



ARTICULATING YOUR ARCHITECTURE

BY JEFFREY EDIGER

USING FAUX FINISHES to bring out the true character of your home

“Paint it beige and install carpet to match.” That’s the mantra we’ve learned to heed when preparing a house for resale. It’s not bad advice for homeowners putting their house on the market. The problem is that what began as a bit of strategic advice for last-minute “freshening up,” has grown into an overall design strategy. The fundamental principle is this — when in doubt, keep it neutral.

Neutrality is maintained by dipping only deep enough into the ocean of color to scoop up shades of off-white and pastels. This

acquiescence to neutral colors is certainly understandable — a consequence of the excessive mobility of our age. Living in perpetual uncertainty of being transferred has caused a shift from a domestic attitude to something closer to a nomadic attitude toward our homes. No wonder, then, the homeowner feels the compulsion to maintain the house in a “beige design” mode of perpetual readiness for resale.

But playing it safe is not without consequences. Consider that the word “beige” was originally one of three French terms which referred to the color of cloth in its raw, unbleached and undyed state. Beige is the color of raw stuff. It’s the color of cardboard boxes and burlap bags. (Of course, when it is mixed as a house paint, we add a lot of white so we don’t notice that we’re painting our walls the color of burlap.) When the principle behind this color choice is expanded to become the guideline

for all interior design decisions, what you end up with is a house that is more potential than actual — that is, a “raw house.”

Where do we turn, then, to discover a more effective alternative? The answer lies in a single phrase — architectural finishes. The term is far more than simply a pretentious way of saying the word “paint.” Let’s look at each of the words more closely — first, the word finish.

Finishing has two functions. One function is practical — to provide a protective coating to the surface that is also easy to maintain. The second function is aesthetic and spiritual. Finishes are applied to the raw structural surfaces to create an aesthetically pleasing, deeply welcoming environment in which to dwell.

But the real guidance this phrase offers with respect to interior design decisions comes from the second word — “architectural.” What is being finished? It’s a simple question but one that is often neglected. Indeed, many contemporary “faux finishes” are applied, even by professionals, without the slightest attention to architecture.

It is the architectural space, itself, that we are seeking to enhance with the finishes we choose to apply to its surfaces. And since each architectural space is distinctive, it is not any more effectively finished by applying beige to its surfaces than would be the human body if it were wrapped in burlap!

But what guidance does this suggest for establishing an alternative to “beige design”? An interesting anecdotal experience “from the trenches” may suggest a direction. Painters frequently discover the history of color transformations through which a room’s surfaces have gone when removing outlet covers, pieces of trim that need to be repaired, or any other wall-mounted objects that expose what lies below the surface of the most recent finish. Time and time again, what is revealed is that — somewhere in the past — a color very similar to the one that is about to be painted on the walls has been previously selected. It doesn’t happen all the time. But when it does, there is a comforting sense that the current clients have tapped into an enduring ambience in the room and, therefore, have made a good choice in their selection of color.

But is this any surprise? Even the most color-challenged of men has at least some vague notion of what colors and styles of clothing do or don’t look good on him. (And if he doesn’t, his wife is sure to have told him!) The color of our skin, the build of our bodies, and the persona we exude all contribute to determining a finite range of colors, materials, and styles of clothing that

AVOIDING PAINTING FAUX PAS CHOOSING THE RIGHT DECORATIVE FINISH

VIRTUALLY UNLIMITED IN SCOPE, faux finishes can be used in a variety of ways. Here are some of the tried-and-true techniques.

❑ **COLORWASH** — Mixtures of color shaded together to create clouds of color that blend together. This effect is ideal for kitchens, though it can also be varied to create shadow-like subtle shifts of color that work well in elegant dining and living rooms.

❑ **RAG ROLL** — Rolling a rag through wet glaze to create a more or less saturated abstract figure. This finish works particularly well in bathrooms and bedrooms.

❑ **STRIE** — Sometimes referred to as “dragging,” the strie effect produces thin, organic, vertical lines, producing a rich texture that reminds one of anything from grasscloth to silk.

❑ **LINEN** — Rendering the strie finish in both directions results in a cross-hatched effect, creating the impression of cloth-covered walls — ideal for bathrooms and dining rooms.

❑ **FROTTAGE** — Created by placing newspaper or other absorbent paper on top of wet glaze, smoothing it down, then peeling away. Despite the crudeness of the process, the technique can produce amazingly complex, fractured impressions.

❑ **FEATHER FINISHES** — A featherduster can be used to create rich effects ranging from rice paper to Victorian wallpaper to oriental motifs. These finishes work well in living rooms, dining rooms, and bedrooms.

❑ **METALLIC FINISHES** — Dramatic finishes created with metallic paints work well in foyers and first-floor powder rooms. These finishes also work well on objets d’art and furniture.

❑ **VENETIAN PLASTER** — A mixture of marble dust and lime reder applied with plaster knives and burnished to create a rock-like finish that is as smooth as marble itself. These finishes work well in almost any setting. Be forewarned, though, material costs can be high.

❑ **FAUX MARBLE AND FAUX BOIS (FAKE WOOD)** — Do you have wood pillars flanking a formal entryway? A skilled artisan can transform these humble columns into dramatic imitations of Carrara marble for a fraction of the cost. Similarly, that metal door you installed on your front entryway because of its superior insulation-value can be made to look like the wood of your choice, be it oak, mahogany or bird’s eye maple.

❑ **STAMPING AND STENCILING** — Two ways of creating repetitive motifs that can produce finishes as subtle as imitation damask silk — an elegant dining room finish — to your child’s favorite cartoon figure stamped on his or her bedroom walls.



From clouds on a ceiling to faux tiles on a bathroom wall, decorative painting can produce a variety of creative finishes.



complement our persona. The same goes for architectural space.

Many factors go into determining this optimal range of finishes for a given space — the amount, color and quality of the natural light that fills the space; the purpose for which the space was designed; the kinds of materials that were used in creating the space; the relationship of the space to adjacent spaces (and to the exterior space); and the distinctive architectural style and features of the space. Even the auditory quality of the space — which may be triumphant or contemplative — may suggest the “volume” of the color that is best suited for the space. (What’s that, you’ve never heard of a loud color? How about muted tones? Color isn’t just visual, you know. It has a voice as well.)

These, then, are some of the more pronounced factors that contribute to the character of a space which, in turn, gives some clue as to what range of colors, patterns and materials will finish the space in the most complementary way. By extrapolating from these observations, a general principle of design can be established that, by contrast to “beige design,” can help maximize the livability of the space.

*Used correctly,
decorative finishes
enhance the overall
look and feel of room,
as exemplified in this
two-story entryway.*

THE BEST ARCHITECTURAL FINISHES for a given space, then, are those finishes — there’s always an open-ended range of possibilities — that complement the space most elegantly. That is to say, they give expression to the best qualities of the space much in the same way clothing expresses our own personalities. Elegance combines with eloquence in this equation. The elegant finish makes a statement. Unlike the indeterminacy of “beige,” it stands up and wants to be noticed.

And how do we achieve such an effect? In sharp contrast to “beige design,” it is what can be best termed as “articulating the architecture.” But just what does this mean?

We articulate words when we speak them clearly and distinctly, expressing each syllable both in their separation from other syllables

and in their relationship to one another. But we also use this word to describe a person who knows what he has to say and says it with eloquence. Of such a person, we say that he is “an articulate person.”

A similar process goes on when we articulate architectural space, that is, give definition to it in such a way that its full potential is realized. That is to say, the architectural finish should eloquently express the distinctiveness that is inherent in the space itself.

A sitting room that is distinguished by its meditative atmosphere, for instance, might best be articulated by a velvety architectural finish — a dimensional “suede” finish, for example, that exudes a plush, whisper-like feel. By contrast, a formal dining room featuring a stately air and classical precision in its architectural details might best be articulated with a bold, rich color with crisp lines — a confident striped finish in deep colors, for instance, or perhaps even a red and metallic gold stripe.

To use architectural finish as a means by which to articulate a space



Photo courtesy of Charles Vincent George Design Group



After

Decorative arts painter Jeffrey Ediger tests a sample board of a marble finish that will ultimately be used to transform a concrete mantel into a truly eye-catching fireplace.

is to give expression to the most appealing qualities of that space. By contrast, "beige design" covers up all the distinctive potential of any given space under a blanket of sameness.

Of course, there is a cost to this approach toward design. Neutral design takes a whole lot less effort to achieve than does this more elegant and eloquent approach of articulation. For instance, it is hard to go too far off-course in matching off-white colors. Since they are mostly white, even the most discordant off-white hues have all that white tone to mask the discord. But once you dip into more saturated colors, you have to pay closer attention to matching them.

In the final analysis, salability and livability need not be irreconcilable home improvement values. Understanding the purposes to be served by architectural finishes enables the attentive homeowner to make choices which will simultaneously enhance the value of a house both as an investment and as a place to live.

Studying the distinctive character of each architectural space and rendering finishes that articulate the space in an elegant and eloquent way can transform an otherwise generic community-of-rooms into a truly unique home. ♦

With training through both the Miller-Wageneer and North American schools of decorative arts, Jeffrey Ediger has been working as a decorative arts painter in the Chicagoland area for the past 11 years. He can be reached through www.emergefinishes.com.



Before

THE RED DOOR OF COURAGE

LIKE A LOT OF PEOPLE, my clients were, well, color shy. Their house was white; their rooms, off-white; their furniture, beige. Add to this color shyness the fact that their house sat prominently on one of the busiest streets in town and it is easy to understand why agreeing to his wife's request to paint their front door red was a bold move for the even more color-modest husband.

At the same time, the man was facing a crisis at work. As the chief administrator for his employer, he was in the midst of budget negotiations. Years of deferred maintenance by predecessors had come home to roost. And the lot had fallen to him to deliver the wake-up call that the facilities were badly in need of repair.

Having stripped and sanded multiple layers of paint from the door, I was ready to prime and paint. By the time the man arrived home at the end of the day, the door itself was finished. Briefcase held firmly in his hand, he stepped back to take a look. Pausing briefly, he then raised his shoulders to full stature and declared for all the world to hear — or at least the neighbors — "I have a red door!"

The next morning, my client lingered a moment to chat before making his way to work. He told me again how pleased he was with his red door. In light of what lay in store for him that day, he said, it would be good to recollect his satisfaction with what had been, for both him and his wife, a bold gesture — a risk of high-gloss, fire-engine proportions.

I commiserated with him over the difficulty of having to be the bearer of bad news. Then, as he turned to go, I said, "When you step up to that podium to speak, just say to yourself, 'I have a red door!'"

Home is often our place of respite, our sanctuary. It is where we go to renew our strength, recharge our batteries, and revive our spirits. But home can also be a place for inspiration — where a surprisingly red door can embolden us with courage to face the day.