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Cover: A “Main Street” with signs from around the country is featured at the American Sign Museum’s new location in Cincinnati, Ohio. *Photo by Debra Jane Seltzer.* Read more starting on page 28.

Back cover: The Elephant Car Wash, a roadside landmark of Seattle, Washington. *Photo by VintageRoadside.com.*

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Advertising Underfoot

Commercial archeologists walk around with their heads held high, always on the lookout for commercial signage. But what about vintage advertising underfoot? Much has been documented at eye level or higher, but there are but limited references about terrazzo and tile entryways that were once a de rigueur advertising feature of stores.

■ areas with heavy foot traffic such as downtown districts, a store's entrance served a vital function. First impressions were critical; people often made split-second decisions on

whether to enter a business based on the window displays and flooring. Stores attempted to use these elements to create a welcoming ambiance for potential customers. With their beautiful color combinations and classy feel, terrazzo and tile (porcelain or ceramic) walkways were used by countless businesses to convert pedestrians to patrons. Embedded in the floors were the business initial, emblem, name, function, scenes, and/or geometric patterns.

These "entrance aprons," as Indiana University of Pennsylvania Geography Professor Kevin Patrick terms them, have an evolutionary morphology. "Mosaic tile was the favored first material, terrazzo was king in the postwar era, and everything was covered by hideous slip-free indoor-outdoor carpet in the 1970s," says Patrick.

Speckled and polished terrazzo or intricate tile floors were used by a variety of stores to market themselves; professional services such as doctors or accountants also employed them but less frequently. Drug stores used them in high traffic areas such as along the soda fountain counter. Perhaps the most elaborate floor designs were used at theaters. The show truly started long before the movie started, given the detailed flooring, neon signs, the marquee, unique brick and/or stone patterns, and a funky ticket booth out front.

Terrazzo has a long construction history. In ancient times, it was made using discarded marble chips that were bound together with clay and goat milk. Nowadays there's no need to haul livestock to the construction site. Modern terrazzo entryways are constructed by adding colored marble chips to a mortar base, then sanded and buffed for a glossy shine. Different sections of the floor

are defined with brass strips that provide a control joint for expansion and contraction. By using different color aggregates and a variety of shapes, design possibilities are limitless. Besides creating a beautiful piece of art to walk on, terrazzo's use of waste materials makes it a "green" product. It's also practical for high-volume walkways as it's durable and easy to clean.

Commercial archeologists will also find interesting flooring that used ceramic and porcelain tiles. Tiles are created from a crushed mixture that includes clay and feldspar that are fired in kilns, but porcelain tiles use special clays and are cooked at higher temperatures to make them harder. Both types of tiles are popular because of their low maintenance and availability in a wide range of shapes, colors and texture.

More than their intrinsic beauty, durability, and sustainability, my favorite feature of terrazzo and tile floors is the unsurpassed optimism of their origin. Imagine the proprietors' conviction in the future prosperity of their stores, such that they had the names of their businesses inlaid in stone-like material to welcome customers for eternity. Did these shopkeepers ever envision a time when their enterprise

would not be a part of the business community? What were their thoughts when the business went under or they sold it and they crossed their terrazzo or tile threshold for the last time?

Amazingly, some businesses with their terrazzo or tile entryways still intact continue to flourish through the decades. One of these is the 42nd Street Oyster Bar in Raleigh, North Carolina. The restaurant has been serving hungry patrons since 1931 when it first opened as a grocery store, originally just offering oysters and draft beer. The dazzling entryway drew in my wife and me for a meal many years ago and, despite Maureen's distaste for bivalve mollusks, we look forward to a return visit.

Another depression-era business that has survived is the Minetta Tavern in New York City's Greenwich Village. I discovered this treasure courtesy of my sister-in-law, who booked us on a literary tour of Manhattan. Since 1937 it has been a haven for writers including Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, Eugene O'Neill, E.E. Cummings, Dylan Thomas, and Joe Gould. The establishment recently reinvented itself as one of the city's top steakhouses.

Dating even farther back, into the 1920s, is the tile



THIS PAGE: 42nd Street Oyster Bar, Raleigh, North Carolina; Minetta's Tavern, New York City.

OPPOSITE: Portland's Outdoor Store, Portland, Oregon.

All images from author's collection except (Chessie Kitten logo: www.roadsideArchitecture.com) and (Clown, San Diego: Dean Jeffrey).



entryway of Portland’s Outdoor Store; a western wear store that time forgot in Oregon. Even a fashionable city slicker can’t resist substituting snaps for shirt buttons at this downtown store, whose tattered edges only add to its authenticity and charm.

Since they add sophistication to a business, a lucky few entryways, and their buildings, have been rehabilitated. A must stop on any mid-century architectural tour of Phoenix is Hanny’s, the International Style former men’s department store. Opened in 1947, the downtown department store had an almost 40-year run before closing in 1986. The building was eventually refurbished and reopened a few years ago as



a swank nightspot. Hanny’s not only retained their terrazzo entryways; they feature them on complimentary postcards provided to customers.

Another tasteful rehabilitation is Wichita’s Hotel Eaton which gained a second life as Eaton Place by offering loft living. Crossing its tile entryway in 1988, I didn’t realize my stay would include unintended access to the rooftop and my first introduction (via a life-sized photograph in the foyer) to the militant prohibitionist, Carry Nation, who attempted to destroy the hotel’s bar with her hatchet in 1900.

Often, the original terrazzo flooring has no relationship to the new business, making an incongruous link between the two entities. But whether the oddity is noticed by the clientele cashing their checks at the payday loan enterprise located in the former Clover Jewelers store in Las Vegas is anyone’s guess. The same goes for shoppers with diamonds in their eyes in Muskogee, Oklahoma who stride over the name, “Susman’s” to enter Michael’s Jewelry Store.

With the decline in downtown and Main Street shopping, floor signs now mostly advertise only vacant storefronts. Although many are mom and pop enterprises, even once famed commercial chains have not been immune to this trend. From its first shoe store in 1922, Thom McAn expanded to over 1,400 outlets in the 1970s before closing up shop in 1996. Woolworths, started in 1879 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, grew to be one of the world’s largest retail chains. The original “five and dime” store was defunct in the U.S. by 1997. Though the well-known businesses are gone, their signature terrazzo floors remain intact in some locations.

In Douglas, Arizona a tile entryway is all that’s left of the mercantile store once owned by the Phelps Dodge Mining Company. The company store closed up shop sometime before 1991 when the towering smokestacks of the town’s famed Copper Queen smelter were imploded. I fondly recall the excitement of buying provisions at the store in 1986 for a spring camping expedition to nearby Skeleton Canyon, the site of Geronimo’s surrender. The canyon was the site of much bloodshed during Arizona’s territorial days,

and, allegedly, a fortune in buried treasure. We failed to locate the hidden gold bullion but came away with memories that proved much more valuable.

The sense of permanence provided by vintage terrazzo and tile entryways stands in stark contrast to many of the commercial buildings that have been constructed within the past half century. These businesses seem to have a lack of conviction in their future, especially those which advertise themselves using vinyl banners tied to their facades. A strong wind is seemingly all that is necessary to blow away these transient enterprises. Perhaps the current skittish economic climate has something to do with the implied ephemeral qualities in the commercial landscape. In this internet age, brick and mortar businesses need to be spry and respond quickly to the marketplace, which doesn’t bode well for new commercial construction.

So as you train your camera lens up at beautiful signage and architectural details, don’t forget to look down at the ground. You might spy an amazing terrazzo or tile floor created by artisans from decades ago, that’s sure to give you pause and will undoubtedly compliment even the most elegant footwear. ●

OPPOSITE: Eaton Hotel, Wichita, Kansas; Susman’s, Muskogee, Oklahoma.

THIS PAGE: Thom McAn, Durham, North Carolina; Phelps Dodge Mercantile Co., Douglas, Arizona; Hanny’s, Phoenix, Arizona.



RIGHT: On June 26, 1946, the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway opened an Art Moderne passenger depot at Prince Prince, West Virginia. The waiting room, with its terrazzo floor, still displays the Chessie kitten logo. *Photo courtesy www.RoadsideArchitecture.com*

BELOW: Clown, San Diego. *Photo by Dean Jeffrey.*



Spot-Lite Market, Guerrero and 15th streets, San Francisco, California.

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