

Side Swiped

By William Crosby

There is no doubt that a "siding job" can, and often does, totally wipe out the original character of a historic building. In the worst cases, all the decorative wood trim is removed from the building, reducing even the most ornate Italianate masterpiece into a featureless box of plastic or aluminum. In the best cases, siding is applied only over existing weatherboards, but its application still decreases the projection of door and window frames, reducing the shadow lines and giving the building a curiously "flat" appearance.

Ninety percent of homeowners who buy siding do so because their houses peel and blister, and may have to be repainted in fewer than 10 years. They do not realize that peeling paint may be symptomatic of a house with too much moisture inside.

As warm, moist indoor air passes through interior walls and hits cold exterior walls, it condenses into water, causing the exterior paint to bubble and peel. Slapping siding on a weeping house can trap moisture, creating an ideal habitat for wood-destroying insects, and causing the material underneath to decay. It is like putting a hat on headache – it just does not fix the problem. Eliminating the major sources of moisture may be all that is needed to end exterior peeling: ventilate kitchens and bathrooms with exhaust fans, vent clothes dryers to the outdoors, install dehumidifiers, and vent crawl spaces.



Before application of synthetic siding.



After application of synthetic siding.

Aluminum will corrode and dent. Vinyl can actually melt and crack and, like all plastic, it expands and contracts. If it is nailed tightly enough to hold through winter, it may expand in distorted, wavy shapes when heated in the summer sun. Once vinyl takes on new, unexpected shapes, it tends to stay that way. Imagine a vinyl record that warps when left out in hot sunlight.

No one likes to paint a house. It is expensive and bothersome, and artificial siding seems like a great alternative. But even though vinyl can be colored throughout, it can still fade. Once it fades – despite the claims of paint manufacturers who are marketing specially formulated paints for vinyl siding – it is very difficult to paint. And once a homeowner begins painting the vinyl, what has he really achieved?

These concerns make it clear that a regular painting schedule and maintenance of wood siding is far preferable to the synthetic stuff. The cold, hard truth is that no material is completely maintenance-free.