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DESIGNING CERAMIC TILES

Ms Pragati Lapalikar, Senior Manager, Prism Johnson Limited; on the process and challenges involved in the design and production of industrial ceramics

The range of Johnson Tiles, customised to cater a variety of environments, involves a rigorous in-house R&D routine as part of the design process. Industrial Designer and Senior Manager, Pragati Lapalikar elaborates on the philosophy, process and challenges encountered, and the influence of a new and advanced technology on the design of ceramic tiles.

PHILOSOPHY

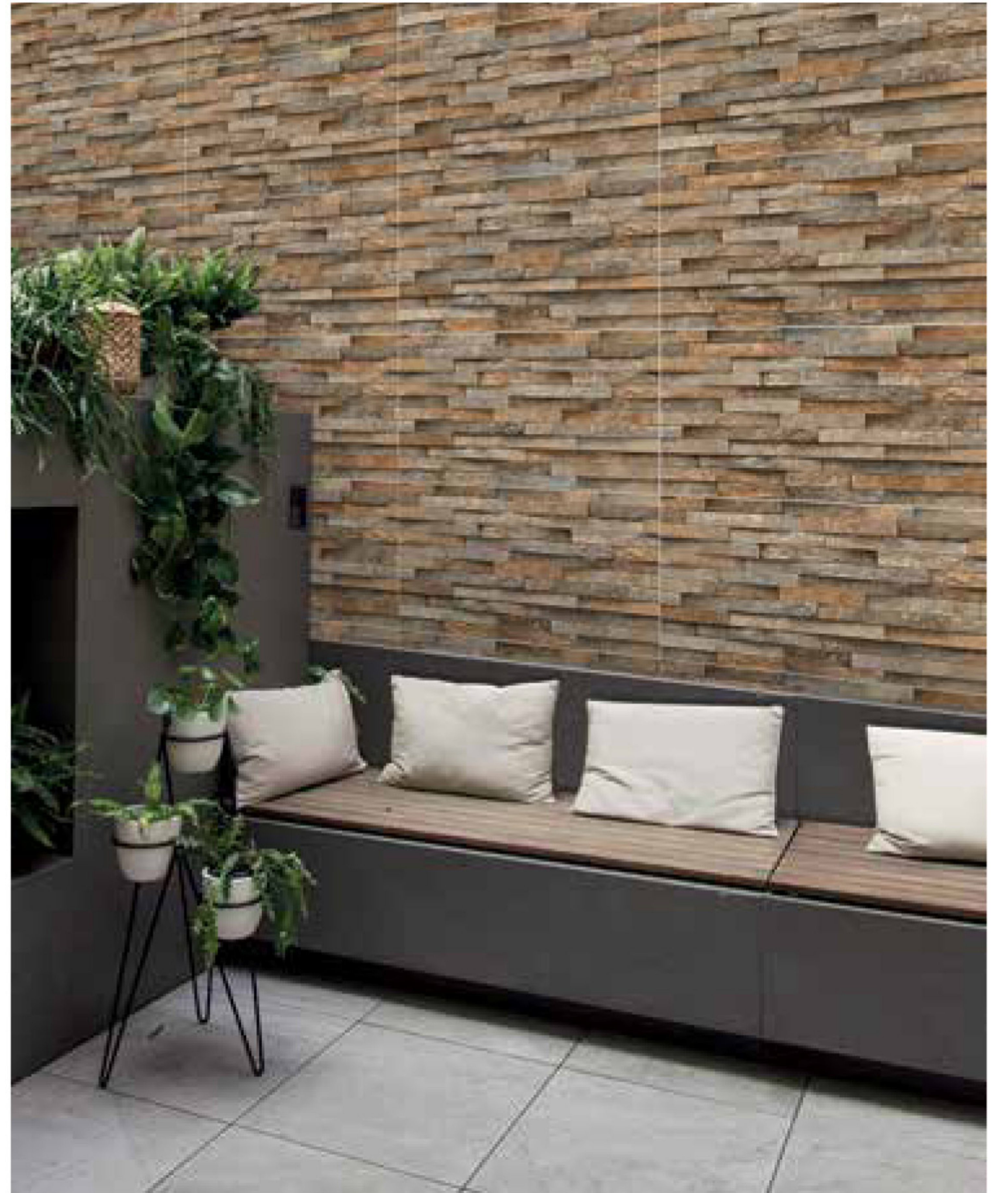
At Johnson, we have a design philosophy which in essence states that ceramic tiles must never be designed in isolation as it is 'an element' of an overall enclosed space as envisioned by the designer along with the end-user/client. The design thinking for our team starts with application in any given environment. It is very contextual in that sense. Our design team comprises designers from diverse backgrounds including the arts. However, unlike an artist, the role of a designer in this case is to cater to a purpose and in doing so establish a commercially successful range of products. From the perspective of functionality, there are limitations to explorations in the third-dimension as far as tiles are concerned, barring some deep textures for wall cladding or rendering some relief work on stones and wooden floor tiles as designs.



PROCESS

The crucial stages in designing ceramic tiles involves an elaborate process where certain activities happen in tandem with certain others, while some of them are just sequential in nature. To briefly explain, some of these stages include:

- Market-research in order to gauge what works in reality and then identify the gaps and potential opportunities to create newer and interesting options.
- Conceptualisation and optimisation of designs since choices of themes vary. In order to stay largely accessible and relevant, we work with multiple design ideas.
- In-plant trials and development of prototypes.
- Finally, we make necessary enhancements and continue to stay involved in production until the first commercial run is completed.



CHALLENGES

Ceramic tile-design involves multiple skill-sets. By virtue of this, the first challenge for us is to appropriately identify and manage talents from diverse backgrounds. The second challenge then is establishing a balance between conventionally successful ideas and probing unconventional territories. There is always the possibility of a hit and miss accounted for where in a design conceived and developed at studio may or may not manifest into a ceramic production. This calls for repeated trials and tribulations, and change-overs as part of a continuous production process.

Personally, I feel the biggest challenge is in the ability to achieve commercial success wherein the sales team goes in to present the design to a fraternity of architects and designers. The risk of miscommunication of an idea behind a design is minimised in collaborative projects as the design team is involved in all stages leading up to production and supply. Most of these challenges can be resolved internally with the help of an effective framework for control within the organisation, making it almost imperative for the design team to interact with the sales and marketing team and vice-versa throughout the process of development.

INFLUENCE OF TECHNOLOGY

If one were to trace back from where we began as a manufacturing unit, many things have changed since the transition of our design studio into a completely digitised space. Today, collaboration with different design studios across the globe, and working with varied materials and methodologies is entirely feasible. Developing software and visualisation tools have added value and this new breed of designers are extremely hands-on with the tools of their time. Technological advancement has brought us one step closer to understanding and addressing market forces which are quite competitive today. With the aid of technology, today we can visualise the end-product with much more clarity than it was possible a few years ago where the errors in the tile could be rectified only once the end-product was realised. Technology has definitely created a more versatile environment for applied design ■

Facing Page: Exterior wall cladding tiles designed for a natural stone-finish look

