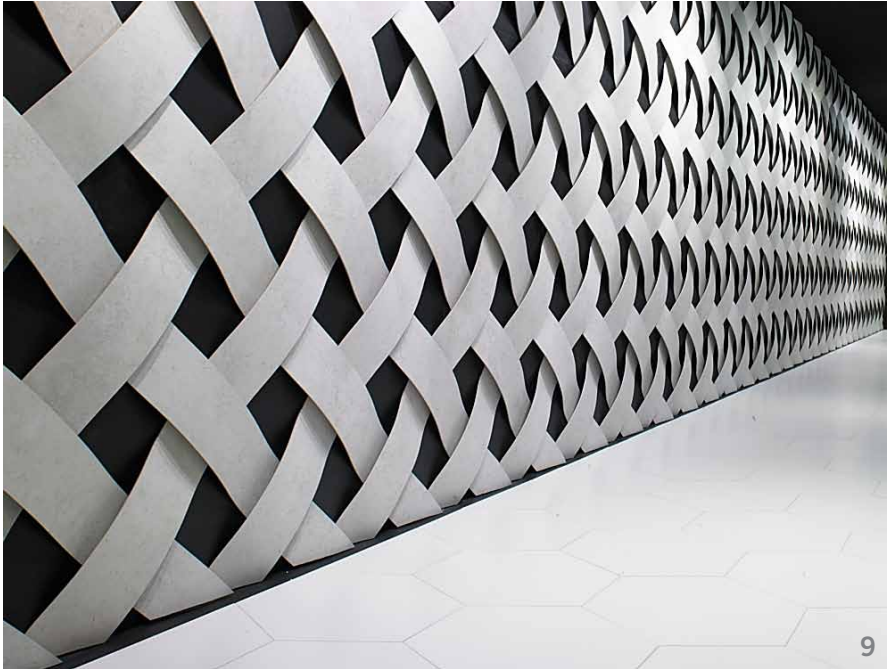
The tile body was formed in a mould of an appropriate shape and size. In time, the shape became less important as designs frequently spread over two or more tiles. The four tile pattern in **Photo 4** is remarkably similar to the cottoforte products marketed by many Italian and Spanish companies in the

early 1970s. The featured design would fit perfectly into Cerdisa's 1972 catalogue but remarkably it was produced in the sixteenth century.

### The new vintage

By and large, the majority of tiles produced today are square, but the emergence of slim tile technology, coupled with digital inkjet printing techniques, allows designers to conjure myriad shapes, colours and designs, that can be pre-cut in the factory or onsite by skilled operatives. It can be argued that renewed interest in decoration has sparked interest in shape and design. A growing number of tile makers are producing interesting shapes including; provencale, rhombus, trapezoid, hexagonal, octagonal and rectangular products.

Special ceramic pieces have been manufactured down the centuries, but today the possibilities are endless. All the cited historical reference points can be found in modern tile design. Tile is still used because it is hard wearing, easy to clean and maintain, and infinitely flexible in terms of decoration and application. There are barely any limits in terms of thickness, size, colour or shape. 



**Photo 9** - a modern ceramic special piece by Ceramicas Aparici, S.A., confirms that ceramic materials can be formed to create unique architectural shapes and designs.

**Photos 10** - an intriguing new shape from Verso 25. (Courtesy Urban Edge Ceramics).

**Photo 11** - shape and texture combined in the form of a 260mm x 300mm polished hexagonal tile coupled with a 125mm x 300 mm matt finish parallelogram. (Courtesy Everstone).

