



Photo 1. Dreamtime marble from Cairns Marble & Granite.

Bench top surface finishes

In Issue 23 of Discovering Stone we reviewed Housing Industry Association (HIA) predictions for kitchen installations in new and renovated homes in 2014-15.

Using a figure of 2.5 slabs per kitchen we calculated that there would be a requirement for 728,000 slabs (or alternative surface finishes) required to cover bench surfaces in a combined figure of 291,200 installations in new homes and renovations.

Following a rise in the popularity of engineered stone, and to a lesser degree natural stone, we concluded, following discussions with a variety of industry figures that 45 per cent of all bench tops will be covered in natural or engineered stone. This would result in the following outcome:

HIA prediction for new and renovated kitchens total bench top space in 2014-15 = 291,200 x 2.5 slabs = 728,000 slabs or alternative surface finishes.

A number of leading fabricators and suppliers suggested that between 10 and 20 per cent of those surfaces will be covered with natural stone. We decided on the lower figure, which equates to 13,104 kitchens, and 32,760 slabs.

We estimated that engineered stone will be used in 117,936 kitchens, calling for 294,840 slabs.

These calculations do not include stone used

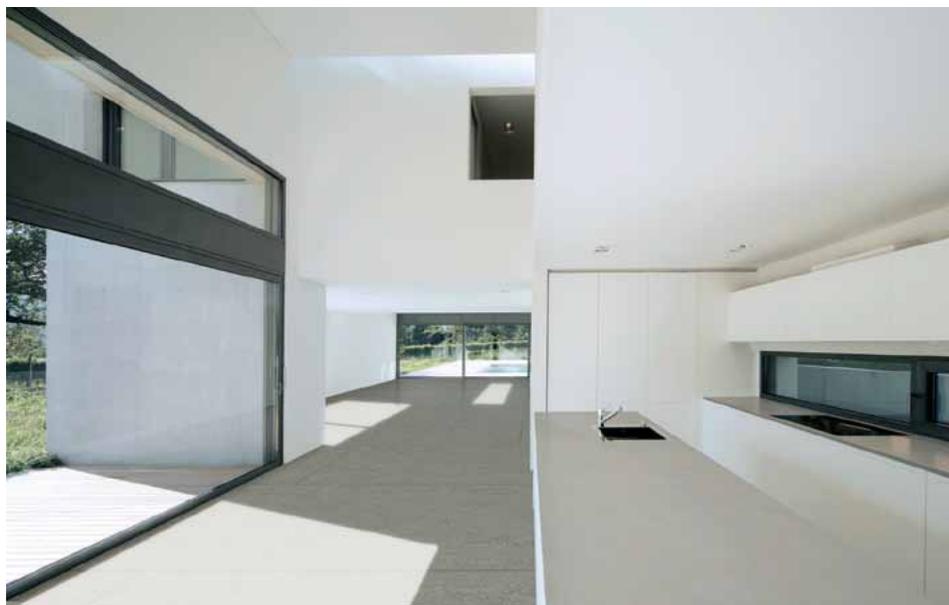


Photo 2. Dekton (Cosentino), a remarkable engineered stone that can be used internally and externally. A slim 8mm thickness is available.

on kitchen splashbacks, or natural and engineered stone used in the commercial, civic and hospitality sectors.

Whichever way you look at it, these figures represent a substantial amount of product.

Consequently, we decided to look at some of the bench top products and trends, which have come to our attention during recent times. In addition we spoke with a few large and small bench top fabricators to get their opinion on prevailing product trends.

Determining how much natural and engineered material is used on kitchen bench tops, in commercial kitchens, and the hospitality sector is a difficult task.

Gene Kalpa of VP Granite in Cheltenham, Melbourne explained, "In my experience if an architect or designer is directly involved they will usually choose natural stone. We generally produce material for big residential builders and they basically select engineered stone. Less than 5 per cent of the kitchens we fabricate use natural stone."

Victor Adamo, of Vicstone in Knoxfield, has a very different experience: "Before I started my own business I worked for a company that produced slabs for architects and designers. I tend to pursue those avenues, and as a result, 50 per cent of the slabs we output are natural stone. In many high-end residential and commercial projects natural stone is the material of choice."

Lindsay McInnis, the General Manager of Adelaide Marble specialists commented: "We produce around

nine complete kitchens per day, 45 per week, and in my experience, approximately 60 per cent of the kitchens we fabricate are engineered stone, 40 per cent are natural stone. We carry extensive stocks of natural stone, and it remains a big seller for us. The new housing sector tends to favour engineered material; well established home owners often prefer natural stone."

Without knowing the value of imported engineered stone, it is impossible to make a valid comparison between natural and engineered stone consumption. Nevertheless, the 'Worked Stone Import Value' figures for 2007-2012 published in the last edition of *Discovering Stone*, appear to indicate that demand for natural stone slab material remains strong.

Total imports of stone in 2012 were valued at \$165,329,340 – marginally lower than the preceding year. A substantial proportion of that figure related to worked granite, marble and travertine.

While many lovers of traditional materials are concerned about the level of interest in engineered stone, it can be argued that the popularity of engineered materials, and continued attempts to mimic the appearance of natural stone (by producers of engineered materials and ceramic tiles) have actually inspired a resurgence of interest in natural stone tiles and slabs.

When we commenced publishing back in 1993, hardly any ceramic tile importers or retailers imported or sold stone. Today, a majority of tile merchants offer some stone



products, and a growing number of importers import both materials.

Can we be confident that these materials will retain their current level of popularity? The growing trend to larger, slimmer ceramic tiles and panels, and lightweight building materials in general, continues unabated, and as we shall see it has already influenced manufacturers of engineered stone.

Some remarkable new products have just been launched, and a larger number of importers are providing consumers and specifiers with a wider range of natural stone materials. An increased understanding of the role that sealers play, coupled with the introduction of coating systems that permit use of virtually any natural material on bench or vanity tops, will gradually encourage use of materials like sandstone and bluestone on bench tops.

New and popular products

Cosentino recently launched Dekton, an engineered product that can safely be used internally and externally on a wide variety of horizontal and vertical surfaces in residential and commercial environments (**Photo 2**).

Dekton is highly resistant to UV rays and extreme temperatures. Dekton is manufactured using ultra compaction and baking processes. The ultra compaction process is achieved courtesy of a press that has a capacity of 25,000 tons, which is six times greater than any other conventional press. Slabs are produced in a large 3200 x 1400mm format, in contemporary 20mm and 30mm thicknesses.

This radical new material is also available in a slim 8mm format, which can also be used on bench top surfaces, building facades, and walls. To discover more about Dekton see our interview in this edition.

Caesarstone recently launched its 2013 collection featuring seven new additions to the Classico collection; including four additional Supernatural designs which feature new, wider veining, which is produced using Caesarstone's proprietary technology (**Photos 3 & 4**).

Caesarstone offers four attractive collections – Classico, Supremo, Motivo and Concetto. These highly functional surface finishes can be used on bench and vanity tops, internal vertical surfaces, and furniture.



Photo 6. Elba Marble CDK Stone. Elegant book matched marble.



Photo 5. Fiandre showcase 3 metre x 1 metre x 3mm panels of porcelain at Cersaie 2011. Courtesy of RMS Marble.

Fabricators of stone sometimes favour engineered materials because the material is easier to cut, and in some regards is less challenging. Gene Kalpa of VB Granite said, "In general we don't have to concern ourselves with book-matching material, or avoiding particular marks or veins when we use engineered stone."

A strong part of the appeal of engineered stone, particularly to builders who use high volumes of product, lies in the consistency of the material's appearance.

Caesarstone also market a relatively slim engineered stone wall panel. View their Frosty Carrina floor-to-ceiling wall panels in 'Featured Stones' on page 48. They are available in four of the Supernatural designs and two other popular colours.

The trend towards thin slabs has undoubtedly been inspired by the incredible advances made by Laminam and a variety of ceramic tile manufacturers. Laminam pioneered the launch of 3 metre x 1 metre x 3mm thickness panels of porcelain. Other tile manufacturers now produce slim tiles in conventional 300 x 300mm and 600 x 600mm sizes in thicknesses which range from 3 to 7 millimetres. The latest addition to the ranks of slim porcelain panels, illustrates the remarkable progres-



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sion that has taken place in regards to digital decoration techniques. The 1.5 metre x 3 metre x 3mm panels of porcelain released by GranitiFiandre can be applied to a multitude of internal and external vertical surfaces (**Photo 5**).

Natural stone

Our hero shot (**photo 1**) illustrates Cairns Marble's elegant Dreamtime marble which is quarried in the Pilbara region of Western Australia.

Cairns Marble manufactures a variety of marble products, including polished and unpolished slabs, marble tiles and furniture products. Dreamtime is very fine-grained marble which is extremely hard. The product has a pink/red base, with attractive red streaks and occasional black patches. Cairns Marble quarries 14 different marbles, some of which are exported to Italy and other destinations.

Photo 6 (CDK Stone) illustrates the absolute beauty of natural stone, and the classic appeal of this timeless product. Creating a book-match effect may be a challenge but it is hard to deny the attraction. Use of marble on splashbacks is also shown in **photo 7** (CDK Stone), which captures the charm of wide veining.

Photo 8 (Ocean+ Merchant) provides a remainder that a substantial volume of natural stone is used in wet areas in residential and commercial projects. The HIA suggest that new housing starts will climb to 153,200 in 2014-15, which 'implies demand for around 29,100 bathroom installations' (HIA Kitchens & Bathrooms Report – Past Growth & Future Prospects, 2012-13).

The illustrated marble bench tops (**photos 1, 6, 7 and 8**) will all require sealing and careful protection, against spills of potential liquid contaminants. In most instances



Photo 7. Statuario marble CDK Stone

the surface will be honed and sealed. It should be noted that conventional penetrating sealers provide a barrier which delays impregnation or reduces the risk of staining and etching.

CDK Stone's representative Lithofin manager, Greg Foulds said, "Increasing numbers of people want to put marble, limestone or travertine on their kitchen bench tops, however, we always warn them that even honed and sealed stone will stain or etch. We tell customers who love the appearance of natural stone that they need to adopt the attitude shown in Europe or the United States, where people have learned to live with the blemishes that will occur and accept them as part of the patina and appearance of the stone, knowing that they can have it mechanically re-honed or re-polished to return it to its former glory.

Alternatively, they can take the safe option and use granite, which usually requires no sealing or special attention."

Another option for lovers of natural stone is use of a coating in preference to a conventional sealer. This is a more expensive option but it provides guaranteed protection against staining and etching of the stone. Clearstone and Dry Treat manufacture coatings. The Clearstone product has been applied to a number of bar tops in casinos and hotels. Professional application of a coating will even allow use of natural stone products like sandstone on kitchen work surfaces (**Photo 9**).

Photo 10 features Antique Brown granite by CDK Stone. This robust stone does not require sealing, or any special treatment. A number of local granite quarries are actively producing stone and a few companies actually export stone to Italy and other destinations.

Imports of granite – in various forms – totalled \$42,667,754 in 2012. It would be interesting



Photo 8. Superb use of natural stone in a residential bathroom (Ocean+ Merchant).

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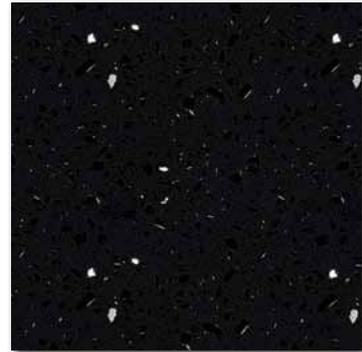
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BRINGING NATURE TO HOMES

to know how much of that stone is used in the public, civic, commercial and hospitality sectors.

Photo 11 depicts use of Calacatta Viola marble fabricated, supplied and installed at Rosetta's Italian Ristorante in Riverside at Crown, Melbourne by Apex Stone, illustrating that with appropriate care and attention marble can be used in commercial projects.

Conclusion

A combination of natural and engineered stone products, particularly engineered materials are capturing a growing share of the market for kitchen bench and bathroom vanity tops. Natural stone sales are probably stronger than many people imagine, particularly in the commercial and hospitality



Photo 9. Clearstone Coating applied to sandstone prevents staining and etching. (Courtesy Best Marble & Tile Care).



Photo 10. Durable Antique Brown granite CDK Stone.

sectors where many specifiers still favour natural materials.

However, competition from ultra-thin materials like Laminam (porcelain) will increase as manufacturers master the art of mitring edges. The arrival on the scene of advanced slim products like Cosentino's Dekton will create added interest in lightweight alternatives to traditional 20mm and 30mm slabs.

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Photo 11. Marble at Rosetta's Italian Ristorante installed at Apex Stone.

Visitors to Cersaie and Marmomacc, Italy's prime tile and stone expos will undoubtedly discover new slim products. One of the world's major manufacturers of porcelain tile is working on a new range of large 15mm porcelain slabs specifically designed for use on bench tops. Developing digital technologies will allow them to imitate almost every possible surface finish.

New materials appear constantly, like Boss Architectural's



Photo 12. Boss Architectural, advanced cement benchtop and tile products.

intriguing collection of sustainable cement slab and tile products (**Photo 12**). Slabs are produced in a standard large format 3060 x 1440 x 20mm and an extra large 3300 x 1640 x 20mm format. A range of complementary tiles are available in a variety of contemporary sizes and three thicknesses, including an exciting 6mm product, which has multiple applications. Find out more about this radical product in our feature overleaf. 

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