

About.com Architecture

Vinyl Siding and Your House

Builders love it, environmentalists hate it. What's the truth about vinyl?

By [Jackie Craven](#), About.com Guide

The advertisements seem so enticing. Install vinyl siding, they say, and you will never have to paint your house again. Unlike wood or cedar, this durable plastic will not rot or flake. Vinyl is available in several dozen colors, and can mimic architectural details that were once made from wood. It's no wonder that vinyl has become the most popular siding material in the United States and is quickly gaining momentum around the world.

But, wait! What the ads don't tell you can cost you dearly. Before you install vinyl siding over wood clapboard or cedar shingles, consider these important factors.

1. Health Concerns

Vinyl is made from a PVC (polyvinyl chloride) plastic resin that is thought to cause cancer in humans. Although vinyl may be safe while it is on your home, some scientists believe that manufacturing and disposing vinyl is hazardous to our health and to the environment. Accidental fires in vinyl-sided buildings are more dangerous because vinyl produces toxic fumes when heated. In addition, doctors are reporting a high incidence of neurological damage, respiratory problems, liver and kidney failure, birth defects, and cancer among people who work in or live near factories where vinyl is produced.

To learn more about the ways vinyl siding impacts our health and the environment, watch the award-winning documentary film [Blue Vinyl](#)¹, available on dvd. Or, read what the environmental group [Greenpeace](#)² has to say about vinyl.

For an opposing view, read the arguments written by the [Vinyl Institute](#)³.

2. Durability

Advertisements often imply that vinyl siding is permanent. It is true that vinyl will last a very long time. (That's why it is so difficult to dispose of safely.) In extreme weather, however, vinyl is less durable than wood and masonry. Violent wind can get underneath the thin sheets of vinyl siding and lift a panel from the wall. Windblown debris and strong hail can puncture vinyl. New developments are making vinyl is stronger and less brittle, but the plastic sheets will still crack or break if struck by a lawnmower or snowblower. Damage cannot be patched; you will need to replace a panel.

Liquid vinyl coatings, which are sprayed on like paint, may prove to be more durable than vinyl panels. However, liquid vinyl coatings are difficult to apply correctly. Numerous problems have been reported. (See [Miracle Liquid Siding Products](#)⁴, on *Ask the Builder*.)

3. Maintenance

Wood must be painted or stained; vinyl requires no paint. However, it's not exactly true to say that vinyl is maintenance-free. To maintain its fresh appearance, vinyl siding should be washed once a year. Any wooden window sashes and trim will still require routine painting, and ladders leaning against the house can scuff or crack the vinyl siding.

Unlike wood and masonry, vinyl siding presents its own breed of maintenance worries. Moisture trapped beneath the vinyl siding will accelerate rot, promote mold and mildew, and invite insect infestations. Left uncorrected, dampness in the walls will cause wallpaper and paint inside the house to blister and peel. To avoid hidden decay, you will want frequently recaulk joints between the vinyl siding and adjacent trim. Roof leaks, faulty gutters, or other sources of moisture should be repaired without delay. Vinyl siding may not be a wise option for an older home with a chronically



When vinyl was installed on this Victorian home, the architectural details were covered.

Photo by Jackie Craven

damp cellar.

4. Energy Conservation

Be wary of a vinyl salesperson who promises lower energy bills. Even with thick Styrofoam backing, a vinyl panel cannot provide significant insulation. Regardless of the type of siding you choose, you may want to install additional insulation inside the walls.

5. Color

Vinyl is available in more colors than ever before, and new vinyl siding does not fade as quickly as older vinyl. Also, the pigmentation is baked through instead of applied to the surface, so vinyl won't show scratches. Nevertheless, depending on the quality of vinyl you buy, expect some fading after five years or so. Time and weather will also alter the gloss of your vinyl siding. If a panel is damaged, the new replacement panel will not be an exact match.

After you have lived in your home for a number of years, you may grow weary of its color - especially if the vinyl has grown dim and faded. You can paint the vinyl, but then the vinyl is no longer maintenance-free. In general, the color of your vinyl house is the color it will always be, until you install new siding.

6. Historic Preservation

With a careful installation of a better-quality vinyl, the siding will truly fool the eye. Yet no matter how closely vinyl resembles wood, any artificial siding will diminish the historic authenticity of an older home. In many cases, the original trim and ornamental details are covered or removed. In some installations, the original clapboard is completely removed or seriously damaged. Vinyl siding will always alter the overall texture and proportions of the house, changing the depth of moldings and replacing natural wood grain with factory-made embossed patterns.

7. Property Values

As the quality and variety of vinyl improves, acceptance is growing. For new construction in the United States, vinyl is becoming increasingly common. On the other hand, many home shoppers still perceive vinyl as a tacky shortcut or a cover-up for possible problems. Homes built before 1940 lose their historic appeal when their authentic siding is covered. Before you install vinyl over wood clapboard or cedar shingles, look closely at other homes in your neighborhood. In a neighborhood of historic homes or upscale houses constructed primarily of wood and masonry, adding vinyl siding can diminish a home's appeal to potential buyers.

NEXT:

[Exterior Siding Options](#)⁵ >>

What to use instead of vinyl

This About.com page has been optimized for print. To view this page in its original form, please visit: <http://architecture.about.com/cs/repairremodel/a/vinyl.htm>

©2010 About.com, Inc., a part of [The New York Times Company](#). All rights reserved.

Links in this article:

1. <http://www.bluevinyl.org/>
2. <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/campaigns/toxics/polyvinyl-chloride/the-poison-plastic>
3. <http://www.aboutbluevinyl.org/facts.asp>
4. http://www.askthebuilder.com/411_Miracle_Liquid_Siding_Products.shtml
5. <http://architecture.about.com/od/buildyourhous1/tp/siding.htm>