Color It Green

In real estate, color is rarely chosen anything less than seriously. It plays a powerful role in shaping the way buildings and developments are perceived; the color scheme can either attract homebuyers, renters, and consumers, or drive them away. Many architects and clients hire professional color consultants to help with the complex array of color decisions. Most of the clients with a stake in these kinds of decisions are real estate developers and managers who are trying to sell houses, build new or revitalize existing retail space, or soothe ruffled neighbors.

No two people respond to color in exactly the same way. Color has several layers of meaning that trigger responses on a variety of levels. Environmental designer and author Frank Mahnke has identified six major factors that influence the experience of color. These layers of consciousness and evaluation are in action each time an observer responds to color.

Biological response. Scientists have discovered that different colors have different physiological effects. A study conducted by Harry Wehlmann, professor of fine arts at the University of Alberta at Edmonton, found that making color changes and installing full-spectrum lighting in elementary school classrooms reduced students’ blood pressure, raised academic performance and IQ scores, and reduced episodes of disruptive behavior. Other studies also have identified physiological responses to color—even when subjects are blindfolded.

Associations and symbolic meanings. Color carries certain associations and symbolic meanings that grow out of the habits, traditions, values, and myths of a particular culture. For instance, in Western culture, the color of mourning is black, while in Eastern cultures it is white. “Blue” can mean sad in America, but it means intoxicated in Germany. On the other hand, the Red Cross symbol communicates help is on the way across most cultures.

Cultural influences and mannerisms. Certain color palettes tend to be associated with a particular region or appear more natural in a region’s particular light—whitewashed houses in the south of Spain, for example, or the art deco pastels of South Beach in Miami, Florida.

Style and trends. Colors change meaning over time as fashions come and go and trends evolve. Economic and social conditions influence the popularity of certain colors. In times of peace and stability, people prefer colors with bright hues, while in times of unrest or economic depression, muted colors such as black, brown, and gray are favored.

Collective unconscious. The collective unconscious, psychiatrist Carl Jung’s term for humanity’s reservoir of inherited images, can influence response to color, regardless of personal experiences or cultural influences. This impact, of course, is harder to quantify.

Personal relationships. Each individual has personal color preferences based on past or learned experiences. Memories of happy times in a blue room during one’s childhood may lead one to favor blue as an adult. Likewise, sad memories can influence an individual’s response to color.

Green is the complex interplay of these factors, choosing colors for a broad audience can be a difficult task. The choice of colors appropriate for a particular situation involves applying a cross-disciplinary approach to color using these six principles in varying degrees. In many situations, a variety of complementary colors will give individuals an opportunity to respond with a positive emotion.

Color consultants make different choices depending on the project’s target audience. For the youth market, vibrant, fresh, and surprising colors tend to have the most appeal. Baby boomers, however, seek sophistication and security; for them, less saturated hues that suggest nature and the landscape often work best. For a traditional audience, deep blues, dark browns, and dark greens connote stability.

Color is a particularly important element in housing developments, especially new urbanist projects. Older neighborhoods often grow over many decades and, therefore, have a range of homes built in different styles by various architects and builders. Different scales, building materials, details, proportions, colors, and landscaping provide variety and a sense of individuality. With new subdivisions, even new urbanist developments, hundreds of homes are built at once, and the designs are similar, with few variations. But many homebuyers still value a sense of living in a unique place, and a series of nearly identical homes can be monotonous and disorienting. A thoughtful application of color can alter the appearance of materials and create contrasts that individualize homes.

A few recent examples illustrate different approaches to using color to enhance a project’s value.

Rivermark, Santa Clara, California. Rivermark is a master-planned infill community in Santa Clara, in the heart of Silicon Valley, developed by Riverpark Partners, a team composed of Centeres Homes, Shea Homes, and Lemnar Communities. With 3,000 housing units planned, a neighborhood shopping center, civic buildings, and open space, the community was targeted to appeal to Silicon Valley workers—sophisticated buyers 30 to 50 years old willing to pay from the low $500,000s to the upper $800,000s. The target market consisted of people who did not want to live in identical homes but wanted a traditional-looking neighborhood. The challenge was to ensure that every lot assignment was unique but worked within an overall color scheme.

When looking at homeowners’ demographic profiles, developers, designers, and architects should evaluate what may have the most impact for a specific project. For example, qualities of light in the San Francisco Bay area play favorably with a natural palette based on organic and earthy tones addressing the geographic and specific site conditions. These tones convey a sense of stability and tradition that may suit the architectural vocabulary. The color for a residential development is not selected based on fashion trends, but rather in part on its timeless quality.

The houses at Rivermark are designed in a number of different architectural styles. Wood homes and shocco homes have different color palettes because...
Medium- to deep-value hues differentiate the individual facades of the retail center (above) from the nearby Rivermark residential development (facing page).

the materials take color differently, and because people tend to associate specific colors with each style. Wooden homes bring to mind Cape Cod, Georgian, and East Coast architectural vocabularies, and are suited to blues, blue greens, olive greens, yellows, reds, and some neutral hues. They typically have light trim, and accent colors such as bottle green, burgundy, navy, and forest green for shutters and entry doors.

Stucco buildings invoke the Mediterranean, Tudor, and Craftsman design vocabularies. The traditional Tudor-style home palettes feature a white body trimmed with deep browns and charcoals. The high-contrast colors help to define the distinct shapes and volumes of the peaked roof details predominant in the Tudor architectural style. The Mediterranean homes have tile roofs, which traditionally run the gamut of hues from creamy white, salmon, and soft butter yellow to terra cotta and ochre. Craftsman styles historically feature a palette of natural or earth tones. To keep strong rooflines from dominating, taupes, tans, olives, beiges, and tone-on-tone neutral palettes were assigned to these buildings.

The cost of coloring the homes at Rivermark was less than $300 a unit, and the project sold out quickly. The developer believes that the color, combined with the architecture, distinguished Rivermark from competing projects in the area. Rivermark has already received 16 design awards, and a second phase is underway.

Rivermark Center, San Francisco. The Rivermark Center, San Francisco’s third-largest apartment complex, opened in 1992. With ten buildings, including two residential high-rises and street retail space, the complex had an occupancy rate of only 80 percent by the late 1990s—a concern in the tight San Francisco housing market. Helman Capital Management and later Elker Realty Corporation sought to replace the monotonous color scheme with a palette that would reenliven the buildings and integrate them into the San Francisco streetscape.

For the high-rises, a rich midrange or medium-value color palette was selected for the exterior walls, and a light color was chosen for the roofs. These colors, such as taupes, tans, and beiges, suggest natural materials, such as soil and stone. Elements that project from the building—bays and balconies—are articulated with hues that accentuate the planes and break down the mass of the structures, more in keeping with the local Victorian vernacular style. However, it was important that the towers not be too dark because that would diminish the individual’s spatial experience, so dynamic, saturated hues were placed at the pedestrian level to add visual interest to the streetscape. The demographic for this complex was renters, not buyers, so the palette needed to communicate vitality at the street level.

After the new color scheme was implemented, the residential occupancy rate rose to 96 percent. Occupancy in the street-level retail space has taken longer to improve because the city-sponsored Fillmore Jazz Preservation District has stalled.

Rivermark (retail), Santa Clara, California. The retail portion of the Rivermark community, developed by Rivermark Village with Shere Properties as the managing partner, was to develop a color scheme that would relate to the residential portion without being too similar. At the same time, the retail component needed to have enough visual presence to attract attention from people driving by on the nearby freeway.

Building materials for the retail space were dominantly stucco, with some stone at building bases and selected entry portals. Roofs were dominantly featured at corner elements in metal or clay tile materials. The client wanted a palette that would not grow old or tiresome over time. The solution was to invoke local colors, taking cues from bark, soil, and foliage samples collected at the site as it was being cleared for construction. The resulting palette relies on medium- to deep-value hues: browns, golds, taupes, greens, and terra cotta. Careful modulation of each elevation helps to break down the massing of the buildings, and coordination of swaying colors with tile and stone elements on individual facades creates a rhythm of colors. Placement of identifiable colors on corner building elements assists in wayfinding on the large site. Retail sites need a balance of stimulus and harmony. In a weak economy, Rivermark’s retail project was fully leased to a range of tenants, including several national chains such as Jamba Juice, Peet’s Coffee, Safeway, and Wells Fargo Bank. The retail project has brought in residents from the new neighborhood as well as destination shoppers.

Larkspur Landing, Larkspur, California. The original 1970s concept behind Larkspur Landing in Marin County was to bring a Cape Cod–like, East Coast architectural range of design and colors to San Francisco Bay. In keeping with this idea, each building was painted gray and white. Over time, the occupancy rate slipped to 65 percent, due in part to competition from other nearby retail centers. However, the original monochromatic color scheme was perceived by many to lack interest and energy, so Simeon Commercial Properties commissioned new color concepts to create vitality through variety while responding to the existing context, which included wood shingles. Traditional wood home colors were chosen for the site—blues, blue grays, yellows, and even some barn reds for contrast—to make the buildings less uniform and more like a village. With the new color scheme and other repositioning efforts, the occupancy rate has climbed to 90 percent. The right color scheme can help increase unit sales, rentals, or retail traffic. Then, the right color is green.—Jill Pilarski, founder of Color Studios, a San Francisco-based color consulting practice.