

# Southern Accents

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# Into the Woods

Designers avow that wood paneling is not part of a trend but an investment that will last the life of a home

WOOD PANELING IS A TIME-HONORED DESIGN element that imparts warmth, beauty, and architectural interest to a space. Dorothy Draper once wrote, "Rooms paneled in wood are, to my mind, the most beautiful homelike places imaginable."

Historically, wood panels provided an opportunity for painted, carved, or gilded details. Today, this sophisticated design element often gives a period look to a room. Practically speaking, wood can also cover up old plaster walls that are in disrepair. However, it is a relatively costly finish that requires careful consideration, says designer Ralph Harvard. "Finding quality wood, laying out the design to

fit a given room, determining correct proportions, and getting the finish right are among the challenges of creating paneled rooms," he explains.

First, consider how light or dark you want the room to be—and expect the wood to darken several shades as it ages.

Walnut, cherry, mahogany, rosewood, and oak (and combinations thereof) are popular choices for formal living and dining rooms, or settings where one might want

**Pecky cypress paneling makes a chic design statement throughout a Florida beach house designed by Tricia Foley. This wood enhances Foley's casual, organic scheme, as well as the sand and sea palette.**

BY JULIA E. LEWIS

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JEFF MCNAMARA

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Designer Mona Hajj used mahogany paneling in this study, making it an inviting place to sit and read. An antique Farahan Sarouk rug and rose-colored upholstery complement the dark walls.

an impression of opulence, luxury, and permanence, such as libraries. To keep a dark-paneled room from seeming gloomy, designer Miles Redd says, "I like to soften the space with a Sultanabad carpet or chintz slipcovers—cozy touches that provide foils for all of that wood."

Most designers agree that, unless paneled walls are painted, they shouldn't contrast too much with the ceiling and floors. In a mahogany room, for example, Harvard suggests covering the ceiling with tea paper. Designer Cindy Smith also prefers a seamless look. "I prefer to see wood

on the ceiling too," she says. "Otherwise, it should be painted an accent color, but never stark white."

For less formal paneled rooms, particularly in more rustic settings, poplar, pine, and cypress are perennial favorites. The latter two frequently appear in Southern homes, notes architect Mark Maresca, who used longleaf pine paneling in the kitchen, solarium, and den of a house in Greenville, South Carolina. The hand-planed planks are a "mellow honey color that complements the homeowners' collections of Oriental rugs, antique furniture

PHOTOGRAPHED BY PIETER ESTERSON



and maps, and botanical prints," he explains.

Pecky cypress, a wood distinguished by deep holes and crevices caused by a fungus that invades older living trees, was fashionable in the 1930s and is still appreciated today. This sculptural wood, which is native to swampy areas throughout the South, proved to be a chic yet practical design statement throughout a Boca Grande, Florida, beach house designed by Tricia Foley. "With its unusual pinkish sandy color and unique texture, the wood paneling is more interesting than plain drywall, and it underscores the casual, indoor-outdoor feel of the house," she says. "Plus, it's a durable, indigenous material that can withstand the local climate. It lives and breathes with the house."

Decorating a wood-paneled room is less problematic than one might imagine. "Wood paneling enhances everything in a room," says Smith. "It is always a handsome backdrop for furniture, provided the woods are compatible, but it generally calls for stronger, textured fabrics that can stand up to the walls, whether they are light or dark." Pale woods, such as longleaf pine, can create a luminous



Architect Mark Maresca specified hand-planed longleaf pine panels of varying widths applied horizontally to create an informal interior in a Greenville, South Carolina, house. In the passageway, a collection of pressed flowers is displayed behind acrylic insets.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JEFF MCNAMARA

space. In a dark-paneled room, however, good lighting is essential. "It doesn't need to be bright," advises Smith. "If the walls are very dark, keep the drama." Harvard agrees but avoids using too many recessed lights: "Dark walls suck up light, so there should always be plenty of lamps and picture lights to create a pleasant glow."

Though some worry about hanging art on paneled walls, Smith maintains that the panels shouldn't be considered too precious. "Think of those lovely old English rooms where there are generations upon generations of paintings that always overlap the panels," she says. Indeed, those precedents illustrate the enduring appeal of the tradition. "Wood paneling creates that cozy, inviting room we all want," says Maresca. ♦

For details, see *Sourcebook*, page 166.

## panel review

Designers offer some pointers on decorating with wood paneling.

- "In a dark-paneled library, line bookshelves with light-colored felt to keep them from looking like black holes," advises designer Ralph Harvard.
- Designer Miles Redd softens a paneled room with velvet or leather insets.
- "Wood can withstand a lot of abuse and activity, which is why it's actually a practical wall surface for hallways and staircases," says designer Tricia Foley. "Paneling can make boring transitional spaces more interesting."
- Architect Mark Maresca loves limed oak. "The finish is aged without looking fake or overdone, and it's a great foil for other woods," he says.
- For any type of wood, "the right finish is crucial," says designer Cindy Smith. Dark stain should be a warm brown that isn't too red or too opaque. "A hand-waxed surface is labor-intensive but worth the effort. You don't want the walls to look too perfect."
- Wood paneling will last a lifetime with very little maintenance. "A gentle dusting with a damp cloth is really all you need to do on a routine basis," says Maresca. "But if the walls need cleaning, use vinegar and water. The panels can be waxed every couple of years to restore luster."
- "If the sky is the limit, I buy antique panels in England or France," says Smith. "But when the budget is tight, some decorative painters can create incredible faux paneling, and there are some great trompe l'oeil wallpapers."



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