

Add a touch of glass

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It'll be a tough decision for the Arnon/McGregor family if they ever have to move out of their home. Besides the stress of packing, the young family would be forced to leave behind colourful shards of their collective personalities.

Good thing the plan is to stay put, because the family of five has recently finished a major and personal renovation of their kitchen.

The Arnon/McGregors wanted to include something distinctly personal when they decided to rip and tear apart the kitchen in their home. It was designer Nick Semanyk who suggested a backsplash with glass tile mosaics made by each family member. The mosaics are tied together by a zigzag line that leads through the background of black matte tiles from one mosaic picture to the next, showing off the versatility of glass tiles and the preoccupations of parents and children.

"It's quite effective," said homeowner Iris Arnon, who figured out the best way to construct the mosaics and then helped her three children devise their designs depicting hockey, flowers and curvy fish. There is a tribute to Scotland and Andrew McGregor's roots and music and Arnon's weekly choir sessions.

While glass tiles in architecture goes back to the Byzantine days, they've risen and fallen in popularity this century and are currently on the upswing, showing up in backsplashes, on counters and floors, surrounding fireplaces, in pools, spas and shower stalls, and as accents, either on their own or in mosaic patterns.

"Definitely, I've seen more use of glass tile, not necessarily just in contemporary, but also in a traditional setting," said Elaine Nikiforuk, owner of World Mosaic.

"Glass always has a freshness factor. It's shiny and smooth without being too glitzy."

Friedemann Weinhardt, owner of Design First Interiors, often uses glass tile in his award-winning kitchen and bath projects. Small mosaic tiles are useful on curves, while one award-winning kitchen showed off watery-blue four-by-nine-inch tiles installed in a stacked pattern for the backsplash.

"It was very beautiful, clean and simple. The result is very stunning," said the designer who is known for simple and elegant designs. "I like the properties of glass tiles, the vibrant colour palettes."

Interior designer Penny Southam predicts tiles will be around for a long time thanks to their pizzazz, texture, warmth and translucence.

"They're not just a trendy blip," she said.

"It lends itself to the clean lines of contemporary style - that spa, boutique-hotel look," Southam said. "They really pull it all together,"

Glass tiles were hugely popular in the 1960s, when Italy was pretty much the only producer of small one-inch glass tiles, Nikiforuk said. That's when World Mosaic opened for business in Montreal, encouraging customers to sort through glass jars filled with small mosaic tiles. The B.C. Telephone Building in Vancouver is entirely covered in those glass tiles from Italy, she said.

all over the world making tiles using many different methods and with a wide array of textures and finishes.

"It came back with a vengeance," said Nikiforuk, who helped open World Mosaic in Ottawa in 1981 and took over as owner in 1985.

There are tiles with metals, such as gold, silver and copper, mixed in with the glass, or with clear glass used over foils of gold or silver. The Glasstone Scapes Collection combines natural tumbled stone with glass in many colours.

"The glass is just delightful because it's aged," she said. "It looks like tumbled beach glass."

Recycled glass - from airplane or car windshields as well as old bottles - is hugely popular now since people are more environmentally conscious. It can be chopped up and combined with cement for a terrazzo look or melted and cast into other forms. The Oceanside line has up to 80-per-cent recycled content, while Terra Green uses 55- to 65-per-cent recycled glass and the rest ceramic.

Royal Mosa uses large format 18-inch square glass tiles that give a smooth, contemporary look because there's less grout.

"They're beautiful," Nikiforuk said. "There's substance to it and you feel you can see inside."

Glass tiles are no more breakable than ceramic or porcelain, although there's the perception that they might be. As with any tile, good installation techniques are a must.

While ceramic or porcelain tiles range from \$4 to \$12 per square foot in good quality tile stores, glass tiles are pricier at \$35 to \$100 per square foot, so they're often used sparingly as accent pieces.

"You can get a lot of punch for a relatively small cost," said Southam, explaining that glass tiles are not just for high-end projects.

One project she's working on uses a palette of blue six-by-six-inch tiles in a brick pattern, with some polished and some honed to give texture when the light hits it. In another project, a children's bathroom, has glass tiles in four colours for accents, in niches, on the shower seat and the half-wall behind the vanity.

"You can have a lot of fun."

That fun factor emerges when glass tiles are used in custom art pieces. In an award-winning basement renovation, Southam included two custom-made curvilinear counters made by artist Delfina Falcao, who applied glass tiles, pieces of coloured glass and even long shards to a plywood base.

"You look at it as an addition to your art collection," Southam said.

"It's visually quite stunning, a detail that becomes a point of discussion." The two counters cost about \$4,500.

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