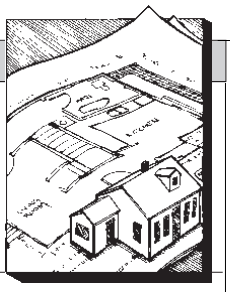


Wood Sidings

by Gordon F. Tully

A design seldom demands a particular kind of cladding. Usually the designer or builder must make hard choices from among a few options. Here are the most important questions to answer when choosing an exterior cladding:

1. Is it available?
2. What is the cost?
3. How long will it last?
4. Is it attractive in itself?
5. Does it support the overall design?
6. How often will it have to be refinished?
7. Is the available labor able to install it properly?
8. Does its use harm the environment?

This discussion will focus on bevelled siding and shingles, a variety of vertical boards (either tongue and groove or battened), and plywood. I have no experience with shakes, but most of what I have to say about shingles also applies to them.

Clapboards and Shingles

Both clapboards and shingles are available in red and white cedar, and occasionally in other woods. If red- or white-cedar bevelled siding is left unfinished, the color variation from board to board will cause unpleasant horizontal stripes. Similar color variations may be pleasing, however, on shingles.

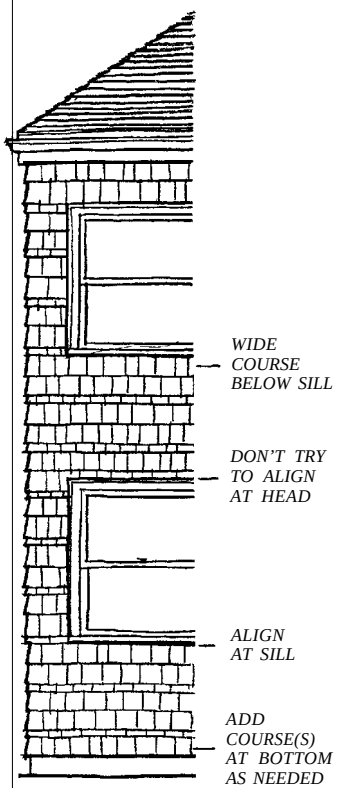
Clapboards should be neither woven nor overlapped at outside corners, so corner boards are necessary. These interrupt the continuous horizontal lines and completely change the appearance of a building. If you want the look of corner boards, it makes sense to use siding.

How to finish bevelled siding is a major decision. The siding usually comes with a smooth side and a rough side. When painted, the smooth side has a sheen that gives the house a look of solidity and formality. Shingles—or the rough side of siding—take stain nicely, but have a rough, informal look.

Some say that the long-term cost of stain versus paint is a toss-up. But stain does not trap moisture and blister, and it does not build up thick layers over time. If you choose to paint clapboards, it's a good idea to drive tongue depressors or nails up under each course to open the joints and allow the wall to breathe. It is also a good idea to back-prime painted clapboards.

The most important difference between stain and paint is probably in the number of colors. There are very few stain colors. If you are interested in a Victorian color scheme, for example, paint is a must.

Shingles, unlike bevelled siding, look fine unfinished. Exposed white cedar is traditional on Cape Cod, where the sea air turns it silver gray. Exposed red cedar gives the traditional "shingle style" look. Today's white cedar, however, comes wet and inferior. It probably has a life span of less than 20 years, particularly when used right on the water where wind erosion takes its toll. Red-cedar shingles can be bought dry, and last longer—perhaps 35 or 40 years.



ALTERNATING SHINGLE COURSING

Both kinds of shingles will mildew and turn black if they stay wet and out of the sun. I have seen cases where each facade of a white-cedar-clad house had a different color because of variation in mildew and exposure to salt air. (I suspect moisture driven out from inside was a prime culprit.)

Unfinished shingles can be beautiful and almost cost-competitive with painted clapboards. They do give an informal quality to the house, though, which some people do not like. Whenever I propose unfinished shingles, I take pains to show the owner examples of what they will look like at various stages in their life. Shingled houses change continuously, and this distresses many people.

An ideal, but more expensive, solution is to stain the shingles. Many people, particularly condo developers, put a coat of bleaching oil on white cedar to turn it gray instantly. Before you do this, take a look at bleached shingles that are two or more years old; they can look like they have acne.

Staining red-cedar shingles produces a wonderful effect if the color is not too strident. From a distance, properly installed, dipped, kiln-dried "perfections" look like slightly shaggy bevelled siding without the corner boards.

Besides the finish, you should pay attention to the coursing options. For windy sites, triple coverage—meaning 5-inch to 5 1/4-inch courses for 16-inch shingles—is the minimum. Elsewhere, having 7 inches to the weather for 18-inch shingles is fine.

One trick, which averages to triple coverage, is to alternate two 7-inch courses with a 2-inch course, using 16- or 18-inch shingles. Make sure the course under the window is not two inches. Otherwise, you'll have to install an apron board, since you can't face-nail short pieces of shingle. If you have trouble making the coursing come out right, take up the slack with an odd-sized extra course at the bottom. You can vary coursing widths by about 10 percent before the variations become noticeable.

Another nice trick is to change coursing width. You can make courses narrower as you go down toward the bottom where the shingles are more exposed. Also, a flare is handsome at the bottom.

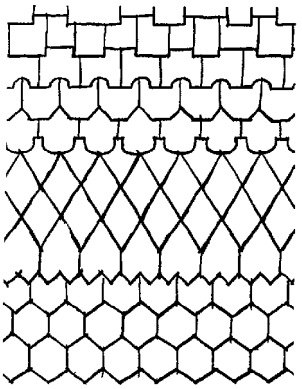
Shingles lend themselves to wonderful decorations, made by cutting the ends in various ways. These decorative systems are surprisingly tricky, so talk to a shingling expert before you draw something that looks pretty but can't be built.

Vertical Boards

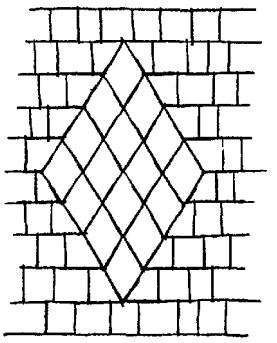
A standby of modern house design in the '60s and '70s was bleached, vertical T&G, red-cedar boards. These are still used, but have their drawbacks. First, the boards are difficult to work with because they often taper and must be shaved off to keep the joints vertical. (If both sides have the same texture, alternate boards can be reversed, thus canceling the taper.) Second, vertical boards require full-height staging for every course. Finally, vertical siding should be used carefully, because it gives a house a boxy, geometric look.

Big vertical boards—barn boards, battened or T&G—can give a nice, informal look to a house. Wider boards are not as prissy-looking as narrow ones, but many people don't like the rustic appearance of barn boards. And, in the long run, they will warp and discolor more than top-quality cedar. They may be much cheaper, however.

An important thing to consider with vertical boards is treatment at the ends. Water can wick up through the end grain if it isn't kept sealed and detailed so the ends do not stand in water. (But what do you do to prevent water from wicking into the bottom of boards where snow piles



CONTINUOUS SHINGLE PATTERNS



'EMBLEM' SHINGLE PATTERN

up against the house?) Be sure that end-to-end joints are bevelled down and out.

Plywood

Occasionally, I need a flat area on the facade to contrast with bevelled siding. Plywood is the natural material, since stucco is usually too costly. Some people use medium-density-overlay (MDO) plywood, the stuff they make road signs out of. I have not tried it. The builders I work with worry about its long-term durability, and about "telegraphing" of football-shaped patches through the paper skin.

To solve the problem, on one house I am using 1/4-inch, exterior-glue birch plywood over 1/2-inch CDX—all over the usual Tyvek-covered sheathing. The joints are battened with small strips, and we have taken great care with the detailing to keep water out at the edges. Between battens, we have face-nailed the panels with box nails, since finish nails won't hold. Next time, I will use glue. Even with all this care, I would be nervous if the panels were not nestled under a three-foot overhang.

Other Issues

In choosing a cladding, you should consider other criteria.

- No material should be chosen without working out the trim system. Bevelled siding requires corner boards; shingles do not.
- Bevelled siding needs window surrounds to go with the corner boards, and so works better with wood windows. Shingles look good running right up to clad windows, and can be cut around the protruding window flanges.
- At some point, all of us will have to face the depletion of irreplaceable woods (just as we will have to reduce or stop our use of Freon-blown foams). Favorite options may become unavailable or unacceptable.

Choose cladding and exterior trim thoughtfully. Design for more than one option, and leave the decision flexible as long as possible until the material, labor supply, and costs are known. ■

A footnote to designers: Many designers, especially young ones, insist on a particular effect even though the materials that achieve it are unreliable, difficult to maintain, or expensive. If you can't use reliable, proven materials and details, at least inform the owner about the situation. It may cost you a special design effect; then again, it may keep you out of court.

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