

Innovations revive wainscoting tradition

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The best ideas in the world are timeless, and wainscoting is a case in point. It's a classic architectural feature that uses frames and panels of wood fastened to the bottom half of walls to add an atmosphere of beauty and class to a room or staircase. The wainscoting tradition is more than a thousand years old, but it continues to turn heads today because it's simply gorgeous. Wainscoting has also become a whole lot easier and less expensive to install, thanks to a Canadian innovation. Three innovations, in fact.

Until four years ago, if you wanted real wainscoting in your home, you either had to teach yourself to install it, or find one of those rare tradesmen who knew the tricks of this nearly forgotten trade. The widespread lack of wainscoting know-how is why so many homes include fake wainscoting made of thin strips of painted trim glued to drywall. Second-rate details like these create the vague impression of wainscoting, but it's a far cry from the real thing. It's a shortcoming that gave Marino Primozić an idea that's spreading across North America.

Primozić believed that traditional wainscoting could be reintroduced to the Canadian building scene if difficult parts of the construction process were prefabricated ahead of time and sold in the form of ready-to-install wainscoting kits. Using design features that minimize or eliminate the need for on-site cutting and fitting, Primozić launched an online collection of customizable wainscoting systems in 2003.

It must have been a good idea, because his shop, Elite Mouldings (905-760-1665; <http://www.elitetrimworks.com>) can hardly keep up with Internet purchases, much of it coming from south of the border. And part of the reason for his success is an ultra-simple installation process that I got to see first hand when I toured the Elite plant.

The hallmark of all traditional wainscoting is a framework of vertical and horizontal wooden strips called stiles and rails. The challenge has always been getting these parts to join with each other tightly on the wall, with a minimum of fuss. To overcome this hurdle, Primozić has partnered with an international manufacturer of router bits to create something so simple you have to wonder why it never happened before.

The idea is revolutionary: create a single router bit shaped to create matching male and female ends on interlocking wainscoting parts. He took his idea to Freud – an Italian-based router bit company – and they now produce this bit for worldwide sales. It's the same bit used to manufacture Elite wainscoting, while also making the product so easy to install.

In the world of trim and wainscoting, stained wood that allows natural grain patterns to show through is more highly prized than painted woodwork. That's because it looks nicer, but it's also considerably more challenging to install – t least if you're building wainscoting from scratch.

Elite offers both painted and stainable wainscoting kits, but an innovative veneering technique from Quebec has cut the cost of stain-grade wainscoting by more than half. You're going to see this innovation cropping up in all kinds of interior trim products over the next decade.

Veneer is thin slices of high-grade wood, often glued to less expensive substrates. No news there. What's revolutionary, as far as wainscoting goes, is a new technique that allows hardwood veneers to be applied to sharply curved parts that used to be impossible to make from anything other than solid lumber. As it turns out, Canada leads the world in the formulation of chemical treatments that radically soften veneers enough to be wrapped successfully around nearly square corners.

The latest additions to the Elite wainscoting system include veneered products that use this technology. They allow homeowners to enjoy the look and feel of the world's highest quality hardwoods, while making much better use of forest resources, all at reasonable prices.

Besides the fact that authentic wainscoting is now poised to make huge improvements in houses all over the world, you've got to be proud. The innovations that make it possible come right from our own backyard. We may not have invented wainscoting, but Canadians have done a lot to bring it into the 21st century.

Steve Maxwell is technical editor of *Canadian Home Workshop* magazine. Send homebuilding and renovation questions to <http://www.stevemaxwell.ca>. Sorry, but letter volume may prevent individual response.