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The Quest for a Black Ceiling



Photo courtesy of Ceilume.

The rising trend of black ceilings is also an opportunity to upgrade with decorative tile options.

GRATON, CA, 2025-July-02 -- The black ceiling trend continues to gain speed. Bucking decades of white-ceiling orthodoxy, designers are utilizing a black “5th wall” to make spaces more intimate and dramatic. Some retail and hospitality chains are even making this rich overhead darkness an element of their branding. That can send franchise owners scrambling to find a black ceiling solution that meets corporate standards and looks customer-worthy, but doesn’t break the budget. Since many of these locations have suspended grid ceilings, the owner faces a decision whether to try to paint the existing white ceiling tiles, or replace them. One franchisee in Northern California turned the required re-coloring of her ceiling into an opportunity to upgrade from a boring flat surface to a decorative expanse that makes a positive contribution to the design of the space. She found a perfect solution, or rather, it found her.

The Black Ceiling Mandate

Jeri Deatherage, owner of two Bad Ass Coffee of Hawaii franchises in Santa Rosa, CA, faced exactly that dilemma. The coffee chain, founded in 1989, had suffered a severe decline. A new CEO brought together a group of franchisees to help re-design the brand from the ground up. Deatherage was one of them. They simplified the logo from nine colors down to three (which made it much less expensive to print everything), and re-designed the stores, jettisoning the “sunset” color scheme of yellow and orange in favor of teal, brown, and black. Their design mandate dictated a black ceiling.

From a franchisees’ standpoint, the remodel was a considerable financial commitment, but Deatherage went through with it in both stores, to the tune of about \$100,000. Corporate visited the locations before the remodel was complete, and they approved. However, Deatherage had yet to do the black ceiling.

At her location in the Stony Point neighborhood, building management had nixed a black ceiling, so she didn’t have to do that one. The ceiling of the Mark West location, however, had to be done. It hurt, too, because that store had fairly new ceiling tiles. It had survived the Tubbs fire in 2017 that burned down large sections of Santa Rosa, but the mineral fiber ceiling tiles, which are highly absorbent, were permanently damaged by smoke, and they had all been replaced. “I wasn’t too thrilled about having to paint them or buy new ones,” confesses Deatherage.

The rebranding strategy was getting attention while the remodel was still in progress. “I was sitting there talking to a customer, and they were telling me how nice the store was looking,” Deatherage recalls. “I said, ‘Yeah, it’s been crazy doing both stores, all the remodeling... I still have to paint my ceiling. I have to go black.’”

Another customer at the adjacent table said, “I’m not eavesdropping, but I think I can help you.” She was Sonya Yonash, VP and CFO of the company that makes Ceilume thermoformed ceiling tiles, located just 20 minutes away in Graton, CA.

She explained that her company makes tiles to fit the same 2x2 and 2x4 grids as mineral fiber tiles, but Ceilume’s are a different kind of material that is lightweight, non-absorbent, and easy to clean. The thermoformed decorative tiles are made in 16 colors and finishes, not just flat white, and are available in 40 three-dimensional patterns, which allows designers to find a ceiling that can complement virtually any interior space.

Rescued from Flat and White

“A lot of people are simply not aware,” comments Yonash, “that there are many affordable alternatives to flat white tiles. Some of those alternatives, like Ceilume’s, are actually more durable, more stain-resistant, and a better long-term investment than the old tiles.”

Ceilume is a family-owned company that has a long track record of supporting other local businesses in the community. They offered to supply the tiles and help design the ceiling. “She sent me a couple of samples,” relates Deatherage. “I just picked one, and we did it.” She chose Cambridge, a shallow-relief tile that is reminiscent of a coffered ceiling. The new ceiling tiles were simply slide underneath the existing mineral fiber tiles, keeping the insulating properties of the old ceiling while giving it a significant visual upgrade. Oxford, which is identical to the Cambridge pattern but recessed instead of projected, was used for areas at the edge of the ceiling where tiles needed to be cut to fit less than full size grid squares.

The Easy Install

Deatherage's contractor, Tyler King, had never installed thermoformed ceiling tiles before. "It was a pretty quick-to-get-used-to process," he recalls. Cutting the holes for the sprinklers, however, took a little adaption on his part. Ceilume tiles can be cut with snips or scissors, but for perfectly circular openings, King wanted to use a hole saw, same as he usually does with mineral fiber tiles. In order to get clean cuts and to prevent the vinyl material from binding, he simply ran the saw in reverse.

Jeri Deatherage didn't want black ceiling behind the bar. She thought it would be too dark for working. She was able to use Ceilume tiles over the work area - they are non-absorbent and washable, so they are approved under health codes for use in food preparation areas – by getting the same pattern tile, Cambridge, in a neutral gray color called Stone. "You see the contrast, and I think it looks better. Corporate never said anything," she laughs. "Sometimes, you just ask for forgiveness afterwards. It looks really good."

King painted the grid black, which can be a long and tedious job. An alternative to painting is now available, though, unfortunately for him, it wasn't at the time of the remodel. Ceilume's EZ-On Drop Ceiling Grid Covers are plastic strips in black and other complementary colors that snap over the grid transforming it simply and easily.

"I liked the end result," King reflects. "I thought it was pretty impressive for a simple install. It would be pretty nice for art galleries, cafes, hospitals. The entire process was fun, to my mind." All in all, King and his crew of two did the project, about 2000 sf, in 8-10 hours.

Trending Now

"The black ceiling trend is being boosted by the availability of cost-effective decorative tiles," remarks Ceilume's Sonya Yonash. "We're seeing increased sales in black ceilings, and another hot trend, Copper ceilings. When people find out they can have a shiny copper ceiling that looks like early Twentieth Century stamped metal, without paying the skyrocketing price of solid metal, they are delighted."

At Bad Ass Coffee, the black ceiling strategy appears to be breathing new life into the brand. "We get a lot of returning customers," Deatherage explains, visitors to the healthcare center next door, and summertime wine country tourists. "A lot of the same ones come year after year – and they're noticing the ceiling. We get a lot of compliments."

About Ceilume

Ceilume is the leading manufacturer of thermoformed ceiling and wall tiles and panels. The company's roots go back to the pioneers of modular ceilings, when "Mid-Century was Modern." The family-owned business is located in California's wine country and occupies a historic apple-packing warehouse. With an eye on the future, Ceilume's research and development continues to improve interior finish systems to meet changing environmental, performance, and aesthetic needs. For more information, see ceilume.com/pro.

High Resolution Images

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Photo courtesy of Ceilume.
Before (above) and After (below)



Photo courtesy of Ceilume.
The dramatic difference between a flat white ceiling and a decorative black ceiling is shown by these shots of Bad Ass Coffee before and after the installation of the Ceilume tiles. The coffee shop now looks more designed, intentional, and decidedly upscale.



Photos courtesy of Ceilume

Ceilume's very popular Cambridge pattern, above in Black and Stone, creates an attractive look reminiscent of a coffered ceiling.



Photo courtesy of Ceilume.

The ceiling over the food preparation area was tiled with a neutral gray color called Stone, visible on the underside the soffit in back of the bar. Ceilume tiles are approved for use in food preparation areas because they washable and nonabsorbent.

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