

Plastic Ceilings and Polymer Corbels: Reproducing the American Heritage

by Steve Carlson



This vinyl lattice from Cross Industries doesn't split when you nail it, and can be cleaned with a garden hose.



This house, built in 1850, was recently restored to its original splendor. The material of choice for the ceilings: polystyrene panels from Old Jefferson Tile Co.

There was a time when plastics got no respect in the building trades. They were associated with fake beams and laminates with phony wood grains.

Things have changed. Plastic pipes, glazings, coatings, laminates, flooring, siding, and insulating sheathings have become the preferred materials for some applications. Words like "polystyrene" and "polyisocyanurate" roll off the lips of builders in the course of normal conversation.

And the march is continuing. Newer plastic products are constantly crossing the line of respectability.

Take lattice, for example. Cross Industries in Atlanta has been making vinyl lattice for six years, and has sold over 200,000 panels so far.

Why would anyone want plastic lattice? Steve Burch, co-owner of Cross, asks why anyone would want wood lattice. "There's no need for pre-drilling, and you can nail it without splitting," he comments. "It never needs painting. You can take care of all maintenance with a garden hose."

But the most recent inroad is perhaps the most surprising. Plastics are now used, and increasingly accepted, as a material to protect America's architectural heritage.

The tiny, historic town of Jefferson, Texas, contains 63 homes with National Register plaques, noted in part for their unique tin ceilings. Local entrepreneurs, eager to revive that bit of heritage, formed the Old

Jefferson Tile Company to reproduce the ceilings.

But according to Vernon Randle, president of Old Jefferson, modern alloys could not accommodate the intricate, deeply-embossed patterns. The only practical alternative was polystyrene.

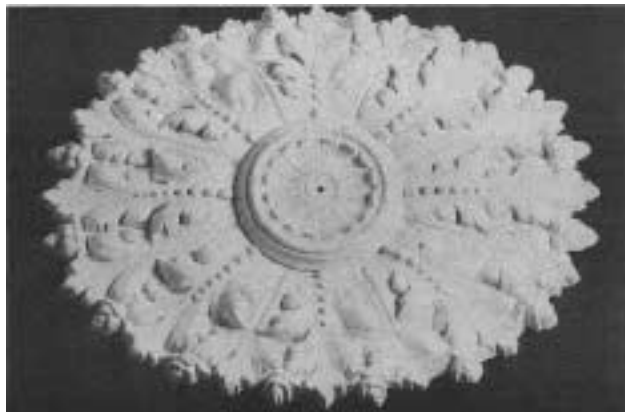
In addition to faithful reproduction of the historic patterns, Randle says plastics have other advantages over metal, including low cost, light weight, ease of installation, durability, and good acoustic qualities. Randle says the product is used in historic renovations as well as new construction throughout the country, and is expected to be featured this spring in *House Beautiful* magazine.

"Tin" ceilings are just one of many traditional architectural details made from plastic. The inventory at MRA Broadway Market in Brooklyn, N.Y., includes vast assortments of plastic columns, capitals, ceiling medallions, cornice moldings, entryways, niches, bosses, and rosettes representing virtually all architectural periods.

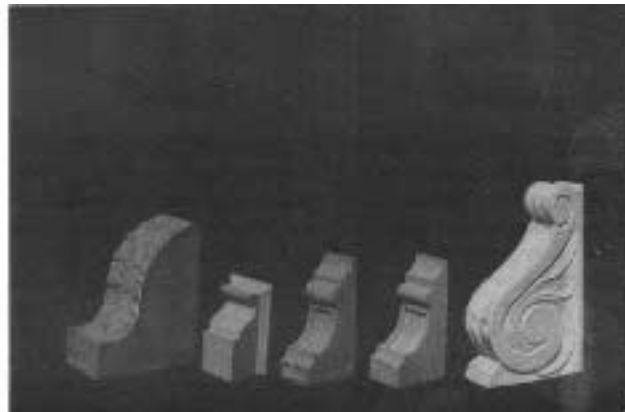
MRA Broadway Manager Greg Hodgman says "people want a traditional look," and the design is more important than the material. Plastics are easy to ship and install, and once in place, and indistinguishable from plaster or wood, Hodgman says. For example, he says a typical column "is as dense as #2 pine-by tapping it, you can't tell it's foam."

Consumer skepticism has evaporated, he says. "As recently as two years ago, there was some resistance to the materials. Now there is none." ■

In 1967, audiences of the movie "The Graduate" laughed at the fellow who offered "plastics" as his one word of advice to Dustin Hoffman. In retrospect, the guy may have had a point.



The Old House Journal Catalog lists 34 companies that supply ceiling medallions. Of those companies, 12 stock plaster medallions, 14 stock "non-plaster" (translation: plastic) medallions, and eight carry both. This one is "non-plaster."



Until recently, who would have thought that the words "polymer" and "corbel" would ever be used in the same sentence? These polymer corbels serve as evidence of social, as well as technological, change.