

# Maintenance time may be saved with ceramic tile polishing compounds.

By Rawi Tabbah

Guidelines for the care of ceramic tile floors are applicable to most porcelain- and quarry-tile flooring. Many restroom floors are composed of 1" x 1" or 2" x 2" ceramic tiles grouted with standard sanded grout. The color of the grout varies according to the color of the tile and is usually white, off-white or gray. The ceramic tile itself has little porosity; however, the grout is very porous and susceptible to stains.

Traditionally, most restroom tiles are installed "honed." The term "honed" refers to the reflectivity and smoothness of a tile. Honing is the action of abrading the surface of the tile. A honed tile usually refers to a tile which has been abraded up to a certain grit and is not highly polished. Many architects choose such honed tiles for two basic reasons: they are less slippery than highly polished (or glazed) tiles; and for aesthetic reasons. Dirt and stains do not show up as much on polished tile as they can on less polished tiling.

## MAINTENANCE CONCERNS

If the building owner or manager were to instruct maintenance staffs to keep the honed look of the tile, the procedures would be as follows:

- \* Examine the grout closely. Spot-clean if needed with a phosphoric acid cleaner.
- \* Clean and neutralize the floor with a mild, synthetic, slightly alkaline, biodegradable detergent, and rinse well.
- \* Seal the tile and grout with a penetrating, water and stain repellent sealer.

This penetrating sealer should not add any shine or color to the tile or grout. A recommended sealer would be one that is a non-silicone, non-urethane and non-acrylic penetrating sealer which is water- and oil-repellent and stain- and mildew-resistant. However, this sealer will not resist acids such as urine.

Two applications of this kind of sealer are recommended (for optimum results, wait 8 hours between applications). A yearly application of this sealer is advised for long-term maintenance procedures.

## POLISHED TILE

Should the building manager or owner ask that the tile be polished, a maintenance manager should not automatically direct their staff to apply a coat of acrylic sealer or wax. When a tile floor is sealed or waxed with an acrylic or urethane coating, the coating may:

- \* Scuff and show foot and drag marks.
- \* Build up and yellow, requiring at least a yearly stripping and waxing. attract dirt, especially in the grout lines.

In other words, once it is "waxed," ceramic tile may require a great deal of maintenance.

Instead, have your staff follow the maintenance procedures outlined above for the honed look and then polish the tile with a ceramic tile polishing compound. Note that ceramic tile polishing compounds are not interchangeable with marble polishing compounds. Tile polishing is easily done with a standard 175 rpm floor buffer and a natural hair pad that will naturally polish the tile itself without coating it.

The penetrating sealer eliminates the need for any stripping, waxing or spray buffing and significantly facilitates the daily cleaning of the tile, because the dirt does not adhere or penetrate the tile surface.

Ceramic tile polishing compounds may be available in colors that coordinate with the tile color. Color coordination allows the small amounts of unavoidable compound residue, which are eventually removed with regular maintenance procedures, to blend into the tile color.

## OLD AND NEW TILE

Proper care of a newly installed restroom floor is important because this care will simplify subsequent maintenance. The grout should be cleaned immediately after installation. Most installers clean the tile and grout with a solution of water and vinegar after installation to remove the grout haze over the tile.

It is important to let the grout cure (set) and dry before performing any further maintenance procedures on the tile. A few days are usually sufficient for the grout to cure, and it will cure faster if the grout has been mixed with latex additives by the installer.

Once the grout has set properly, your staff should follow the maintenance procedures outlined previously for the honed look (and polished look, if desired) for optimum results.

Older floor typically require a more thorough cleaning before polishing. The floor should be completely stripped of all waxes, sealer, and other coatings, and neutralized. A scrubbing brush, rather than a stripping brush, is recommended because the bristles of the scrubbing brush may be more flexible and clean the grout better.

Clean the grout line with a specialized grout cleaner (sometimes referred to as a mineral deposit dissolver) with the scrub brush. Imbedded grout stains may have to be scrubbed by hand. Proceed with the sealing of the grout and polishing of the tile as previously described.

## LABOR AND COST

The shine comes up from the tile itself. The conditions and ages of the tile and grout are factors in determining the time it takes for the shine to come up. With a ceramic tile polishing system, it takes about 8 man-hours to strip, clean, polish and seal a standard-size restroom floor (125 to 150 sq. ft.). About 1 pound of a ceramic tile polishing compound is needed to polish this size floor.

Considering that no waxing, stripping and spray buffing is required after this initial labor, and considering that the shine lasts years with a minimal amount of maintenance, the cost of the system is indeed low.

However, in tile maintenance, the cost of labor can vary drastically between geographical areas. Because of this geographic range, it is difficult to give an exact cost of a ceramic tile polishing system.

The use of a ceramic tile polishing compounds represents the latest technological advance in the care of ceramic tiles, as well as most porcelain and quarry tiles. It can replace the application of acrylics on these floor by providing a more natural, slip-resistant, low-cost and long-lasting shine.

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