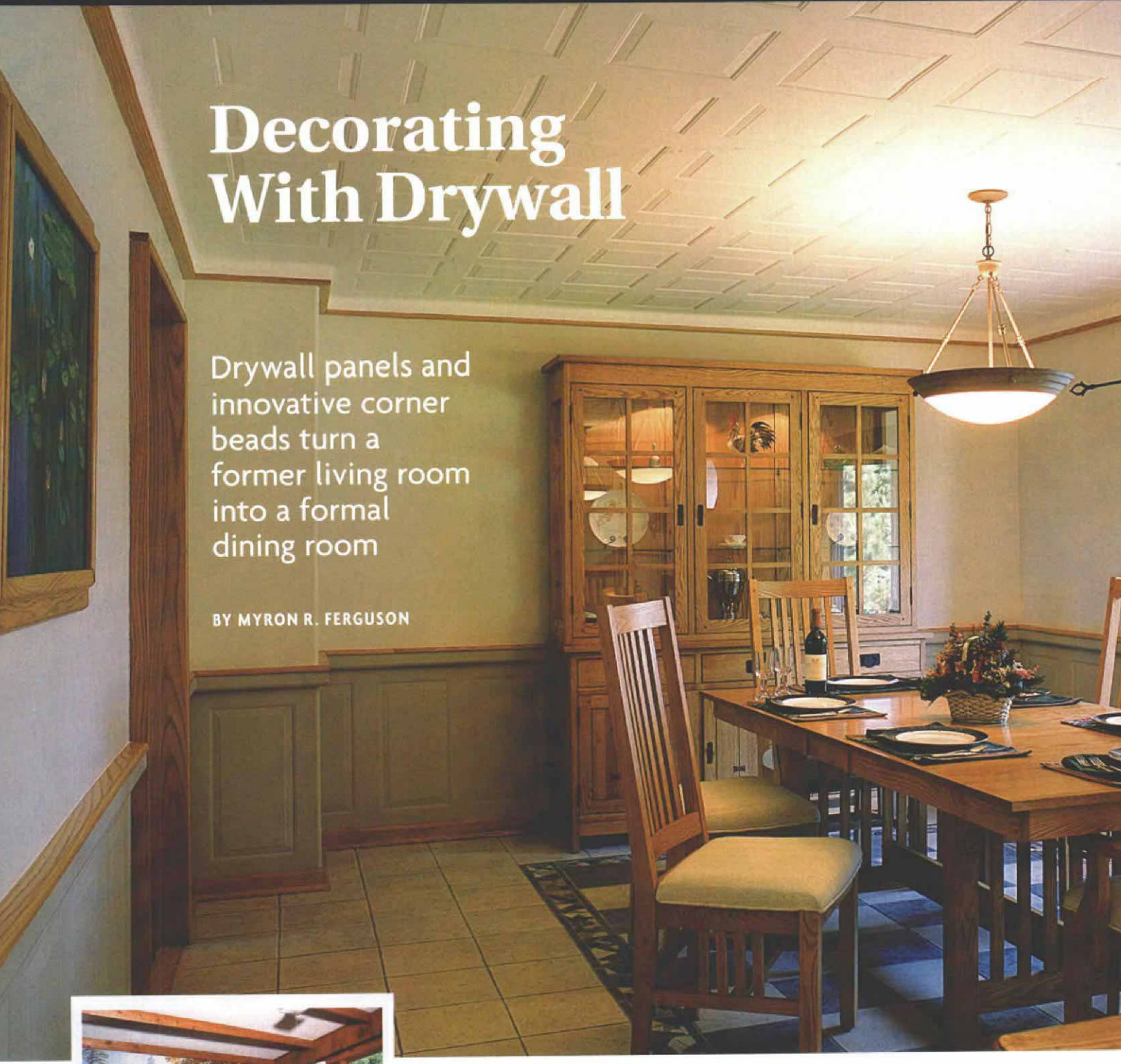
Decorating With Drywall

Drywall panels and innovative corner beads turn a former living room into a formal dining room

BY MYRON R. FERGUSON



Drywall puts on a tux. Embossed gypsum wainscot and ceiling panels made it possible for a drywall contractor to overcome his fear of carpentry and transform a dreary, hopelessly out-of-date living room (inset photo) into an attractive formal dining room (top photo).

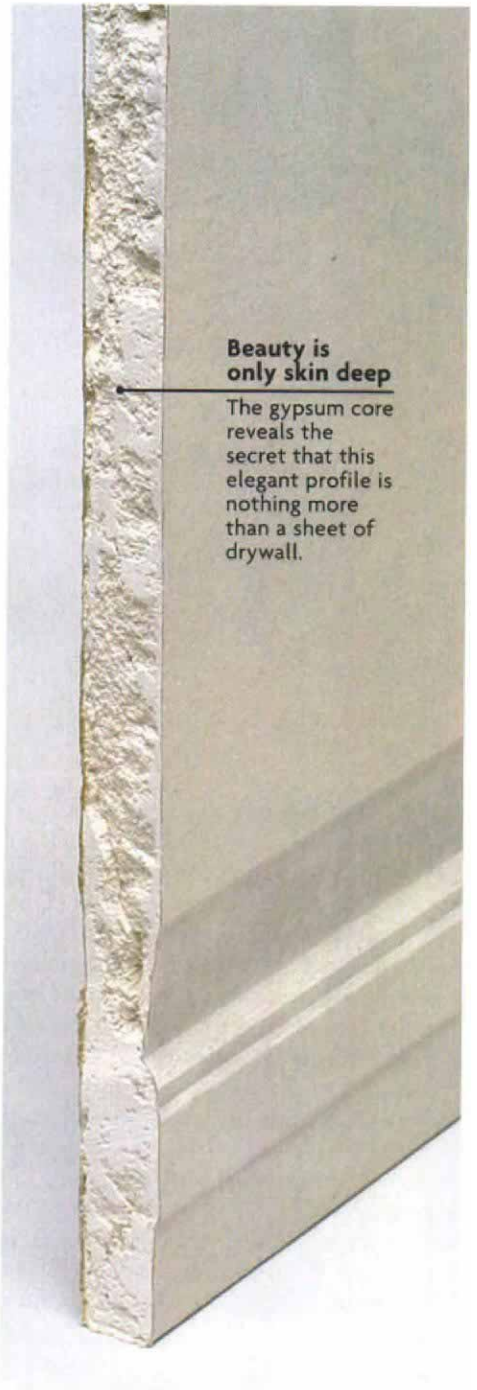
Back in 1981, when my wife and I built our house, we were fond of the rustic look. Of all the rooms in our house, we were most proud of the living room with its knotty-pine trim, woodstove and fieldstone chimney (photo left).

Over the years, our tastes, like our family, have grown up. After ten years and three kids, we added a larger living room, and our former living room became an informal dining room. Having outgrown the rustic look, we planned to turn this room into a formal dining room, complete with raised panels and built-up moldings. I'm an accomplished drywall mechanic, but my finish-carpentry skills are rudimentary at best. So the remodel was put off. Fortunately, procrastination paid off: After years of making plans and putting off decisions, I discovered that drywall manufacturers had come out with materials that allowed me to use my drywall skills to create a formal dining room and save a lot of money in the process.

Raised panels need careful layout

I knew I was ready to tackle this job when my local drywall supplier showed me a sample of Designer Drywall (Pittcon Industries;

Top photo this page: Tom O'Brien



Beauty is only skin deep

The gypsum core reveals the secret that this elegant profile is nothing more than a sheet of drywall.

Layout precedes framing. Having first determined the best layout for the recessed panels, the author placed all the furring strips to align with the flat sections between the panels. Nails placed between adjoining panels create gaps to tweak the layout slightly.

800-637-7638). Designer Drywall is simply a ⅝-in. thick sheet of gypsum with a collection of raised panels embossed on the face. All four edges taper to ½ in. This material is available in a ceiling version as well as a wainscot version; I decided to use both for my job (top photo, facing page). The ceiling version consists of 1-ft. square panels embossed onto a 4x4 sheet of drywall; the wainscot version has 12-in. wide by 22½-in. high panels embossed onto a 32-in. by 48-in. sheet. Other shapes and sizes are available for stairwells and other special situations. Although I did not have to learn much carpentry to install these panels, I did have to brush up on my layout skills. Designer Drywall panels are designed to be installed over standard wood or metal studs spaced 16 in. o. c.; however, the layout must be carefully considered so that all the fasteners and cutouts for things such as electrical boxes fall within the flat surfaces of the panels. I also had to make sure the collection of embossed panels was evenly centered between the walls.

Standard drywall fills the gaps

Other than the layout considerations, I approached this project much as I would any other drywall job, starting with the ceiling. To avoid a lot of messy demolition, I decided to leave the existing ceiling in place and to cover over it with the new one. I used furring strips and shims to create a level substrate for the new ceiling. Even if I'd removed the old ceiling, I would have used furring strips because they gave me the flexibility to lay out the ceiling panels without regard to the existing framing (photo above right).

Installing the ceiling was surprisingly easy, not only because I could place furring strips wherever I needed them but also because the drywall panels allowed me a lot of wiggle room to work out the layout. I found my starting points by establishing centerlines for the length and width of the room; then I measured from the centerlines to each of the walls to determine a layout that would leave a consistent gap between the walls and the edges of the embossed panels. Rather than cutting individual panels to fill the gap, I created a flat border between the panels and the wall using standard drywall. I intended that border to be roughly 6 in. wide, but an inch more or less on any given wall would not have been noticeable. For further adjustment, I also used nails (or shims) to create small gaps between adjoining sheets (photo above right). These gaps disappeared once the joints were taped.

I began the installation by snapping chalklines around the perimeter of the room to denote the edge of the border. To help position the first row of panels more easily, I placed temporary nails every few feet along the chalklines. I started in one corner with a full sheet, butted it up against the nails and fastened it to the furring with 1¼-in. drywall screws. As a drywall professional, I found it easy to hoist the 4x4 panels onto the ceiling single-handedly, hold them in place with my head and fasten them using a screw gun. I would advise nonprofessionals to get help or to rent a drywall lift *(FHB* #140, p. 88-93).

Joint compound makes layout problems disappear

My drywall experience was not always a plus, however. Standard drywall is often

Photo left this page: Tom O'Brien

Off to a good start. The author uses a 4-ft. level to make sure adjacent wainscot panels are perfectly aligned. The gaps in the corner are filled with pieces of standard drywall. Electrical receptacles will be mounted in remodeling boxes.

slightly out of square, but I've found that the finishing process allows plenty of room for error; not so with recessed drywall panels. As I moved through the field, installing one sheet after another, I had to remind myself to make sure the edges of the recessed panels were perfectly aligned. Had I been a carpenter, I probably would have pulled a stringline; as a drywaller, I relied on my eye. Fortunately, I started this project over the summer, so I was able to holler at my 16-year-old son to get off the couch and eyeball the sheets before I fastened them into place.

My careful layout, plus the minor adjustments I made along the way, would have given me a consistent 6-in. wide border if the room had been a simple rectangle. I still had to deal with a couple of minor jogs, such as the chimney for the woodstove, for which I had to cut a notch into one of the embossed panels. In both of these cases, however, I knew that during the finishing process, I could simply fill the relief with joint compound to create a smooth border and make the whole problem go away.

Wainscot goes on before the electrical

Once I'd hung decorative panels on the ceiling, I was ready to tackle the challenge of creating a gypsum wainscot. I knew the wainscot would be a more complicated job than the ceiling because I had to account for a bunch of intersecting corners, as well as a couple of doorways and a huge bay window.

The basic procedure was the same as it was for the ceiling. To make sure the wainscot layout would not have to conform to the framing, I applied three horizontal rows of furring strips perpendicular to the studs (photo above). Rather than furring out the entire wall to bring the rest of the wall surface into the same plane, I applied a layer of ¾-in. rigid insulation above and between the furring strips.

As with the ceiling, I was able to work out most of my layout concerns by measuring from the centerline for each run. In most

Cove molding from corner bead

I love the look of built-up cove molding, but all my attempts to cut and fit the wooden versions have ended in disaster. When I found out that U. S. Gypsum made a cove-shaped bead for finishing inside corners, I decided to give it a try.

To create a more substantial profile, I ran a furring strip along the wall at the edge of the ceiling; then I covered the furring strip with a layer of drywall. After finishing the corner with a tape-on corner bead, I was ready to apply the cove bead.

The cove bead was also the tape-on variety, and mistakes would have been messy. So I'd precut individual patterns for inside and outside corners, and dry-fit each piece before applying joint compound (photo left).

Once I had the bead in position, I checked the overall length for straightness before firmly embedding it in place with a 4-in. taping knife.

—M. R. F.

cases, I ran the panels short in the corners and used standard ½-in. drywall to complete the corner. As much as possible, I tweaked the layout so that the filler pieces that met in a particular corner were symmetrical, but I didn't try to get all the corners exactly the same. If I couldn't find a way to run short of the corner, I ran the piece long and turned the corner by back-cutting and folding the same panel (sidebar right).

Once I'd completed the panel layout, I located the electrical outlets. I'd previously run all the wires to their approximate location, but I left them extra long to allow plenty of latitude. I wanted all the receptacles to fall within the 4-in. wide strips that separate the embossed panels, but I was never entirely sure of my layout abilities. So I decided to use remodeling boxes rather than the nail-on kind. When I installed each sheet, I found the centerpoint of the box, poked a hole with my drywall saw and pulled the wires through (top photo, facing page). I cut in the boxes after all the drywall was installed.

Corner beads create attractive trim details

With the walls and ceiling complete, the dining room was ready for trim. I needed to cap the wainscot with a chair rail, and I wanted to jazz up the ceiling.

A few months earlier, I started using paper-faced corner bead (U. S. Gypsum; 800-874-4968) for all my outside corners. This paper-faced bead (also called "tape-on") is fastened to the drywall by being embedded in joint compound (sidebar facing page). It is quick to apply, and because it's held on with mud, there is little chance of edge-cracking and no nails to pop. In addition to 90° beads, the company makes a variety of tape-on bullnose beads, but when I discovered they also make an inner cove bead, I knew I'd found the solution for my ceiling trim.

I applied the inner cove over a two-layer substrate I'd built up from ½-in. drywall and ¾-in. furring (bottom photo, facing page). The foundation of the chair rail was simply a ¾-in. bullnose bead applied over a substrate of ¼-in. drywall and furring. I don't like wood, but my wife does. So to keep peace, I accented the ceiling trim and the chair rail with a simple piece of ¾-in. oak (top photo, p. 82). My cost for the drywall, trim beads and joint compound for this job came out to approximately $900. □

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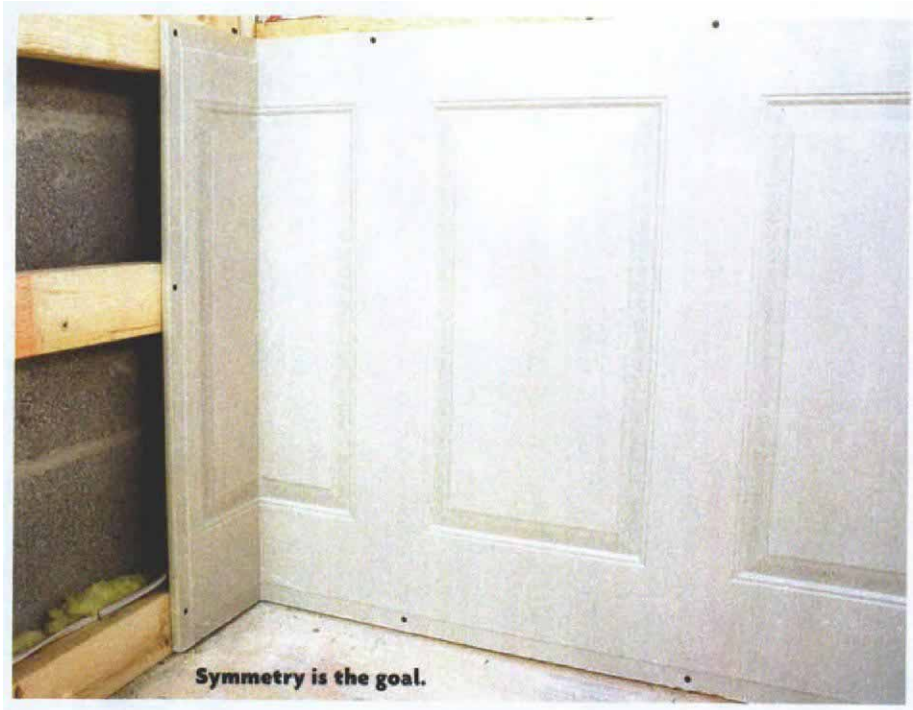
Photos by Linda Ferguson, except where noted.

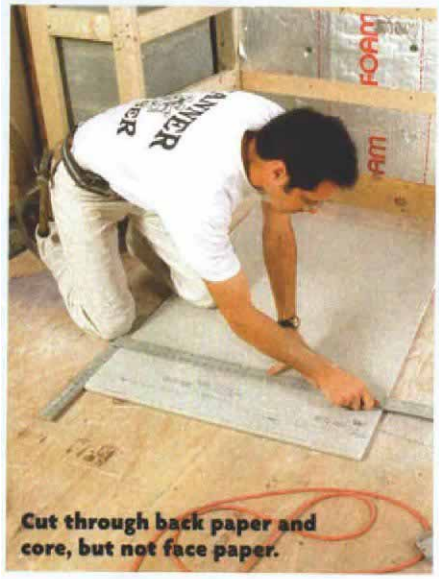
Turning a corner with drywall

The easiest way to create an attractive inside corner with embossed drywall panels is to stop both panels short and fill the gaps with standard drywall. When that layout won't work, the fallback option is to run the panel long and bend it (top photo below). Here's how I did it on this job.

I measured the distance between the adjacent sheet and the corner, and subtracted ⅝ in. (the thickness of the drywall). After marking this position on the backside of the panel, I repeatedly scored the back of the panel with a sharp utility knife until I'd cut through everything except the face paper (photo bottom left). Then I gently bent the sheet to form a 90° inside corner. It's nice to have the corner fall in the middle of an embossed panel, but that's not always possible. To give the corner added strength, I filled the void in back with construction adhesive (photo bottom right).

—M. R. F.


Symmetry is the goal.


Cut through back paper and core, but not face paper.


A generous dose of adhesive reinforces the joint.