

HOT STUFF

- Angelica Pence

Wednesday, January 29, 2003

**WALL COVERINGS / Voguish vinyl membranes**

There's a sleek new import from Europe: French Ceiling. And if you haven't heard of it by now, you soon will.

Marie and Jean Gachet moved from Marseilles to the Bay Area in 1999 and brought with them the voguish product -- a vinyl membrane, which is heated, stretched from wall to wall (or ceiling to floor) and tacked to a frame. The material molds easily over any shape, disguises the most unsightly surface and comes in six dozen vibrant hues. While so-called stretch ceilings long have been used in commercial spaces, the product now is gaining ground in private homes.

"Stretch ceilings have been popular in France since the '70s. But here, very few people knew what we were talking about," says Jean Gachet.

No need to move your furniture, French Ceiling can be installed over most facades -- flat or stretched -- within hours. Yes, even over that circa 1972 popcorn ceiling. The wrapper-like material is available in 75 flat, satin or glossy finishes, requires minimal maintenance and is decidedly less messy than painting.

Soundproof or thermal insulation can be added -- key features when designing music, rec or bed rooms. It lasts about two decades, can be perforated to allow for lighting, sprinkler or ventilation fixtures, and can be swapped readily for a new color.

"We simply unclip and change it. You can redo a ceiling overnight," says Marie Gachet.

Modern day PVC stretch ceilings date back three decades to Sweden, where they were used as a remedy for damaged plaster ceilings. French Ceiling's formula is more environmentally friendly because it's made with 50 percent sea salt and 50 percent petroleum).

The mod material was a big hit at last month's "Dining by Design" charity fundraiser, where the Gachets created a retro red awning and wall for interior designer Steven Miller's festive table, as well as some sleek panels for DeSousa Hughes and Antoine Proulx.

Esmeralda Mondoloni had French Ceiling installed in several rooms of her Marina District home, including a bathroom shower stall in which the silken

black vinyl created an illusion of a much larger space.

"We didn't want to move any walls or worry about painting," Mondoloni said of her 1936 villa-style house. "So we're very happy with it."

For more information on French Ceiling call (707) 649-9312 or visit www.frenchceiling.com.

©2005 San Francisco Chronicle