

They just don't make flooring like they used to...(They make it better)

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I had a lot of great responses from the "mailbag" columns earlier this year, especially my comments on my favorite resilient floors of all time. I mentioned a couple of great old time resilient products, and I think it took a lot of you down memory lane! When you think back, you may be inclined to say "They sure don't make them like they used to." I tend to disagree. Based on my recent experience in the commercial realm and the sheet vinyl I put down in my own kitchen, I have to conclude that today's resilient products are better than ever – and I have had vinyl floors in my homes since 1980.



Kentile Colonial Brick tile, pictured here in a 1968 Life magazine ad, had an amazingly realistic look that could be installed in herringbone patterns or in a traditional brick format. Manufacturing this flooring was a painstaking process, which may explain why neither the company nor the product are around today.



A close-up look at Armstrong's highly popular Embossed Linoleum # 5352

Make no mistake, there is a lot of very high quality, high performance flooring material out there today. My experience is that many will outperform any of the vintage products that my grandfather used to sell. Still, to be fair, some time-honored resilient products like linoleum and cork have been making a comeback in recent years, so I guess you could make a case that the products of yesteryear are still sought after!

This all got me thinking about some of the great old resilient products that are not around any more. For example, I recently came across an ad for Kentile Colonial Brick solid vinyl tile in a 1968 Life magazine. This was part of a family of tile products that included slate, flagstone and terracotta designs as well as several others. In the early days of my career, I used to sell a lot of these products, both for residential and commercial use. Not only is this product no longer around, the company is long gone as well. Colonial Brick was a 9"x 9" solid vinyl tile that came as a flat brick (two bricks per tile) or edge brick (three bricks per tile), and as single bricks so you could install a

herringbone pattern or floor that looked like real brick.



A kitchen setting with Coronelle Vinyl Corlon which fell by the wayside with the advent of "No Wax" vinyl

I was lucky enough to visit the Kentile plant in South Plainfield, N.J. back in the late 1970's and saw how this product was made. It was painstaking. Much of the work was done by hand and the product was designed to have variations in color and texture—there were actually something like nine different variations within each box. It all made for an amazingly realistic look. I mean no disrespect to the companies that make similar looking products today, but Colonial Brick had a realistic look like no other and it lasted forever.

Another popular flooring type now long gone is 9"x 9" Asphalt or Vinyl Asbestos tile, which was also used commercially and residentially. I remember my dad saying how they installed truckloads of this material in the Levittown housing developments that sprang up on Long Island in the 1940's and '50s. I distinctly recall such flooring in a local church that was built in 1961. That tile is still in fairly good shape.

Speaking of my father, he and my mom like to joke that they paid the hospital bills after I was born with the income from my dad's installation of "linoleum rugs," which were a loose lay variation of the old printed "oilcloth" linoleum. I found a recent photo of it on Gardenweb.com and it is a 1950's vintage linoleum floor that is still in good shape. This one, unlike the loose lay floors (dad called them "flops"), is glued to the floor so it has really lasted.



A vintage linoleum floor, circa 1950, was glued to the floor to assure longevity

Finally, the floors I was raised on were the "inlaid." It is a category perfected by Armstrong, although there were other products sold as "inlaid" that were made by other manufacturers. When I was growing up in the business "installing inlaid" meant 6' wide heavyweight material that only the best installers could install. "Inlaid" was slang for stencil inlaid linoleum, which evolved into inlaid sheet vinyl. This product category was actually made using a stencil process that dropped chips through a metal stencil, one color at a time, onto a backing. The process was used to make one of the most famous inlaid floors, Armstrong Embossed Linoleum # 5352. The product evolved into a vinyl version, Coronelle Vinyl Corlon. I owned several Coronelle floors in the old "San Marco" design and that was a heck of a great floor that fell by the wayside with the advent of "No Wax" vinyl. Coronelle evolved into Designer Solarian, which was Coronelle with a urethane coating. That, in turn, evolved into Designer Solarian II, a stencil inlaid product on a vinyl backing that was able to be installed with perimeter adhesion only using the "Interflex" installation system, as shown.

I am lucky to have been around long enough to have watched Armstrong inlaid evolve. I had the pleasure of visiting Armstrong's stencil inlaid plant in Lancaster, Penn. several times, and saw all but the linoleum product actually being made. It was really an art form where the final adjustments to the pattern and color were often made by hand before the product was heated and embossed to become the finished product. Sadly, this plant closed a few years ago and a fantastic flooring category faded into history.



Vinyl Asbestos tile installed in this church in the early 1960's, still in good share today

Someone once told me "you are really passionate about resilient flooring," and I guess I am. Talking about these old floors really gets me going and I have had many conversations with people in the industry who are equally passionate. I could keep going on about the history of resilient flooring and I'll bet many of you readers could as well. In fact, if you have any photos of these old products, I would love to have them for my archives so please [e-mail them to me](#).

There is no question that today's resilient floors are of excellent quality but it's a lot like today's cars compared to some of the classics. I still get wistful for my first car (a 1965 Chevy Belair) or my first floor (Armstrong Coronelle San Marco). Then again, you can't turn

back time.
