

Leaving no stone unturned to find quality materials

○ KEREN BELLOS

Once a favourite in Australian home design, engineered stone has been permanently sidelined, sparking a renewed interest in natural alternatives.

On July 1, a national ban on the use, supply and manufacture of engineered stone products, including benchtops, panels and slabs, was implemented due to health concerns relating to crystalline silica exposure.

However, in Western Australia, installation is still permitted for contracts signed before January 1, provided the work is completed by December 31.

Focusing on the benchtop industry, Trendsetter Homes Design and Strategy Executive Rachel Maree

Smith said the new regulations have had a major impact, leading some manufacturers to close entire arms of their operations while others have reworked their products by using glass instead of silica.

The ban was also a catalyst for creativity, compelling designers and homeowners to explore materials which had previously taken a back seat to engineered stone.

"It's quite exciting, as we're now looking at materials like porcelains that are exceptionally beautiful and hardwearing – almost indestructible," Ms Smith said.

"Natural stones are becoming really popular again due to the variance in stones available.

"Engineered stones had gotten to a stage where the options were

limited to similar looking end products, but with natural stone, we're able to explore the beauty of what's available in nature."

Another standout alternative, Corian has a 50-year legacy and is now gaining traction in the residential market.

Ms Smith said Corian's seamless joins, ultraviolet (UV) stability, repairability and impressive versatility made it an attractive option, especially for those looking to create custom-shaped benchtops with integrated sinks.

"If damaged, Corian can be repaired to its original condition, which is a huge advantage over other materials," she said.

"Corian is also stain resistant and 100 per cent quartz and silica free, so it can be safely cut onsite if needed and installed with seamless joins.

"Its UV stability even makes it suitable for outdoor use – something not all other benchtop products can claim."

Ms Smith said natural stones like marble and quartzite offered unique luxurious looks, which made a statement, while materials like laminate created a more subtle appearance.

Porcelain is an excellent choice

for those seeking the look of natural stone or concrete with less maintenance.

Budget-friendly options include the new silica-free engineered stones, however they are not as striking as other options.

Mixing and matching materials could also be a clever, cost-effective strategy, as seen in a recent Trendsetter Homes custom build pairing a quartzite island bench with a more understated porcelain for the other surfaces.

"By using porcelain, we significantly reduced expenses without compromising on style or quality," Ms Smith said.

"This method allows clients to allocate their budget more efficiently, investing in key areas that deliver the most visual and functional impact while still maintaining an overall harmonious and elegant design."

She said it was crucial to collaborate with a skilled professional who could ensure the quality and precision of the finished product, regardless of the material chosen.



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