

# Surface Materials

BY THE NATIONAL KITCHEN & BATH ASSOCIATION

In addition to cabinets, appliances, fixtures, and fittings in residential kitchen and bathrooms, another key ingredient of a successful remodeling project is the selected surfacing materials specified for the floors, walls, wet wall surrounds, countertop areas, and backsplash verticals.

Before selecting any of these surfaces, you must first understand the importance of a proper substrate material. The *Kitchen & Bath Residential Construction and Systems* volume of the NKBA Professional Resource Library covers the basic construction elements of a well-planned kitchen and bathroom. Once the proper substrate has been specified, the functional and decorative surfaces can be selected.

Unusual, innovative, and proprietary materials are continually being introduced. Design professionals should include time during their business schedule to research new products and regularly visit key suppliers to be current with newly introduced products as well as regional specialty offerings.

In addition to evaluating a surfacing material's appropriateness for a specific application and understanding the installation requirements of these surfacing materials, designers should also consider the sustainability of the material and the responsible management of the manufacturing company.

**Solid wood counter surface** countertops are made from laminated or solid wood products. In addition to full countertops, insert blocks are often installed in the kitchen work surface.

**Unfinished wood** requires oiling wood throughout the counter surface life span on a four-to-six-week maintenance schedule. This method is most desirable if the entire counter surface will be wood and local fabrication of seams or miters is required. Prefinished tops hinder proper adhesion of seams and must be refinished if any sanding will be done.

**Prefinished wood** finish includes a penetrating sealer and a non-toxic lacquer finish. The combination of sealer and varnish prevents moisture penetration. No oiling is necessary, and a damp cloth may be used to wipe the board clean. Chopping on the surface may not damage the finish. This type of finish is appropriate for countertop sections, such as island tops or sandwich centers.

**Wood sealed with polyurethane sealer** is used on unfinished wood tops that will not be used as chopping surfaces and will not come in contact with food. The finish is very good on tops that will

be exposed to moisture and liquids.

**Ceramic tile** is a favorite surface product for many kitchen and bathroom designers.

Tile for any surface other than decorative vertical areas should be selected after careful investigation into its appropriateness for the planned installation. As you consider a tile for a specific installation, first refer to the manufacturer's literature for usage recommendations. Second, check the porosity of the tile. Third, check the availability of trim (curved shapes for smooth corners, edges, and coves). Fourth, think through your grout selection. Finally, make sure you have specified the recommended installation method for the tile you have selected.

Some decorative tiles create a design that flows from tile-to-tile to give designers great flexibility for a unique, one-of-a-kind wall, border, or backsplash. Others are one-of-a-kind art pieces that should be showcased within the field of plain tile.

**Decorative glass tiles** are a popular alternative today as manufacturers and artisans experiment with colors, materials, and techniques. One of the main attractions of glass tile is the way light reflects off them, drawing the eye to their sleek surfaces. Glass tiles come in textures from mirror slick to rough, and in a variety of colors from deep and muted to multicolored with iridescent options. Glass tiles are available in clear glass all the way through or with a backing finish designed to camouflage the rough wall surface.

Glass tile installations require special expertise. Because of the translucency of many tiles, manufacturers recommend setting glass tiles in white adhesive that should be smoothed carefully to prevent notched trowel lines from showing through. Additionally, a typical tile saw will not cut glass tile; a diamond wet saw will be required for cutting. Although glass tiles are more difficult to work with, they are extremely durable because they are hard and non-porous. Some can actually be installed in exterior environments. Because they can scratch easily, they are not recommended for kitchen counters or floors unless they are etched and embossed

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