

Antonella Romano, The Tile Oracle: Get help to plan stone and tile work for new house

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THE RECORD

Antonella Romano is owner of the Stone & Tile Emporium, Inc., Wyck-off (www.stoneandtilenj.com). Send your stone and tile questions to her at thetileoracle@stoneandtilenj.com.

QUESTION: My wife and I are building a new home where we plan to raise our family. We've been working with a salesperson at a tile store who has helped with our design. We're going to use porcelain almost everywhere, since I saw on an interiors reality show that it's really durable. Since we're going to have children, that's important. To save some money, I'm going to do the installation myself. What kind of pitfalls should I look out for?

- Jim, Township of Boonton

ANSWER: Anyone who has read The Tile Oracle in the last two years knows I would approve of your choice of porcelain. Given that you're going to raise a family in your new home, it is a pragmatic choice. There are porcelain imitators for almost every kind of natural material - from marble to ceramic - so you can have a rich environment without pampering and protecting your kitchen floor or bathroom sink.

It's great that the salesperson you're working with is helping you with design, but the design must take in the whole picture. The materials have to be installed around cabinets, outlets, plumbing, vanities, plugs, cabinets - every nook and cranny in the room. If you're not working with a good installer, or a salesperson who can guide you through the installation process, and if you don't lay out design and install plans, you will wind up with problems. You'll have plugs interrupting chair rails, and valves and other hardware interrupting border designs. Your plumbing and your tile design have to work together.

To try to prevent these issues, work with a tile designer who can lay out each space on paper before you begin the installation. This schematic will show everything the tile has to be installed in and around.

A bathroom's schematic should illustrate where the tile must be installed around diverters, outlets, showerheads and anything else that will affect the borders or accents. The plan for the foyer should show tile size, the direction in which tiles will be installed, and any borders and/or medallions. If you're planning a kitchen backsplash, you may need to use a pot filler to fit around any accent pieces behind your range, or move outlets and install under-cabinet plugs to avoid interrupting the design. I usually prepare a layout that my clients give to their plumbers and electricians, so mistakes aren't made during the roughing and wiring.

A tile designer will come to your home, because there are critical things that can only be seen on-site. Is the foyer tile going to be installed on a wood sub-floor that may need building up with cement, and/or wonderboard installed with thin set? Will it be a radiant-heated floor installed on a mud bed? In the bathroom, will edges be bullnosed and will corners need mitering? You also need to know the precise amount of material needed for the job in terms of linear and square footage.

Since you're building a new house, you're undoubtedly individualizing various spaces with accents and borders. When you work with a tile designer who lays out the space on paper first, you can erase mistakes before they happen. You can't do that once a foyer floor has been installed. At the very least, hire a tile designer to visit your home and lay out everything for you, while also confirming your quantities.

I do not recommend you attempt the installation yourself - work with an installer who has at least 10 years of experience. Everyone puts thought into the stone or tile they want, but a poor installation job will butcher even the most fabulous materials.

I never suggest bypassing a tile designer and a good installer to save money, because you pay for it later when you have to rip everything up and start over. My father - my teacher and my mentor, whom I thank so much for my success - once told me, "You will always get what you pay for, so do it right and do it once."

Happy Holidays and a wonderful new year!

I look forward to answering more of readers' questions in the new year. Please look for me in 201 magazine starting in February.



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The tile work in a bathroom must be carefully designed to fit around not only major fixtures, but also smaller features such as light switches, electrical outlets and thermostats.