

Front doors are increasingly being chosen as a mark of eco-consciousness and luxury. First impressions are important: It is, after all, 'the first handshake of the house'

Matthew Hague

The best front doors are both boringly prosaic and inspiringly poetic. They provide an effective barrier to the elements and act as an important security element. They also tell a story. Whether sexy and alluring (sleek steel, say) or unassuming but inviting (wood), the lines, materials and proportions introduce anyone passing by to the character of the house – and, by extension, to the people living within.

Too often, though, the functionality of the door (its insulation value or locking mechanism) is the primary concern (along with the price). But to discerning homeowners (and their designers and architects), the feel and look – even the smell – are equally important. That's why on the best homes, the portal pops.

There are many reasons for the increasing rise of the entryway. It's essential for curb appeal (although it won't show up on a real-estate feature sheet, a comely portal is something buyers swoon over); it's a sly luxury signifier (a bit like the glinting rims on a really nice car); and it's a marker of eco-consciousness (what's more sustainable than a door so well-built it never breaks down – especially if it's made of FSC-certified wood and treated with a non-toxic finish?).

So these days, the most handsome hatches are bold-looking, indestructible and strike the perfect balance between standing out and inviting people in.

Building a top-quality door "is a bit like cooking. You put in good ingredients, and the recipe will turn out," says Marcel Mulder, who has 30 years of experience manufacturing and selling entryways. He currently works as a sales rep for Tradewood Windows and Doors, based out of St. Catharines, Ont., and suggests that hardwoods such as mahogany are a great base material. They tend to have a stable grain structure so they won't warp, swell or crack (an issue in our extreme, hot-and-cold climate). Mahogany also has natural insulating qualities and doesn't need to be sealed with toxic varnishes. Instead, a simple finishing oil works.

Michael Piernitzki runs one of Canada's pre-eminent door-design and manufacturing studios, Bauhaus Doors. He only works with hardwoods, such as mahogany. "They aren't no-maintenance doors," he points out, "but it's basically Karate Kid maintenance. You have to rub on the oil, then let it sit for 20 minutes, then take it off with a cloth. You have to do it six months after you get the door, then again two or three years later."



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Most people enjoy maintaining the door this way, says Piernitzki, because it allows them to spend time touching the door, and the texture of the woods he uses are soft and lush.

Beyond the base materials, Piernitzki describes a good door as "an event," one that provides a bevy of sensorial pleasures. The clicking noises, for example, that the locking mechanisms make as they slide into place should sound clear and sharp (not squeaky or grating).

And the smell matters, too. Sapele mahogany, for example, has a pleasant, if subtle, cedary bouquet. Piernitzki once had an architect come into his Toronto showroom who was quite concerned about the olfactory experience for a client. (Piernitzki gave her a sample to take away to prove it would pass the smell test.)

There is also a measure of psychology involved. Both Mulder and Piernitzki supply doors that are a beefy 2 1/4-inch thick (the standard is more like 1 3/4 inches). The added depth gives a heft that suggests vault-like safety. It's not all for show. Combined with the right lock, and shatterproof glass sidelights or inserts, the doors are hard to break down. "We haven't had a break-in in 20 years," says Elizabeth Wright, Piernitzki's partner.

Of course, the added weight and peace of mind comes at a cost. A Tradewood or Bauhaus door might cost upward of \$10,000. That said, it would last the lifetime of a home. Which is why it's important these portals look perfect (and perfectly timeless).

According to award-winning architect Meg Graham, principal of Superkul studio, the "front door is the first handshake of the house, both for the homeowner and for visitors." In that sense, "the door should convey the spirit of the house in some way."

When she was designing an addition to a century-old farmhouse, for example, Graham wanted the entryway to speak to both the historical elements of the project, and the big, modern, Cor-Ten steel-box shed added on the back (even though it's not visible from the street). She created a simple, wooden panel (a mix of sapele mahogany and white oak) that reflected the traditional architecture. Then, on the exterior, she wrapped it in a steel shroud that would announce to anyone approaching: "Something different is happening here."

(Steel shrouds, she also points out, can help with maintenance, because, like canopies and overhangs, they can help protect the entrance from snow and rain.)

In contrast, sometimes an effective aesthetic stands out against, rather than fitting in with, the rest of the building. Architect Michael Taylor, founding partner of Taylor Smyth Architects, explains that his doors "depend on the specifics of the project." For a house he did in Toronto's Scarborough Bluffs neighbourhood, he used a rich, warm, sapele mahogany door on a building that is otherwise "fairly cool and neutral." The juxtaposition makes the whole exterior sing, and draws the visitor's eye right to the entryway – the way a jewel, for example, draws the eye to the middle of a necklace.