

Combining Paint and Natural-Finish Trim

by Gordon Tully

Paint promotes procrastination: build now, decide on the color later. But if you're using any natural finishes on trim, you need to work out the entire system of trim and finishes before you build, so you will know what wood to use where. It helps to classify the trim into groups that you can deal with separately. Certain pieces go together: if one is natural finish or painted, the other should be also.

Floors and Stairway

Since stair treads are really pieces of flooring, natural-finish stair treads go with wood floors. A common way to finish stairs, especially in Colonial houses, is to paint the stair risers and skirtboards, leaving the treads natural. But painted risers scuff easily; in my opinion they should be left natural.

You can easily leave both risers and treads natural if they are caught between two skirtboards. However, if the treads overhang an open skirtboard on one side, and you paint the skirtboard under the extended treads but leave the risers natural, you will create a natural-finish and paint joint where each riser miters into the skirtboard (see Figure 1). I do not like this condition, but it is common in traditional houses.

On the other hand, if you leave the outer skirtboard natural to avoid this color change at the miter, there will be a color change where the baseboard meets the outer skirtboard (unless the baseboard is stained as well). This usually presents no problem at the top of the run, where the skirtboard turns or runs into a wall.

The handrail is best left natural, as paint will wear out. Balusters are independent elements which can either be painted or left natural. The newel posts, however, must be considered carefully, since they interrupt other trim and often extend into the wall below. Unless a natural-finish newel is tied to other natural wood, it can look very isolated, like a piece of architectural salvage just stuck in.

Baseboard, Doors, and Door Trim

Baseboards and door casings should be considered together, because it is awkward to change color at the joint where they meet. Since the jambs are especially vulnerable to chipping and gouging from furniture or kids passing through, the best solution is to leave them and the baseboards natural. And natural-finish door casings and baseboards combine nicely with a natural-finish stairway.

Doors likewise stand up better if they are natural, but since they are such large elements, wood doors have a powerful impact on the overall color scheme. Painted doors in natural wood casings look odd to me. But natural doors within painted frames look very elegant and stand up better to abuse.

Window Surrounds

It is traditional to make window and door casings the same. But it is worthwhile to consider windows separately from doors for several reasons:

- Window casings usually do not abut baseboards, so they do not need the same finish.
- Windows are usually on outside walls, separated from most of the doors.
- Window and door heads don't necessarily line up, so the trim does not have to line up either.

Patio doors complicate the situation: Are they doors or windows? I tend to treat them as windows, although that can result in abutting painted casings to natural-finish baseboards.

Natural-finish window surrounds present two problems. First, a natural-finish surround doesn't reflect as much light into the room as does a surround painted a light color. Second, all but the most expensive windows are made of pine. While pine can be stained with moderate success to resemble oak or birch, it will not look good if you try to match walnut, cherry, or mahogany trim. In those cases you might want to paint the sash and window frame, in contrast with natural-finish casings.

If you choose to paint the window surround, consider returning the

wallboard into the window opening and omitting the casings. This simplifies things considerably. It also completely solves the patio door problem when you have natural baseboards: You merely turn the base into the opening and let it die against the door frame (see Figure 2).

While you can continue the jamb and head detail around all four sides of a window, it looks better and is more practical to make a separate stool which projects out to the sides, perhaps with an apron trim below.

Because window sills must stand up to coffee stains, house plants, bric-a-brac, and sleeping cats, paint is not a good covering. A sill can have a natural finish even if the jambs and head are painted, or it can be made of glass, stone, tile, formica, or practically any other durable material. Don't use marble, however, it is dissolved by carbonated drinks.

Variation Between Rooms

It is perfectly acceptable to change trim systems from room to room, though I tend to emphasize continuity in my designs. The logical place to switch is at the door casing. Half the casing can be painted and the other half left natural, as can one side and the other of the door. Note that the finish on the door hardware can be different on either side of the door — a detail commonly found at bathrooms and doors to the exterior.

Wainscoting and Paneling

Paneling and wainscoting make nice additions to higher-budget jobs. Like other trim, paneling can be painted or left natural, or a combination of both, and can vary from room to room. Paneling finish does not have to match baseboard or door trim finish. I know of a beautiful old dining room with dark paneling adjacent to deep green painted baseboards and door and window casings.

Ceiling Treatment

Beamed ceilings and natural-finish crown moldings add intimacy and visual interest to a room. They make a room more cave-like, although at the expense of reducing reflected light. The reverse trick is also possible: a natural-finish board ceiling interrupted by contrasting beams painted off-white. This effect is quite different from an ordinary beamed ceiling.

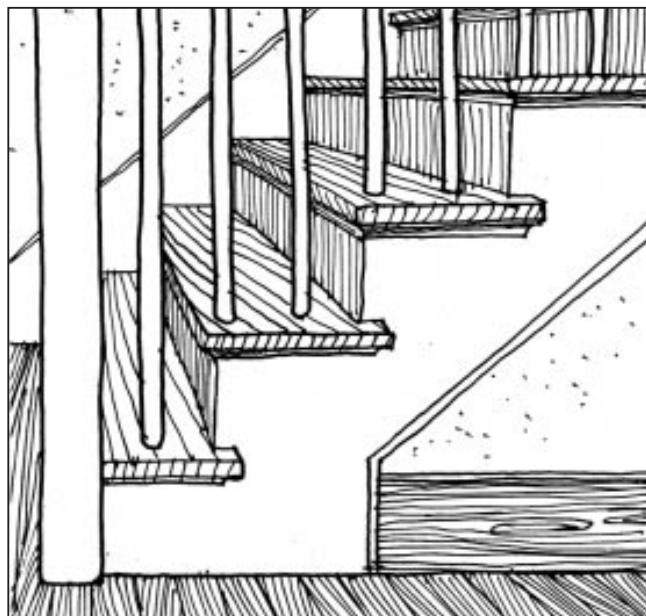


Figure 1. Mixing painted and natural-finish trim can be tricky around stairs. Note how the painted skirtboard seems out of place with the natural-finish risers and baseboard.



Figure 2. Natural-finish baseboard can work well with either painted patio door trim or a plaster return.

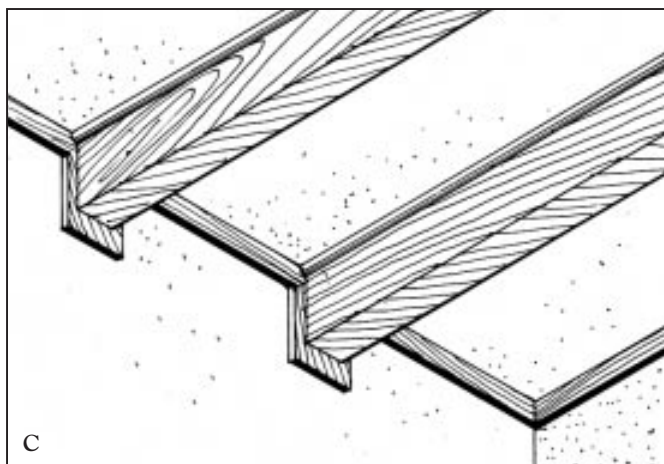
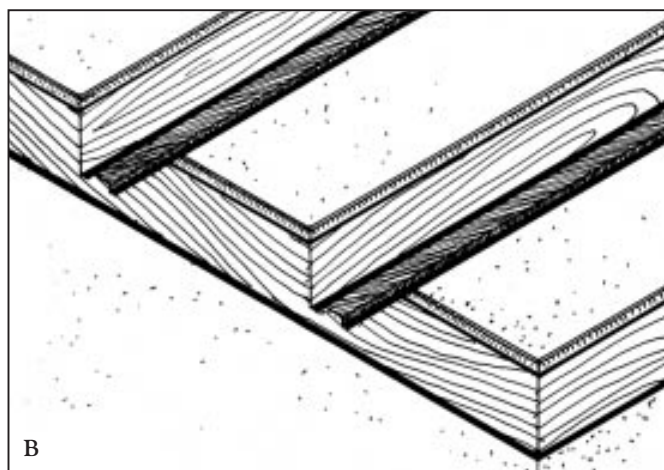
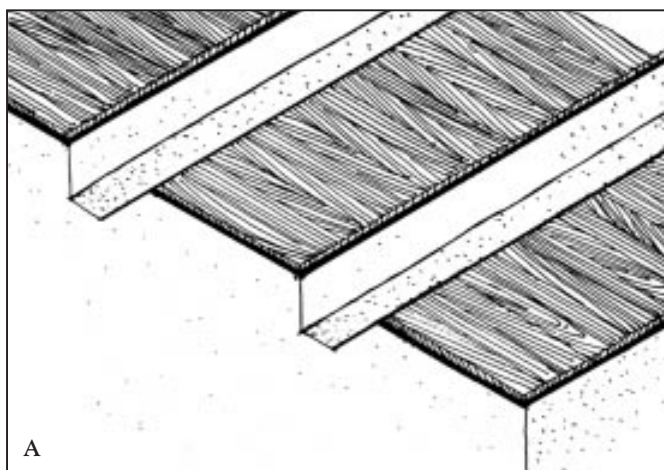


Figure 3. Using painted beams against a natural-finish board ceiling (A) can make a room seem more spacious. When installing natural-finish beams in a painted room, it is important to trim around the beam at the wall. One approach is to run trim boards that are as wide or wider than the beams (B), or natural-finish molding can be run around the beams (C).

While adding interest and intimacy, it lifts a low ceiling, since the areas of wood plank feel like holes in the grid of painted beams (see Figure 3A). If you use a real plank floor above (rather than simply attaching decorative boards to an ordinary ceiling), the ceiling really will be higher than normal, because the floor is thinner. But if you use real planking, make sure you insert a layer of Gyp-crete or other sound-deadening material between the upper finish floor and the planking. Don't simply attach unpainted

wood beams to a painted wall; the beams need some visual support. One approach is to run trim around the room at the same depth as the beams or deeper, creating a completely coffered ceiling as in Figure 3B. Another method is to provide a natural-finish crown molding and carry it around the beams as in Figure 3C. If you can't do either of these, consider painting the beams.

Wall Trim

Several architectural styles popular at the turn of the century

feature bands of natural wood attached to painted or papered walls. This trim, located down from the ceiling, creates a nice division of the wall, tying the room together visually while providing a molding from which to hang pictures.

The most obvious height for this trim is at or just above the door. It can be set lower, however, to "spear" the window and door casings — a useful way to organize windows and doors where the heads don't line up. Set lower, the trim becomes a chair rail.

Remember that whenever you insert contrasting trim, as in this case, you have created two additional paint breaks. There will always be a temptation to save time and money by painting over the trim along with the walls the next time the room is painted. ■

Gordon Tully is an architect practicing in Cambridge, Mass. He also teaches at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.