

# TILE TODAY

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# 124

**SIGMA IN AUSTRALIA**

**COTTO TILES  
IN FOCUS**

**ACADEMY TILES  
NEW SHOWROOM**

When thinking about influential retail showrooms in the Australian tile industry, only a few come to mind. Anthony Zeaiter's Academy Tiles' new showroom in Sydney's Redfern (NSW) sets a high benchmark when it comes to displaying tiles and connecting with architects, designers and builders.



(l&r) Academy Tiles' sales manager Doug Jenkins and managing director Anthony Zeaiter

Developed as a creative hub, it represents a lot of Anthony's forward thinking. He told Tile Today: "Our showroom is more than just a retail space; it is an innovative community design hub. It has been conceived as a hospitality venue where architects and interior designers can host client presentations remotely from their studio space." The story starts on page 19.

In this issue, we also mark the history of how Sigma entered the Australian market. International Tiles Agency (ITA) has been pivotal in bringing it to installers, distributors and resellers. Thanks to ITA, the brand continues to grow its reputation as a top-notch tiling tool that many tile installers want to use.

Unlike blog posts that reference PR information, Google searches and captions on social media, Tile Today continues to produce magazine editions that provide context and analysis about the tile industry. Its online format means that it is easier to access and has more reach than just our subscriber base.

To keep up to date and not miss out, just click here: <https://bit.ly/3dJ5EBc>

See you when we launch the Buying Guide special edition,

Betty Tanddo

**FRONT COVER IMAGE**

La Lampara from Antiche Fornaci D'Agostino have bright colours and sinuous lines that intertwine to create patterns that evoke the mysterious fishing lamp lights that shine in the dark sea of the Amalfi Coast. The collection represents a combination of tradition and creative design that recalls the magical atmosphere of local seascapes. It has a unique character and a charm that tells stories of the sea.



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**PERFORMANCE**



**TILE TODAY BUYING GUIDES**



# New product maestro

**Anthony Zeaiter, managing director at Academy Tiles holds a unique place in the tile industry. He helps to set benchmarks in terms of what is possible and wants to see the sector continue to evolve.**

It's not often that something feels genuinely new in the supply and merchandising of ceramic tiles in Australia. The Academy Tiles showroom in the inner Sydney suburb of Redfern ticks many boxes when it comes to establishing an original concept of what a tile showroom can be. As Anthony explains to Tile Today:

"Our showroom is more than just a retail space; it is an innovative community design hub. It has been conceived as a hospitality venue where architects and interior designers can host client presentations remotely from their studio space."

It's an approach that suits the products featured at Academy Tiles. These are designer tiles which are not only high-quality and aesthetically inspiring, but also offer superior technical performance. They can add an appealing and inspirational element to any project space.

But Academy Tiles also has a more broad-based approach. "That said, we also display and sell a huge range of complementary architectural body tiles to satisfy all floor and wall tiling requirements," Anthony explains.

This development was based on a long history, and a thorough understanding of the needs of both direct customers and designers.

Anthony talks about how the new showroom came about. He said:

"We have operated from the North Shore for 46 years and it was time to finally cross the bridge and create an inspiring space which more accurately reflects our reputation and abilities. A platform where we will be able to build more meaningful and creative relationships, in the heart of Sydney's A&D [architecture and design] community."

### Exterior

Foot-traffic is half the task of any city-based tile retailer, and Anthony made sure the outlet would grab the attention — and imagination — of potential customers.

"We wanted a space which captures the attention of those passing by, so our new 600m2 showroom has extensive street frontage. Here we offer a variety of custom interchangeable surface displays combined with highly adaptive creative zones designed for workshoping material selections with designers and their clients in a relaxed, inspirational environment.

"In this space we showcase a wide variety of materials displayed in vertical and horizontal formats balanced with generous breakout

spaces combining to provide a passive and organised retail experience.

"Fully equipped with audio/visual and bar facilities, our showroom aims to take customer service to a new level."

### The design process

Anthony worked with architect Philip Chia of The Uncarved Block to implement his vision for the showroom. Philip specialises in hospitality and retail spaces. They have worked on a number of prominent projects together including the food court at Melbourne Central and The Galleries Victoria food hall. Anthony said:

"The idea was to create something communal where architects and designers can be comfortable to visit with their clients, to use the space as their own, and bringing along the other architectural finishes and materials that they're working on for a project, in a space filled with Academy Tiles' designer products. Our hospitality approach is focussed on accommodating, cooperating and collaborating in a venue with facilities for them to really enjoy make the most of the space."

(The Melbourne Central food court featured on the cover of Tile Today





#74 in 2012 and in the issue of the magazine. See the link.)  
<https://www.academytiles.com.au/images/news/Tile%20Today%20issue%2074.pdf>

## Trust

While the showroom illustrates Anthony's deep connection to architects and designers, it goes beyond the relatable display of high-end products. For Anthony, it's just as much about relationships. He said:

"It's being authentic and reliable, offering your guidance and expertise in our products, and it's about just genuinely sharing your knowledge and passion with clients who are aspiring to use interesting and innovative materials.

"As I always say to my sales reps, we are known for being creative, but first and foremost, we need to be trustworthy and conscientious.

"In terms of product, anyone can go to Italy or Japan or wherever and source something. That's true.

"But you need to back that up with the integrity, honesty, and the wealth of knowledge that we've accumulated for over 46 years now. And you need to share that in your daily interactions and advice you give regarding the realistic possibilities with our various materials. It's not about saying what someone wants to hear.

"I was really proud when another publication surveyed architects

and designers about trust. For the three years they did that survey, we came out on top as Australia's most trusted tile brand ... I told my team that everyone knows Academy Tiles as inspiring and decorative, but trust means more to me. In every interaction you have to be able to look yourself in the eye."

## Made in Japan

Academy Tiles is also known as the largest importer of Japanese mosaics and tiles in Australia and New Zealand. It has a long-standing relationship with Nagoya Mosaic-Tile Co that began almost 16 years ago. (Nagoya itself was founded in 1938.) Anthony has been very effective managing exclusivity and growth for its products. He explains:

"It started with one collection with us showing catalogues and folders to different architects and designers in Sydney at the time, we were only in Sydney back then. Once you start delivering, and converting interest into results, your overseas partners become confident that when they have something new, they know that Academy Tiles will be a successful medium for them to get their products into our market. And they're not going to jeopardise that if we keep growing with them and respecting them.

"For the first few years of our relationship, we'd simply promote and sell what they presented to

us. But over the last 10 years, we've constantly designed and created our own products with them. Now they're manufacturing them for us exclusively to sell in Australia and New Zealand. And they're really beautiful ... we're creating materials that are really sought after in the Australian and New Zealand market.

"For us, it's a mutual relationship. These people are genuine friends now.

"We are proud of the loyal and mutually beneficial relationship we have developed, to the point that we are now their largest customer worldwide."

## Product development

Not surprisingly, Anthony finds the product development work with Nagoya Mosaic-Tile Co the most exciting element of his job. He learnt a valuable lesson from his uncle (Michael Zeaiter) who originally purchased a small tile shop in Thornleigh, in Sydney's North-West. (Anthony's late father Joe Zeaiter, an accountant, also bought into the business. Anthony is now the sole owner.) He said:

"On my first trip to Cersaie in 2001, he said to me, 'Anthony, when you visit the factories, it's one thing to have a look at what they present to you, in their catalogues and showrooms, but try to have a look in their marketing departments or in their laboratories, and you'll see all the other products









or materials that they're considering or think might be successful'. And I've been doing that for over 20 years. The number of times I've walked in and pulled out a test product and said, 'Hold on, what's this?' This would be amazing in our market. I now do that every time I go to Italy and Japan.

"We've had some really successful collections on the back of that. And it's quite funny because sometimes they'll look at you and say, 'Really, you think that will be popular?' And I say, 'Absolutely it will be!'

"It's at the point now where, for the last few years in particular, I've seen many other Australian importers promoting Japanese-inspired tiles produced in China. They're promoting Japanese inspired, not Japanese made and it's just not the same.

"There's also a number of other Australians now going to Japan too. We've really helped create a demand for Japanese products, and we're proud of that."

### Continuous change

Anthony's passion for new and inspiring tile products started when he was a primary schooler in his uncle and father's store when he helped to do stocktake in the warehouse. He said:

"Sitting with my uncle on a pallet and being driven up and down the aisles on a forklift counting stock. It felt exciting because I was pressing buttons on a calculator. I was only eight years old!"

By the time Anthony became a young adult, he briefly wanted to explore a different career pathway before seeing the benefits of owning your own business and directly influencing the way it is managed.

"I gained a commerce degree [majoring in marketing] at Macquarie University, then started doing work experience at a leading PR agency at the time in the city [Hill & Knowlton]. Whilst doing that, they offered me a full-time job which I enjoyed for a couple of years. Then I realised that my success was dependent on my client's success, whereas I had an opportunity to go back into the tile business when my father and uncle re-approached me. I appreciated that I could apply anything I'd learned and could help mould the business and our future directions.

"I became really passionate about that. And I never took it for granted ever again from that point.

"But the thing I love most that keeps me most passionate and enthusiastic is seeing and developing

new products. I adore that side of the business."

It would be highly inaccurate to describe Anthony and Academy Tiles as victims of change. He readily admits that he doesn't know everything, something that is simultaneously smart and realistic. He tells Tile Today:

"No one knows everything, it keeps evolving. This is the nature of business.

"From my experience over the past 25 years, I have learned the benefit of focusing on our own strengths and plans for growth, rather than being distracted and consumed by what others are doing in the market. I now understand that we cannot do and be everything in our industry for everyone. Instead, we are better off dedicating our energy and efforts to what we do best and then growing from that space."

This is one way in which the tile industry is somewhat unique. While other industries frequently benefit from "outsiders" with fresh ideas, in tile the best ideas usually come from the supreme insiders – like Anthony – who have a generational understanding of the industry, and combine that with a knowledge of market changes to create new opportunities. ■

