

Interior Trim

Part I

by Gordon F. Tully

This month, we'll begin discussing some of the tough questions that come up when working with interior trim. Trim can perform one or more of these four functions:

- Cover a joint.
- Enhance the design of a wall or ceiling surface.
- Protect a surface.
- Define a change in finish.

Natural Vs. Painted Finish

By far the hardest and most critical decision to make about standing and running trim is how you are going to finish it.

Painting all trim is simple and foolproof. A variety of woods can be used, as long as the grain will lie down when the wood is painted. Pines, pecan, and birch are commonly used for painted finish.

One of the chief advantages of painting the trim is that almost all the wood windows by the well-known companies are made of pine. If you paint all the trim, it will all match. If the trim is natural finish, nothing but more pine, or fir, will look good next to the pine window frames.

If painted trim is so much easier and more flexible to deal with, then why bother with natural-finish trim? Some reasons:

1. Varnish is a more resilient and scuff-resistant surface than paint, and so looks better than paint after a few years. Put another way, if you want perfection, you have to repaint more often than you have to revarnish.

2. Varnish, being darker, does not show fingerprints and other stains as much as paint.

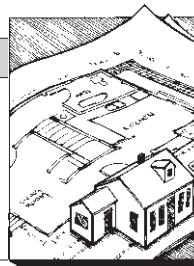
3. Natural wood rings all sorts of emotional bells with people, and makes a house seem warm and cozy.

4. Painted trim sometimes looks odd with natural-finish doors. A mixture of natural-finish and painted trim is possible, but must be handled carefully; to look good. Federal style staircases often have natural-finish treads and handrails, with painted balusters and skirtboards. The result has a very specific character with historic overtones. And in some Modernist homes, white walls, door trim, window trim and baseboards are contrasted with planes of natural-finish wood. The effect is striking and crisp, but leaves the owner with the problem of maintaining very light painted trim.

Baseboards

In my view, baseboards are the crucial element of trim in a house. Why bother with baseboards? Why not just paint the bottom of a wall with glossy paint? A painted stripe at the base of a wall looks unfinished and institutional, and is hard to do as well. It is possible to attach a small piece of trim to form a paint break, but the trim is easily knocked off. A groove in the wall surface will cost as much or more than an applied base.

A wood base has the added advantage that it distributes pressure from a kick or other impact over a

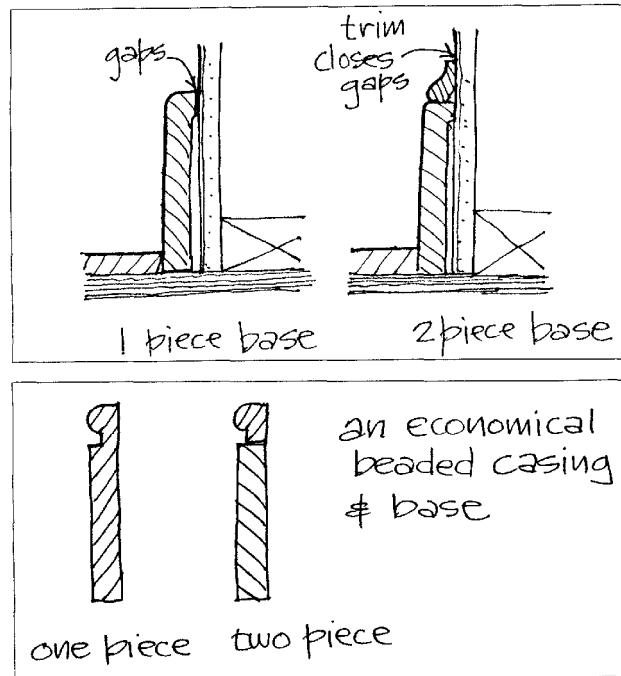


Window Casings

Since we do energy-conserving homes, we are constantly running into the problem of walls that are thicker than the window manufacturers envisioned. Some manufacturers can supply special jamb and head extenders so that the frame comes out even with the surface of the gypsum board. Most of the time our builders run their own extenders.

We always ask whether it is cheaper to return the gypsum board into the window frame, thus avoiding both jamb extenders and casings. While it often is cheaper, the clean, stripped-down appearance is inappropriate in many houses.

As mentioned above, the window trim is an important element in a scheme of natural-finish woodwork. It is possible to stain pine in a moderately good imitation of oak, but as the stain gets darker, the variations in the pine begin to show up more and more, and the effect becomes unconvincing. Here are



inevitable undulations in the plaster or gypsum board wall surface.

If the wall is a well-finished skim-coat plaster job, a one-piece base will usually be acceptable. However, the stock moldings available from places like Brosco are watered down versions of the highly sculpted moldings available in the 19th Century. The "clamshell" door casing is the worst offender; it looks like a classical shape which has melted into a smooth blob. Simple rectangular trim is always preferable and more authentic than poor imitations of classical designs.

It is relatively inexpensive to have a millwork shop run a special one-piece molding of your own design. We use a variation on our two-piece design (see sketch), and more complex forms are possible without breaking the bank. Also, more and more shops are selling older molding designs to satisfy the recent revival of Victorian detailing.

several suggestions as to how to deal with this problem:

- Paint the window and return the gyp board to the window frame, and use a natural-finish stool. This avoids natural-finish trim at the head and jambs.
- Stay with light natural woods such as oak, birch, or ash, and stain the pine windows in imitation.
- Use more pine, or pine and fir, as the natural-finish wood.

Doors, Frames, Casings

Another problem with natural-finish woodwork is the doorframe. Like a window, it typically comes in pine, but unlike a window, it is a wide piece of wood which is highly visible, right at eye level, and very close.

There are fewer good solutions for natural doorframe trim. One is to have special frames run in the same wood as the casings and trim. Another is to use natural-finish pine and fir throughout. Painting the

frame very dark and applying a natural-finish casing might work—although I have never tried it.

Added to the problem is the door itself. A door is one element that should never be painted in a house, because of the hard wear it gets. Flush doors come in almost any wood you like. Stock panelled doors are pine or fir, and unless you personally select them (good luck!) they may not be acceptable looking when stained. Fir doors have boat patches in the panels, and some doors have finger-joints in the frame. A typical pine door has contrasty grain which becomes more pronounced as it is stained darker.

It is possible to find low-priced panelled wood doors, often made of exotic woods. My experience, however, is that you get what you pay for, and you should expect to pay a lot for a good natural-finish wood door.

Next month, we'll discuss trim in kitchens and baths, around stairs, and in other nooks and crannies. ■

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Gordon F. Tully is president of Tully & Ingersoll Architects in Cambridge, Mass.