An Interview with Jill Pilarosca
By Kenneth Caldwell

Color may be the least expensive way to impact the everyday environment. We decided to interview Jill Pilarosca, founder of Colour Studio, about her process and observations. She consults with developers, institutions, and architects on selecting colors to enhance the built environment.

LINE: What is a color consultant?

Jill Pilarosca: A wizard who uses color to strategic ends.

LINE: How did you come to this field?

JP: My initial observations about the field were grounded in my fine arts painting degree from the San Francisco Art Institute. As a nonrepresentational color field painter you could evoke a mood or an emotion, or communicate an idea, through the use of color. Depending upon the palette of hues applied to a canvas, the observer could feel happy, sad, uncomfortable, soothed, or inspired. This realization encouraged me to delve into the science and psychology of color and find out what types of research and studies were available that could explain these responses.

LINE: What did you find out?

JP: There is a large body of information on color psychology, the history of color and pigment discoveries, as well as color symbolism in different cultures. Deciphering information pertaining to color from the fields of biology, cellular response, and visual ergonomics was more challenging. It seemed that no one had woven all the disciplines together into a cohesive view of the power of color. From the different sources you could deduce that color can inform behavior and shape experience.

Bridgecourt Apartments, Emeryville, Calif.
Photo: Paul Peck

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Larkspur Landing, Larkspur, Calif. Originally all the buildings were colored gray and white, and suffered from low occupancy. New deep colors that related to the original architecture and other repositioning efforts helped revitalize the complex and raised the occupancy rate to 90%.
Photo: Paul Peck

A substantial number of studies and research papers have focused upon children in academic situations, as children come with less baggage. There is evidence indicating that color and light can enhance intellectual performance and encourage behavior that promotes learning.

LINE: How can a color consultant determine an effect?

JP: First of all, there are two distinct marketplaces. The residential market dictates that a person’s individual or subjective color preferences be of the utmost importance. The function of color in this application is to make people feel comfortable in their environment. Subjective color preferences are based upon synaesthesia and color memories. The visual perception of one hue may trigger a memory that has color connotations. I can recall the poached eggs my grandmother served at her farm – the yolks were brilliant gold, and to this day golden yellow is a favorite color. I had a grade school teacher who made me sit in the corner facing a blue-green wall for timeout, which humiliated me, and to this day I dislike that color. A good consultant will customize the palette to suit the preferences of an individual or family. The skill is in knowing how to access the color biases that may be repressed or hidden from the client’s conscious mind.

The second market is functional public spaces. Public spaces cannot necessarily be chosen – your workplace, school, hospital, courthouse – they are imposed on you.

Color selections need to be made from objective criteria using a cross-disciplinary perspective. Identify what tasks and functions will take place programmatically in the space and select color to support the behaviors and experience the spaces need to orchestrate.

LINE: How do you make decisions for many when color is so personal?

JP: No two people respond to color in the same way. There are several layers of meaning, which trigger different responses. In music the listener

Rivermark Residential, Santa Clara, Calif. The developers wanted a master color program for an infill community in Santa Clara sited on 152 acres. Each home was meticulously colored to complement the diverse architectural styles in the development, and to relate to its neighboring buildings with little repetition.
Photo: Paul Peck
may not hear each individual note, but perceives the full sound of the chord – color is similar.

Environmental designer and author Frank Mahnke has identified six major factors that influence the experience of color. These include biological response; color associations and conscious symbolism; cultural and geographic influences; influence of fashion, styles and trends; personal relationships; and the collective unconscious. When an individual sees a color, multiple levels of stimulus trigger the color response. Color response is not one-dimensional, but multifaceted like the musical chord. You can use these influences to achieve a desired result in the built environment.

LINE: But how do you use all these criteria in selecting colors for a project?

JP: I analyze and calculate the qualities of a space like an artist and an engineer. I use a graph chart adapted from the work and writings of Sven Hesselgren, who authored On Architecture: An Architectural Theory Based on Psychological Research.

For each project I prepare a matrix and plot architectural characteristics and psychological characteristics. Then I use a rating system assigning what I believe to be the most important to least important items to cure or address in a space. For example, I would look at light qualities, spatial qualities, and then perceptual qualities like friendly, unfriendly, open, closed. Once the profile is created, the task of selection of objective color commences.

LINE: What’s an example of conscious symbolism?

JP: Across cultures the red cross signifies that help is on the way.

LINE: Explain some more about the collective unconscious and its application.

JP: Carl Jung described the collective unconscious as a body of primordial images that we
are born with that is not influenced by learned behavior or conscious thought, or based on personal experience. These are inherited memories. Collective unconscious is intuitive. Tapping into the power of intuition adds an additional layer of depth to the design process. Leonard Shlain, in his book *Art & Physics: Parallel Visions in Space, Time, and Light*, wrote, “Color precedes words and antedates civilization, connected as it is to the subterranean ground waters of the archaic limbic system,” and he cites infants’ ability to respond to brightly colored objects long before they learn words. I believe the collective unconscious helps to validate the inherent power in the medium of color. This is a hard topic to discuss with many, as the concept implies that there are forces outside the rational that can inform and inspire us.

LINE: Why is Peet’s Coffee painted that shade of brown? Is it just the obvious reference to coffee beans?

JP: Peet’s environment supports the experience of consuming coffee. The environmental color choice references the commodity that they are selling. The interior is honest and straightforward.

Starbucks has taken a different approach based on fashion, styles, and trends. They created a signature or branded look using bold colors, strong shapes, curved forms, decorative lighting, fireplaces, and upholstered seating groups. The coffeehouse is a destination, a home away from home that is hip and fun. The fact that they sell coffee seems secondary to the experience they want to orchestrate.

A new Starbucks opened in early December and I noticed a significant change in the color formula. The paints, finishes, and packaging graphics have shifted to a soft pastel palette. It’s reminiscent of the – spa – look. Their approach to retailing based on lifestyle trends will cause them to constantly reinvent themselves.

LINE: How do you apply these ideas to the larger built world?
JP: Let's take the Fillmore Center. It was San Francisco's third largest apartment complex when it opened in 1992. By the late 1990s, a busy time, they had an occupancy rate of only 80%. They were originally colored in a postmodern palette of mauve and gray. It was a trend and that trend was over. For the towers we selected a new palette based on natural stone and masonry hues. It was important that we not make the towers too dark. For the bay windows and balconies we introduced midrange accent hues. The variety in color and use of color differentiated the buildings, and allowed the massing of the structures to appear smaller in scale. The most vibrant hues were placed at the pedestrian level to add visual interest.

We wanted to articulate the experience at the street by creating a color change every 25 to 50 feet. Delineation of the individual store fronts made the development more sympathetic to the scale of the typical San Francisco streetscapes. Once the color program was implemented, the occupancy rate went up to 96%.

At the Larkspur Landing shopping center in Marin, the Cape-Cod design vocabulary was painted all gray and white. You couldn't see it and the occupancy was low. We selected traditional wood home colors to be in keeping with the forms, but create more vitality and interest. Afterwards, their occupancy rate went up to 90%!

LINE: I would think that when you color a building you want some permanence. But the apartments in Emeryville that you recolored, they look very trendy.

JP: Yes, but those homes are not owned. They are rental homes built for a particular demographic. Density and style translated for the youthful occupant. The units are not large enough for mature families. The goal of the owner was to be seen from the freeway. Initially, the entire complex had the same four colors. The pizza deliveryman went to the manager because he could not orient himself.

We were responding to Emeryville, a little edgier, industrial. Remember it was built up from being a scrap yard.

LINE: What about technology and color?

JP: Technology is fast and flexible. Look at the Google logo. They change colors to keep their site interesting and vital. That's a great idea. New advancements in lighting technologies allow you to change the color in your environment by remote control.

LINE: But that means that buildings and public spaces will feel tired just after they've been colored?

JP: No, there are many factors in addition to color that influence the perception of space, form, light, and air. A sound application of color can work with architectural elements and be almost timeless.

Color influences our well-being. The fields of human factors psychology and environmental science are attempting to quantify that people feel better and work more efficiently in surroundings that are well planned and attractively designed.

The famous Hawthorne Effect, studied by Harvard Business School Professor Elton Mayo in the early 1930s, demonstrated change in environment did improve the perception of the physical environment. Likewise, the Hawthorne Principle states that human beings respond favorably to change in their environment. A corporate client, who targets key focal walls to transform with paint on a fairly regular basis, will experience a human resource benefit. People will find their space interesting and lively. The application of color has tremendous value in the marketplace. Change and variety are human needs. The cost of a coat of paint and color is relatively inconsequential for all the joy it brings. You just need the right colors.

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