

Paint and Color Guidelines

The Detroit Historic Districts Style and Color Guide was originally created and published in 1986. The guide was developed according to the study of architecture styles in designated historic districts and the determination of historically accurate colors for those houses. A basic classification system was developed consisting of twenty-three architecturally stylistic classifications and six color systems. These twenty-three classifications include composite and miscellaneous categories so that every building receives a classification number and corresponding color system.



Paint colors should reflect the historical age and style of the house, show the best features of the design, and represent the current owner's taste.

A house of one period rarely looks good with colors of another period. For example, an 1870s brick or stone house requires a dark sash so that the windows will appear to recede into the facade. A white sash, as would be seen on a Colonial Revival style house of c.1910, makes the windows project, changing

the relationship between the walls and the window openings.

There should be some thought given to the styles and colors used by owners of other houses on the street or throughout the district. By ignoring the historically appropriate palette for house style and district period, the owner risks injecting a discordant note into the neighborhood that may directly influence the appearance and property values of the entire area.

When dealing with historic neighborhoods, it is safer to select colors that are contemporary with the date and style of the house, leaving 'modern' colors for simpler and often characterless suburban homes. This method of selecting colors does not mean that every house in a neighborhood or of a particular period and style should be painted the same color. There is a wide range of attractive color which may be combined in hundreds of ways to provide for individuality with overall neighborhood continuity. All of these combinations are based on colors known to have been available and used in Detroit throughout the 19th and 20th-Centuries.

Color Systems

Nearly all houses built in America prior to World War I were intended to be "defined" by the trimming color(s). Trim color is used



to define wood elements such as corner boards, cornices, and outlining belt courses along the siding. All of these elements are usually painted the major trim color to provide contrast or definitions to the body color. In the same fashion, the vertical and horizontal elements of the porches are painted to provide an outline of color in contrast to the body siding.

- **Unpainted brick, stone, or stucco buildings:** The trim will be one color to provide contrast to the masonry while harmonizing well with the color of the brick, stone, or stucco.
- **Frame or masonry buildings:** The gutters and downspouts should be the same color as the trim to which they are attached.

After the structure has been fully defined in the trim color, additional colors may be introduced if appropriate to the system being followed. A good guideline to follow is: the simpler the design of the structure, the fewer colors used.

- When the **brackets** are fabricated from three or more boards there is a recessed scroll on the sides. In those cases the recesses are usually picked out in the body color against the trim color (on a frame house) or in a slightly lighter shade of the same color (in the case of a masonry structure) to provide some contrast.
- **Sash and shutters**, however, may carry different colors from the main trim color. As a general rule, these two elements will be the darkest parts of the house. Especially for the houses erected between 1840 and 1900, the sash should be darker than the trim, usually a deep reddish or chocolate brown, dark green, olive, or even black.
- If **wooden storm windows** are available, they should be painted the sash color. **Shutters** too, should usually be darker. Occasionally, they are painted in the trim color with recessed panels picked out in a slightly lighter shade of the same color. The use of multi-color schemes appears to be rare.
- In general, **roofs** of Victorian homes were of natural materials such as stained wooden shingles, slate, or tile and occasionally metal, such as copper. The post Victorian era through the 1930s generally followed these traditional colors and even the later introduction of asphalt colors tended to imitate darker natural colors.
- **Doors**, likewise, should be stained or varnished to highlight natural wood; painted to simulate rich wood; painted the same color as the trim; or painted the same color as the sash. Generally the doors should be of one color with little or no picking out.
- Although **wood shingles** were stained in the past, most surviving shingles have long since been painted. The colors given in the Color Systems provide an accurate color scheme for additional repainting.

Paint Types

Today, all historic paints are recognized as semi-gloss. Any high quality latex paint is acceptable for most house painting.

The section of this document "Color Systems" was taken from the original Detroit Historic Districts Style & Color Guide and contains copyrighted text by Roger W. Moss, 1983.

NOTE: The online style guide is provided for the public's convenience by the Detroit Historic District Commission.

Commission approval is not required for touch up painting with the exact same color. However, if painting with a new color, Commission approval is necessary. Please contact the HDC staff at 313-224-6543 to obtain a color-correct copy of the individual Color System that coordinates with your property.