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Industry Insights

Choosing the best finish for your design project

The finish on door hardware is just that—the final touch that turns a functional piece of hardware into an attractive design element. But not all finishes are the same.

While the “look” is important, it should not be the deciding factor on door hardware—particularly for commercial use.

Consideration #1: Application

In commercial facilities, the application of the building is often the primary driver in finish selection.

Case in point: A hospital, for example, needs a finish that withstands daily exposure to a high volume of people—not to mention carts, gurneys, daily cleaning and more. Stainless steel or satin chrome finish options are the best on the market today for this type of application.



Stainless steel—a steel alloy mixed with chromium—does not readily corrode, rust, stain or show fingerprints. However, its shiny appearance doesn’t always fit with the design look of the building. Satin stainless steel or satin chrome are often chosen as alternatives.

“Satin chrome remains our highest-selling finish for commercial facilities,” explains Jim Sweney, manager of finishing/engineering services. “Its brushed appearance is more appealing for some designs. Plus it is very durable and withstands more wear-and-tear than its counterparts.”

With this finish, chrome is plated over another metal to provide extra hardness and resistance to corrosion. For all these reasons, Sweney says satin chrome is often selected for schools and universities.

Older schools and historic buildings often have to consider the original or vintage design of a building when selecting a finish. “Daily traffic must still be considered, but older buildings or buildings with that look—such as museums, theaters or high-end condominiums—also need a finish that blends with the unique design,” Sweney says.

Oil-rubbed bronze—which boasts a more artistic look—is often the first choice in these cases. As a living finish, it is chemically darkened or blackened for an “aged” look. It has some downsides, though. For starters, the dark bronze coating wears off with time, to expose the dull brass/bronze material beneath. The process used to create the look can also cause variation in the finish—from dark chocolate to a dark gray with copper undertones. In some facilities this is the intended look, but in other buildings it comes as a surprise to see the wear pattern where the hardware has been touched.

Because of these limitations, Sweney says the aged bronze finish is becoming the natural alternative to oil-rubbed bronze. Aged bronze maintains the vintage look of oil-rubbed bronze but, because it uses a mechanical process to remove the black at key touch points, it lasts longer and shows less wear.



He says aged bronze and satin nickel are popular in mixed-use and office buildings. “Both have a warmer look to them—without the institutional look of stainless steel or the blackening degradation of oil-rubbed bronze.”

Consideration #2: Geographic region

If you design buildings in a coastal city, salt and moisture make it a real challenge to find a finish, particularly for exterior doors.

“Bright chrome is the best finish against salt and moisture—if the application can handle that look,” says Sweney.

If not, he recommends oil-rubbed bronze or one of the powder coats.

Powder coating—a tougher alternative to conventional paint—is made of a thermoplastic or thermoset polymer with a hard finish that protects against corrosion.

“We’ve seen good performance with the flat black powder coat on Von Duprin exit devices,” he says.

Sunbelt states pose another finish challenge: extreme UV rays.

“UV rays degrade clear coating finishes,” says Sweney. “Almost everything but chrome or oil-rubbed bronze has trouble withstanding the rays over time.”

Finishes with clear protective coating have improved recently to provide better UV protection. This invisible coating generally protects metal from damage, tarnish, corrosion and oxidation.



Consideration #3: Suite potential

In most commercial facilities, door hardware finishes are typically selected in tandem with lighting and plumbing. For the most part, Sweney says, the same finish options are available, but the lighting industry offers greater flexibility.

“There are many decorative finishes in lighting that do just not hold up in a door hardware application,” he explains. “Some faux finishes or metallics used for lighting have not been adopted on the door hardware side, either because it is too cost-prohibitive or technology hasn’t advanced enough that it will last on a door handle or exit device used hundreds of time a day.”

Consideration #4: Durability

When it comes to selecting a finish, aesthetics are very important. However, if a finish wears off, corrodes or tarnishes after just a few years, then the aesthetics of your room will be out the door!



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“There are significant differences in performance between finishes,” says Sweney. “I’ve seen beautiful finishes on door hardware looking pretty rough just five years after install—it’s important to understand that more expense doesn’t always make a finish more durable.”

If you need help choosing a finish that meets your design needs and holds up over time, [contact one of our architectural consultants](#) for assistance.

										
605 US3 <i>Bright Brass</i>	606 US4 <i>Satin Brass</i>	609 US5 <i>Antique Brass</i>	612 US10 <i>Satin Bronze</i>	613 US10B <i>Oil Rubbed Bronze</i>	619 US15 <i>Satin Nickel</i>	625 US26 <i>Bright Chrome</i>	626 US26D <i>Satin Chrome</i>	629 US32 <i>Bright Stainless Steel</i>	630 US32D <i>Satin Stainless Steel</i>	643* /716 US11 <i>Aged Bronze</i>

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