The Importance of Color Choices for Multi-Housing Development

By Jill Pifarocia, Colour Studio

The often, builders contract with an architect to design a multi-housing product, then use the same plans and color schemes in multiple geographic locations in order to maximize their investment. One summer, I visited San Diego, Sacramento, Convallo, Cie, and Boise, Idaho. In each place, new housing developments were offering the same style of homes and using the same building materials and color palettes. Peach and easy tones and red tile roofs that sat comfortably in San Diego looked completely foreign in Oregon and Idaho. Why did these buildings feel out of place? Because they paid no attention to the local architectural vernacular, building materials and color palettes of the region.

In an increasingly competitive market, color should also contribute to a sense of place and make each dwelling in a larger community seem unique.

Color choices should be made with an awareness of the different cultural factors that influence color response and should reflect local geographic conditions. Each location has particular characteristics and qualities of light. Depending upon the sunlight's angle of inclination as it passes over the terrain, the appearance of colors will vary. When light travels perpendicular to the earth's surface, it encounters the least amount of atmospheric resistance, rendering intense, warm light. As the angle of light becomes more oblique, colors become more subtle.

For example, in Ireland, the ground plane can appear to be bathed in a glow verdant green, while in the Pacific Northwest the quality of light can swallow up pastel colors and render them lifeless. For one housing development in Northern Ireland in Kils, County Antrim by Aztec Homes, a cool color palette was chosen. The silvers, grays and ivory hues suited comfortably on the landscape and harmonized with the dramatic Irish sky and clouds. Contrast this with the rich, earthy palette developed for the Bivensmark Development in Santa Clara, Calif. Here, the hues of gold, brown, taupe and terra cotta derive from the regional landscape.

The combination of the air molecules in different geographic locations also affects the perception of color. Most air at coastal and seaside locations produces full round molecules that reflect light in a dynamic and fullspectrum fashion. Both richly saturated and clear pastels can look natural in these surroundings. In contrast, the dry air of the desert produces irregularly shaped molecules that elongate and diffuse light, accentuating or diminishing both warm and cool hues during the course of a day, depending upon light qualities and weather conditions.

Praying attention to the specific qualities of the context is crucial. Even within the same city, different locations require customized color schemes. In Oakland, Calif., two infill projects of approximately 100 units each are calling for completely different color solutions. One, 450 Grand Avenue, is across the street from a lake and surrounding park. Its palette draws on local colors from the natural surroundings—banks, foliage and bird life—as well as the many historic brick buildings in the surrounding neighborhood. The other project, currently known as Jodi, is across from City Center, a high-rise structure of terra cotta and steel. The site has a hardness and urban edge to it. The palette for this project will need to take these conditions into account and use colors that will harmonize with the context, yet have enough distinction that the building will have its own sense of place.

Savvy developers are relying more and more upon research and focus groups to understand the demographics of target buyers. Trend spotters have identified the lifestyle elements that resonate with the most with a variety of age groups and cultures. Certain items take on a cachet that is associated with success and exclusivity. Floor plans, amenities, color, materials and finishes can all improve the developers' bottom line when they take into account the target-market's current tastes. However, today's solution may not work in a few years.

Youthful buyers have a higher tolerance for dynamic color than older buyers, and they like variety and architectural gestures that provide distinction within the housing development. Young professionals without children are seduced by highend finishes and restrained colors like cream, wheat and coffee. Older buyers, or empty nesters, focus on safety, security and quality move more than on flair. Timeless colors and finishes—neutals and classic accents like red and sapphire blue—can be employed judiciously for exclusive appeal. This is not to say that some older sophisticates will not prefer contemporary and more adventurous color. This is where clearly understanding the demographic profile of your project comes into play.

The Fillmore Center, a high-density high, mid and lowrise development in San Francisco, provides a great example of how color can attract its target market. Built in 1992, by the late 1990s, the complex had a low occupancy rate, only 80 percent. The solution was to replace the monochromatic color scheme with one built on six core neutral tones—a warm and cool taupe, warm and cool gray, buff and tan, calling to mind natural materials such as stone and soil. These core neutrals were paired with accent colors. For example, a cool neutral could be paired with a warm accent terra cotta to create a dynamic tension. In the same way, a warm taupe could be paired with a cool temperature sage green. The most dynamic, saturated hues were placed at the pedestrian level to enliven the streetscape. The demographic for this complex was renters, not buyers, so the palettes needed to communicate vitality at the street level. After the new color scheme was implemented, the residential occupancy rate rose to 96 percent. By assembling a cross-disciplinary criteria for color design and taking full advantage of color's role in shaping the response to a project, we can enhance the value of housing developments across the globe.