

The go-between

Interiors | Grout's new graphic dynamism and cheeky charm is making it as striking as the tiles. By *Keith Flanagan*

Tiling, you might think, is all about the tiles. But a number of designers are making one quiet labourer something of a protagonist: grout.

"The use of in-between spaces is common in both architecture and graphic design," says Stockholm-based interior architect Johannes Karlström, co-founder of Note design studio. "So it is strange that there hasn't been more exploration of how to use grout to create something special."

That is changing. Whites, browns and greys started to be ditched for more exciting contrasting or colourful tints a few years ago, but the emerging trend scales up and doubles down, exaggerating line thickness and treating it like a graphic device.

Australia's Hecker Guthrie recently installed terracotta pavers in a traditional running bond pattern (similar to bricks) but used a pronounced grout line in one direction. "The spaces between the tiles are just as important as the tiles themselves," says founding principal Paul Hecker. In a recent Mexico City home by New York's Studio

Valle de Valle, the practice widened spacing between terracotta tiles, giving the grid visual weight. Melbourne's Georgina Jeffries goes further: in a Queensland holiday home, the spaces between terracotta tiles in an outdoor shower are roughly the same width as the tiles themselves.

Chunky grout isn't new. Early tiles were less refined and required larger, more forgiving joints to even them out. But "advances in ceramic engineering allowed for more refined tile sizing, thinner tiles and more rectified edges, which has allowed for thinner grout joints," says Deborah Osburn, chief executive and founder of California's Clé Tile. The pendulum has swung back: renewed interest in handmade tiles that lack uniformity, such as Moroccan zellige, has contributed to more expressive designs with "extreme variations in grout joint sizes," she says.

Modernist Venetian architect and designer Carlo Scarpa's tessera floors are also providing inspiration. Installed in his famous Olivetti showroom in the late 1950s, the floors introduced a terrazzo-like effect: larger, irregularly



shaped tiles set in a matrix of extra-wide joints, as if the tiles were floating.

"We're playing with that idea, using thicker grout lines to frame thinner ones, to form bold geometric or organic patterns," says Yasmine Ghoniem, co-director of YSG Studio. In a project in Australia's Byron Bay, Ghoniem



Clockwise from left: pronounced grout lines across a splashback by KLH Custom Homes; Note's tiling for Stockholm restaurant Tysta Mari; Hecker Guthrie's terracotta pavers — Diana Paulson, Stefan Haskel, Shannon McGrath



grouped terracotta pavers in tight squares of four, but framed each set with an extra-thick grout line. It creates an almost double-checkerboard pattern.

"We are too focused on the tiles, and the 'logical' repetition of those, so we forget that there is an opportunity to create new things," adds Karlström. In the Stockholm restaurant Tysta Mari, Note treated the tiles as "secondary" characters. Angled white rectangles alternate direction row to row. But it's the wide-set blue-tinted grout that gives the scheme excitement.

Liz Hoekzema, co-founder of the Michigan-based company KLH Custom

Homes, uses grout to create "a dynamic visual versus a static one", she says. Hoekzema recently widened three horizontal grout lines across the kitchen's blue splashback, injecting a cheeky striped nod to an Adidas sock for the home's very active family.

Others have embraced organic edges. Singapore-based L.Architects installed organically shaped stone with fluctuating grout widths, creating an almost river-like feel.

Not all grout is created equal, however. New and improved products avoid the cracking that comes when basic formulations are used unconventionally. (Hecker Guthrie used the non-shrinking ARDEX WJ 50, allowing joints up to 50mm.) "Doing these larger joints requires a very seasoned installer," adds Osburn, along with more delicate treatment: KLH Custom Homes positioned thicker grout lines high up on the wall, away from dirt and wear and tear.

It takes extra effort and planning. But the results are a fresh case for laying it on thick.