

Color, texture all in one

By Gillian Drummond, Special to The Arizona Daily Star

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American Clay wall treatment may also have health benefits

Croft Elsaesser was toiling away as a faux-finish decorator in Phoenix when the business idea came to him.

He was working with Venetian plaster, gypsum and lime-based plaster, and a lot of paint, to perfect the looks he wanted. Added to that, he says, some of the products were "not very fun" to work with because of their high alkalinity.

Elsaesser couldn't see why it wouldn't be possible to get the texture and color that plaster and paint techniques gave, but all in one product.

Hence the birth of **American Clay**.

The stuff is a blend of natural clays, recycled and reclaimed aggregates, borax and natural pigments, and Elsaesser says it's ecologically conscious and easy to work with.

It comes in 32 colors (more can be custom-made), and it can be applied either with a rough, adobe-like texture or smoothly.

Elsaesser, now based in Albuquerque, has won awards for the product, which was launched in 2002. He acknowledges that he didn't exactly reinvent the wheel; **clay** is readily available in the earth (**American Clay** comes from sites including Georgia and Missouri) and has been used in building work for centuries.

But many plasters have veered away from their original states, he says, with binders and polymers that "get more and more complex."

There's evidence that **American Clay** may have health benefits, too.

Here's what Elsaesser says researchers know so far: Clays release negative ions, which have the same effect as buying a plug-in air ionizer. They don't attract dust and allergens as much as painted surfaces do. And they've been shown to absorb toxins, so they're good for asthma sufferers.

Research is still going on surrounding what he calls "the woo-woo aspects" of the product. But he believes from anecdotal evidence that there's something about it that gives customers a good feeling.

"People always come to me and say, 'This room just feels better - kind of a warm type of feeling,' " he says.

One couple who are happy with its effects are Meg and Tim Hagyard, who have used **American Clay** on several walls of their restored warehouse in the Dunbar/Spring neighborhood in central Tucson. Tim is also Elsaesser's cousin.

The Hagyards customized one of the colors, a dark, coffee-like shade, in their open-plan kitchen and added flakes of mica to it to make it sparkle. The rest of the colors - shades of pale blue and light brown - are taken from the company's own palette.

Their home has a modern, industrial feel, and the Hagyards, who had used Venetian plaster in one of their former homes, liked the depth and the colors they got with

American Clay.

"I feel like this made it a little warmer, which is a nice contrast with the warehouse feel," Meg says.

Elsaesser's revenues have grown 400 percent in the last year, and **American Clay** has been used nationwide, everywhere from high-end condos and Manhattan apartments to restaurant refits and country homes.

People not only want a certain finish in their homes, he says, but more and more they want to know about the products they're using.

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» Where to find it

Go online to www.americanclay.com or call 1-866-404-1634, or you can buy it at Originate, a natural-building-materials store at 526 N. Ninth Ave., 792-4207.

Croft Elsaesser says his product costs an average of \$1 to \$1.25 per square foot, compared with around 65 cents per square foot for other plasters. But because you don't have to add paint for faux finishing, he reckons it works out to be less expensive than traditional plaster and paint methods.

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Caption/Lead: Photos by Dean Knuth - Tim and Meg Hagyard used **American Clay** on several walls of their home in the Dunbar/Spring neighborhood in central Tucson.

- Tim Hagyard and his daughter Emma, 6. The **clay** used on their home's walls may absorb toxins.

- **American Clay** comes in 32 colors and more can be custom-made. The product is easy to work with and ecologically conscious.

- A detail of one of the walls at Tim and Meg Hagyard's home.

- The depth and colors provided by **American Clay** warm up the Hagyards' modern home.

