

11. FINISHES

11.01 Plaster & Plasterboard

11.02 Paper & Papier Mâché

11.03 Paints & Membranes

11.04 Floorcloths

11.05 Glass

11.06 Shutters

The aesthetic aspects of decoration and finishes are not of direct concern to us here, but the materials and technology involved are as important as the structural aspects of building.

However what for present purposes should be regarded as a part of the building is debatable. Loose matting of various sorts was widely used, but will not be discussed here.¹ Chinese bamboo mats were reportedly used for both wall hangings and floor coverings.² Carpets were mostly loose and even where fitted did run wall-to-wall in the modern fashion.³ In these respects floorcloths are little different, but they nonetheless seem more integral to the structure, and are discussed below.

Plastic laminates are so late in arriving, and so much an imported technology, that they need be mentioned only briefly. Leo Bakeland had in 1907 first produced fibrous sheets impregnated with a phenol-formaldehyde resin, and he established the General Bakelite Company which sold the material largely for electrical purposes. Daniel O'Connor and Herbert Faber developed a process to make the laminate in sheet form, and in 1913 established the Formica Insulation Company of Cincinnati. The name, reading 'for mica' indicated its role as a substitute for mica as an electrical insulator. The colour of the phenol formaldehyde resin limited the products to dark colours, but in 1927 the Formica Company used an opaque barrier sheet to block out the body colour, and began the production of light coloured lithographed wood laminates.⁴

In 1947, not long after its introduction in the United States, the first plastic laminate, 'Laminex', appeared in Australia, and with its competitor, 'Formica', quickly displaced linoleum from bench tops, and ceramic tiles from many surfaces of the bathroom. From 1955 two-tone designs were available, and by 1957 each brand advertised over fifty designs, including patterns, weaves and wood grains.⁵

1 Scott Carlin, 'Matting', in Scott Carlin [ed], *Floorcoverings in Australia 1800-1950* (Sydney 1997), pp 15-19.

2 Judith Wright, *The Generations of Men* (Melbourne 1959), p 73.

3 Scott Carlin, 'Pile Carpets', in Carlin, *Floorcoverings in Australia*, pp 31-9.

4 A J T Walker, K A Konrad & N L Stull, 'Decorative Plastic Laminates', in T C Jester [ed], *Twentieth-Century Building Materials* (Washington [DC] 1995), p 27.

5 Peter Cuffley, *Australian Houses of the Forties and Fifties* (Knoxfield [Victoria] 1993), p 86, citing Norman Scott in the *Australian Home Beautiful*, July 1947, and the *Australian Home Beautiful*, pp 3,7.