

Keep Your Terrazzo Floors Beautiful¹

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Terrazzo was widely used as a flooring material in Florida homes from the 50's to the 70's. It was often selected by families who were especially concerned about economy, ease of care and durability. Terrazzo was used successfully in entranceways, bathrooms, laundries, recreation rooms and sometimes the entire house. It was suitable for any area of the home where underfoot comfort, noise control or the special aesthetic effects associated at that time with carpets and resilient floor coverings was not needed.

Today, terrazzo is making a come back as older homes in Florida are remodeled. Many terrazzo floors were covered with wall-to-wall carpeting when carpet became the "flooring of choice" in the late 60's to the mid-90's. Now these floors are being uncovered and people, particularly in South Florida, are appreciating them for their beauty, ease of maintenance and the 50's look.

There are few flooring materials in use today that require less care than terrazzo. Yet, people have problems in maintaining it. Why is this? There are perhaps two reasons: (1) a lack of understanding of the material and its required care; and (2) neglect — it requires so little care that we simply forget it!

What Is Terrazzo?

There is nothing new about terrazzo. It has been used as a flooring material for at least 2000 years, dating back to the Golden Age of Rome. The word itself is of ancient Italian vintage, derived from "terrace" or "terrassa." Over the centuries it has been defined as a "form of mosaic flooring made by embedding small pieces of marble in mortar and polishing."

To best understand terrazzo, first consider its ingredients — marble and portland cement. They are mixed together in a ratio of two parts marble and one part cement. During the installation process additional marble chips are sprinkled on the surface so that at least 70 percent of the exposed surface is marble.

Terrazzo's marble surface is practically non-absorbent, so most materials which stain simply do not affect it. But the cement binder is very porous and absorbs stains easily. This is the portion of your terrazzo floor which requires much care and protection.

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If staining is likely to be a major problem in your home, investigate some of the new epoxy, polyester, urethane or other synthetic resins which do not contain cement. Resinous terrazzo compares in appearance with cement terrazzo, but does not stain as easily. It also has the advantage of greater strength, which permits its use in thin layers to form low-weight floors.

Protect Your New Floor

When the contractor installed your terrazzo floor, his final step should have been to apply a penetrating sealer approved for terrazzo. In fact, the Florida Terrazzo Association specifications state: "until it has been sealed, terrazzo is unfinished material and, as such, should be carefully protected from possible damage."

The penetrating sealer is absorbed by the cement, thus sealing the pores and greatly reducing its absorptive qualities.

Proper protection for terrazzo, then, is internal rather than "on the surface," and makes waxing unnecessary. It is true that waxes will give temporary protection to your terrazzo floor, but wax tends to wear off readily and also to make the floor slippery. Too, if you keep a layer of wax over marble, you are not allowing the floor to take on the natural sheen, or patina, which is characteristic of terrazzo.

Resealing is necessary only when regular cleaning and polishing fails to restore the soft sheen — or when neglect has resulted in staining or heavy build-up of soil.

Rejuvenate Old Floors

Possibly you have acquired an older home with terrazzo floors that have been abused in some way? Have harmful products been used? Or, do you have a terrazzo floor that was not sealed properly? The result in any case is probably dingy, dull, scuffed-looking floors. Then follow these steps to restore your terrazzo floors to their normal lovely appearance:

1. Use a good quality wax-stripping product to clean the floor thoroughly. Remove all foreign matter and old wax.

2. Rinse very thoroughly, being sure all the cleaner is removed.
3. Apply a thin coat of penetrating type of terrazzo sealer, following manufacturer's directions.
4. When the floor is dry, buff with an electric polisher.
5. Follow the general cleaning methods given below hereafter.

Follow These Cleaning Methods

1. Clean as often as needed to keep grime and sand removed. Remember that soil acts as an abrasive and damages the floor.
2. Use only **neutral liquid cleaners** (meaning those which are neither acid nor alkaline). For best results, use a commercial cleaner made especially for terrazzo. All-purpose household cleaners, soaps, detergents and wax removers usually contain one or more alkalis, and so should not be used on terrazzo. For general cleaning, use one cup of neutral cleaner with each three gallons of water — or follow manufacturer's directions.
3. Wet mop the solution onto the floor, and allow to remain several minutes. Then mop up the dirt-filled solution, changing rinse water often. This helps to remove all soil and also does away with unsightly "moplines." Keep the floor wet at all times during the cleaning operation. Otherwise, dissolved soil dries back onto the floor. When the floor is dry, buff with an electric polishing machine, if you have one. Buffing helps restore the natural sheen on your floor.
4. To remove stubborn soil, periodically use an electric scrubbing machine with a stronger solution of the neutral cleaner.
5. Daily sweeping or dusting will mean easier weekly care and more attractive floors. Do not use an oiled mop or oily sweeping compound. Oils in any form can penetrate the surface and permanently discolor terrazzo floors.

6. Wipe up spilled materials quickly so staining has no chance to occur.

Remove Those Stains

No flooring material has yet been developed which is completely stainproof. Properly sealed terrazzo is stain-resistant; and if you wipe up spills promptly, you should have few problems with staining. However, some staining will eventually occur, as with any other flooring material.

Ask yourself two questions before attempting to treat any stain:

1. What caused the stain?
2. What is the least harmful way of removing it?

Chemicals should be used only as a last resort in removing stains. Remember that a certain method may be effective on the stain but harmful to the floor itself.

Stain removers act in one of three ways: they either **dissolve** the substance that caused the stain or they **absorb** or **bleach** the stain. Solvents such as carbon tetrachloride dissolve grease, chewing gum and lipstick; absorbents, such as chalk, talcum powder, blotting paper or cotton, absorb fresh grease and moist stains; and bleaches, such as household ammonia, hydrogen peroxide, acetic acid or lemon juice, discolor or fade stains.

Caution: Follow directions carefully when you use chemicals to remove stains. And, always "remove the stain remover" as soon as its job has been done. Remember that many of these substances are on the "Not recommended list" for general floor care, but must be used if the stain is to be removed.

Try the following methods for some of the more common types of staining. Try the first method listed first, and go to the second only if this doesn't work. For unknown stains or heavy staining, consult a professional.

The chemicals listed may be purchased at drug stores or at chemical or laundry supply houses. Where poultices are recommended, apply them about one-half inch thick, and let the mixture dry thoroughly before removing.

Caution: Always wear rubber gloves when using the methods marked with an asterisk (*).

Alcoholic Beverages

1. Use liquid detergent and warm water.
2. *Follow with denatured alcohol if stain remains.
3. *Lay an absorbent cloth soaked in hydrogen peroxide directly over stain; put an ammonia-saturated cloth on top of this.

Blood

1. Try cold clear water first, then add a few drops of ammonia.
2. Wet spot with lukewarm water and sprinkle with powdered malt. Let stand an hour and rinse.

Coffee

1. Saturate an absorbent cloth with solution of one part glycerin and three parts water and lay over spot.
2. *Apply a poultice of hydrogen peroxide and calcium carbonate.
3. Apply a poultice of abrasive powder and hot water.

Fruit

1. Use a powdered detergent and warm water.
2. If rough spot results, rub with powdered pumice stone under a block of wood.

Grease or Oil

1. Use a liquid detergent and warm water.
2. Pour solvent on spot. Rub with clean, soft cloth.

Ink

1. Use a liquid detergent and warm water.
2. *Apply a poultice of two tablespoons sodium perborate in pint of water mixed with whiting into a paste. Repeat if necessary.

3. Some blue inks respond to a treatment of strong ammonia water solution applied on a layer of cotton.

Lipstick

1. Use a liquid detergent and warm water.
2. *Lay an absorbent cloth soaked in hydrogen peroxide directly over stain; put an ammonia-saturated cloth on top of this.

Paint

1. Use a liquid detergent and warm water.
2. Pour solvent on spot. Rub with clean, soft cloth.

Rust

1. Apply a poultice made by mixing one part sodium citrate crystals to six parts water, mixed thoroughly with an equal amount of glycerin. Mix with whiting to form a paste stiff enough to stick to the surface in a thick coat. Allow to stand several days. Repeat process if stain remains.

Soft Drinks

1. *Lay an absorbent cloth soaked in hydrogen peroxide directly over stain; put an ammonia-saturated cloth on top of this.

Tobacco

1. Try lemon juice in water.
2. *Lay an absorbent cloth soaked in hydrogen peroxide directly over stain; put an ammonia-saturated cloth on top of this.
3. Apply a poultice of abrasive powder and hot water.
4. Treat with equal parts of alcohol and glycerine.

Urine

1. Apply a poultice of abrasive powder and hot water.

2. *Lay an absorbent cloth soaked in hydrogen peroxide directly over stain; put an ammonia-saturated cloth on top of this.

Sources

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