

Old House Gospel

by Walter Jowers



After ten years of taking apart old houses and putting them back together—from the 1880s Brooklyn remodeled row house I lived in for a year, with its all-white walls and ten-dollar light fixtures; to the 1950s nondescript South Carolina bungalow that I grew up in, with its hardboard- and fiberglass porch built out of spare parts from my father's building business—I've developed more than a few prejudices about renovation projects. Let me share just a few of them with you...

Starting From the Top

Let's start on the outside at the top. If somebody had an old house—any old house built in this continent since the Pilgrims came—and they asked me what kind of roof to put on, I'd tell them to use standing-seam terne metal. Now understand, I wouldn't rip off a repairable slate or tile roof to put on a metal roof. I'd fix what was there. But if the existing roof were shot, I'd choose terne metal. Here's why: In my part of the world, a standing-seam terne metal roof can be installed for \$400 per square, just a little more than twice the cost of a top-quality asphalt shingle job. Considering the fact that the asphalt shingle roof will be shot in 20 years, and the terne roof, properly maintained, will likely be in good shape after 80 years, I'd say the metal roof is the better value, even with the higher up-front cost. Also, terne metal roofs are rich in history. They have been used on houses in this country since the first European settlers came, and they're still used today.

Taking Sides

For years now, preservationists have been fighting hard against vinyl and aluminum siding. Most of the complaints have to do with two things: The installation of the stuff often involves chopping up original details such as window surrounds. The other problem is that most old-house owners want to install vinyl or aluminum siding to cover up peeling paint, which more often than not is the result of some leaky gutter or rising damp problem that doesn't go

away when the siding is installed. So, after the siding is installed, the house rots even faster. These are legitimate complaints. More than a few salespeople are guilty of selling a \$3,000 siding job to somebody who really just needs his gutters fixed; and some installers are guilty of wrecking out-of-square window surrounds when they ought to be cutting siding to fit.

But for those who make their living selling building products, there's the old salesman's axiom, "If a man wants a green suit, turn on a green light." Lots of people *want* to re-side their old houses. Fine. There are a few things,

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though, that builders ought to understand and pass on to their clients, before they sell them on a siding job. First of all, nothing lasts forever. Sooner or later, vinyl or aluminum needs washing, painting, and repairing. How-to magazines are full of articles on how to do these things. The stuff eventually fades and cracks. You can't even promise *stainless steel* for 50 years. And vinyl siding hasn't been around for 50 years, so a pro-rated guarantee is like a 10-year guarantee on caulk. What good is a minuscule refund on old worn-out material, when the non-guaranteed labor costs are the biggest part of the job?

I think wood siding, painted with a good-quality paint, is still the best value for any older house. If the paint falls off after a number of years, you paint it again. No big deal. It's easier than pulling all the vinyl siding off a house and starting over with new siding.

Speaking of paint, a painter friend of mine offers this bit of wisdom: If there's a good local paint manufacturer near where you work, use them. Here in Nashville, we have Warren Paint Company. Just about all of their business is local, and they don't spend a wad on advertising. The result is that their best-quality paint, which is comparable in quality to any nationally-advertised brand, costs about half to two-thirds as much as paint from the big national outfits.

One other thing about paint: I know there's been a lot of research into historical paint colors. I've seen a bunch of college students scraping away with their penknives until one of them finds the bottom coat of paint on a wall somewhere. "Here it is! The original color was a deep red!" So the house gets painted deep red. Pshaw! That "original" red could have been a blood stain, from one of those battles that made the house famous. Or some rust from an old clothesline post.

If you're in the restoration business, it's good to know what colors were popular during certain periods. You don't want to paint a Craftsman house white, or people who know about such things will steer clear of your company in the future. But beyond saving yourself from egregious errors of history and taste, you shouldn't be overly concerned with the historical "appropriateness" of paint colors. Remember this: If somebody suddenly decided that San Francisco should be "interpreted" to the late 1940s, all the houses would be battleship gray.

Inside Info

Inside the house, a few things need mentioning. First of all, there is no good reproduction early-twentieth-century wallpaper. There are some good Victorian reproductions, but the Craftsman and Art Deco wallpapers I've seen just look stupid. Don't recommend them to your clients. If you feel you must show them to your clients, act like you might just be joking. That way, if they hate them, you can just laugh along with them, and if they like them, you can pretend you were smiling because they were so beautiful.

Lighting is another area where people do funny things. I've seen a lot of well-done rehabs where people loaded up the ceiling with a rash of recessed fixtures. Let's face it, in most cases this looks weird. It's not all that hard to restore old lighting fixtures. In next month's column, I'll talk about how to do it. ■

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