The Use of Color in Commercial Architecture

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The multi-family housing market continues to bounce back, especially in inner-ring suburbs or outlying areas of cities that can support increased density and offer opportunities for walkable urban environments. Real estate developers are finding that the right color scheme is crucial, not only to draw tenants, but also to satisfy planning commissions concerned about the quality of the streetscape. With strict budgets still in play, color is an inexpensive way to create enhanced curb appeal.

Fig. 1: Located in Huntington Beach, CA, Bella Terra’s color palette of 15 colors was developed in response to the building’s architecture, building materials, and site-specific light conditions of coastal Southern California. (Rendering image courtesy of Colour Studio)
Fig. 2 (left): Avalon Ocean Avenue. Located next to San Francisco City College on a busy thoroughfare, the two mid-rise buildings house 173 units. Colors draw upon those found in the surrounding neighborhood to weave the building into context.

Fig. 3 (above): Avalon Ocean Avenue’s interior courtyard provides a quiet respite from the activity-oriented streetscape. Warm building colors compliment the colors found in the landscape.

(Photos left and above courtesy of Cesar Rubio)
A strategic use of color is particularly important because construction patterns have changed significantly since many of these suburbs came into being. Existing residential neighborhoods that grew over many decades consist of many individual buildings built in different styles by different architects. The scale of buildings is generally small, and building materials, proportions, architectural details, and color schemes widely vary. Adding large contemporary multi-family complexes, some of which take up an entire block or more, needs to be sensitively done. Architects have strategies to break up the visual mass of the building, but the color scheme can either enhance these efforts or undercut them. Color can create relationships with other structures in the neighborhood, giving a sense of cohesion.

Color can also give these complexes a sense of individuality that appeals to renters and buyers alike. Much depends on the demographic profile of the expected market. Generation Y often
seeks more vibrant, unexpected colors; baby boomers often look for less saturated, natural hues that convey a sense of sophistication and security; and seniors are best served by high-contrast colors against a light background.

Mixed-use projects also require care in choosing colors. The new Residences at Bella Terra in Huntington Beach, California, has 467 apartments adjacent to a 20,000-square-foot open air retail center, both by DJM/Holland Bella Terra Development, L.P. (Figure 1). The developer sought a color palette for the housing that would set it apart from other, similarly sized new residential developments nearby, while at the same time relating to the retail center to lend a sense of consistency to the overall development.

The apartment building’s base is clad in limestone, which presented a challenge. Typically, the base of a building would be darker than the portion above, in order to visually ground the building. The light color of the limestone didn’t allow this strategy, and the city’s planning department initially expressed reservations. The solution was to use saturated blocks of color to bookend the building’s perimeter. Varying dark, medium, and light colors created a rhythm that reinforces the architectural volumes, using contrast to draw the eye across the building face, and give the building a strong presence. Pulling colors from the stone up into the trim and detail areas of the stucco above helps integrate the base with the rest of the building.

Developers often have to maximize every square inch of a site in order to determine the viability of an investment. That can constrain architects’ ability to break up the mass of the building. In the central business district of the densifying suburb of Fremont, California, Paragon at Midtown is a new two-building complex of 300 apartments and ground-floor retail developed by SummerHill Homes. With one- and two-bedroom floor plans and a pedestrian-oriented public park between the two residential buildings, along with Trader Joe’s and a forthcoming Whole Foods within walking distance, the complex is aimed to attract younger professionals. The façade is relatively monolithic, punctuated by vertical tower elements. The challenge was to break up the visual mass to better fit within the cityscape. Darker colors anchor the base, and earth-toned colors blend with the fields and hills visible in the distant landscape.

With Avalon Ocean Avenue, at the southern edge of San Francisco’s Balboa Park neighborhood, the charge was the same: break up the visual mass. The first
piece of a planned transit-oriented district, it has 173 apartments, ranging from studios to two-bedroom units, and a Whole Foods (Figure 2). The two mid-rise buildings bring high-density to an outlying medium-density residential neighborhood. Likely tenants include young professionals who work in Silicon Valley or the Financial District, along with faculty and students at nearby City College, so the palette had to be fairly sophisticated. The city had requested that the development include high-quality materials, such as ceramic tiles and wood. Colors draw on those in the surrounding neighborhood and include earth tones to relate to the wood details and bring a calm feel to the busy commercial thoroughfare.

Designed for the other end of the age spectrum, Mary Helen Rogers Senior Housing, developed by UrbanCore, in San Francisco has 100 senior apartments (Figure 4). As part of the city planning approvals, the owners had to present a color palette reflecting the cultural heritage of the building’s namesake as well as differentiating the building from the monochromatic elegance of the adjacent civic buildings. The building needed to appear cheerful to users as well as their visitors. Strong contrasts were essential in order to help those with failing eyesight easily find their way. On the exterior, blue and gold create a complementary palette with two bright red elevations to give the complex a strong, energetic presence on the street. On the interior, the floors are color-coded to assist with way-finding: even-numbered floors feature cool colors, while odd-numbered floors are warm. Yellows are avoided on the interior, since aging eyes have difficulty perceiving this hue. The patterning on the floor reinforces the color and accent colors on the walls.

Changing Times, Changing Colors
Because fashion, color preferences, and contexts change over time, color schemes will periodically need to be refreshed. Fillmore Center, one of San Francisco’s largest apartment complexes, has had three different color schemes since it was completed in 1992. That was the heyday of the postmodern era, and all 10 buildings in the seven-block complex, which includes two residential high-rise buildings and ground-floor retail, had the same color palette: pink, gray, and white. The only variations were that some buildings had window trims in an evergreen shade and some had charcoal-colored trims. By the middle of the 1990s, vacancy rates were high in both the residential and retail components.

New owners asked for an overhaul of the dated, monotonous color scheme. Because the property was located in a redevelopment area, the redevelopment agency was involved. The agency wanted a color scheme that would break up the complex’s monolithic mass into several smaller visual pieces, better integrating it with San Francisco’s Victorian-house-filled neighborhoods. The solution involved articulating elements that project from the high-rises, such as bays and balconies, with hues that accentuate the planes. The high-rises featured natural colors, such as blue-gray, blue-green, pale yellow, and tan, while more dynamic hues were added at street level. Once the new color scheme was complete, vacancies quickly filled up.

In 2010, new investors bought the Fillmore Center complex, and sought to give it a fresh look in tandem with repair work. With California’s redevelopment agencies dissolved, the requirement for a Victorian look no longer applied. The new scheme uses fewer colors, and is aimed at creat-
ing a feeling of timeless elegance. The dominant hues are based on a tailored palette of warm white, grayed green, plum, and brown in various tints and shades (Figure 7).

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to color. Preferences vary by region. What appeals to people in Atlanta, Georgia, may not fly in Berkeley, California. Think of the whitewashed houses in the south of Spain, the vibrant colors of Cape Town, the pastels of Miami. Each part of the country has its own particular light, which significantly affects color perception. The specific colors of the surrounding buildings will alter perception as well. Developers should look for a consultant who understands the multi-disciplinary criteria mentioned above for selecting color.

Every color decision alters the landscape around it. City planning commissions have good reason to be invested in the color choices that developers make, and property owners should make sure the hues they choose will attract the target market. Color’s influence is visceral and profound; and making thoughtful, informed decisions will make all the difference.

**About the Author**

Jill Pilaroscia is an acknowledged worldwide innovator in the field of color consultation. A 1975 graduate of the San Francisco Art Institute, Jill launched her career creating palettes for Victorian houses. The founder of Colour Studio, she consults for diverse global companies and is a fully accredited member of the International Association of Color Consultants. She continues to research the psychological, biological, and visual ergonomic factors of color. Her thesis “Color in the Manufacturing Environment” analyzed the impact of color in carpet manufacturing facilities. D+D