WEB FEATURE: Color Trends in Housing Respond to Long Term Interests

By Jill Pilaroscia, Colour Studio

JANUARY 10, 2007 -- Color trends in multifamily housing are not like color trends in clothing or home furnishings. They are not temporal; they follow long-term real estate interests.

Housing color should reflect demographics, geography, and building type. In a rental community that caters to young people, the exterior colors may be brighter and relate to trends in popular culture. Since these kinds of properties are repainted fairly often to look fresh, the palette may change as often as every few years.

In contrast, first time homebuyers—often an anxious group—may want something contemporary, but not so avant-garde as to make resale difficult. In these cases, color selection will depend on the pricing and the target population.

While housing types may share some general color strategies, the specific colors depend on what everything in real estate depends on—location.

One trend appears consistently: most new multi-housing developments are sited on infill parcels that have been underdeveloped or are being redeveloped. Often they are in close proximity to highways or existing buildings, so there is some kind of context—whether positive or negative—for them to respond to. Here are a few recent housing trends and correlating color strategies.

Main Street Housing over Retail

At the new Bay Street Project in Emeryville, California, where there are long residential buildings over retail (an old building typology made new again), the color strategy had to respond to the retail condition below and to the extruded rectangular nature of the design.

Color often helps mitigate or refocus architecture. Each of the 95 one- and two-bedroom townhome residential units is two stories and only 16 feet wide. To have colored each one uniquely would have given the project an unintended mosaic-like appearance. Instead, the color scheme changes approximately every 80 feet, or every five units, giving units the sense of individuality that homeowners desire. Since the project is close to San Francisco Bay, the color palette responds to the natural colors of the bayfront landscape.

An additional challenge with main street housing is that the color palette needs to be interesting and differentiate itself from the retail, yet not become visually overbearing or aggressive; the retail and the housing coexist in a tight spatial condition. Many of the retail shops at street level are large chains that employ branded colors for signage and graphics while applying neutral colors to architectural storefronts.

Large expanses of glazing offer displays of the latest merchandise in trend colors. The neutral window surrounds of charcoal, aluminum, bronze and deep green paired with creams and taupes create a backdrop for ever-changing retail palettes. Retail colors support the pedestrian shopping experience, while the housing above needs to simultaneously relate and be distinct. At Bay Street medium value tertiary or muted color tones in reds, plums, greens, browns, yellows, allowed the housing to accomplish that.

Mixed Income Complexes and Demographic Preferences

Projects for residents with a mix of incomes are becoming more prevalent. At Irvington Village in Fremont, California, two different housing concepts share a single location on 8.6 acres. Regis Homes is building 115 to 125 units, some for first-time buyers, and detached homes for more affluent purchasers. The orientation of the site plan was designed to maximize public open space and provide each home with a private patio or yard.

To appeal to the area’s Asian American buyers, an early color scheme was jettisoned because it used black for railings and canopy elements; according to the principles of feng shui, black is associated with depression and lack of hope. The color was changed to rich umber brown.

The topography of the site is relatively flat. The palette draws on colors inspired by the broad open grassy field surrounding the site, and each building is differentiated from the adjacent buildings through rhythmic color placement.

Mixed Age Complexes

More often these days, senior living complexes, a growing market across the country, are located next to market-rate rental or for-sale units. In Palo Alto, a 12-acre master-planned site, the Taube-Koret Campus for Jewish Life, will consist of a synagogue and community center constructed adjacent to 182 senior living residences and for-sale housing.

At least three different ownership entities had to be coordinated so that the projects worked together. The developer for the 98-unit townhomes wanted vibrancy, while the developer for the senior housing wanted a quiet palette. The public, large-scale buildings on the campus set the tone for the architectural style and the overall site palette. Natural materials such as wood and limestone established an elegant and restrained color direction. The senior housing was designed with outdoor balconies screened by wood railings. The palette was conceived to be subtle yet warm.
High-End Low-Rise and Dense Rentals

The for-sale housing has a contemporary design vocabulary, with surface planes that undulate and indent to add interest. Cladding materials are used to add variety and texture. Surrounded by much larger structures, the homes required more saturated hues to establish a sense of place. Blues, greens, taupes, and golds in medium values orchestrate the building rhythms in an organized but dynamic fashion.

Differently colored entry doors add individuality to the units. The three different areas of the campus are built around warm creams, golds, and their complementary opposite, cool blues and greens, to weave a cohesive yet dynamic color story.

Redevelopment Projects

About 50 miles north in Richmond, California, an area depressed for several generations, developer AF Evans Development is working with the City and the Redevelopment Agency to build 237 high-density for-sale housing units above retail along Macdonald Avenue. This two-block project between 11th and 13th Streets is planned to revitalize the city’s downtown. Richmond, like many cities, wants the developer to intersperse below-market-rate units [or BMR] throughout the project.

As in many American cities, early redevelopment efforts tended to raze entire city blocks. Cities are rediscovering their earlier fine grain and encouraging developers to design projects that follow the original historic pattern and relate to the few remaining historic buildings.

Since the predominant building material in downtown Richmond was brick, the colors chosen for the MacDonald Avenue project employ a variety of earthy brick tones, red, red orange, taupe, and buff brown. Upper building body colors were also selected to complement the organic brick tones.

The colors are fairly deep in value. This approach helps integrate the upper body with the lower building base. Light buff trims and dark amber metal finishes offer light and dark counterpoints to the rich color palette. Sage greens, golds, terra cotta, and hearty tans are most saturated on the exterior street elevations and lighter for the inner mews.

The architectural design of the buildings breaks the long blocks into segments, each colored in different yet harmonic tones. Variety of color helps keep the scale of the project from overwhelming the surrounding buildings.

High-End Low-Rise and Dense Rentals

Los Gatos is an affluent community at the south end of Silicon Valley. Sobrato Development Company is building Aventino to target people who are “renters by choice,” and see renting as a temporary condition. The 290 units are placed in eight different buildings that contribute to a village-like setting with an elaborate landscape.

An early scheme colored the buildings in dark tones, which contradicted the Mediterranean associations the owner desired and also didn’t work well in the Californian light. Most importantly, dominantly dark colors can feel confining and overpowering and usually don’t work well in low-rise complexes with relatively high densities. Lighter colors tend to foster a sense of spaciousness.

The landscaping was carefully planned to soften and enhance the experience within the complex. Using the lightest colors in the palette for the building base allowed for the variety of plant color and texture to be the focal point. People can experience the landscape from the pedestrian perspective or from within units looking down from above. Each building is a fairly straightforward rectangle, with color creating variety and a sense of architectural detail that conveys quality and justifies the high rents.

Middle-Income Rentals in the Midwest

A developer in the Midwest, Brookstone Capital figured out how to build middle-income rentals using durable and relatively inexpensive metal and vinyl cladding. Woods and mature deciduous trees surrounded the site. Hidden by foliage in the summer, but completely exposed in the winter, the color palette needed to work in both conditions. By employing bold color choices the developer felt that he could attract tenants who would appreciate relief from the dominant neutral grey and beige tone rentals in the region.

The standard materials he selected didn’t come in the very bright colors he favored. However, his fundamental assumption was correct. In the long, harsh winter an all-grey building is depressing. But the spring, summer, and fall months in Kalkaska, Michigan can bring some beautiful colors. The goal was to find colors that would work year-round and be available in the standard choices of the wall siding manufacturers.

A universal crisp white was used on all of the trim and coordinated with the prefinished white window sashes. Two distinct schemes mark the building ends. One scheme utilizes barn red at the ends of the elevation, with a deep blue green on a metal panel at the building’s mid point. The second scheme uses a navy blue at the end points and a burgundy metal panel at the midpoint. The palettes contrast and balance warm and cool colors, using natural neutrals of grey and taupe to bridge the brighter colors.
New Urbanist Infill

Sophisticated communities near established urban areas want new multifamily housing to meet stricter architectural and urban design guidelines. Many of them require new urbanist principles and are reviewing not only architecture, but color. Petaluma, a formerly agricultural town about an hour north of San Francisco, has redeveloped its industrial waterfront. Rather than branding the entire Riverfront mixed-use community with one architectural style, the developers, Basin Street Properties and Delco, are proposing to give the various demographics both traditional-looking and contemporary townhomes. The challenge was to have the palette work with each product type but also create a sense of a cohesive community.

A proposed development of this scale requires a great deal of color planning. The palette needs to respond to the site, the buyers’ demographic, the architectural style, and the function of the buildings. By focusing on these global issues, the colors are created and then plotted onto a site plan so they can be analyzed for flow, variety, and visual composition.

The palette for new developments needs to have unity without feeling static or boring. Ultimately, colors should suggest that the community was built incrementally, but not haphazardly. This can be accomplished by using a variety of color values for main body tones and trims. Some homes were defined by light-body colors and contrasting darker trims, while others would use mid-range body colors combined with light trims. This adds an element of orchestrated randomness—just as the interior model homes are styled in several different looks, the exterior coloration follows the same concept. A single repetitious color palette will not appeal to every buyer. An element of creativity, personal expression, and variety needs to be part of the buyer experience.

As new combinations of housing arise, so will new strategies for color. Density, demographics, geography, and light quality will require different color combinations. Color in multifamily housing is not about fads in the fashion marketplace, but rather about long-term trends in the multifamily housing marketplace.

The one trend that seems constant is that as costs rise color plays a more significant role in defining a building. Getting the color right speeds community acceptance, which results in shorter construction periods and faster market absorption. Color shouldn’t be taken lightly.

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