

# covering **installation**

*Promote a naturally beautiful option*

## Cork: A quick look

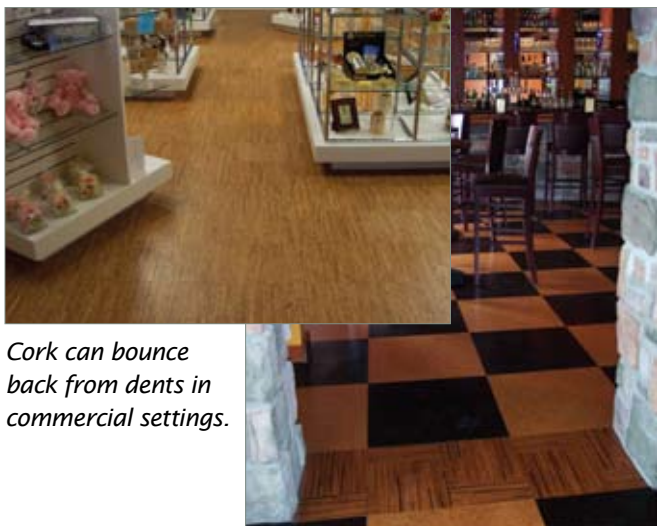
*By Christopher Capobianco*

Several years ago I started presenting a seminar called *The Fascinating World of Cork*, and I have written about cork tile a number of times. I regularly receive calls and e-mails about from designers, flooring dealers and installers that want to know where to use it and not to use it, how to install it, how to maintain it and how to refinish it. This month I'll be covering "traditional" cork tile that is all cork, as opposed to cork floating floors or vinyl-clad cork tile.

Cork has made a comeback in the last 15 years or so as an "environmentally friendly" material because it's a "rapidly renewable resource" — tree bark that is harvested and grows back in about nine years. It's also "post industrial recycled" because most of the material is what's left after bottle stopper production.

Although classified as resilient flooring, cork floors are a lot like wood floors when it comes to handling, installation and finishing. Specified and handled correctly, cork is a beautiful and long-lasting material. Here are some key points.

There are two types of cork flooring. Homogeneous cork is "through colour" and veneer cork has a thin layer on top of a cork backing. The difference is that veneers cannot be sanded and re-finished and homogeneous floors can, so they last a lot longer.



*Cork can bounce back from dents in commercial settings.*

*Natural variations in colour allow installers to get creative.*

Because of its cellular structure, cork bounces back very well. However, water, heavy loads, direct sunlight and heavy objects being dragged across the floor can permanently damage cork or wood floors.

No two cork tiles are alike, so don't expect a uniformly coloured floor. The installer should "shuffle" the tiles and don't install any tiles that are dramatically "off colour".

Like wood and laminates, cork is subject to changes in dimension due to temperature, humidity, and moisture, so the jobsite needs to be at "in use" conditions and the product needs to be delivered and acclimated for three days before installing.

As in any floor covering, cork must be installed on a dry, flat, smooth and clean substrate. Prepare and test concrete according to the manufacturer's guidelines and ASTM F 710, *Standard Practice for Preparing Concrete Floors to Receive Resilient Flooring*, which covers moisture and pH testing and proper preparation. Use the cork manufacturer's recommended adhesive and follow its guidelines exactly.

Maintain cork floors like wood: sweep, damp-mop and don't use a lot of liquid on the floor.

Cork is available prefinished or unfinished. Unfinished cork can be stained and finished on-site. Prefinished cork floors are most often a urethane finish, which works well in commercial or residential settings. Keep urethane floors lasting a long time with a periodic "screen and re-coat" that puts a coat of urethane over the existing urethane before it has a chance to wear off. Other prefinished cork floors include wax, which is maintained using paste wax, or oil. This is relatively new to the cork market and being used residentially. In both of these cases, follow the manufacturer's maintenance guidelines.

As far back as the 1920s, millions of square feet of cork flooring were installed in North America, but cork use fell off as other synthetic materials grew in popularity. As cork is making a comeback, understanding this product can help you become a cork specialist that will get the orders when everyone else is intimidated or unfamiliar with this environmentally friendly, soft, warm and beautiful flooring material. ●

*A fourth-generation floor-covering specialist, with experience in retail, architectural sales and technical support, a consultant, writer, educator and activist, Christopher Capobianco is owner of Christopher Collaborative Inc. Capobianco volunteers with FCICA, ASTM Committee F.06 on Resilient Flooring and II CRC (Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration Certification).*