



Lippage – Causes and Prevention

TDS 164

Lippage of tile and stone installations is increasingly becoming a highly contentious issue in the industry. Often times, expectations far exceed the physical abilities of the tile or stone, or the physical characteristics of the surface on which the tile or stone will be installed to provide for a perfect installation.

Over time, the size of tile and stone modules has increased significantly; a trend which continues today. It was not too long ago when a large format tile was considered to be 12" x 12" (300mm x 300mm) tile. Now, some manufacturers are producing tile that is 4' x 4' (1200mm x 1200mm) or larger. With the increase in module sizes comes the increase for substrate tolerances which are much tighter than the industry guidelines require.

The first question which needs to be answered is: What is lippage? According to ANSI A108.02-4.3.7, Lippage refers to differences in elevation between edges of adjacent tile modules. These differences or perception thereof are influenced by many factors such as;

1. The allowable thickness variation of the tile modules when judged in accordance with manufacturing standards.
2. The allowable warpage of the tile or stone modules.
3. The spacing or separation of each tile module, which would influence a gradual or abrupt change in elevation.
4. Angle of natural or manufactured light accentuating otherwise acceptable variance in modules.
5. Highly reflective surfaces of tile or stone modules accentuating otherwise acceptable variance in the modules.

The Tile Council of North America (TCNA) states "Lippage is a condition where one edge of a tile is higher than an adjacent tile, giving the finished surface an uneven appearance. This condition is inherent in all installation methods and may also be unavoidable due to tile tolerances, in accordance with ANSI A137.1."

The different components and factors which can lead to lippage problems are;

Subsurface Tolerance: According to the TCNA, "Thin-set tile installations have a specified subsurface tolerance, for instance 1/4" in 10' (6mm in 3m) and 1/16" in 1'0" (1.5mm in 0.33m) to conform with ANSI specifications. Because thin-set is not intended to be used in truing or leveling of the work of others, the subsurface typically should not vary by more than 1/16" over 1'0" (1.5mm in 0.33m), nor more than 1/32" (0.8mm) between adjoining edges (e.g. plywood, cmu, cement backer board, etc...). Should the architect/designer require a more stringent tolerance (e.g. 1/8" in 10' {3mm in 3m}), the subsurface specification must reflect that tolerance, or the tile specification must include a separate requirement to bring the 1/4" (6mm) subsurface tolerance into compliance with the 1/8" tolerance desired."

This becomes even more critical as the size of the tile or stone being installed increases. Mosaics on a floor can literally accept most variation in the substrate tolerance due to its small size; large format tile (16" x 16" {400mm x 400mm} or larger) requires a subsurface tolerance that is even more stringent than the industry accepted 1/4" in 10' (6mm in 3m). Essentially, the larger the tile or stone module, the greater the reflection of the unacceptable subsurface tolerance will show up as increased lippage in the finish. The subsurface tolerance is probably the tile contractor's biggest concern in regards to lippage, and, unless a procedure for leveling the floor is included in the contract, is not his fault. Substrates are often not suitably flat to achieve meeting both the owner's expectations and the industry tolerances for allowable lippage.

Grout Joint Width: With the advent of larger tile and stone module sizes comes the desire to have a smooth looking surface as well as one that is easier to maintain. Grout joints that are 1/8" (3mm) or less in width are not uncommon for large format tile; a fact which can greatly exaggerate lippage issues. Subsurface tolerances outside of the allowable range or warping of the tile are much more noticeable when grout joints are tighter. The chart below is the current guideline showing acceptable lippage for typical installations of tile (ANSI A108.02-4.3.7).

Tile Type	Tile Size	Joint Width	Allowable Lippage
Glazed Wall / Mosaics	1" x 1" to 6" x 6" (25 x 25mm to 150 x 150mm)	1/8" (3mm) or less	1/32" (0.8mm)
Quarry	6" x 6" (150 x 150mm) or greater	1/4" (6mm) or greater	1/16" (1.5mm)
Paver	All	1/8" to 1/4" (3mm to 6mm)	1/32" (0.8mm)
Paver	All	1/4" (6mm) or greater	1/16" (1.5mm)

While narrow grout joints may be desirable and expected, joint should not be less than the minimum recommended width as shown in the chart above. Grout joints which are too narrow not only accentuate lippage within acceptable tolerances, it may also create problems in preventing the proper filling of the joint with grout, make it more difficult to keep the grout joint clean, and create potential visual problems when movement joints, within the tile or stone installation, must be wider than the grout joints.

New language is being considered for inclusion in the next revision of the ANSI Manual Specifications for the Installation of Ceramic Tile. The proposed new language is; “To accommodate the range in facial dimensions of the tile supplied for a specific project, the actual grout joint size may, of necessity, vary from the grout joint size specified. The actual grout joint size shall be at least 3 times the actual range of facial dimensions of the tile supplied. Example: for tile having a total variation of 1/16” in facial dimensions, a minimum 3/16” (4.5mm) grout joint shall be used. Nominal centerline of all joints shall be straight and of even width, with due allowances for hand molded or rustic tiles. In no circumstance shall the grout joint be less than 1/16” (1.5mm).”

Warpage: Warpage of tile is natural and is calculated as a percentage of the length of the edge or diagonal being tested. The tolerance range for warpage of tile varies based on size and type of tile, as well as whether the tile is natural, calibrated or rectified. Natural tile (referring to pressed floor tile only) is defined as tiles that are not sized or sorted mechanically. Calibrated tile is defined as tiles that have been sorted to meet a manufacturer’s stated caliber range. Rectified tile is defined as tiles that have had all edges mechanically finished to achieve a more precise facial dimension. The following chart shows allowable warpage for several types of tile;

Tile Type	Warpage Edge Minimum	Warpage Edge Maximum	Warpage Diagonal Minimum	Warpage Diagonal Maximum
Mosaic	-1.00%	1.00%	-0.75%	0.75%
Quarry	-1.50% or -0.18” (-4.6mm) [†]	1.50% or 0.18” (4.6mm) [†]	-1.00% or -0.17” (-4.3mm) [†]	1.00% or 0.17” (4.3mm) [†]
Glazed Wall Tile (Calibrated)	-0.30% or -0.04” (-1.0mm) [†]	0.30% or 0.05” (1.0mm) [†]	-0.30% or -0.05” (-1.3mm) [†]	0.30% or 0.07” (1.8mm) [†]
Glazed Wall Tile (Rectified)	-0.30% or -0.04” (-1.0mm) [†]	0.40% or 0.05” (1.3mm) [†]	-0.30% or -0.05” (-1.3mm) [†]	0.40% or 0.07” (1.8mm) [†]
Pressed Floor Tile (Natural)	-1.00% or -0.12” (-3.1mm) [†]	1.00% or 0.12” (3.1mm) [†]	-0.75% or -0.13” (-3.3mm) [†]	0.75% or 0.13” (3.3mm) [†]
Pressed Floor Tile (Calibrated)	-0.75% or -0.08” (-1.3mm) [†]	0.75% or 0.08” (1.3mm) [†]	-0.50% or -0.08” (-2.0mm) [†]	0.50% or 0.08” (2.0mm) [†]
Pressed Floor Tile (Rectified)	-0.40% or -0.05” (-1.3mm) [†]	0.40% or 0.05” (1.3mm) [†]	-0.40% or -0.07” (-1.8mm) [†]	0.40% or 0.07” (1.8mm) [†]
Porcelain Tile (Calibrated)	-0.75% or -0.09” (-2.3mm) [†]	0.75% or 0.09” (2.3mm) [†]	-0.50% or 0.08” (-1.8mm) [†]	0.50% or 0.08” (2.0mm) [†]
Porcelain Tile (Rectified) smaller than 24” x 24” (600mm x 600mm)	-0.40% or -0.05” (-1.3mm) [†]	0.40% or 0.05” (1.3mm) [†]	-0.40% or -0.07” (-1.8mm) [†]	0.40% or 0.07” (1.8mm) [†]
Porcelain Tile (Rectified) larger than 24” x 24” (600mm x 600mm)	-0.40% or -0.05” (-1.8mm) [†]	0.40% or 0.05” (1.8mm) [†]	-0.40% or -0.07” (-1.8mm) [†]	0.40% or 0.07” (1.8mm) [†]

[†] Whichever is less. For more information on the above chart please refer to ANSI A137.1-2008.

The test method used to determine warpage of tile is ASTM C485 “Standard Test Method for Measuring Warpage of Ceramic Tile” and is calculated by dividing the measured amount the tile deviates from flatness by the length of the edge or diagonal. In the rare instance where tile has a high percentage of warpage, the tile should not be considered commercially viable for floor installations. It should be known that all tiles are warped to some degree because shrinkage of tile is an inherent characteristic during the firing process. How a tile shrinks is dependent upon many factors and no two tiles are exactly alike, so they cannot all shrink exactly the same.

Edge Treatment: The finished edge of the tile may also play a role in the final appearance of a floor in regards to lippage. Tile finished with a square edge is more likely to accentuate lippage as compared to a chamfered edge tile.

Moisture Sensitive Stone: There are some stone products (e.g. green marble, certain agglomerates, and others) which are dimensionally unstable when exposed to moisture. Exposure to moisture on one side of the stone, before or during installation, can cause the stone to curl at the edges and corners causing lippage problems. The use of LATAPOXY® 300 Adhesive is required for installation of moisture sensitive stone products.

Reflective (Polished) Surfaces: Installations with highly polished tile or stone modules may appear to have unacceptable lippage when their reflective surfaces make any unevenness visible. Any variation in the substrate, amount of setting material or warpage in the module, even within allowable tolerances will be visible in the finished installation. The use of a self-leveling underlayment (e.g. LATICRETE® 86 LatiLevel™) or the wet set method of installation may help to prevent some of the factors which can create lippage.

Lighting: Certain lighting conditions can emphasize acceptable lippage tolerances and make them appear significantly worse. As stated in the TCNA Handbook for Ceramic Tile Installation “Use of wall-washer and cove-type lighting, where the lights are located either at the wall/ceiling interface, or mounted directly on the wall, are popular techniques of producing dramatic room lighting effects. When proper backing surfaces, installation materials and methods, and location of light fixtures are not carefully coordinated, these lighting techniques may produce shadows and undesirable effects with ceramic tiles. Similar shadows are created from side lighting interior walls and floors when light shines at that angle through windows and doors.” Lighting is an often overlooked factor when lippage issues are noticed. Please refer to NTCA “Critical Lighting Effects on Tile Installations” for more information.

Layout: Choosing the right pattern layout for tile or stone is important in regards to lippage. For instance, setting large, rectangular tile in a brick pattern can be challenging. Extra attention must be given to subsurface preparation in trying to reconcile 6 junction points for each tile.

Overwhelmingly, the majority of lippage is caused by an uneven substrate or the improper application of thin-set while trying to compensate for irregularities in the substrate. Generally, it is well worth the time and expense to flatten the floor first with a self-leveling underlayment (e.g. LATICRETE 86 LatiLevel), or, a properly screeded mortar bed consisting of LATICRETE 3701 Fortified Mortar Bed; or, LATICRETE 226 Thick Bed Mortar gauged with LATICRETE 3701 Mortar Admix.

There are a few methods to help prevent or minimize lippage issues during installation;

1. Uneven substrate surface – Make sure that the subfloor is within acceptable tolerances based on the tile size and layout pattern. Where applicable, check the floor preparation section of the specification and make sure the architect or designer is aware of any concerns. Use LATICRETE 86 LatiLevel; LATICRETE 3701 Fortified Mortar Bed; or, LATICRETE 226 Thick Bed Mortar gauged with LATICRETE 3701 Mortar Admix to make sure the substrate is flat enough to accept a large format tile or stone installation.
2. Insufficient or uneven thin-set coverage – Follow the National Tile Contractor’s Association (NTCA) guideline E-29 “Bonding Large Size Tile for Coverage, Support and Reduced Lippage”. The use of proper setting methods will help to ensure even mortar application and reduce setting material causes of lippage.
3. Varied tile thickness – Examine tile thickness or get a Master Grade Certificate from the tile manufacturer stating that they meet industry standards. Tiles which are of uneven thickness can be wet set into a mortar bed of LATICRETE 3701 Fortified Mortar Bed; or, LATICRETE 226 Thick Bed Mortar gauged with LATICRETE 3701 Mortar Admix using a slurry bond coat of LATICRETE 254 Platinum (or other thin-set mortar), or a medium bed mortar (e.g. LATICRETE 220 Marble & Granite Mortar, LATICRETE 255 MultiMax™, or LATICRETE 4-XLT) can be used with a larger sized notched trowel.
4. Warping caused by moisture sensitive stone – The only tried and true method to avoid this problem is to use a 100% solids epoxy setting material. LATAPOXY® 300 Adhesive is ideal for installation of green marble, moisture sensitive agglomerate tile or other moisture sensitive tile or stone modules.

It is much easier to take the necessary steps to help avoid lippage before or during installation than it is after lippage has been noticed in a finished installation. For more information on the installation of large format tile and stone please refer to LATICRETE TDS 193 “Installation of Large Format Tile and Stone” available at www.laticrete.com.

Technical Data Sheets are subject to change without notice. For latest revision, check our website at www.laticrete.com
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