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Let's Talk Resilient: Custom Resilient Installations

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It seemed ironic that as I was starting to work on this column, my 18-year old daughter Elizabeth, who loves jigsaw puzzles, was tackling a particularly tough one and saying, "This puzzle is going to be the death of me." I am sure that many resilient flooring installers think the same thing when they look at custom jobs, especially those that have borders, medallions, or other custom inlay work. With careful planning, these jobs can be beautiful and profitable for the installer.

The first thing to consider is to be sure there is an understanding of the cost of doing custom work. I'll never forget when I was a rep calling on architects in New York and was showing a particularly nice high end solid vinyl tile to an architect. He asked for budget pricing and I quoted about \$7 a square foot installed. Several months later he called me, and was annoyed that a project he was involved with had bid out at almost double that cost. It turns out he had specified a custom installation in three colors with special shapes and sizes that had to be done with union labor on weekends. This misunderstanding gave me a good lesson in knowing what you are quoting before you quote it. The same goes for installers when custom work comes your way. These jobs take a lot longer to install than a plain pattern job, so make sure you figure accordingly.

The hardest jobs to figure are the ones where you will have to do all the cutting yourself. It's very hard to know how much time a job like this will take. It will involve a lot of communication between the installer and the owner or the designer who created the pattern. It is often necessary to sketch the pattern on full size on paper or right on the substrate before you start cutting. Make sure the design is approved, because once it gets cut to fit, it may not be possible to change the design.



A hand-cut custom sheet vinyl installation involves careful planning and step by step installation procedures with careful attention to detail. Photo courtesy of Mannington.

As far as custom work or borders, many times they will arrive to the job site having been prefabricated, either by a water jet or ultrasonic cutting system. These systems use Computer Aided Design (CAD) programs to create the design, and the cutting is done on a table designed specifically for this purpose. Once the designs are created and assembled, they are taped together on the top if the material, often in sections, and then shipped to the job

site. On larger designs, there will be a number of sections, so step one is to lay them out on the floor dry to be sure you have all the parts.



A natural cork floor with a custom border. Photo courtesy of Expanko Resilient Flooring.

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Regardless of whether the custom design you are working with is a simple medallion that arrives as one unit, a large complex design that comes in sections, or one you are cutting on the job yourself, there are a number of keys to a successful installation. .

For starters, floor preparation and concrete testing is critical. These are expensive floors, so failures because of moisture or floor prep are that much more expensive to repair or replace. With all of the different puzzle pieces that go into some of the custom floors I have seen, it is imperative that the floor be as smooth and flat as possible. A dip or a high spot in the floor could cause one of your small puzzle pieces to become damaged or even worse, to pop out of the floor.



Even a relatively simple multicolor VCT job such as this requires that the installer plan ahead before beginning the job. Photo courtesy of Mannington

Acclimation of the material is something else to be sure of. The material and the job site need to be at the right temperature (generally 65-80 degrees) so that you eliminate any concerns about the material shrinking or growing because of extremes of temperature. The same thing holds true when you cut the material. Don't use heat to warm the tile for field cuts. My reasons for being so cautious with regard to heat is that many resilient products are sensitive to extremes of temperature – more sensitive than most people in the flooring and construction trades know. For example, warm product can be stretched during handling or installation or can expand slightly because of the heat. If material is installed in this state, gaps may show up when the material returns to its original size after cooling. Make sure the building is climate controlled, the material is on site for at least two days before installation, and the floor is smooth, flat and dry. .

Before starting the installation, placement of the material is key. In the case of a border, this usually means careful measurement to be sure the border is exactly where the customer wants it. Make lines where the border will start, spread adhesive where the field tile will go, allow the proper open time, lay the field tile, roll the floor thoroughly and let the adhesive cure for a while – overnight if possible so that the field area is solid. Then, start to work adhering the border design. If the installation is a medallion, the same process would apply. Make sure the medallion is located where the customer wants it. Adhere the medallion first, let the adhesive harden, and then install the field tile up to the medallion.

Adhesive selection for custom work is a rare time I deviate from manufacturer’s guidelines. Most manufacturers do not make a distinction between custom designs and any other floor when it comes to adhesive selection. However, for such designs, especially ones that have a lot of small pieces, I prefer to use a 2-part epoxy adhesive for several reasons. First, because the epoxy is a “wet lay” system, it is not difficult to slide the flooring into place when putting together a pattern with a lot of small pieces. That’s a lot easier than a tacky type of adhesive that grabs immediately. Second, because epoxy sets so hard and is highly water resistant, I am less worried about the small pieces in a custom design becoming damaged during use by wear and tear or excess water on the surface of the floor. Epoxy sets hard as a rock so if you get the floor laid tight and flat, it will stay that way once the adhesive cures.



Mixing colors and sizes created a beautiful look in this vinyl tile installation.

If you are cutting the designs yourself, it is not a bad idea to face tape the pieces together and lay them in as a mat, which is the same way that prefabricated patterns usually come. If it’s a smaller pattern, this is probably not necessary but on big patterns it may help to cut the patterns and then preassemble the pieces. Before laying these sections in, make sure the joints are all tight. Once the section is laid into wet adhesive, roll the floor thoroughly with a 100-pound roller before continue on to the next section. After finishing the floor, do whatever it takes to get the floor area blocked off so absolutely no traffic is on the floor for the first 12-24 hours. Even a small amount of traffic when the adhesive is new could cause the flooring to shift, and once the adhesive cures there s no way to fix it. .



This inlaid border arrived to the job pre-cut, so the installer carefully planned where the inlay would go, had it approved by the owner, and then installed it a section at a time.

The day after you lay the floor it is important to go back to the job and remove all of the tape from the surface of the floor. This will allow you to examine the floor and repair any spots that may not be just right. Don’t delay this part of the job and risk any damage the tape will cause to the surface. I remember one installation where the installer never removed the tape, which was clear, and the maintenance crew went in and started cleaning the floor with a scrubbing machine. The heat that the pads generated caused the adhesive from the tape to really bond to the floor and it was a major job getting it off. That’s an extreme example, but let’s just say you don’t want to leave tape on the surface

of the floor any longer than necessary.



This beautiful custom job in natural Linoleum was cut by Waterjets Unlimited of Long Island, NY and installed by Alex Shimansky, Carlos Camacho and David Garcia of Floorcraft. Eric Bower of Forbo, who sent us the photograph, described them as "a great example of mechanics in the industry that really stick to fundamentals and end up with great results."

Once everything is done, the floor needs to be protected if there is still construction work going on. On commercial job sites and residential new construction, it seems to be inevitable that despite the advice of the entire flooring industry, the floor is not the last thing installed like it should be. Before you walk off the site find someone in authority and alert them to the fact that there is a brand new custom floor installed. They may even pay you for your time to cover it so it is protected. Proper covering of any resilient floor means a thorough sweeping so you don't cover any pebbles or dirt, then a layer of brown Kraft paper (not the pink construction paper) and then some type of boards on top like plywood or Masonite if there is to be rolling traffic on the floor. .

Finally, when the job is done and the building is occupied, make arrangements to get back to the job and take some pictures. Nothing looks better in an installer or dealer's portfolio than photographs of a beautiful custom installed resilient floor.



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