



National Tile and Stone Authority

NTSA Forensic Principles Series

Why You Need a Tile & Stone Expert

Why Architects, Engineers, General Contractors, and Tile Contractors May Not Be the Right Expert for a Tile & Stone Failure

When a tile or stone installation fails, the first expert retained often shapes the direction of the entire case.

That decision deserves more attention than it usually receives.

Many attorneys naturally turn to an architect, structural engineer, general contractor, or experienced tile contractor. All are respected professionals with valuable expertise. In many construction disputes, they are exactly the right choice.

A tile or stone failure, however, presents a different question.

The issue is no longer how the project was designed, how it was built, or how it should have been installed.

The issue is why it failed.

Those are not necessarily the same disciplines.

Over the years, I've reviewed investigations performed by highly qualified professionals whose conclusions were based on honest effort, sound reasoning, and years of experience. Some of those opinions were correct.

Others were not.

The difference was rarely intelligence or professionalism.

It was specialization.

A Tile Failure Is Not Just a Construction Failure

Tile and stone are often viewed as finish materials.

In reality, they are complex systems.

A successful installation depends on the interaction of numerous components, including the tile or stone itself, setting materials, substrates, movement accommodation, waterproofing, moisture management, environmental conditions, installation methods, manufacturing characteristics, and applicable industry standards.

When one of those systems fails, determining why can become surprisingly complex.

A cracked tile may indicate structural movement.

Or it may not.

A hollow-sounding floor may suggest poor bond.

Or it may not.

Water appearing below a shower may originate from the waterproofing.

Or it may not.

The visible condition is only the beginning of the investigation.

The failure mechanism is something else entirely.

That distinction is where specialization becomes important.

Experience Alone Is Not Enough

Construction experience is invaluable.

So is engineering experience.

So is design experience.

The question is whether that experience matches the questions the investigation must answer.

A structural engineer understands structural behavior.

An architect understands design intent.

A general contractor understands construction sequencing.

A tile contractor understands how to install tile.

A forensic tile and stone expert must understand enough of each discipline to determine which one, if any, explains the failure.

That requires a different approach.

The investigation is not limited to identifying deficiencies.

It must determine whether those deficiencies actually caused or contributed to the reported problem.

Those are two very different questions.

The Investigation Often Begins with an Assumption

By the time an expert becomes involved, the project usually has a story.

The owner believes the contractor made a mistake.

The contractor believes the product was defective.

The manufacturer believes the installation was improper.

Attorneys begin developing legal theories.
Sometimes another expert has already issued an opinion.
All of that information provides useful background.
None of it should determine the investigation.
One of the first responsibilities of a forensic expert is separating assumptions from evidence.
The question is not whether a theory sounds reasonable.
The question is whether the available evidence supports it.
That sounds obvious.
In practice, it is one of the hardest disciplines to maintain.

Asking the Right Questions

I've learned that the quality of an investigation is determined less by the answers than by the questions asked at the beginning.

Instead of asking,

"Who is responsible?"

I first ask,

"What actually failed?"

Those are not the same question.

Did the tile fail?

Did the bond fail?

Did the substrate fail?

Did the waterproofing fail?

Did the product itself comply with the applicable standard?

Has the reported failure mechanism actually been established?

Or has everyone simply accepted an assumption because it appears reasonable?

Those questions often redirect an investigation before destructive testing even begins.

A Real Example

Several years ago, I became involved in a dispute involving what everyone described as a porcelain tile installation.

The allegations focused on workmanship.

The parties debated mortar coverage, installation procedures, and compliance with industry standards.

The investigation appeared headed in one direction.

The first laboratory testing changed everything.

The product did not meet the applicable standard for porcelain tile.

Months had been spent debating whether the installation complied with the requirements for installing porcelain tile before anyone established whether the product was porcelain in the first place.

The investigation wasn't unsuccessful because someone lacked experience.

It went in the wrong direction because the first assumption was never verified.

That lesson has stayed with me.

Before determining why something failed, first make sure you've correctly identified what it is.

The Difference Between an Installer and a Forensic Expert

This is not a criticism of installers.

I've met exceptional tile contractors whose workmanship is among the best I've ever seen.

But installing tile and investigating failures require different skill sets.

An installer's objective is to build the assembly correctly.

A forensic expert's objective is to determine why an existing assembly did not perform as expected.

One creates.

The other reconstructs.

One relies on established procedures.

The other relies on evidence.

Both require experience.

Neither automatically qualifies someone to perform the other's work.

Why This Matters in Litigation

Construction litigation rarely turns on who presents the longest report.

It turns on whose opinion survives scrutiny.

Judges and juries don't decide cases because an expert appears confident.

They decide cases based on whether the opinion is supported by reliable evidence and sound methodology.

That's why selecting the appropriate expert at the beginning of a case matters so much.

The right expert doesn't simply provide answers.

The right expert helps ensure that the investigation asks the correct questions before reaching those answers.

Final Thoughts

Every construction professional has an important role.

Architects.

Engineers.

General contractors.

Manufacturers.

Tile contractors.

Each contributes expertise that may be essential to resolving a dispute.

The challenge is recognizing when the dispute requires something more specialized.

When the central question is why a tile or stone installation failed, the investigation deserves someone whose practice is devoted to understanding those systems, evaluating the evidence objectively, and following that evidence wherever it leads.

Because in the end, the most important question isn't who can offer an opinion.

It's who can offer an opinion that will still stand after every reasonable question has been asked.

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