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Insulating older homes

 BY DWIGHT BARNETT
 SCRIPPS HOWARD NEWS SERVICE

Question: I just bought a home and found out from one of the previous owners that it isn't insulated well on the exterior wall. The attic has been blown but is still hard to keep cool in the hot Louisiana summers. I plan on replacing the siding with the hardy board (cement board) siding in due time. I was still concerned about all the "vapor barrier" I have been hearing about. I planned on taking the old siding off, blowing cellulose insulation in the exterior wall, putting up felt/tar paper and then putting up the siding. Is this the correct method? Is there any cheaper/better solution to this problem?

Answer: Insulating an exterior wall of an existing home without removing the interior wall coverings can be accomplished by drilling holes in either the interior or exterior of the walls and injecting an insulating material. You mentioned cellulose, and that's fine. But if you were to choose a closed-cell expanding foam, it would not only insulate the wall cavities but would also serve as an air barrier and vapor retardant, making the project more energy-efficient.

Your question indicates your home has siding. Removing the siding first can make the job of insulating easier for the contractor as long as the exterior sheathing under the siding is in good condition. Once the walls are insulated, the siding contractor should add a house wrap or, if you prefer, tar paper over the sheathing to prevent water entry to the home's wood frame. Homes with brick or stone veneers, which are not practical to remove, can also be insulated by drilling holes on the interior side of the wall to inject insulation into the wall cavities. The drilled holes are then patched and the walls can be repainted.

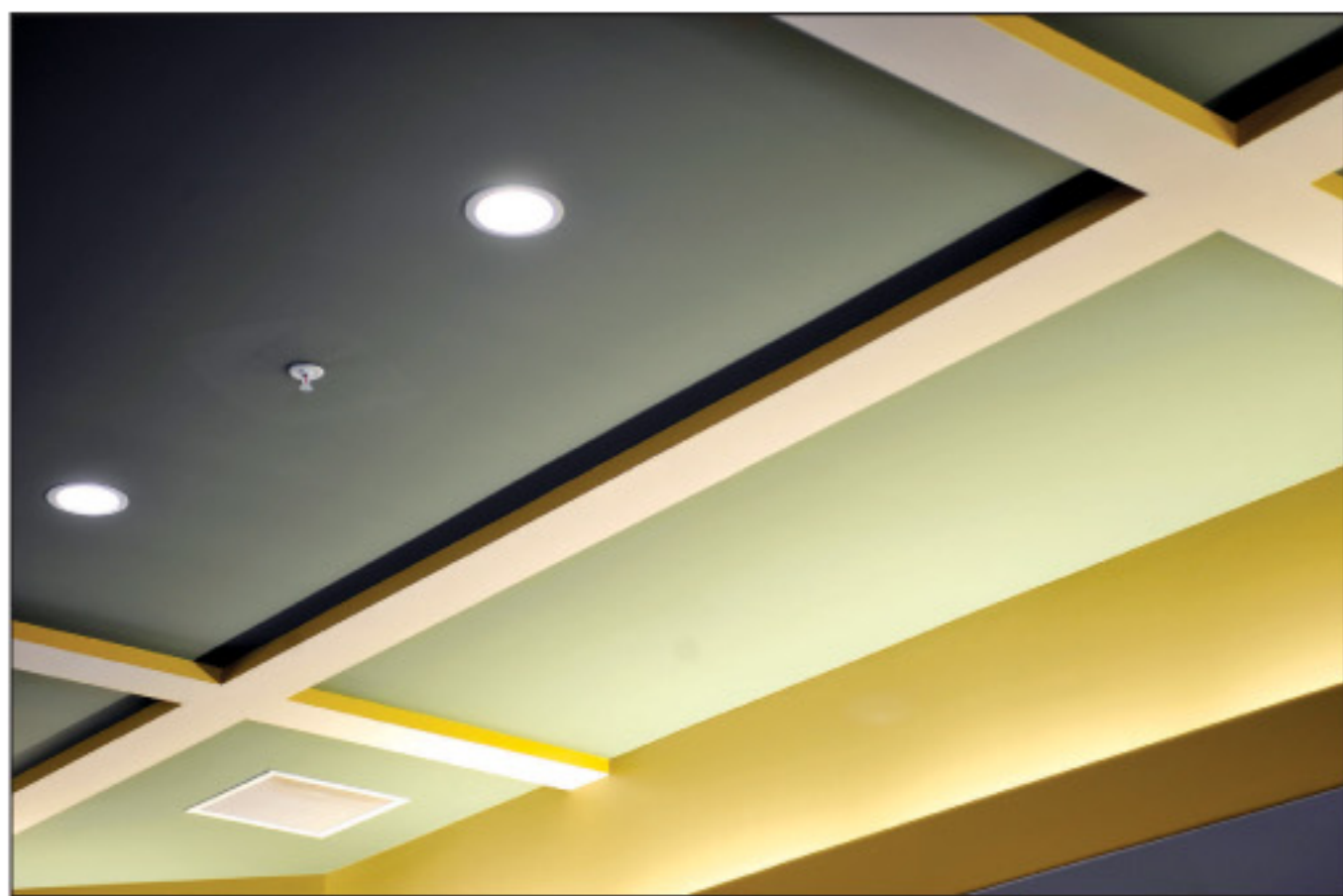
Check for fire blocking, knob-and-tube wiring

Things all homeowners need to be aware of when insulating an older home: The wall cavities may have fire blocking, which are pieces of 2-by-4s installed horizontally midway up the wall to slow the progress of smoke and fire to other parts of the home. To fill the entire wall cavity, holes would need to be drilled above and below each fire block to ensure the cavity is full.

Older homes may have knob-and-tube wiring in the basements, walls and attics. You cannot insulate over this type of wiring because the wires depend on air circulation to keep cool. If you see ceramic knobs attached to joists and holding a single strand of wire or a ceramic tube where a wire passes through a floor joist, the home has knob-and-tube wiring.

Before adding insulation to the walls or attic, the wiring would have to be replaced and, most likely, the electric panel would need to be upgraded. Also be aware that some homes that once had knob-and-tube wiring may have been upgraded with modern Romex wiring, but the older-style wiring may still be inside the wall cavities. Removing some of the exterior sheathing will reveal the wiring inside the walls, or you can have an electrician check several outlets and switches to inspect the type of wiring used.

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KENOSHA NEWS PHOTOS BY BRIAN PASSINO

The ceiling of the great room at a new assisted living facility in Somers features complementary colors, open soffits with uplighting and a grid pattern created with wood.

CEILINGINGS

WITH FEELING

BY CYNTHIA JENSEN | KENOSHA NEWS CORRESPONDENT

Overhead and yet often overlooked, ceilings provide fascinating opportunities for creative expression in your home décor. Whether your ceilings are of modest proportion, or soar to vertiginous heights, making the most of what you have can be as simple as applying a striking color, or as exciting as adding a new architectural element.

Unleash the color

Across the board, interior designers are as passionate about ceilings as they are about walls. When she goes out for a consult with a client, Lizzie Huck, owner of L. Huck Interiors of Kenosha, asks, "And what would you like to do with the ceiling?"

Including a treatment for a room's ceiling "makes the room complete, more interesting," Huck said, adding, "The easiest way to do that is with a can of paint. A new coat of paint can entirely change the feel of a room. Adding color to a ceiling can make that change dramatic."

Knowing what color to choose can be a bigger challenge. According to Huck, choosing a ceiling color should be governed by the amount of natural light the room receives during the day and the type of lighting available at night. "Above all, the color has to coordinate with and reflect what you're doing with the rest of the room and the feeling you're trying to achieve," Huck said.

Calming tones include the blue and green family of colors, while red, orange, yellow, and pink are more cheerful.

Popular ceiling colors right now include chocolate and eggplant — both of which exude an "elegant feel," Huck said. Dark colors can also draw attention to a special fixture or other architectural elements such as tray ceilings, crown moldings and cornices.

Huck also suggests that darker colors should be uplit with sconces or torchère lighting for emphasis. And yes, a dark ceiling topping a typical 8-foot wall can work well. "Don't hesitate to do it. Just make sure to paint the walls a lighter color," Huck said.

Painting a vaulted or cathedral ceiling a darker color "can bring more intimacy to a space — especially a dining room or entryway," Huck said. If you're looking for colors that are on trend generally, Huck recommends "Tuscan" colors which include ochers (reds), oranges, greens and blues.



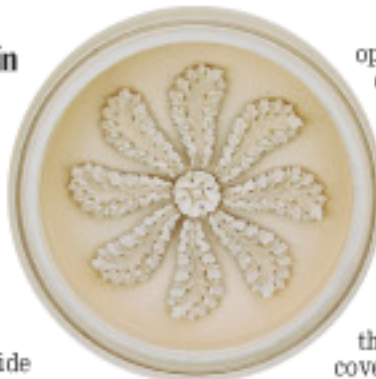
Lizzie Huck

What's old is new again

Another trend in ceiling treatments not requiring any structural changes is the application of wallpaper. Whereas heavily patterned wallpaper may be too busy for your walls, it can often be just the right accent for your ceiling and provide the perfect counterpoint to an otherwise subdued palate of fabrics and furnishings.

The plaster medallions meticulously crafted and installed by artisans to dress up light fixtures in days gone by are making a comeback and can now be purchased at local home improvement stores. Instead of plaster, pre-molded polyurethane forms, ready for painting, give homeowners an easy, do-it-yourself weekend project.

"They are perfect for adding a touch of elegance and formality — or for evoking a Victorian sensibility in a period décor," Huck said. For an even easier-to-apply



option, at a fraction of the cost, consider stenciling a medallion. Stores that sell stencils have medallion stencils — or can customize one to suit your design requirements. For an online source visit www.stencilsources.com.

Huck also suggested that "if you're looking to cover flaws in the ceiling of an older home, achieve an authentic period look, or just want a highly reflective surface to carry out a design theme," consider installing a metal ceiling.

A return to metal ceilings is not as exotic as you might think. Shanker Industries in New York has continuously produced tin and copper ceilings for over 100 years, making such products instantly available to designers and homeowners alike. Shanker's promotional materials state, "When properly coated, no maintenance is required." In addition to tin and copper, they also manufacture stainless steel, brass and chrome ceiling tiles.



Dramatic options

If you're looking to make a huge statement in your home's décor, and have the budget to support it, you might consider adding an architectural element to your ceiling — particularly if you have high or vaulted ceilings.

"Creating a grid pattern with wood is gaining in popularity," Huck said. "It's a wonderful way to create some drama — especially if you include a tray ceiling with lighting." A tray ceiling, sometimes referred to as a "trex" ceiling, is a type of open soffit that runs along the perimeter of the ceiling. Uplighting is often hidden in the recess to emphasize a "step" effect. In a smaller room, this feature can make the room appear larger than it is. In a room with a tall ceiling, it brings the room into a human scale while still maintaining a sense of spaciousness.

Not for the weekend do-it-yourselfer, coffered ceilings are a series of sunken panels or boxes of any uniform shape that create an especially formal appearance. Wood paneling or bead board on the ceiling can add depth, character and a casual vibe. High-gloss wood paneling can be highly reflective and contemporary.

If you are lucky enough to be at the stage of designing your home, you might consider a sculpted ceiling — a ceiling that follows the lines of your roof. A curved or barrel ceiling, especially if it is wood paneled, can have a stunning effect and create its own theme in a room.

Exposed beams are always a beautiful touch whether they are rough hewn for a casual look or highly polished for a refined look. Constructing a coved ceiling to round out the sharp angles between wall and ceiling will achieve a look of ultimate sophistication, especially with crown molding added to finish it off.



COMING FRIDAY: Somers man rediscovers the dream car from his youth -- a 1959 Dodge