

Walls with WOW



On the brink of extinction, a sharp-looking mid-century interior paneling finds new life through Eichler Siding

INDUSTRIAL DESIGNER Donald Deskey may have been the product's inventor of record for the past 70 years, but Jeff Nichols of Bay Area-based Eichler Siding gets the nod these days for spearheading its revival, which has just gotten underway.

The product the two entrepreneurs have in common is 'Weldtex,' a striking striated interior paneling that continues to catch the aesthetic eye of mid-century modern buffs and homeowners and beyond.

It all began during World War II, when Deskey, looking for an inexpensive yet timeless interior wall panel that would look attractive in a variety of modern residential installations, went to work on a design of his own.



TIMELESS PANELING. Top: Eichler Siding's Jeff Nichols with several colorful panels of Weldtex he recently milled. Above: This photo from a 1957 Weldtex advertisement features a room with the ceiling and all walls treated with the striated paneling. Left: Weldtex inventor Donald Deskey (circa 1940) was a prolific designer throughout his career.



Knowing that accent walls were becoming a sought-after finish that could warm up interiors, the talented Deskey—his prolific 50-year career of diverse design included the interior of the legendary Radio City Music Hall in New York City, lots of deco and modern furnishings, and even classic logos and packaging for Tide detergent and Crest toothpaste—invented a unique paneling design whose scored long, vertical ridges played with both light and shadow.

When Deskey's decorative 3/8-inch plywood panel was introduced to the market by U.S. Plywood Corporation in 1940, it was dubbed Weldtex.

"Back then Weldtex was used for interior and exterior paneling, and for cabinetry and furniture making. Even Frank Lloyd Wright used it in at least two of his homes," says Nichols, whose Eichler Siding, launched in 1987, is responsible for making available three different patterns of original Eichler exterior siding.

In the United States, homeowners used Weldtex primarily as an interior finish, while Canadians tended to use it both inside and outside.

Weldtex was widely popular in the 1940s through 1960s among builders and handyman, many of whom found they could panel walls much faster when using big sheets of pre-milled wood. The face grooves of the Weld-

tex panels also made their job easier because their pattern allowed them to install sheets side by side with joints that were seamless to the eye.

As wood paneling fell out of fashion by the 1970s, Weldtex production tapered off, leaving many homeowners searching in vain for reproductions that they could use to restore or replace their original paneling. Others, wanting to add the striated panels to recreate the look and feel they recalled from their grandparents' homes, were also out of luck.

Now fast-forward 50 years. Fascinated himself with the classic plywood paneling and noting a rising demand in the last few years, Nichols made a move in 2014 to offer Weldtex as part of his standard product line.

"My business was founded on the need to produce wall panels that are no longer produced today, but are needed by homeowners to continue to maintain

the original look of their MCM homes," Nichols says of his niche customer base. "A fair amount of people who find me do so from their searches on the internet.

"From time to time I would get calls from folks asking if I could reproduce the combed plywood of Weldtex. I've learned that people really like its look and often need it for repairs to their existing homes. So, finally, I decided to pursue it more seriously."

Manufacturing the Weldtex pattern requires a unique cutting mill, says Nichols, who continues to keep the secret of his siding and paneling reproduction techniques close to his chest.

"Due to the nature of how plywood is made today versus in the mid-century, I've had to experiment quite a lot to be able to produce the product we now manufacture," Nichols says. "People have expressed that our version of the Weldtex pattern is a great match to the pre-existing combed panels they have, and have put it up side-by-side with satisfying results."

Today, homeowners are using Nichols' Weldtex paneling as they did in the mid-century: as interior accent walls and full-room paneling, and on door fronts, cabinets, and furniture. Some also use it as ceiling panels, cutting the plywood into 12-inch to 24-inch squares and installing it at right angles to create an interesting pattern.

Nichols' modern-day version of the Weldtex panel is manufactured in 3/8-inch thickness (with limited 1/4-inch availability), and in two sheet sizes: 15-7/8 inches by 96 inches and 23-7/8 inches by 96 inches. Sheets can be milled on stock solid lumber, walnut, maple mahogany, or tongue-and-groove redwood.

—Tanja Kern

Photography: David Toerge; and courtesy Donald Deskey Archive, Eichler Siding

• For more information about Weldtex paneling, visit Eichler Siding's alternate web site: vintageplywood.com