What About Color?

RECENTLY, COLOR CONSULTANT Jill Pilaroscia of Colour Studio, based in San Francisco, sat down with development consultant Rob Parker of Pacific Marketing Associates, also in San Francisco, to discuss the benefits of using color in multifamily housing.

Pilaroscia: We’ve worked on a number of projects together. Sometimes, color helps a project win approval; other times, it helps sell units. Why don’t you share some examples of how exterior color choices have helped development projects be more successful?

PARKER: One project that we worked on together was a new master-planned rental community in San Bruno (California). The project had to stand out in a fairly nondescript, flat surrounding area—essentially, we had to create a place where there was none. The housing in the immediate area had been built in the 1950s; there was a mall built in the 1980s, and there were two freeways—Interstate 280 and Highway 101. In the first phase, we were building high-end luxury rental apartments with a clubhouse building. We had to create a sense of place, and also really communicate that it was upscale. We decided to communicate that message in large part with color.

Pilaroscia: How do you quantify the benefits of hiring a color consultant?

PARKER: The cost to hire a color consultant is minimal compared with the project budget and the marketing budget, and yet it has a huge impact. You have to paint the building anyway! In San Bruno, the colors we used resulted in a higher-than-projected rent, translating into a higher-than-projected pro forma. Now, when we project rent and revenue, as developers, we are always very optimistic. We have to get loans to finance construction, so the project must be successful on paper before we ever break ground. Exceeding those numbers is rare, especially in a market like San Bruno, which had no proven upscale, luxury rental housing.

Developers who do not hire a professional to do their exterior colors, who rely on themselves or even on architects—who are not, by training, color people—are really stepping over dollars to pick up dimes.

Pilaroscia: So, how much do you think you were able to exceed your pro forma in that project?

PARKER: We exceeded it by 15 percent. But the impact isn’t just on the pro forma of one property. It also benefits the city and the entire

The coloring of townhouse condominium units at the new Bay Street project in Emeryville, California, helps articulate the architectural idea, but does not emphasize each separate unit.
development, by setting the benchmark for the developers who bought other parcels in the new master plan and are developing the hotel, apartments, condominiums, housing for seniors, and retail uses.

Pilaroscia: Our work with color for rental properties differs from our work with for-sale homes. Can you talk about that?

Parker: Rental housing traditionally turns over every year and a half. So the leasing office has to sell the community over and over again. From the developers’ point of view, for-sale housing only has to be sold once—and in many cases, you sell it out before the project is finished. So it’s a very different dynamic. On a for-sale project, the use of color is really important when you are showing photographs and renderings to customers, because they are buying a property that will be under construction, sometimes six months, a year, even two years before they can move in.

Pilaroscia: So, buyers are basing their decisions on an image.

Parker: Yes, you’re creating an image. It’s very unusual, in any for-sale project, that buyers purchase an already completed home. At most, there might be a completed model home for them to look at. On the rental housing side, the apartment building demonstrates the quality of the project, serving as a marketing tool. Much of your traffic comes from people just driving by the building. They see your sign, know you’re an apartment community, they work in the area, and they pull in because it looks good.

Pilaroscia: In my work, that means that the colors you select for the rental communities tend to be bolder because they’ve got to draw attention all the time.

Parker: Absolutely. And because the renters tend to be younger. Also, an apartment community might repaint every five years as part of its ongoing maintenance program, so you can choose something trendy.

Pilaroscia: Homebuyers, on the other hand, generally represent an older, higher-income demographic, so, we might choose a subtler color palette for them. Could you talk a little about how different kinds of multifamily housing call for different color solutions—for example, attached townhouses versus four stories of housing over a retail podium versus high rises.

Parker: From my perspective, the bigger the structure, the more it
The scale of large high-rises, such as the Fillmore Center in San Francisco (left and below left), can be reduced with color choices that also respond to the building’s verticality.

needs to be broken into smaller pieces, so the structure isn’t overwhelming. And for rent housing typically involves larger buildings, although there are certainly plenty of large condominium projects. I would say that the largest projects need to be broken up either horizontally or vertically. In an attached townhome project, you wouldn’t necessarily break up the project horizontally, but you might break it up vertically to individualize each townhome, differentiating it from its neighbors on both sides.

For a five- or six-story mid-rise, the ground level could be one color and the top level another color. The residences at Bay Street Emeryville [in Emeryville, California] are townhomes that are quite narrow, only 16 or 17 feet wide. Had we colored each one separately, the townhomes would have looked toy-like. It made sense to give several contiguous units the same color scheme to group them together. It is still a row of townhomes, but now the pieces look bigger.

Pilaroscia: With high rises, a lot depends on building materials. When the materials are stucco or concrete, we can work with the architecture to break down the monolithic quality. But there are fewer options with glass and steel, existing housing community, one built in an older style? Do you think the color should reflect the original architecture?

Parker: We worked on a 1970s two-story, garden-style, California ranch-style apartment community set next to a golf course in a suburb east of San Francisco. The project was a major renovation and conversion to condominiums. We had some buildings spread over eight low-density, very green, very wooded acres. The buildings were low-slung, reflecting the style of their era. We looked to that era, the California ranch era, for our color cues, as well as to the surrounding greenery of the golf course and the landscaping. We didn’t want to have an endless sea of buildings in one color but a residential neighborhood, with each building like a large ranch. We used a palette of colors that would create variety in the project, to make it look less like a neighborhood that had been built all at once and more like one that had grown slowly over time, with different people painting their houses different colors at different times.

Pilaroscia: How about color choices when you’re renovating an
And then we had a clubhouse and we wanted it to pop out from the surrounding residential buildings and be the jewel at the center of the project, with a swimming pool and landscaping around it. We painted it barn red.

PIANOSCI: If the housing market enters a downturn, do you see color becoming more important or less important? Do you think that we will become more conservative?

PARKER: I think that a downturn will result in a more competitive market, and projects will be competing with each other to attract a smaller pool of buyers. A project will have to stand out even more.

Rather than become more conservative, we’d choose colors that were slightly more optimistic.

PIANOSCI: Recently, I worked on a new multifamily project on the San Francisco peninsula where the color issues were largely political. The developer needed approval from both the neighbors and government authorities, who wanted colors that would blend in with the existing landscape. But, sometimes, buyers want the opposite; they want colors to create distinction.

PIANOSCI: In Irvine, I worked on a project located in an area dominated by Mediterranean houses. The 1980s and 1990s in Irvine were all about pastels, and the first part of the early 2000s was all about Tuscan and Siena—browns and terracottas. We were working on a project that consisted of four stories of luxury apartments—535 units—which we converted to condominiums halfway through the process. The project had to stand out in a very competitive market in which one developer had built almost everything. We designed a very formal building that was northern European in style and Georgian in vernacular. The building is painted soft white, to imitate sandstone, which stands out because it is so pale compared with the beige and deep brown of surrounding Mediterranean houses. The roof tiles are charcoal gray, and all the trim and the canvas awnings over the windows are black. The project was a success and generated high rent. Even before Phase I was leased out, we opened Phase II, which became condominiums. Who but a color consultant would have thought of black?