Choosing an interior wall system is like buying a car. Chevrolets, Oldsmobiles and Cadillacs are all available, but performance and price vary considerably. Similarly, the cost and performance of various interior wall systems are definitely not alike. How should architects, clients and contractors choose among conventional plaster, veneer plaster and gypsum drywall to best suit a commercial job?

The parties involved should consider building requirements, budget and local building practices, for what is standard construction practice in one region may be unfamiliar in another. Above all, bear in mind that no one system meets every construction criterion. Knowing the basic facts about each system, however, will help in making the right decision.

Conventional Plaster

Conventional, full-thickness (a half-inch or more) plaster systems represent the “Cadillac” in interior wall construction. They are abuse resistant and provide a supremely monolithic surface. They also can be fin-

By Edwin J. Jakacki
ished smooth or textured and provide long-term performance and beauty.

Plaster walls and ceilings, however, come at a price. This system’s high cost generally limits it to the most heavily used public buildings such as hospitals and other institutional buildings. Where walls of high mass density and sound control are required, such as in college dormitories and state correctional facilities, plaster is the system of choice. Its density also delivers excellent acoustics, making plaster walls and ceilings ideal for concert halls.

One- and Two-Coat Veneers

Veneer systems are a good option when the project calls for many of conventional plaster’s benefits, but where cost is a limitation. The best of these systems is a two-coat veneer, which employs a gypsum plaster base board (commonly called “blue board”), a 1/16-inch to 3/32-inch basecoat and a veneer finishing material.

There are several veneer finishing mate-

Integrally Colored Finishes
Create Beautiful Walls

One of the hottest trends today is the use of integrally colored finishes for completing interior walls and ceilings. As their name implies, the color is mixed throughout the finishing coat of what is basically a veneer system, giving walls a vibrance and character not achievable with any other decorative finish, including faux finishing, paint and wallpaper.

The finishes are composed of a variety of ingredients, from marble dust to limestone to gypsum, which are mixed with other materials and troweled onto wall surfaces, allowed to set and then knocked down and burnished to the desired texture.

These finishes vary in price, ease of installation and aesthetic qualities. By far the most expensive finishes are made from marble and limestone. They produce the widest range of colors (including very dark tones) and the smoothest surfaces, but also are very expensive and difficult to install. Gypsum-based finishes are the most economical and produce a variety of textures. They also are the easiest to install and are more readily available than their marble and limestone counterparts.

Regardless of the integrally colored finish chosen, all produce a rich, timeless look for commercial interior walls and ceilings. They are particularly desirable for retail stores, hotel and office lobbies, restaurants and other entertainment venues.
rials, all of which provide monolithic surfaces with good-to-excellent wear resistance. They vary, however, in their workability and surface hardness. High-strength veneer plasters, which are hundreds of times harder than drywall or other plaster finishes, make sense when abuse resistance is a priority. Moderate-strength veneer plasters offer slightly less hardness but better workability. Many of these finishes trowel on more easily for a smoother surface and greater contractor productivity.

One step down in price and performance from two-coat veneer systems are the one-coat systems. Both high- and moderate-strength one-coat systems are an upgrade from drywall, with greater abuse resistance inherent in the high-strength veneer, which offers up to 100 times the abrasion resistance of drywall and a fourfold increase in indentation resistance. Both one-coat systems provide a more durable surface than drywall and a truly monolithic finish, while they save labor and construction costs due to shorter finishing times.

Gypsum Drywall

Today’s drywall systems provide a relatively smooth, serviceable finish at the lowest possible initial installed cost. Drywall offers an acceptable means of interior finishing construction where surface hardness and a monolithic appearance are less important.

Overall, making the right choice among interior wall systems begins by setting priorities. What’s most important to your job? Is it cost? Workability? Surface hardness? Appearance? Sometimes a job may call for balancing more than one factor. By knowing what benefits are offered from plaster, veneer plaster and drywall systems, you can be confident of making the right choice.

About the Author
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