

From the weird to the wonderful, the SCIN Gallery is a treasure trove of new and innovative materials - and on its way to becoming a global resource, says director Annabelle Filer

Words Amelia Thorpe Pictures Andrew Meredith

MATERIAL WORLD

essential materials SCIN Gallery

SCIN director Annabelle Filer surrounded by Rezart decorative resin finishes

'WE HAVE A **GREAT OVERVIEW** OF WHAT'S GOING ON IN MATERIALS IN A **COMMERCIAL WAY**, AND THAT HELPS US **PUSH BOUNDARIES**

Annabelle Filer, director, SCIN Gallery



Developed by Denk, Granicism is a mix of crushed granite bound with yeast, made into a clay-like substance that can then be formed into creative stone-look designs



A resin finish made by Advanced Resin Solutions specialist, Rezart, with Sea Balls by Neptutherm behind



Liquid Elements poured resin floor with a super-glossy finish - and impressive resilience under foot



Alkemi is a recycled material made of scraps of waste aluminium flake, solid surface scrap and recycled acrylic, which can be used for horizontal and vertical decorative interior surface applications



The top-floor interior gallery, with central display of stone tiles and slabs from Burlington Stone

The SCIN Gallery calls itself a 'Materials Library and Architectural Resource', which sounds really rather formal. So it's quite a surprise to see – on the gallery's front window, and in even larger letters – the words: 'Fondle & Squeeze'. It's a clue, though, to the lively nature of this business, run by director Annabelle Filer.

Inside there are four floors of new, innovative and inspirational materials, drawn from all sorts of sources, and on show to everyone, professional and private. From the curious, fondle-able Sea Balls by Neptutherm, a natural felted material for thermal and acoustic insulation, to Mycelium Foam Boards, which are 'grown' rather than manufactured using fungi, to a table by designer Jay Watson, which features a thermochromic finish – so the heat of a mug leaves a temporary watermark.

And it all started when Filer, now 46,



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who trained as an architect and set up architectural design practice Filer & Cox with husband Graham Cox in 1989, had an idea. "I was always the one caught having a good old rummage in the sample box," she says. "I loved looking at materials and being courageous in our choice of them when clients would allow us," she recalls.

But creating concept boards was sometimes a frustrating task. "I'd find myself staring at a 3cm sample and wondering what on earth it would look like on a bigger scale. I also never quite

had the range of materials I needed," she adds.

A plan began to bubble away – one that involved creating a materials sourcing and advisory company, a resource with a huge range of surfaces and depth of expertise.

The year was 2003 and Filer called her new business, SCIN, for 'Surfaces Covering Interiors' and pronounced 'skin'. Initially she published a series of interior design toolkits, including collaborations with *Elle Decoration* and *House of Fraser*. "But we soon discovered that it was professionals, rather than consumers, who were buying them," she explains.

With architects, designers and procurement companies now calling up, she opened a small showroom in Bermondsey in 2005, with the architectural and design community as its focus. It was a successful step: now she has

Filer's five

Five innovative materials to tempt kitchen and bathroom designers

Rezart – this decorative resin finish would make very individual and personalised splashbacks

Manipulated Slate on wood by Anthony Gregg as pictured on page 71

Liquid Elements – a poured resin floor that can be used in wet environments with texture added to create additional slip resistance

ECOM4Tile by Ceracasa – this porcelain floor and wall tile contains Phase Changing Materials – PCMs – that act as a buffer in the surface of the tile to absorb heat and then release it into the environment when needed

Alulife – recycled aluminium tiles that can be used for countertops, flooring and wall panelling



David Clouting's products, including the printed film Glasen that is laminated to the back of glass for a high-gloss effect, Decotile vinyl tiles, self-adhesive decorative Interior Film, and Deco Foil PVC foils



Vives wall and floor porcelain tiles, including slip-resistant ranges, wood-look and textured stone-look collections, on display in the first-floor architectural product area, with tripod-style information panel



Dress Code tables, designed by Fukutoshi Ueno, and shown by Matilda, a company that promotes Australia's best product designers

The ground-floor gallery space, used to display new materials and work by up-and-coming designers



SCIN director Annabelle Filer

business profile

The SCIN Gallery

Who are we? Annabelle Filer, director

Where are we? Morelands, 27 Old Street, London EC1V 9HL.

Tel: 0207 357 7574. www.scin.co.uk

What we do Materials sourcing and advisory company

Business history Founded by Annabelle Filer in 2003, SCIN opened its new gallery on Old Street in September 2011. Filer is currently a guest lecturer on the Textiles Future course at Central Saint Martins, and has judged a number of surface design awards

Sales stats Current annual turnover is about £1m

Staffing levels Eight including Filer, a librarian, researchers, events staff, office manager, accountant

Favourite aspect of job "The unknown," says Filer

Least favourite aspect of job "Sometimes – and only sometimes – the unknown can be a problem too"

Strange but true "I was once asked, 'Is leather waterproof?' And I replied, 'Have you ever seen a soggy cow?'"



Boxes and drawers full of material samples in the basement library, also known as the 'rummage room'



Samples of sustainable worktop material PaperStone, top and bottom, made of recycled paper, resins and natural pigments, and in between, Envirowall panel product made from either waste straw or recycled newspaper and magazines, designed to provide a cost-effective eco alternative to MDF, chipboard and plasterboard

11,000 subscribers, and moved to a brand-new 3,500sq ft showroom, a stone's throw from the Barbican in the heart of the Clerkenwell design district, in September last year.

While the ground floor is laid out, gallery-style, with changing exhibitions of innovations in materials and the work of new designers, there's a floor of architectural materials and one of interior surfaces above. Here, as a manufacturer, if your product catches Filer's discerning eye, you can pay for space to exhibit. "We are quite transparent about it," she says. "And it's a relatively low-cost way of displaying your product in an inspirational setting and it's all looked after by us. We're well connected and have developed a really good and trusted bond with the architectural and design community."

Downstairs in the basement library, also known as the 'rummage room',

is a collection of about 1,000 materials to poke and prod. All the samples are currently being bar-coded, so, once registered, visitors can zap them to obtain full information about the material, its technical properties and characteristics. They can look for free, but if visitors want specific advice from Filer and her team, consultancy rates are from £100 per hour.

So how does Filer choose what goes into the gallery? "All the materials must have something that makes the back of my neck tingle," she laughs. "They can be pretty mundane or very tactile or super-smart: the key is that they must have incredible market potential."

About 20% of the library is devoted to eco materials. "I'm constantly being asked to clear the fog around sustainable materials," she says, adding that she is a fan of introducing an accreditation system to help purchasers assess the

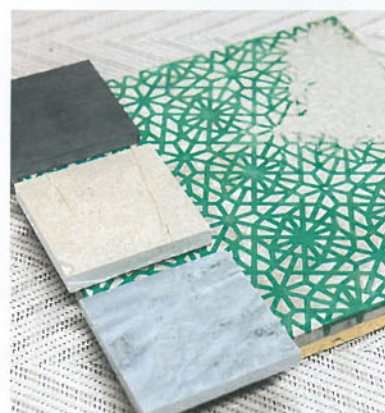
eco-credentials of each product.

"It's not just what materials are made from, but it's also about designing without waste, the longevity of the material and its potential for re-use, the energy embodiment of the material including its transportation. As we shift towards designing for a more sustainable environment, materials are fundamental to this change."

While there are some other materials libraries in the UK, most are either affiliated to universities or to a manufacturer. "We are probably the largest independent materials company in the UK," says Filer. She has already been approached to take her business model abroad. "We have a great overview of what's going on in materials in a commercial way, and that helps us push boundaries. I do think we have the potential to go global – we are a scale-able resource."



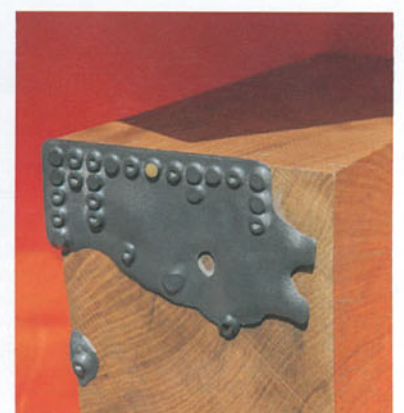
Alusion cellular aluminium foam material forms the backdrop to Alulife recycled aluminium tiles and Textilglass fabric behind glass from Bluestein



Natural stone samples from Burlington Stone on a concrete and plastic fretwork tile by Patrik Petterson, on Bolon woven vinyl flooring



Samples of flooring, including Opus Slate Ferra vinyl from Karndean, top



Manipulated slate on wood by Anthony Gregg