



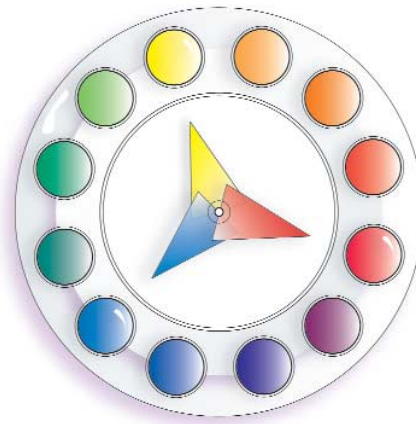
COLOR CONVEYS MEANING
AWARD WINNING DESIGNER COMMENTS ON
SYMBOLIC MEANING OF COLOR IN THE
COMMERCIAL INTERIOR SETTING

WHITE PAPER

Commercial interiors symbolically convey meaning by creating a specific dynamic around corporate image - conservative, trustworthy, high-energy, casual, upbeat, etc. In visual experiences, harmony is identified as something that is pleasing to the eye. Color harmony helps to create a sense of order and balance in the visual experience of a space. Color interaction among each surface, area, and quantity affects design strength. The successful use of color in interiors comes from knowledge of color basics, the translation of color language, and the effect of proportion and scale with the use of color in a given space.

Think of a space as “planes” of color - the floor; ceiling and walls - taking into account how available light interacts with each plane. Calculating the contrast among elements controls how the eye will move around a space, creating a successful visual picture. In general terms, more saturated colors give weight and substance, while a gradation of contrast will add depth.

Carpet is almost always the largest textile in a given space. Consider making this choice first and building a palette of other finishes from the carpet. Also consider how the floor “plane” will anchor the space – Will it be a backdrop for fabulous furniture? Should the pattern reflect architectural elements? Is it used to define specific areas or for way finding? Answers to these and other questions will lead to pattern and texture choice(s) that give identity to a floor.



The color wheel best illustrates the basics of colors and their interaction. This icon of color theory is perhaps the most useful tool in translating color language to a range of colors that best suit given criteria for a space. Understanding proportion and volume of color, and the ability to visually communicate those proportions is critical.

Active colors are generally the warm side of the color wheel: yellow, red and orange. These colors can advance and dominate a space. The cool side of the spectrum, blue, green and purple, are more *passive*, and so retreat and calm. *Neutral* colors are neither active nor passive, but act as a bridge between colors, as they often have an either cool or warm tint. Volume, proximity and associations complicate these simple color axioms. It is the combinations of colors that truly extend the power and personality in a space.

Color strategy begins in the project programming stages where color evocative words can be derived from client conversations about what a space should “say” to employees, customers and other visitors. A thorough analysis of language can reveal clues to a client’s personal color vocabulary, and how they might react to certain colors and combinations. It is as important to discover the negative associations, and the strength of those, as it is to find the strong positive associations. Translation of those words to colors comes from the application of “mood” words commonly applied to a given color, color family, or scheme.



RED in its various incarnations has more personal associations than any other color. It can typify the lowly stop sign, or the inference of a bordello. Recognized as a stimulant, red is inherently exciting, and can be useful in restaurants and other high-power settings. The volume of red is directly related to the amount of energy perceived. Small amounts can add vigor to an otherwise calm space, without the negative connotations of broad use. *Some common words associated with red: power, energy, excitement, strength, hot, seductive, passionate, aggressive, attention-getter, fire, blood, danger.*

ORANGE, a close relative to red, sparks more controversy than any other hue. There is usually a strong positive or negative association ranging from juvenile plastic toys, the fruit of the same name, or the radiant colors of a sunset. Orange has more broad-based appeal in forms such as rust, terra cotta, or apricot and is powerful as a component in “ethnic” palettes. As with red, small doses can be very energizing and flattering. It can also bring needed warmth to cold climates, or windowless environments. *Some common words associated with orange: radiant, bold, warm, flamboyant, vibrant, happy, harvest, autumn, fruity, friendly, garish, juvenile.*

YELLOW is traditionally associated with enlightenment, and its close associate, gold, with wealth and success. In its many variations, from custard to mellow amber to the very active primary, yellow will advance from surrounding colors and instill energy and optimism. The color of the sun, yellow will warm and lift spirits, raise expectations and is appropriate to areas that require this related mood or where attention is needed. *Some words associated with yellow: friendly, joyful, light, free, open, vigorous, sunny, stimulating, cheery, fun, luminous, exuberant.*

GREEN requires two discussions. As green occupies more space in the spectrum visible to the human eye, it can cover a lot of territory of perception. Green is so pervasive in the natural world, landscape and seascape, that it is the ideal backdrop because we are so used to seeing it everywhere as such. The “natural” side of green, from forest to lime, is seen as refreshing and tranquil, with a natural balance of cool and warm (blue+yellow). There is, however, the “institutional” side of green, associated with illness, or Government Issue. Aside from the more slimy, or bilious greens that conjure up negative associations, green is second only to blue as a favorite color. *Some words associated with green: restful, tranquil, soothing, cool, refreshing, traditional, stable, conservative, calm, spacious, relaxing.*

BLUE is the overwhelming “favorite color.” It is the sky and the promise of beyond. It is the color of no-frills, honest, working-class uniforms. The collective color of the spirit, blue invokes the qualities of rest. The distant receding character makes blue ideal for small spaces, or places for study and reflection. The calming qualities of blue inherently slow down activity and cool down hot surroundings. *Some common words associated with blue: clean, relaxing, serene, refreshing, classic, conservative, traditional, hospitable, professional, dependable, confident, nautical.*

PURPLE embodies the balance of red stimulation and blue calm. This dichotomy can cause unrest and uneasiness unless the undertone is clearly defined, and the blue or red-based purple can then be characterized by the prevailing undertone. A sense of exclusivity and the mystic and royal qualities associated with purple come from its early rarity and expense. *Some words associated with purple: regal, sophisticated, rich, dignified, magic, spiritual, mysterious, exotic, melancholy.*

The infinite variations of **white** and **black**, serve as the powerful and complex fundamentals that bridge color gaps. This can also pertain to the countless **neutral** colors, beige, gray, and taupe that take on the characteristics of their undertones. These are the true chameleons in an interior, as they can change mood depending on what surrounds them. All can be excellent backdrops, as well as provide relief. Darker neutrals lessen the power of surrounding colors, while light neutrals will intensify them. It is important to use neutrals that are tinted toward the anchor color in a scheme.



Monochromatic color schemes use one hue in different values or intensities. The level of energy is directly related to both the contrast between the values, and the character of the hue itself. *Analogous* compositions use colors adjacent on the color wheel. Again, contrast and intensity can establish these combinations as calm or dynamic. *Complementary* colors are located opposite on the color wheel, and by nature create an excitement by intensifying each other. Using lighter or deeper values can turn down this level of excitement. Start with a "base" color for a scheme; choose neutrals that enhance the character of your base color; then add accents that fulfill the desired energy level for a space.

Often a paint chip, a fabric memo sample, and a swatch of carpet are inversely proportional to how actual volumes of each will be in reality. Because carpet is often the largest textile in a space, large samples should be viewed horizontally at both close proximity and with distance. Colors can "blend" with expanse, creating an altogether different effect.

Use this knowledge to create a harmonious space that will enhance client image, products and services. Start with the carpet, the largest plane of color, as an anchor to the space. Then move to other finishes, remembering they are not embellishment, but an extension of the architecture. How does available light interact with each plane? How will the eye move around the space? What reaction are you trying to achieve? Create confidence with color selections that complement client strategy.

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