

Exterior Paint: What Suits My House?

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With spring almost here, many people are beginning to think about painting their homes – be it the trim on an unpainted brick Queen Anne, or the entire body of a previously painted Italianate. For those who own the prior, remember that the East Row Historic District Design Review Guidelines do not allow previously unpainted brick to be painted (just think – one less item on your old home to maintain!). No matter what type of home you own, nearly everyone needs to deal with paint at some point. Of particular interest to many historic homeowners is picking a color scheme. Many historic building owners are concerned with what colors are considered to be appropriate for their home, as well as wanting something that looks good. While the Historic Preservation Office does not control paint colors (with the exception of “intense bright and arresting colors such as florescent green, orange, yellow and similar shades”), the history of your house and its style can help with these decisions.

Before the Civil War, paint was mixed by a local painter, who created the colors according to what his clients desired, and what was readily available. However, by the 1870s, most buildings would have been painted with ready-mixed paint. These were richer and more colorful than paints previously available. As well, popular pattern books and color paint brochures helped to homogenize building colors all over the country, as many owners and contractors now were able to choose from the same palettes, rather than local and regional variations.

What is considered to be historically appropriate is generally more accurate by considering style rather than time period. Colonial Revival homes, for example, had very different color schemes than Arts and Crafts homes, even though their popularity coincided. Colonial Revival homes utilized light colors such as white and pale yellow, while Arts and Crafts homes emphasized simple, natural colors that were already reflected in the architectural elements of the building and the land around it – greens, browns, grays, brick and terra-cotta colors. Arts and Crafts homes had an emphasis on materials, massing, texture and exposed structure, which is the reason that many of the district’s Arts and Crafts-inspired homes were left unpainted. Italianate structures were often painted colors in an attempt to simulate brownstone, sandstone or limestone, often utilizing warm grays, browns and sandy yellows. Queen Anne buildings tended towards deep, rich colors that often created contrasting schemes. Lighter, simpler color schemes were introduced with the later popularity of the Neoclassical and Colonial Revival styles.

The vibrantly painted Victorian buildings popularized in San Francisco called Painted Ladies, while often quite striking, historically speaking are more a product of tastes of the 1970s and 1980s than of owners 100 years ago. Painted Ladies are generally found only in certain areas of the country, most notably California and Florida. In addition, masonry buildings, if painted, tended to be carried out in much more subdued tones than clapboard structures of the same age and style. Even at the height of popularity, polychromy was often limited to a two-toned

paint scheme. This was necessary for simplicity, ease of maintenance and cost. By the end of the 19th century, multicolor schemes were passing out of fashion.

The trim on buildings was also treated differently than many current homeowners may realize. In the first half of the 19th century, the practice of painting the trim a lighter color than the body was in vogue. This was later replaced with the trend of painting trim a bold, contrasting color. Dark red, browns, grays and dark yellows were common colors for body and trim in the late 19th century. While bright colors such as blues and yellows were used, they generally highlighted small details, and were not used on the body or the trim of a Victorian building. The brackets, one of the most visually distinguishable characteristics of Italianate buildings, were predominantly painted in the trim color to match the frieze and soffit of the cornice, as they were meant to demonstrate the supportive nature of the brackets, and were not visually distinguished with another color.

To make certain that your paint job lasts as long as it should, and looks good in the meantime, it is crucial that certain steps are taken. Repainting should always occur before the current paint fails, allowing moisture to penetrate the substrate, and hastening paint deterioration. If moisture problems are evident, it is crucial to identify the source – deteriorated flashing, leaking or missing gutters and downspouts are some of the most common problems – and to repair it before repainting a building. Without fixing the source of the problem, it will only continue to deteriorate, causing a fresh paint job to fail as well. After a job is completed, occasional touch-ups will prolong its life.

Several national brands, including Benjamin Moore, Sherwin Williams and Devco, offer palettes with historical colors. These are a great place to turn to find colors that suit your home. If you are looking for a historically accurate paint scheme, then the colors should be selected from what was available at the time, as well as what suits the style and age of your building. Additionally, consider what the paint job will do to the house from a maintenance perspective. Are more colors or fewer colors good for you? This is something that needs to be kept up and redone over the years. Most importantly, the paint should enhance your building, and therefore be both appealing on it and pleasing to you.

Whether or not you decide to try and replicate a historic paint scheme for your home, or go with something a little different, there are several sources available about historic paint colors and painting techniques that can aid in your endeavor. These include:

- Caring for Your Historic House, published by Heritage Preservation and the National Park Service
- Victorian Exterior Decoration: How to Paint Your Nineteenth-Century American House Authentically, by Roger W. Moss and Gail Caskey Winkler
- Paint in America: The Colors of Historic Buildings, Roger W. Moss, editor

The Historic Preservation Office also has various articles on paint, both exterior and interior, available. If you would like copies, please contact 859.655.6347.