

THE RETURN OF THE TRADESMAN

Hundreds of Years Versus a Decade

Why old-world masonry still outlasts the big-box shower — and why homeowners are finally demanding a real tile setter instead of a product catalog

An industry story on planned obsolescence in wet-area construction, the \$14 billion adhesives boom, and the apprenticeship methods that still work

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I read a market report circulating this week that puts a price tag on something every working tile setter already knows.

The report: The global stone and tile adhesives and sealants market- is now valued at \$6.44 billion in 2025. DataM Intelligence (www.datamintelligence.com) now projects it will reach \$14.04 billion by 2035, growing at 8.1 percent a year. The press copy talks about “high-performance installation systems,” “wet environments,” “documented route to approval,” and — buried where only a tradesman would hear the alarm — aftermarket demand from bathroom updates and **waterproofing remediation**.

Read that last phrase again. The growth story is not only new construction. A meaningful slice of the forecast is repair. Failure. Tear-out. REMEDIATION. The second and third bathroom remodel in a house, that should have **never** needed even one!

Japan, the report says, is requalifying systems because renovation work and “higher expectations for long-life building performance” are forcing contractors and suppliers to stop treating tile as a commodity. That sentence should be taped to every big-box aisle that sells cement board, paint-on waterproofing, vinyl membranes, prefabricated foam pans, and other “products” designed to fail, as if they were interchangeable with a mason’s time tested mortar bed.

The industry is selling more product into wet rooms at the same moment those wet rooms are coming apart. That is not a paradox. That is a business model.

What a shower used to be

Before there was a branded membrane with a color and a warranty card, there was a trade. Tile setting sat inside masonry. An apprentice learned to mix mortar; to hang metal lath; to apply a scratch coat and then a brown or float coat; to pack and screed a deck-mud floor to a true slope; to butter the back of a tile and set it into a fresh bed so the unit and the structure became one mineral body.

Those steps are not folklore. They are still written into licensed apprenticeship standards in the United States. Washington and Oregon programs still schedule hundreds of hours on metal lath and scratch coat, thousands of hours setting tile in mortar, and separate blocks for membranes. A tile-setter apprenticeship is commonly six to seven thousand hours. That is not a weekend certification. That is the time it takes to put water-management into a person’s judgment, not only into a data sheet.

The lineage is older than the codes. Roman builders lined baths, cisterns, and aqueducts with opus signinum — lime mortar charged with crushed fired brick and tile — because the ceramic fines made the mix hydraulic and dense. Vitruvius described floor beds in layers. Pliny noted that beaten pottery tempered with lime became “more solid and durable.” Ottoman hammams used brick-lime plasters for the same reason: hot, wet rooms need a body of material

that can live with moisture, not a film that hopes to exclude it. Walk the ruins. The rooms are still rooms. The lining is still lining. Two thousand years is a long product cycle.

A traditional American mud-set shower is the descendant of that thinking, adapted to wood-frame houses. The floor is deck mud — a stiff sand-and-cement mix — packed and sloped by hand to a clamping drain. A liner or bonded membrane sits in its proper plane. Walls are metal lath with a scratch coat of mortar applied over the lath, then a brown or float coat worked to plane. That wall is thick enough to take the tile and thick enough to ignore a little movement. The tile is set in mortar, not perched on a paper-thin skin of adhesive over a panel that was hung with a screw gun on Tuesday and tiled on Wednesday.

When it is done by someone who was taught, that assembly does not “expire.” Demolition crews still open 40- and 50-year-old mud showers and find the mortar as sound as the day it was packed. The tile style is what died. The structure did not.

What a shower became

Walk a big-box retailer’s wet-area aisle and you will see the modern liturgy: cement backer board, fiber-cement board, paint-on membranes, sheet-membrane kits, prefabricated foam pans, and a stack of specialty screws that exist because the whole idea is to hang a factory panel on wood and call it a masonry wall.

These products are not imaginary. Liquid membranes and bonded sheet membranes can meet ANSI A118.10 when they are applied at the specified thickness, with every seam, corner, and penetration treated as a continuous plane. Prefabricated sloped trays remove the guesswork of a first-year slope. Manufacturers invest in training for a reason. A competent setter can make several of these systems perform.

That is not the argument. The argument is what the culture around those products has done to the trade, and what the fasteners do to the water.

The screw is a pipe

Cement board is water-resistant. It is not waterproof. That distinction is printed on the literature and ignored on the job. A typical wall is a grid of corrosion-resistant screws driven into studs on a tight schedule so the panel will not flex. Each screw is a puncture. Each puncture is a potential path. If the membrane that is supposed to cover those heads is thin, skipped, pinholed, cut short at the curb, or never applied at all — and on production bathrooms it is often one of those five — water that moves through grout does not politely stop at the face of the board.

It follows the fastener. It travels along the shank. It wets the face of the stud. Fiber-cement boards with cellulose content will wick. Ordinary cement boards will pass moisture through their pores. A traditional water-in / water-out shower at least assumed that some water would reach a sloped liner and leave through weep holes. A modern “we hung board and rolled pink stuff” shower often has no honest drainage plane behind the tile at all. It has a theory of exclusion, and a thousand holes.

Field teardown after teardown shows the same autopsy: intact tile, stained grout, dark lower board, rusty fastener rings, and studs that look like they spent a decade in a crawl space. The finish lasted. The house did not.

A screw that holds a wet-area substrate to wood is not only a fastener. It is a manufactured capillary. If you do not treat it that way, you are building a leak on a 16-inch grid.

Speed dressed up as progress

Prefab pans and foam boards exist because time is the most expensive thing on a residential job. A mud pan takes a setter who can screed, a mix that has to stand, and a day that cannot be collapsed into a product SKU. A foam tray arrives with the slope already molded. A liquid membrane rolls on like paint. A sheet membrane goes up with a notched trowel and a utility knife. None of that is evil. All of it becomes dangerous when the selling point is that

almost anyone can do it.

That is the quiet substitution. The industry did not only invent better waterproofing. It invented a way to remove the apprentice from the critical path. The skill that used to live in the setter's wrist — mixing mortar, applying a scratch coat, floating a wall, packing a mud bed, bonding tile to a mineral body — was relocated into a branded kit. The kit is easier to specify, easier to warranty on paper, easier to sell through distribution, and much easier to install badly at production speed.

When the kit fails, the aftermarket opens. The same chemical companies that sold the first system sell the remediation system. The market report is candid about this. Aging buildings need bathroom updates and waterproofing repairs. Specification changes and "recurring installation failures" create entry windows. Recurring installation failures, named as a growth driver, should make a homeowner put the tape measure down and ask who is actually coming to the house.

Planned obsolescence did not stop at the driveway

People already understand the pattern in other industries. They just have not been invited to apply it to the wall they shower against.

Automobiles used to be machines you rebuilt. Then styling cycles, proprietary parts, sealed modules, and software that ages out of support trained the public to replace the car instead of keeping it. Appliances followed. Industry life-expectancy tables have long put dishwashers and microwaves near nine years, washers near ten, refrigerators near thirteen, ranges in the mid-teens. Repair is often priced to lose. The product is not a companion for a household. It is a subscription with a plug.

Housing was supposed to be the exception. A house is the longest-lived object most families will ever buy. Masonry, the old tables still say, is among the most durable assemblies in the building. And yet the wet rooms inside that house — the rooms that take the most punishment from water, steam, and daily use — have been quietly redesigned to behave like appliances.

The mechanism of planned obsolescence is not a cartoon villain stamping an expiration date into a bag of thinset. It is more ordinary, and more effective:

- Sell a substrate that can be hung by a carpenter or a handyman instead of built by a mason.
- Pierce that substrate with mechanical fasteners into wood.
- Cover the punctures with a film whose performance depends on thickness, continuity, and the mood of whoever held the roller.
- Tile over it with a product that looks finished on day one.
- When water finds the grid of screws five to twelve years later, sell the remodel.

That is how you get a bathroom that photographs like a magazine and performs like a toaster. The homeowner pays three times: once to build it cheap, once to live with the damage, and once to tear out sound tile because the structure behind it was never a structure. Do that to every bathroom in a house over a lifetime and you have not remodeled. You have rented your own walls from the materials industry.

The construction press has a phrase for the wider pattern: homes assembled to code minimum, with long-lived finishes depending on short-lived layers. Offsite and production building make the temptation worse. Minutes saved on a hundred units become a business. The unit owner inherits the physics.

A comparison the catalog will not print

Question	Old-world mud-set and masonry bed	Big-box / production kit shower
What is the wall?	Metal lath, scratch coat, and brown coat of Portland cement mortar; a mineral body bonded to the structure	Factory panel screwed to wood studs; board is a product, not a wall
What is the floor?	Hand-screeded deck mud to a true slope; custom shape, custom drain, custom curb	Prefab foam or plastic pan in catalog sizes; slope is molded, not made
How does water leave?	Designed plane: slope, liner or bonded membrane, weeps, mass that can dry	Hope that a thin continuous film never gets a pinhole, a missed screw head, or a cut
Fasteners in the wet plane?	The setting bed is the attachment. You are not building a colander and then painting it shut.	A field of screws. Every one is a channel if the cover coat fails.
Who can build it?	A setter who served time under a mechanic: mixing, packing, sloping, layout, movement joints	A handy person with a screw gun, a roller, and a YouTube confidence
What fails first?	Usually the fashion of the tile, decades later	Often the unseen layer: membrane, fastener, paper face, stud
Honest service life	A generation to a lifetime when the work is real	A product cycle. Plenty of showers are in trouble before the kids leave home.
Who profits from failure?	Almost no one. A mud shower that lasts is a finished relationship.	The same supply chain that sold the first kit, plus the remodeler who opens the wall

The market is admitting the problem in its own language

Return to the OpenPR forecast for a moment, because it is more revealing than it means to be. Premium demand, the analysts say, concentrates where installation risk is expensive: hospitality, healthcare, retail, transport, public buildings, high-rises, refurbishment. In those rooms, a callback is not a coupon. It is a closed floor, a lawsuit, a brand stain. So the specification tightens. Systems must prove they bond, resist water, handle movement, and survive the installer.

That is the tell. When the owner is a hotel or a hospital, nobody is shopping the cheapest five-gallon pail and a handyman. When the owner is a family standing under fluorescent lights on a Saturday, the same industry is happy to sell the appearance of a system. Japan's requalification story is the adult version of the same pressure: long-life performance, not lowest first cost.

Homeowners are beginning to apply that standard to their own houses. That is the shift inside the trade that does not show up as a CAGR, but every serious setter is hearing it on estimates. People have torn out a seven-year-old shower. They have smelled the wall. They have been told the tile is fine and the house is not. They are done confusing a product name with a craftsman.

Handyman, installer, artist

There is a hierarchy, and homeowners are finally learning to see it.

A handyman can hang board, roll a membrane, and set tile that looks acceptable in photographs. Some of that work will survive. A lot of it will not, because water is not impressed by a straight grout line. Water interrogates corners, niches, benches, valve stems, curb returns, and every screw that never received a continuous coat.

A production installer can be faster and cleaner than a handyman and still be a kit operator. Speed is not the same as understanding. Following a manufacturer's steps is not the same as knowing why a movement joint belongs where the plane changes, why a shower needs a slope you can feel with a level and not only a molded tray, why a counter wants a setting bed that will not telegraph every ripple in a cheap plywood top.

A tradesman is someone who went through an apprenticeship or the long equivalent of one: years under a mechanic who would tear work out rather than hide it. That person has inherited tricks that do not fit on a bag. How wet the scratch wants to be. How a packed wall tells you it is ready. How to build a pan that drains in a house that is not square. How to treat a stone threshold so it does not become a dam. How to waterproof a niche without turning it into a hidden bucket. Those are not “hacks.” They are the residue of centuries of wet-room work, from Roman baths through European masonry shops through American union halls.

An artist in this trade is not someone who arranges pretty mosaics and leaves the wet plane to chance. The art is the whole assembly. Pattern, plane, slope, movement, stone selection, and the humility to know that the part you will never see again is the part that matters.

If the person quoting your shower cannot talk for ten minutes about what happens to water after it passes the grout, you are not hiring a tile setter. You are hiring a finish carpenter who owns a wet saw.

Build it once. Build it right.

A current of the culture has turned. Younger owners who watched their parents remodel the same bathroom twice are asking for the opposite of disposable design. They want one demolition, one correct substrate, one setting bed, one lifetime of use. They are willing to wait for a setter who still applies a real mortar wall and packs a mud bed. They are willing to pay for hours that do not look dramatic on a time-lapse. They would rather live with last century's method than next quarter's product launch.

That is not nostalgia. It is accounting. A mud-set shower costs more on day one because it contains more skilled labor and more mineral mass. It costs less across a life because it does not ask the house to be opened like an appliance. The same logic holds for a floor set over a proper mortar bed or an uncoupling assembly that is actually detailed, and for a stone counter that is supported and sealed like a piece of architecture instead of a box-store slab dropped on clips.

A publicly traded building-products company does not hate you, your family, or your bathroom. It answers ONLY to a stock price. Quarterly earnings reward sales volume, short replacement cycles, and a renovation market that never runs out of wet, moldy, rotting, framing. That is the same pressure that taught Detroit to sell the next model year, instead of a lifelong auto. And the appliance makers to price a repair higher than a replacement. The adhesives forecast exploding to \$14 billion is, in part, a map of that appetite. They are counting on the extinction of lifetime tile showers, and wet areas, in homes and businesses for guaranteed huge profits.

The recommendation is simple, and it is the one the catalog cannot print.

Do not let a weekend installer hang cement board in a shower and call the punctures a wall. Do not confuse a rolled membrane with a masonry tradition. Do not buy the idea that a foam pan and a brand warranty are the same thing as a sloped mortar bed floor packed by someone who has failed and been corrected in an apprenticeship. Hire an old-School tile installer — a real one, a person who can still hang lath, pack a bed, slope a pan, and set stone understanding water is a persistent, determined molecule. Have that person do the showers, the wet floors, the counters that will see standing water.

Build it once. Build it right. Use the expertise of the last several centuries, not the quarterly talking points of people who need you to remodel ten times. The Romans did not have a big-box aisle. They had a method, a mix, and a standard of work that assumed the building should outlast the men who built it. That standard is not antique. It is the only one that has ever been proven in a wet room.

The industry is beginning to say so, even when it thinks it is only talking about market share. Homeowners are saying so with their checkbooks. The tradesmen who kept the old methods alive while the catalogs got louder are no longer a curiosity. They are the correction.

Field note from the setter

I still mix sand and cement into mortar, apply a scratch coat, float a wall, and pack a mud bed. I still treat a shower as a small piece of masonry inside a wood house. I still believe the cheapest bathroom you will ever own is the one you do not have to tear out. If you want a handyman special, the big-box aisle is open and the screws are on sale. If you want work that belongs to the long tradition — baths that outlast fashions, floors that do not telegraph every fastener, counters that do not become a second project — hire the tradesman. Hire the apprenticeship. Hire the person who will still be proud of the wall after the paint has been forgotten.

Sources and context

Market figures: DataM Intelligence report as published on OpenPR, 20 September 2026, “Stone and Tile Adhesives and Sealants Market to Reach US\$14.04 Billion by 2035 as Japan Requalifies High-Performance Installation Systems.” Global market \$6.44 billion (2025) to \$14.04 billion (2035), CAGR 8.1 percent (2026–2035).

Traditional methods: U.S. tile-setter apprenticeship work processes (metal lath, scratch coat, Portland cement mortar beds); Roman opus signinum / cocciopesto waterproof linings described by Vitruvius and Pliny and documented in baths, cisterns, and aqueducts; field accounts of intact mid- and late-20th-century mud-set showers opened in demolition.

Modern systems: manufacturer and trade literature on cement backer board (water-resistant, not waterproof), liquid-applied membranes, sheet-membrane kits, and prefabricated foam pans. Common failure modes documented in trade teardown writing: missing or thin membranes, untreated screw heads, wicking at the base of boards, clogged weeps in hybrid traditional pans.

Obsolescence comparisons: published appliance life-expectancy ranges from housing-industry component studies; broader critiques of production housing assembled to minimum code with short-lived layers behind long-lived finishes.