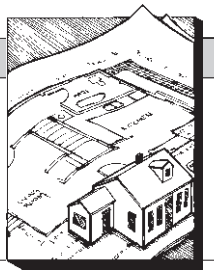


Interior Trim Part II

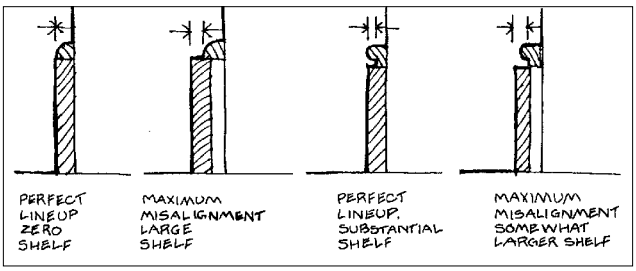
by Gordon F. Tully

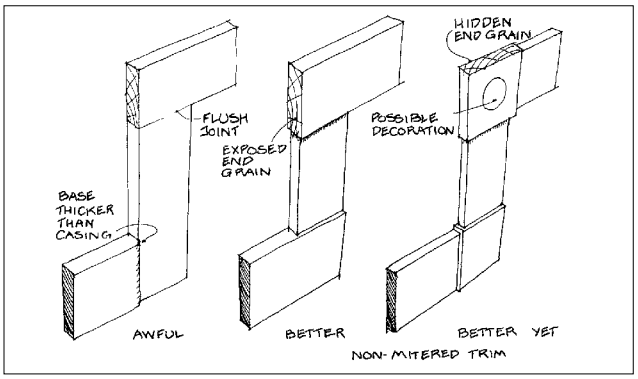
Setbacks

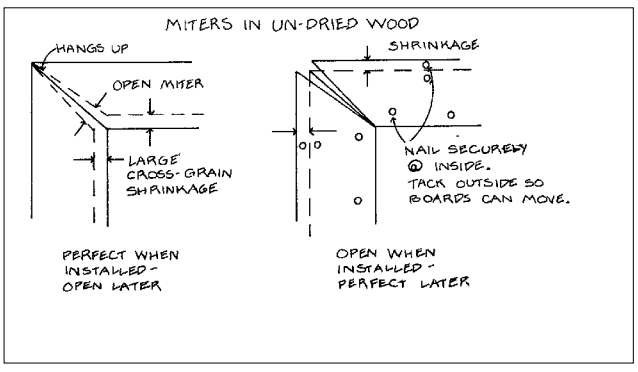
Whenever a setback or shadow line occurs in a building, make sure its width does not vary too much along a piece of trim. Quantifying "too much" is a matter of judgement and experience; ideally the variation between the minimum and maximum setback should not exceed a 12 ratio, and 1:1.5 is much better.

A classic example of this principle occurs when a 1/2-inch quarter-round is placed on top of a 5/8-inch or 9/16-inch baseboard. As the quarter-round base cap moves in and out with the wall, the exposed "shelf' in front will vary from as little as 1/16 inch to as much as 1/4 inch. This variation in the shelf (from 1/8 to 1/4 inch) will be tolerable with the 5/8-inch baseboard but unacceptable with the thinner base, where the variation will be from 1/16 to 1/4 inch.

We solve this problem with the specially run molding shown in the detail (see sketch). The recessed notch creates a substantial shelf even in the minimum case, and substantially reduces the percentage variation in the width of the shelf. The intersection of baseboard and door casing needs some kind of setback. Otherwise, small errors will be exaggerated—it is another example of the principle mentioned above. Since the joint can't be perfect, make it decisively imperfect and you will never notice the small variation from joint to joint. Standard baseboards are from 1/16 to 1/8 inch thinner than standard door casings. If you want them the same size, you can imitate a classical detail which would put a thicker block at the intersection. A similar block can be used at the intersection of the head and jamb casings at doors and windows. These blocks often had decorations in them, such as a button carved in relief. If the baseboard has to be thicker than the casing, set the casing on the baseboard, extend the base just a hair beyond the casing, and if possible, return a miter at the end of the base to cover up the end grain. The same detail can then be used at the head. (See detail.).







Miters

It is impossible to get a perfect miter until the wood has stabilized and the house dried out, which takes up to a year after the building is finished. Most miters which are closed up perfectly at completion will open up at the inside of the miter when the wood shrinks. If this happens, a little spackle at the next coat of paint will cover the gap, while natural finish trim will need some matching wood putty.

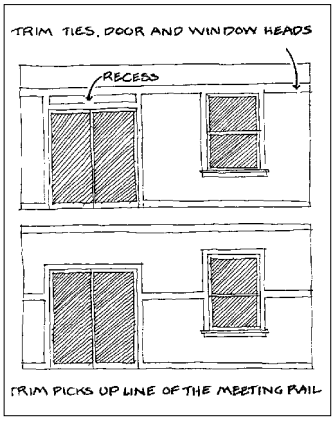
To avoid open miters, open the outside of the miter a bit, and then wait for a few weeks or months before applying the final coat of paint (see sketch). Natural finish trim will close up nicely after being finished.

Line-Ups

It is a very good idea to align window and door heads. Most small houses have so much visual disorder that you should make things align whenever you can.

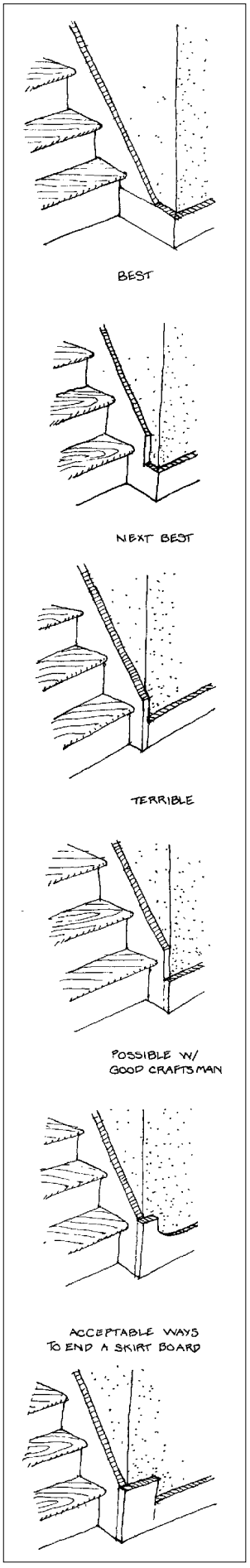
Head alignment can be difficult, however. Window heads at 80 inches are often too low; sliding doors are not the same height as swinging doors; stock window heights may not yield good sill heights if the heads are aligned with the doors.

Leaving aside the problem of the exterior, where visual order is also needed, it is possible to vary the window and door heads as long as some sort of trim ties them together. One possibility is to "spear" all the openings on a piece of trim which runs at about 5 feet from the floor. Another is to run trim at the highest opening and drop down over the lower openings (see sketch). A chair rail may also help. Avoid running vertical trim to the ceiling—horizontal emphasis is always useful in a small room.



Stairs present endless and fascinating trim problems, which deserve a special article or two. But one part of the stair system, the skirtboard, relates to the baseboard. Watch carefully how the skirtboard ends. If the wall stops right near the stair riser, the skirtboard is likely to be very high, and must drop down to meet the baseboard. (See sketch.)

The skirtboard and the base are really the same: if one is painted, the other should be as well. Thus, the finish and character of a stair is



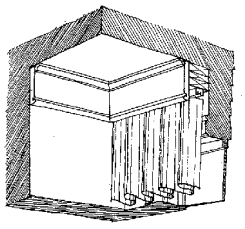
yet another influence on the decision of whether to use painted or natural finish trim.

Finally, I see more and more low-budget jobs (even expensive condos) with no skirtboard at all. I guess the owner is expected to put one in later.

Heating baseboards look pretty awful when they interrupt a natural finish wood base. One expensive solution is to cover the radiator with wood.

Ceiling Moldings

Most modern designs and a lot of low-budget houses omit any trim at the ceiling. Crown and picture moldings are a good idea, because they form a head to the wall at the top, just as the baseboard forms a foot at the bottom. These should be scaled to suit the rest of the trim system. Picture moldings are more useful than crown moldings. If the ceiling is reasonably high, the picture molding can be dropped down from the ceiling, allowing the ceiling paint color to form a sort of hat over the room, with a very nice effect. Pictures can be hung using invisible fishline instead of picture wire. No holes in the wall! The molding can be stock or custom run



CORNICE BECOMES VALANCE

to your design. The picture or crown molding or upper running trim in a room can do double duty as the front of a curtain or lighting valance. In one of our recent projects we held the crown molding in an octagonal room tight to the wall except at the walls with windows, where it was moved out about 5 inches to hide the top of the curtains. (See detail.)

Trim in Kitchens and Baths

While bedrooms, living rooms, dining rooms, family rooms, and closets will usually have the same trim system, kitchens, baths, and utility spaces need special handling.

In the kitchen the recessed kickspace under the cabinets often will have a dark-colored vinyl or rubber base. In some cases, it is best to keep this base throughout the kitchen, knowing that at some point it may meet up with the wood base used in the rest of the house. Often the floor finish in the kitchen changes at the end of a run of counters, creating an appropriate place to change base materials.

If the wood base is brought into the kitchen (we usually do, since we often use wood floors in our kitchens), remember that a 6-inch high base (our standard) will be higher than the toe space at normal-height counters. Don't run a 6-inch wood base right up to the face of a flush cabinet door!

However, sink counters should be at least 38 inches high for normal people, which allows for a 6-inch base under a standard cabinet.

In a tiled space, the base would normally also be tile. Occasionally, tile will meet wood. Such awkward details can usually be avoided by careful detailing.

Heating Baseboards

Remember that heating baseboards look pretty awful when they interrupt a natural finish wood base. One expensive way around this is to cover the baseboard radiator with wood (see my article in the *[NEB]* 12/87) issue. Another is to use painted trim. A third is to use a warm-air heating system. Finally, if you have to use painted metal baseboard heaters, run them from wall to wall.

I hope this brief survey of a tough problem helps your decision-making. I would be grateful for any suggestions from anyone who has come up with an ingenious solution to trim problems, or knows of a good domestic wood for interior trim. ■

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