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# Backgrounds

## FOR YOUR HOME



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## If You're Going to Decorate . . .

- **Avoid drabness.** Neutral, lifeless colors don't really hide dirt and they are hard on the spirits.
  - **Plan your entire home around a few colors,** three or four at the most. Combine them in endless variety—bright and dull, dark and light.
  - **Use color according to the way your rooms face**—warm tones for north rooms, cool colors for south rooms.
- D** — **Consider your artificial lighting.** Incandescent and fluorescent lighting affect color differently.
- O** — **Look for new developments** in paints, papers, floor finishes, and floor coverings.
- **Consider ease of upkeep** in background finishes.
  - **Make your background choices work for good room proportion** and for covering bad architecture if you have that problem.
  - **Take samples with you** when you shop for paints, papers, and floor coverings that are to be used together.
- D** — **Have an entirely different set of colors** in each room.
- O** — **Let pattern get the best of you.** Keep some surfaces plain.
- N** — **Tolerate and emphasize ugly proportions** and bad built-in features. They can be made less noticeable by wise choice of color and finishes.
- '**
- T** — **Hesitate to try new ideas.**
- **Let fashions or the Joneses dictate to you.** Plan for yourself.

# Backgrounds for Your Home

Charlotte Kirchner

**F**LOORS, woodwork, walls, and ceilings form the background for the furnishings in your home. Their colors, textures, and designs should be related to one another, to the type of furnishings, and to the way the furnishings are used. The type of house, size and shape of rooms, exposure, lighting, personal taste, and activities of the family all affect the choice of background treatments.

Four ideas need to be explored to achieve effective backgrounds:

- **COLORS**—Which shall I select?
- **PATTERN**—How much dare I use?
- **TEXTURE**—What do my furnishings and activities demand?
- **FINISHES**—Which are the easiest to apply and care for?

**LET'S LOOK AT COLOR.** Using color is the simplest method of creating attractive rooms, for color is easy to add and costs little.

The direction a room faces and the amount of natural light are two of the first things to note. Light from the south is bright and warm, so rooms facing that direction need cool greens and blues and grays to tone down this light. Light from the north is even and cool, and rooms with this exposure need sunny warm colors from the yellow and red families to give them cheer. East and west exposures may take any color, the choice depending on the use made of the room and the amount of time spent in it.

Artificial lighting must also be considered when you choose background

colors and this choice is more difficult for rooms where both incandescent and fluorescent lighting is used. Incandescent lights emphasize warm colors—reds and yellows. White and daylight fluorescent tubes emphasize the cool colors—blues and greens.

Two steps will help you decide on color: (1) know which of the colors absorb and which reflect light, and (2) decide how much light your activity in each room will need.

In kitchens and in rooms where much reading, studying, or sewing is done, light yellow, gray, green, and blue will reflect from 55 to 75 per cent of the light. Dark colors absorb much light and should be used with care. Dark-colored walls make a small room appear smaller.

Rarely can you change background colors and furnishings like rugs, upholstery, and curtains all at the same time. So choose a background color that will live harmoniously with the colors already in the room. Often your present furnishings can supply a clue to the choice of background colors—the draperies, for example, or a picture, the upholstery of a davenport or chair, or a rug.

Color may often tone down or completely disguise poor details such as built-in buffets, bookcases, wainscoting, and too many windows and doors. Painted like the walls, woodwork fades in importance. On the other hand, many of the handsome built-in shelves and storage cabinets of modern architecture can be highlighted by colored finishes.

Color is also valuable for changing poorly proportioned rooms. Square rooms look longer when the ceiling and one wall are a different color from the other three walls. High ceilings seem lower when they are darker than the side walls. A dark end wall and one lighter side wall will shorten and widen a room that is too long and narrow.

Consider, too, the colors your family likes or dislikes. What activities does your family enjoy? Pale blues and dainty pinks are not for hobby-loving, football-playing Johnny; teen-age Susie will adore them. Guests may enjoy visiting in a living room quiet in tones of green but the family should be able to enjoy reading, radio, television, or games in that same room.

## Patterned Backgrounds

Much care should be taken in selecting patterns to be used as backgrounds. Use **only one** large-scaled or dominant pattern in a room. Too much pattern creates a feeling of restlessness. Use small-scaled patterns in small rooms and large-scaled patterns in large rooms.

Most floor coverings will give you longer lasting satisfaction if their pat-

terns are conservative and quiet in effect, commanding very little attention. Floor coverings cannot often be changed, so they must go well with other, more easily changed backgrounds and furnishings.

A patterned wallpaper may help to take away bareness when the room is large and furnishings are few. Wall areas cut up by many doors, windows, and other architectural features may be made inconspicuous by using the same plain color for walls and woodwork.

## Choosing Textures

We are considering texture when we decide whether to put a dull or a shiny finish on walls or woodwork; whether to leave plaster rough or put on a smooth finish; whether to select linoleum or a pile rug for a dining room.

Consider these points in deciding on texture:

Wall and woodwork finishes such as high-gloss enamel reflect so much light that it amounts to a glare and may cause eyestrain in rooms where we spend much time. Smooth wall finishes are more easily cleaned than rough plaster walls, and smooth floors are more easily cleaned than embossed linoleums. Rough plaster wall finishes do not go well with fine mahogany furniture, and formal papers are not at home with homespun draperies.

The choice of texture should be based on (1) use made of rooms; (2) type of furniture and furnishings that must live with the background; (3) time available for care; and (4) personal preference.

## LET'S LOOK AT FINISHES

There is a variety of finishes from which to select for walls, woodwork, or floors. Each type requires its own preparation of surface, its own method of application. Ask these questions:

Will it wear?

Is it easy to apply?

Can I repair it if necessary?

Can it be cared for easily?

## Wall Finishes

Wallpaper and paint are the two wall finishes used most often, although wood paneling, linoleum, or plastic tile may be applied. Neither paint nor paper should be applied to new plaster. New plaster must be completely dry before decorating starts and time may vary (according to drying conditions) from at least three months up to a year. The problems in finishing walls are the same for paint and paper:

1. Choice of color and/or pattern
2. Preparation of walls for finish
3. Application of finish.

## What About Wallpaper?

The right paper used in the right place can solve many decorating problems.

- Pattern paper can cover patched and rough plaster.
- Small patterns used on both ceilings and walls can make broken, sloping ceiling lines or poor construction less noticeable.
- Small rooms where little time is spent (halls, dinettes, alcoves, closets) can be made dramatic, decorative spots in an otherwise plain background.
- Vertically striped paper adds height to a room.
- Bold plaids and horizontal stripes on walls will seem to lower a ceiling.
- Figured wallpaper on one wall and plain paper on the other three seem to change room proportions.
- Large-patterned wallpaper can help to "furnish" a room where the furniture supply is scant.

But there are things to be careful about—

- Large-patterned paper will make a small room seem smaller.
- Dark papers will make a room seem smaller.
- Papers with too fine, too scrawly a pattern have no character on the wall.

- Shiny patterns in paper call attention to themselves and are often not in harmony with furnishings.
- Patterned paper makes a poor background for pictures.
- Light-colored paper makes a poor background for very dark furniture or for ugly-shaped furniture.

When you shop for paper, remember that—

- Patterns look smaller on the wall than they do in a sample book.
- Colors look different at night. Take a piece of the paper home and try it on the wall to get the effect both in daylight and artificial light.
- Washable papers are the best buy. There are some stainproof papers on the market also.
- Cloth-backed wall coverings are good for kitchens and bathrooms. They wear long, are easily cleaned, and can be hung as easily as ordinary paper.
- The things that make for price differences in wallpaper are number of colors, grade of paper, finish of paper, amount of detail in the design, and the size of roll.
- It's wise to have an extra roll or two for patching when necessary.

If you are going to hang the wallpaper yourself—

- Get as much of the old paper off the wall as possible by soaking with hot water.
- Wash painted walls with a strong solution of washing soda before applying the paper.
- Fill in cracks and broken places with patching plaster.
- Sandpaper the patches.
- Size walls and allow this to completely dry before applying new paper.
- Remember—especially if you're an amateur—that papers with all-over design are easier to handle than those that need careful spacing and matching.

## If You Plan to Use Paint

You have a choice of several kinds of paint but the preparation is the same regardless of the kind you choose.

- Be sure to have all surfaces clean, dry, and smooth.
- Scrape away any old loose paint.
- Wash walls which have any greasy or waxed surfaces and allow to dry thoroughly. Paint will not stick to these surfaces.
- Be sure all breaks and cracks are filled and smooth, since no paint can hide them.
- Apply the first coat of paint or the primer coat before you fill cracks, scars, or nailheads.
- If you are painting over a gloss surface, kill the gloss by washing with a solution of sal soda.

Paints for wall finishes may include flat paints, gloss paints, enamels, and water-based paints. Newer on the market are plastic paints and rubber-based paints. Quality should be a first consideration in the buying of any paint. Cheap paint is always poor economy. It does not dry well, and it is apt to chip, crack, peel, or rub off. Good-quality paint rolls or brushes on easily and smoothly. Since it covers more space, it costs less in the long run. Select your paint according to use. The table below gives some idea of type and place for assuring best wear.

| Kind                        | Characteristics   | Where used   |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Flat wall paint             | Dull finish, does not bear repeated washing.                      | Living rooms, dining rooms, bedrooms.                  |
| Semigloss paint (Egg shell) | Semigloss finish, washable.                                       | Use anywhere on the inside of the house.               |
| Gloss interior              | High gloss finish, washable.                                      | Kitchens, bathrooms (less desirable than dull finish). |
| Semigloss enamel            | Low gloss finish, washable.                                       | Kitchens, bathrooms.                                   |
| Gloss enamel                | High gloss finish, washable.                                      | Kitchens, bathrooms, less desirable than dull finish.  |
| Casein paint                | Water-based paint, dull finish, more washable than calcimine.     | Any room.  |
| Calcimine                   | Water-based paint, dull finish, not washable, will absorb grease. | Any room.  |
| Latex-based paint           | Rubber-based semidull surface, washable.                          | Any room.  |

## Finishes for Woodwork

Two kinds of finish are most commonly used on woodwork—paint or varnish. If you use paint on your woodwork you need a clean, dry, smooth surface just as you do when painting walls. If you use varnish you usually treat the wood to deepen or change the natural wood color before applying the varnish. This treatment may be any one of the following:

1. Penetrating or oil stains applied to produce a deep wood color.
2. Thinned paint used as a stain (applied, allowed to set briefly, and wiped off).
3. A bleach to produce a lighter than ordinary wood color.
4. New light wood stains to produce lighter than ordinary wood color.

There are on the market varnish stains which produce muddy, heavy, not too desirable finishes. And there are some new colors in varnish finishes that give a surface with a clear color effect that is very pleasing.

In selecting varnish remember that:

1. Flat varnish will give a low-gloss, pleasing finish.
2. Regular interior varnish will look nicer if its high gloss is rubbed down with pumice and oil.
3. Spar varnish gives a hard-wearing surface not harmed by water. Reduce the gloss with pumice and oil.

**There are other finishes that can be used:**

- Shellac used as a filler, rubbed down with steel wool, and waxed keeps the natural color of the wood.
- Linseed oil (mixed with an equal amount of turpentine for the first coat) applied in several coats three or four days apart makes an excellent finish which does not mar easily. Each coat should be rubbed with fine steel wool before the application of the next coat and each coat should be well rubbed into the wood and the excess wiped off. The final coat may be waxed. This finish deepens the natural color of the wood.
- Penetrating floor sealers can be used on woodwork as well as floors.

**Consider these points when you choose a finish for woodwork:**

- Dark woodwork makes door and window casings stand out against light walls. This is not good if you have a small room with many openings.
- Middle-value colors and natural-wood colors show fingerprints less easily than very light colors—a good point to remember in the kitchen.
- Dark colors and most varnish finishes show scratches easily.
- Attractive color schemes result when the woodwork is toned to the color of the walls.
- Where there are many openings in a room, woodwork painted the same color as the walls will keep the room from seeming cut up.
- Plywood paneling or knotty-pine walls in a room may be treated like any other woodwork.

## Finishes for Floors

Wood floors are finished so that rugs may be laid in certain areas, or they may be covered wall to wall with either hard-surface covering or carpeting. If you plan to finish the wood, consider two things:

1. A finish that will supply a good foundation color in the room.
  2. A finish that will withstand wear from traffic.
- Old floors that are to be refinished should be made as tight, level, and smooth as possible. It is well to sand them, but if that is not possible, a good grade of paint and varnish remover should be applied to take the old finish off. Remove stains, either with sandpaper or a bleach. Small cracks in old floors can be filled with commercial crack filler in a color to match the wood, or you can make a satisfactory filler at home. Melt flake glue in a small amount of water in the top of a double boiler. Then mix fine sawdust with the glue until the resulting mixture has a putty-like consistency. Fill cracks with this mixture before it has cooled, rounding slightly above the floor surface. Let it dry and sand it smooth. Clean the floor thoroughly and let it dry before applying the new finish.
  - New floors should be given three sandings: first with No. 2 to 2½ sandpaper, next with No. 1 to 1½, and finally with No. 0 to 00. Sweep the newly sanded floor and wipe it with a cloth dipped in turpentine. If the first coat of finish cannot be applied immediately, protect the clean floor with building paper or some similar material until finishing is possible. If the color of the floor is to be deepened, apply the stain before building up a finish.

Varieties of finishes for floors may include the following:

- **Sealers.** There are a number of floor sealers on the market if you are sure to follow directions they will provide an excellent finish because—
  1. Sealers withstand wear.
  2. Worn places can be repaired without redoing the entire floor.

3. Seal-finished floors have a soft luster instead of a shine.
  4. Seal-finished floors do not darken with age.
  5. Sealers are easily applied.
  6. Floors finished with sealers can be kept up by periodic waxing.
- **Varnishes.** A good grade of varnish gives a durable finish which is hard, smooth, and glossy. At least two coats of varnish should be applied, for several thin coats of varnish make a better finish than one heavy coat. Periodic waxing is necessary to protect this finish for it is difficult to repair when worn.
  - **Shellac.** This finish, which forms an

inelastic coating on the floor, scratches easily and wears off quickly. It should always be protected with wax.

- **Paints and enamels.** These should be of a kind designed especially for floor use. Paints will give longer wear if protected by a coat of spar varnish and kept waxed. Paints and enamels conceal worn floor surfaces, give a smooth finish, and add color to the room. Don't select a color so dark that dust and footprints will show. If you want a neutral floor color that will not show dust and footprints, one of the so-called dust colors makes an excellent choice for the purpose.

## FLOOR COVERINGS AS BACKGROUNDS

When hard-surface floor coverings (like linoleum) or woven coverings (like carpeting) are laid wall to wall or even used as room-sized rugs, they become part of the background for other furnishings. Then the color, texture, installation, care, and wearing qualities of these coverings become important to background planning.

### Hard-Surface Floor Coverings

Suppose we choose a hard-surface floor covering. We can select linoleum, felt-base coverings, or resilient tiles made of linoleum, asphalt, rubber, cork, or plastic.

#### LINOLEUM

Linoleum is a mixture mainly of ground cork and oxidized linseed oil to which color, gums, and resins are usually added. This mixture is pressed into a burlap backing, which in good grades of linoleum becomes deeply embedded.

Where color is added to the cork and oil mixture before pressing, the result is known as **Inlaid Linoleum**. Pattern never wears off in this kind of linoleum. Where the mixture is pressed into the backing as is and color is applied to the surface afterward we have **Printed Linoleum**. When this coating of oil paint wears off, the linoleum loses attractiveness but it may be far from worn out.

If you have chosen linoleum as a floor covering, check:

- **THE GAUGE.** There are five gauges.

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| 1/4 inch           | } Used in commercial places where traffic is heavy. |
| 3/16 inch          |   |
| 1/8 inch—heavy     |   |
| 3/32 inch—medium   |   |
| 5/64 inch—standard |   |

Standard-gauge linoleum is commonly used in homes, although in some cases medium may be selected. The extra money that the heavier gauges cost might be better used to have the linoleum laid by a skilled person.



## • COLOR AND PATTERN

1. PLAIN linoleum in solid colors is often least expensive. Colors may be attractive but plain linoleum shows soil more than patterned types.
2. JASPE linoleum blends two or more colors to give a striped effect. It shows soil less than the plain type and is very attractive.
3. MARBELIZED linoleum has two or more colors swirled together to look like marble. It is the easiest color arrangement to lay so that seams do not show, and it shows soil less than other types.
4. PATTERNED linoleum is a combination of a solid color with another solid color—or with jaspe or marbelized sections. When patterned linoleum is used the floor becomes part of the decorative scheme as well as a background.
5. EMBOSSED linoleum is patterned linoleum in which parts of the design have been pressed deeper than the rest. It has a pleasing appearance but is not so easily cleaned as the smooth surface.

• **THE INSTALLATION.** Linoleum properly laid becomes a permanent flooring and can be used in any room in the house. A cove installation (linoleum is extended about six inches up the wall) eliminates the dust and dirt-catching angle between the wall and the floor. Linoleum is best laid by a skilled person but if homemakers are to do the job there are points to remember:

1. The floor should be smooth and dry. If there is unevenness or roughness, sand or plane it or lay some type of new rigid material over the old floor. Plywood  $\frac{3}{8}$  to  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch thick is excellent material for this purpose. Low-grade plywood known as "sound one side" is adequate.

2. Linoleum should be laid crosswise on the floor boards.
3. Felt should first be cemented to the floor and the linoleum cemented to the felt. Felt is not meant to smooth the floor surface but to reduce the effect of spreading and tightening of the floor boards. Rough floors will show through felt, and the linoleum will crack if the floor is not smooth and even.

## FELT-BASE COVERINGS

Felt-base floor coverings are made by applying a paint design to a felt back. Points to remember about felt back are these:

1. The life of this covering depends on the thickness of the paint coat. When this is worn through the dark felt back shows.
2. Felt-base patterns are more varied than those of linoleum because the design is merely painted on.
3. Felt base can be cemented directly to the floor.
4. A coat of spar varnish and regular waxings will increase the life of felt back.
5. Felt back can be resurfaced with paint the same way as a wood floor. A good choice is a foundation of dust-colored paint which may be spatter-painted or given a marbelized appearance with a color overcoat.
6. Felt back is one of the least expensive of floor coverings.

## RESILIENT TILES

1. ASPHALT TILE has a high resistance to moisture. It may be used over concrete flooring and below grade level. It has a low resistance to denting, grease, and oil.
2. RUBBER TILE is one of the most resilient of floor coverings. It should not be used where much oil and grease are present, since they tend to soften the rubber.

3. **CORK TILE** gives the least noise at point of impact, providing the most quiet of all hard-surface floor coverings. Regular cork tile is hard to maintain. Cork is available with a factory-treated resistant surface.
4. **PLASTIC TILE** has a wide color range. It needs no surface finishing, is easily cared for, and is resistant to acid and grease.
5. **LINOLEUM TILE** is made the same way as sheet linoleum.

Instructions for laying any type of tile can be obtained from the dealer, and if you are to lay the tile you should follow these instructions carefully.

## Soft-Surface Floor Coverings

Soft-surface floor coverings are available in a variety of sizes and weaves. Wall-to-wall carpeting covers the entire floor, while rugs may cover only small areas or almost all of the floor. Small throw rugs are considered decorative items, while rugs and carpets become background items. Rugs for small rooms should be large enough to come within 4 to 6 inches of the wall. For large rooms, rug edges may come within 6 to 12 inches of the wall. Rugs and carpets may be purchased in strips (sewn together to gain the desired size) or in widths of 6, 9, 12, 15, and 18 feet, called "broadloom."

**Quality** in general can be determined by the weight of the carpet. The height and density of the pile determine the weight. The more tufts per square inch and the higher the pile, the more the carpet will weigh. The type and grade of the fiber used and the construction of the yarn have much to do with the quality you get in your carpet. The ability of the pile to spring back after use—that is, its resilience—is another principal factor in determining quality in carpets.

## CARPET CONSTRUCTION

Weaving, the traditional method, and tufting, the newer method, are two entirely different methods of constructing carpets and rugs. Woven carpet is made on a loom. Axminster, Velvet, Wilton, and Chenille are the four standard carpet weaves.

- **AXMINSTER** is available in a wide color range and unlimited combinations. Most are figured and multi-colored although a few are plain. This weave has a deep-cut pile and an all-wool surface. It is woven so that each tuft shows on the surface and forms part of the pattern. Good-quality Axminsters will have as many as 11 rows of tufts to the inch—poor-quality as few as four. This weave cannot be rolled crosswise because of the construction of the jute backing. It is long wearing and is good for rooms that get hard usage because spots do not show up on the pattern.
- **VELVET** is most often found in solid colors. It is woven from dyed yarns and if figured, has the design printed on after weaving. This weave has a cut, low pile which may be either twisted or straight, and it can be rolled both ways. There are no wool yarns buried in the back of the fabric. Judge its quality by the closeness of the weave on the back and by the depth of pile.
- **WILTON** has low cut, stubby pile with several layers of yarn imbedded in the back. This is part of the weaving process which carried the pattern colors on the underside. This weave is more limited in color combination than the Axminster. It can be rolled both ways and provides the longest wearing qualities in its better grades of any weave. Judge this weave, too, by closeness of weave on the back.

• **CHENILLE** is a thick, soft carpet which requires two looms for weaving. One loom weaves the pile surface in a blanket, which is cut into furry strips. The strips are then woven into the base of the carpet on another loom. The weaving process is expensive, making the carpet high in price. It can be woven in any size, shape, pattern, or color. Its long-wearing quality and high price have limited its use mainly to business offices and hotels.

Tufting, the newer method of construction, is a process which sews pile yarns to a broad fabric backing by use of wide, multiple-needled machines. The backing may be made of jute or cotton canvas. Most often jute is used. After the tufting is done, the yarn ends are locked into the backing with a coat of latex. The nature of the tufting process does not allow the use of multiple colors or a great variety of designs. Textured effects in one or more colors, striated patterns, rippled effects, and squares are among the designs available in tufted carpets.

#### FIBERS USED IN CARPETS

1. **WOOL** has long been the traditional fiber for carpet-making. It is the most widely used because of its superior qualities—durability, resilience, warmth, color-fastness, and resistance to soil.
2. **COTTON** has long been popular for small-sized rugs. More recently, it has been made in large-sized tufted and woven carpets. Good quality cotton fibers are durable, and can be dyed fast-colors in many shades. Cotton is economical; therefore it is possible for manufacturers to offer serviceable rugs at attractive prices. Its lack of resiliency causes it to crush or pack down under use. Cotton soils readily; thus more frequent cleaning is necessary.
3. **CARPET RAYON** is a special fiber made for use in carpet-making. It may be used alone or in blends with other fibers. It is a relatively inexpensive fiber. It may have a tendency to crush, and the light colors soil more readily than the dark ones. Rayon carpets may be found in a wide range of colors.
4. **NYLON** carpet fibers are long-wearing and the most expensive ones used in the making of carpets. Soil is easily removed from nylon carpeting. Nylon can be dyed a wide range of colors, which are fast to light and washing. It claims a high resistance to crushing. Used in blends with other fibers, it increases their serviceability. The use of 50 per cent or more of nylon in a blend is needed if significant benefits from its resilience and cleanability are to be obtained.
5. **SARAN** carpet fibers may be found alone or in blends with other fibers. Saran is a man-made fiber available in straight or curled form. Its fast-color is added to the solution before the fibers are formed. It claims to have durability, satisfactory resistance to crushing in densely constructed pile, and resistance to soiling and spotting.

## Points to Remember

1. Plain-colored floor coverings laid wall to wall make a room look larger.
2. Dark carpeting shows footprints.
3. Very light carpeting is likely to show soil when given heavy family use.
4. Cotton rugs show soil more quickly than wool.
5. Tone-on-tone designs in middle-color values do not show soil quickly.
6. Select your floor covering and your wall and woodwork colors as a background unit. Take samples of each with you when you shop.
7. Buy a rug cushion (hair or rubber) when you buy your carpeting or rug.
8. Watch the percentages in blends in order to have enough of the desired fiber to give the difference expected in wearing qualities.
9. Broadloom is a width, not a weave. Broadloom comes 6, 9, 12, 15, and 18 feet wide.
10. Some cotton floor covering is being made with the same pile weave as wool rugs.
11. All-wool carpet made in tufted construction is available.
12. Dyes are better than ever. Slight changes in the color of soft floor coverings may be expected, not because of dye fading but because of atmospheric dust or soil which cannot be swept away. Frequent cleaning will mean less discoloration.
13. Dirt is the worst enemy of carpets and rugs. Large areas of soft floor coverings make a vacuum cleaner and carpet sweeper necessary. You should plan to have the carpet professionally cleaned every few years.
14. Carpets and rugs are a long-time investment. Consider them carefully in your background planning.

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