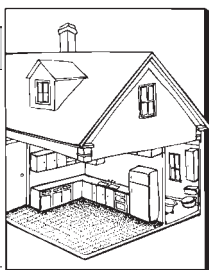


Grout Wars

by Lynn Comeskey



I can almost see the joy on some of my customers' faces as they enter the tile showroom and discover all of the different colors of grout. "Now we can match our tile with a complimentary shade of grout," I can hear them say. Yeah, sure.

The good news, from a design standpoint, is that we are finally rid of that dreadful use of dark grout with light tile. The bad news is with so many different shades of grout available, clients expect that "decorator" colored grouts will solve all the problems of the world.

Once again, it seems, the burden of making the new look (read new product) work well enough to meet the client's elevated expectations is the contractor's.

Shade Variation

The primary risk in working with colored grout is what is euphemistically referred to as "shade variation." A recent bulletin from one of my suppliers contains this masterpiece of understatement: "The occasional occurrence of grout shade variation is a concern voiced to manufacturers across the country." No kidding. Each time we use certain grouts, I have an anxiety attack waiting to hear how the grout looks.

Several years ago, we retiled a large shower with a window in it. When the dust had settled—more accurately, the grout had dried—there was quite a shade variation. The customer was less than pleased so we reviewed the situation carefully. We decided to use an Olympic oil-based stain on the grout. After four hours of tedious work it looked quite good.

A few months later, we remodeled a kitchen which included a tile counter and backsplash. We had the same problem with "shade variation," but just in the backsplash around the cooktop. Again, I had an opportunity to use my artistic talents with brush and stain to solve the problem.

Causes and Cures

There are some prevention techniques and some remedies, but both require some understanding of what happens to portland cement in the transition from dry powder to cured grout. Dry grout is preblended by the manufacturer so that it is consistent in color. The trouble can begin when you add water—a process called hydration when you're talking about cement. If you add too much water, both the shade and strength are affected.

And how you mix grout is also important. High-speed mixing or too much mixing causes air pockets that in turn leave holes in the grout and affect how it dries. One of our tile setters changed from a 700 rpm drill mixer to a 400 rpm drill, and noticed that the grout worked more easily and dried more evenly.

Drying and curing are key words here. Dust and dirt in joints, the cut edges of highly absorptive tile, even an open window, affect the appearance of your grout by producing uneven drying and curing—the completion of the hydration process—of grout. And how evenly these processes take place has everything to do with consistent color.

Some colors seem to be more susceptible to "drying drift" than others, but the faster the grout dries, the darker it will be. Unsanded grouts and the lighter colors seem more problematic, but part of this is due to a greater contrast with the tile.

Most portland cement grout manufacturers are careful about blending their products and state on all advertising literature and packages that shading differences are possible. Most recommended procedures for mixing and curing, and these should be heeded.

Some tile setters use admixtures to stabilize drying, but these can also make the grout harder to work. Another preventative measure that is widely recommended is wet curing—covering the grout with a wet cloth to slow down and stabilize drying.

Covering Up

But even when you're careful, you can still end up with color variations that require some remedial work.

There are three common solutions:

- Leave well enough alone with the knowledge that minor shade variations tend to disappear over time.
- Apply an oil-based penetrating sealer. This will give the grout a wet look, which brings some consistency through darkening.
- Use a water-based stain to "recolor" the grout.

In general, it is a good idea to seal grout, although this shouldn't be done until the grout has completely cured (which can take up to 30 days).

However, you may want to cheat a bit if the grout is in danger of picking up body oils, soap film, or stains. This concern is greatest with a shower, but you should also consider it with sinks and lavies. Again, the lighter colors are more susceptible.

Darker color grouts don't show discoloration from stains as much as they do from efflorescence, which can come from several sources. If a concrete slab is not completely sealed before tile is set, moisture and the salts it brings with it can rise through the grout, leaving a whitish haze. Once standing water evaporates from grout you will often find this same buildup. Again, cleaning the grout and then sealing will help. ■

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