

Werner Schlüter: a revolutionary idea



When Werner Schlüter developed Schlüter-SCHIENE—a profile for clean finishing edges of tile coverings—40 years ago, no one could foresee that his idea would eventually turn into a global company with over 1,000 employees.

"An idea is no substitute for work," the well-known sociologist Max Weber once said. While that is undisputed, a good idea can make work more convenient, easier and more efficient. Precisely such an idea occurred to Werner Schlüter in **1975** during his daily work as a master tile installer.

At the time, Schlüter was facing the challenge of creating a clean finishing edge at the transition from the tiles to the adjoining floor coverings in a bathroom with five doors. He also had to securely protect the edges of a Florentine mosaic installed in the thin-set screed. "I needed a solution," Werner Schlüter recalls, "but such a product simply was not on the market at the time."

This prompted the master tile installer to address the development on his own.

As he was thinking about the way his solution would meet these requirements, he came up with the idea of an L-shaped, metal profile with a flat, wide, and perforated anchoring leg that could be





1. The "original" is turning 40. The picture shows the first model of Schlüter-SCHIENE.
2. Schlüter-SCHIENE-ES, the classic stainless steel profile, is now also available with the patented joint spacer
3. The company headquarters of Schlüter-Systems in Iserlohn
4. Werner Schlüter in product development, mid 1980s

embedded in the tile adhesive and a shorter, thicker leg that matched the height of the tile. Using a drawing and the help of a toolmaker friend, Schlüter subsequently created the first prototype of the new product for an initial sample assembly and successful practical test.

Patent with potential

Werner Schlüter of course recognised the value of his invention. After all, he was probably not the only tile installer to have encountered similar

problems in his working reality. That insight prompted him to file a utility model of a "floor profile" with the German Patent Office in Munich on June 24, **1975**, which would become the basis of further patent filings in Germany and abroad. The patent was officially granted on October 23 of the same year to safeguard the intellectual property rights to the invention.

Nevertheless, Schlüter had no inkling that it was the starting point of a success story that has lasted for over 40 years and that several 100 million

linear meters of Schlüter profiles would eventually be installed worldwide. "I would have never imagined such a development back then. After all, we only had five product types made of brass when we started," says Schlüter in retrospect.

Although profile sales were originally intended as a "side line" to supplement the tile installation business, they were managed professionally from the start. The first profile series made of brass was defined in five lengths for serial production. "We then turned to an ad-

vertising specialist to develop our first brochure and the product name "Schlüter-SCHIENE" was born," recounts Werner Schlüter. To this day, tile installers make reference to M60, M80, M100, M125 and M150—the product designations of the first SCHIENE series, which can still be found in the company's product portfolio. Additional heights—18.5 and 20 mm—were added in **1976**, along with the first aluminium and anodised aluminium profiles.

Although the master tile installer had no formal sales ex-

perience, he has always had a keen sense of industry demand. "In Germany, Schlüter-SCHIENE became quickly known in the industry from advertisements in technical publications and brochure mailings so that even our first-year sales were considerable. Right from the start, I tried to integrate tile wholesalers into the distribution system," Schlüter explains. His concept was simple: "I wanted to make Schlüter-SCHIENE available to tile installers wherever they purchased tiles and adhesive." The combination of promotion and sales strategy quickly led to so much success that the booming business soon outgrew the warehouse space adjacent to the tile installation business.

Schiene as a trailblazer

In **1979**, the company moved to a new operations building with a floor space of approx.

700 m² on Schmölestraße in Iserlohn, where its headquarters remains to this day, although the premises have grown to over 100,000 m². In the meantime, the Schlüter profile assortment had been significantly expanded. In addition to brass and aluminium versions, SCHIENE also became available with colour coatings or in varieties made of coloured plastic. These would later be sold under the brand name Schlüter-JOLLY. Following the company motto, "Practical solutions from an expert source," Werner Schlüter developed and optimised Schlüter-SCHIENE further. In **1981**, it was modified with a newly patented, specially shaped finishing leg with a broadened profile head. In this context, the previous oval perforations of the anchoring leg were replaced with the well-known trapezoid perforations. The three trapezoids are now an internationally regis-

tered trademark as one of the company logos.

The first Schlüter-SCHIENE profiles made of stainless steel were manufactured and sold in the early **1990s**. "Our decision to include this material in our assortment was based on an early recognition of the trend toward this material," recalls Werner Schlüter.

Other milestone innovations for Schlüter-SCHIENE included the introduction of the patented joint spacer in **2001**. A joint spacer, which is available from profile heights of 6 mm, precisely defines a joint chamber with the tile, creating a consistently neat joint appearance with simple and reliable installation.

With the market launch of Schlüter-SCHIENE-ES, the stainless steel version of the profile, the high-quality classic is now available with the patented joint spacer just in time for the 40th product anniversary. Tile installers can now choose

whether to use the proven stainless steel profile with or without joint spacer. SCHIENE-ES is available in three lengths and four heights, in a stainless steel and brushed stainless steel version.

The profile of innovation

"The profile of innovation" has been another company motto not only promoted, but also actively turned into reality by Werner Schlüter, for example by integrating finishing legs with other shapes and functions into the trapezoid perforated anchoring leg. These additions made Schlüter-SCHIENE the trailblazer for movement joint profiles, another new introduction in the world of tiles, in **1985**.

Schlüter stair nosing profiles, which came on the market in 1987, represented another intelligent problem solution offered by the company. These





profiles not only protect the edges of tiled stair steps from heavy mechanical stresses, but also reduce the risk of accidents in their slip-resistant version.

Since the ceramic tile industry increasingly adopted the so-called fast-fire process after **1980**, glazed edges for wall corners were no longer offered. This opened up new innovation areas for profiles, and the "Technology and Design with Profiles" assortment grew steadily as new innovative solutions were added.

The various Schlüter-profile types such as RONDEC, QUADDEC, DECO and JOLLY in a variety of materials and finishes document the ongoing innovation process. Schlüter-Systems presented a new dimension of "Technology and Design with Profiles" at BAU **2013** with the introduction of its Illuminated Profile Technology Schlüter-LIPROTEC. The intelligent system allows for unique

design options for tile coverings with a high-quality LED illumination technology.

Becoming a system provider for tile covering assemblies

Based on the development of the Schlüter-TROBA drainage membrane and the previously introduced balcony finishing profiles, Schlüter presented its first system assembly for balconies and terraces in **1983**. This area has been consistently expanded and now includes all relevant construction variants with the corresponding specially designed products.

With Schlüter-DITRA and -KERDI, Schlüter-Systems introduced two special synthetic membranes for bonded uncoupling as well as bonded waterproofing for tile coverings in **1987**. These products offer a reliable, practical solution for tile installers, particular-

ly for installations on problematic substrates. At the same time, they created the basis for the subsequent development of the floor drain systems KERDI-DRAIN and KERDI-LINE, which form a complete system along with specially developed shower trays and waterproofing components, which can be used to build, for example, barrier-free showers.

Schlüter-BEKOTEC, a crack-free screed construction for floating and heated screeds, was developed on the basis of a special studded screed panel, which is covered with a thin layer of approx. 10 mm screed for installation. This product program was expanded to a complete system in **2003**, when the necessary heating components were added to create the company's thermal ceramic comfort floor. Several million square meters of this floor installation have proven permanently free of damage

and particularly energy-efficient.

The idea to use tiled spaces as efficient heating areas also guided the development of the electrical heating system Schlüter-DITRA-HEAT-E.

Thus, the original idea of Schlüter-SCHIENE became the starting point for today's product portfolio of over 10,000 products. With more than 1,000 employees working at eight locations and in numerous service offices, Schlüter-Systems continues to provide reliable service to its domestic and international customers for everything associated with the installation of tiles and natural stone. By the way, this also continues to include the tile installation company where it all began: Fliesen-Schlüter continues to operate to this day and stays in direct contact with tile installation practitioners to ensure all customers can have "More fun with tiles." X

