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### **Character Building**

\* Wainscoting, crown molding and colorful paint can strip away that too-new feeling and add value to your home.

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When Lorrie and Tom Schortmann first moved to Southern California from Boston 10 years ago and bought a new home in Orange County's Coto de Caza, she initially liked the difference between the houses here and the ones back East.

"The white, open spaces and high ceilings were a nice change," she said, "but after a while, it didn't feel homey."

She longed for what's missing in so many California homes. A trait taken for granted in older homes in well-established neighborhoods. She wanted character.

But building residential character takes time. Imbuing a new home--even one under 20 years old--with the same venerability that another home has acquired over 100 or more years is difficult.

But not impossible.

Though it sounds elusive, character boils down to attention to detail, custom craftsmanship, mature foliage and a semblance of caring. Simple and immediate touches, like bigger moldings, wall color and the right trees outside, can strip away that too-new feeling, and add years of character--and value--to a newer home.

The cheapest way to add character is to wait 50 years. Through use and time, homes acquire charm and patina as owners infuse their personalities. But there's a quicker way. In this celluloid land of stages and sets, you can fast forward the time and hire the experience.

For the legion of interior and landscape specialists in the area, the quest for character is big business. According to figures released last month from the U.S. Census Bureau, consumer spending on residential

remodeling increased 7% last year. Consumers spent \$153 billion on remodeling.

When Lorrie Schortmann saw how finish carpenter Chuck Clark, of Dove Canyon in Orange County, had improved one of her neighbor's homes, she set him to work on hers.

He put wainscoting up the stairs and through the living and dining rooms, and installed crown moldings in the kitchen. There he also tore out a banister that divided the kitchen from a step-down family room and built in a bench, which serves as seating for her kitchen table.

He then added wood moldings around all the home's many doorless doorways to create more distinction between the rooms.

"The bulk of my business turns out to be from buyers of production homes, which don't have any molding in them," said Clark, who relocated to Southern California from Cincinnati six years ago and soon had a business upgrading homes in the area.

"Mainly I pump up casings, add molding at the ceiling, and take out old baseboards and replace them with 6-inch or 7-inch ones," he says. "It gives newer homes a more traditional look."

New homeowners call him as often as people who have homes they've been in for several years.

"People who buy new homes go into the model, which is just dripping with extras like faux finishes, crowns and built-ins," he says. "They all want their home to look like that. But when it comes to signing the mortgage papers, and they see it costs \$100,000 more to get that look, they decide to forego the upgrades upfront and instead chip away at them over time. So two, three, six years later they call me." Such improvements can be money well spent, says Robyn Robinson, broker and co-owner of Regency Real Estate in San Juan Capistrano. "I've sold homes in the same neighborhood with the exact same floor plan, and the one with the attention to detail and the small custom touches has gone faster and for significantly more."

### **Higher Price, Quicker Sale for House With Upgrades**

For example, Rachelle Rosten, a broker with Coldwell Banker in Beverly Hills, knows of two comparable properties in the same Bel-Air neighborhood. The homes had the same floor plan, but one had upgrades, including granite and marble surfaces, stainless steel in the kitchen and updated bathrooms.

Both sold last October. The one with the upgrades sold in five days for the asking price of \$725,000. The other went for \$35,000 less and took a month to sell.

Those touches are what Clark and other interior specialists create. After he installed the woodwork in Schortmann's home, she contracted a painter to paint the wainscoting white and the walls sage green. And she had her oak floors, which were whitewashed, sanded and refinished to a natural honey shade.

"It's a very traditional East Coast look, and I love it," she says. "The house feels more welcoming, warmer and much more personal to us."

Before you start a character crusade on your home, have a plan, advises Gina Robinson, an interior designer who moved from Connecticut to Los Angeles three years ago.

Know the style of your home--whether it's ranch, Mediterranean or Cape Cod--and keep its consistency. Hiring a professional designer for a couple of hours to give you a direction at this point would be money well spent.

Once you know what look you're going for, select a color scheme and then chip away at the project, keeping the big picture and continuity in mind.

The most obvious place to start is with the walls, says Los Angeles interior designer Gary Gibson.

"Paint is my favorite tool for lessening the starkness of a new home," he says. All walls don't need to match, but should work together. Adding wall color and woodwork to a previously stark white room immediately adds character, warmth and texture.

### **Too Much Wallpaper Is Not a Good Thing**

But go easy on the wallpaper and faux finishes, says Robyn Robinson. "While it's fine in small areas, such as a powder room or bedroom, too much in big spaces can be a turnoff for resale. It's too individual."

Wall color also plays up a room's architecture, making window casings, baseboards and door moldings stand out. As long as you're featuring them, beef them up. Crown moldings, wainscoting and larger-than-standard baseboards, in either painted white or stained wood tones, are a great way to add character.

Most new homes start with 3-inch baseboards, Clark says. Once the builder adds carpet or tile, that baseboard shrinks to 1 to 2 inches. Increasing them to 5 or more inches throughout adds substance to a room.

Wainscoting is another way to add character and tradition.

"Take a vanilla room, add wainscoting, crown molding and a little colored paint, and your room suddenly feels like it's been around 15 or more years," says Gina Robinson.

If you can afford to, put in wood floors, or stone or tile, instead of carpet; that's another great way to add timeless appeal and value, say the experts. In general, it's nicer to have hard floors, but they're always more expensive than carpet.

Lloyd Gass, the neighbor who inspired Schortmann, is importing a burgundy floral print wool carpet from Belgium, to go up the staircase and throughout the downstairs.

"It's a look you would see in a much older home," he says.

Once walls and floors have the look you want, revisit your fixtures. If your home is in a housing development, chances are everything from the mailbox to the faucets is the same as your neighbors.

Consider changing these standard appointments, like light fixtures, knobs and mirrors, to ones more in keeping with your home's evolving style. Light fixtures provided for dining rooms, entries and bathrooms are notoriously generic and low-quality.

As you change them, also consider adding more lighting. Most new homes are woefully underlit. Once your furniture and art are in place, add recessed lighting, wall sconces and spotlights for art, which add drama.

Pulling out production mirrors and replacing them with framed hanging mirrors immediately adds a look of age, as does warming up a plain fireplace by adding a couple of rows of decorative tile around it, and a cantilevered wood mantel.

If you have one of those plain white fireplaces, a faux finisher can paint it to look like stone, marble, wood or brick. Better yet, add used-brick veneers or find a fireplace in a salvage yard and have a carpenter adapt it to yours, says Gina Robinson.

## **French Doors Suit California Climate**

Doors, too, can say a lot about your home's character. Many homes have flat, single-paneled doors. Trading them for raised-panel doors adds texture and interest. Gina Robinson especially likes to swap sliding glass doors for French doors.

"They have a classic appeal, and are great in California, where you want to bring the outdoors in," she says.

But no door is more important than the front door. No matter how small your house is, you can add value by simply setting off your front door with a little gate, she says. Be sure the walk is well lit and flank the entrance with two sculptured shrubs, or a pair of lights on columns.

If your driveway is just plain cement, add curb appeal by replacing it with stone or brick. And don't feel compelled to do the whole surface, says Robyn Robinson.

"Just cutting in ribbons of brick or pavers can be enough," she says.

The outside of your home is where the impression of character begins. Good garden design can quickly make your home look lived in and loved. Nothing screams new home louder than trees on sticks.

"If you want your home to look mature, put in a big tree right off the bat," says garden designer Carol McElwee, of Capistrano Beach. Choose something that goes well with our climate, like an old oak, sycamore, or olive tree. Put it in the yard and you'll look as if you've been there for ages. "It's the most instant thing you can do."

Another way to fool visitors into thinking you're not the newest house on the block is to use older-looking materials outside, such as used brick and non-colored concrete, she says. "If during the excavating, they find big rocks, save them. They will look good in the yard." \*

Marnell Jameson is a San Juan Capistrano-based freelancer.

## **Does It Pay to Fix Home for Resale?**

The best reason to fix up your home is for your personal enjoyment. But do a nice job and you can realize some of your investment back when you sell.

In a normal real estate market, says broker Robyn Robinson, co-owner

of Regency Real Estate in San Juan Capistrano, you can expect to get back about one-third of what you paid for an upgrade. However, some upgrades pay better than others. In general, the more personal the choice--strong colors, unusual fixtures--the less buyers like it.

Here's her barometer of what goes over and how well.

Buyers love it:

Nice two-tone paint job

Crown moldings

Wainscoting

Bigger baseboards

Hardwood or stone floors

Recessed and art lighting

Upgraded kitchen

Customized driveway

Built-in barbecue

Mature trees and landscaping

Buyers like it:

Built-ins (depends on function)

Upgraded fireplaces

Upgraded light fixtures

Outdoor trellises

Granite in kitchen

Faux finishes

Raised panel doors instead of flat doors

Framed mirrors for production mirrors

Buyers don't really care:

Wallpaper

Decorative tiles

--MARNELL JAMESON

PHOTO: Colorful walls and molding around doors and ceilings can add character to newer homes, like this one in Coto de Caza.

ID NUMBER: 20010701geyd4mke

PHOTO: Much of contractor Chuck Clark's work is adding molding to production homes.

ID NUMBER: 20010701geyd3mke

PHOTO: Painter Victor Cereceres puts the finishing touches on a newer home.

ID NUMBER: 20010701geyd48ke

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