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Color Harmony for Interiors
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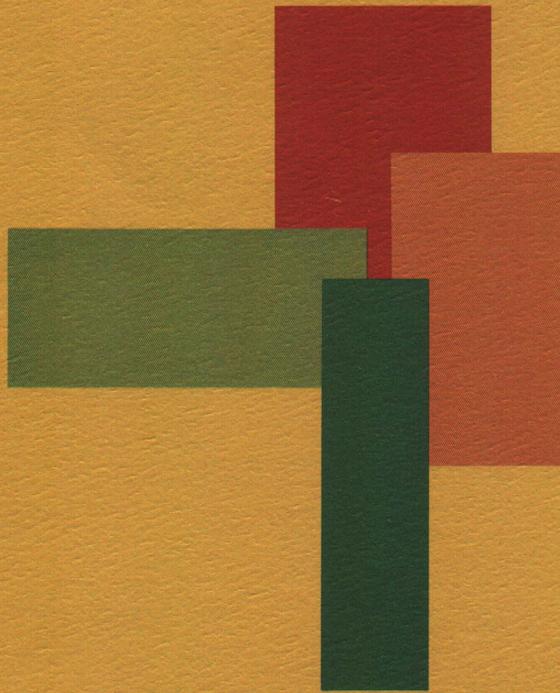Margaret Boschetti, Extension Specialist in Home Environment and Design
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INTRODUCTION

Colors are being used today in freer and more exciting combinations than ever before! Old color notions are being challenged and overcome: pink and orange, once bitter enemies, now make a terrific impact. Traditional rules of color proportion and color schemes in room interiors are considered restrictive and are often ignored.

Bright red walls and hot orange floor coverings defy the old rules that say, "brightest colors in smallest amounts", and "cool, light colors for background areas".

By Margaret Boschetti

Extension Specialist in Human Environment and Design

3P

2

Colors in interiors may, or may not, fall into a mechanical color plan. If you like to explore new color relationships, now is the time to feel free to experiment. You can use almost any combination of colors as long as you understand the effect they will create—and know this to be the atmosphere you want in your home.

This more relaxed attitude toward colors in the home means that you can be freer to express your uniqueness as an individual, to have the kind of home in which you feel comfortable without fear of doing something "wrong" or of being "out of fashion". If you prefer the quiet, peaceful relaxing atmosphere, you can have it; or if you who want a room more lively and daringly different you can satisfy that preference also.

The new freedom in use of colors does not mean there are no controls to guide your selection of colors. It does mean you have many more colors to choose from and greater liberty in using them together.

The purpose of this bulletin is to show you a simple and flexible way to use colors together to create the kind of environment you want in your home.

PLANNING ROOM COLOR SCHEMES

Some important factors to consider when planning color arrangements for rooms are: when selecting colors, you also determine "how much" and "where" the colors will be used in the total room space. These factors play a lesser role in coordinating colors for a clothing ensemble, a table setting or a flower arrangement.

It is possible to see the total color relationship in an ensemble, and to evaluate several possible combinations before finally selecting one. This approach is not practical when making color decisions for a room where you do not have the opportunity of seeing a color in place in your room before deciding if it is the one you want for the walls, or floor covering or draperies. Although your selection of a color is based upon some understanding of color facts—how colors react with each other, the illusionary and psychological effect of color upon your perception of space—it is difficult to imagine how colors will look in relation to each other in the total room space. Yet, the colors, their amounts and their placement in the room will determine the mood of the room and will affect your satisfaction in your home environment. Selection,

proportion and placement are interrelated—a decision involving one affects the others, and thus, the total color relationship in the room.

COLOR SELECTION

Selecting and coordinating colors in the home is a constantly evolving process: as new furnishings replace existing ones or present furnishings are renewed, the colors in a room change and the color harmony shifts. From the colors available, you must select those which fit the existing color scheme and maintain the kind of atmosphere most comfortable to you.

Rooms are made for people, and because people grow and change, rooms should change with them. Fixed color schemes grow tiresome, and the opportunity to change colors in a room provides relief; it refreshes your spirits as well as the atmosphere in the room.

COLOR PROPORTION

Proportion, or amount, is an important consideration in planning a room color scheme, for in small amounts almost any combination of colors is pleasing, but in medium and large amounts in a room size space, colors look altogether different:

1. A printed fabric of vivid red, orange, green, blue and violet is very gay and cheerful; projected into medium and large amounts in a room space, the effect of these colors is harsh, vibrating, confusing and, for most persons, would become irritating and uncomfortable.

2. Small red dots on a light, grayed-green fabric appear quite neutral and harmless; red chairs against a misty green wall and carpet look spotty and out of place.

3. Shades of blue, blue-green and blue-purple flowers on a medium blue background create a quiet, soft, thoroughly agreeable fabric; these same colors alone in a living room are dull, dreary, monotonous and gloomy.

COLOR PLACEMENT

As you decide how much of a certain color to use, you also determine where that color will be placed and with what other colors it will be seen. Colors have a strong effect on each other, and a color can change in appearance depending upon the colors surrounding it. A soft, medium-value green sofa will look clear and bright when placed next to a lighter, duller green background; the same sofa will look dark and dull when placed next to a light, brighter green background.

Color relationships within a room space are active— they alter as you move in, around and through the room. A sofa is seen against two backgrounds, the wall and the floor; it also is seen in relation to the other furnishings near it in the room. By placement, furnishings may blend with some backgrounds, creating a feeling of unity, and may contrast with other backgrounds, drawing attention to themselves and creating a point of emphasis in the room.

4

SUMMARY

You can control the atmosphere in a room by determining how much of each color to use and where each color will be placed:

1. White walls and carpet, bright, bottle green sofa, and dull, olive green accessories create a fresh, lively atmosphere which emphasizes the furnishings by silhouetting them against a lighter background.

The same room with the same sofa, a medium green carpet, dull, olive green walls and white accessories has a closer, quieter atmosphere. The furniture blends in with the backgrounds and the white accessories are emphasized by placement against a darker wall.

2. A red sofa and red and black accessories create a strong contrast against a white background to produce a dramatic effect. Sharp white wall balances the bright bold impact of red and black furnishings.

The same furnishings almost disappear when placed against a red wall. The room seems close, small, and very warm because there is little relief from the vivid red.
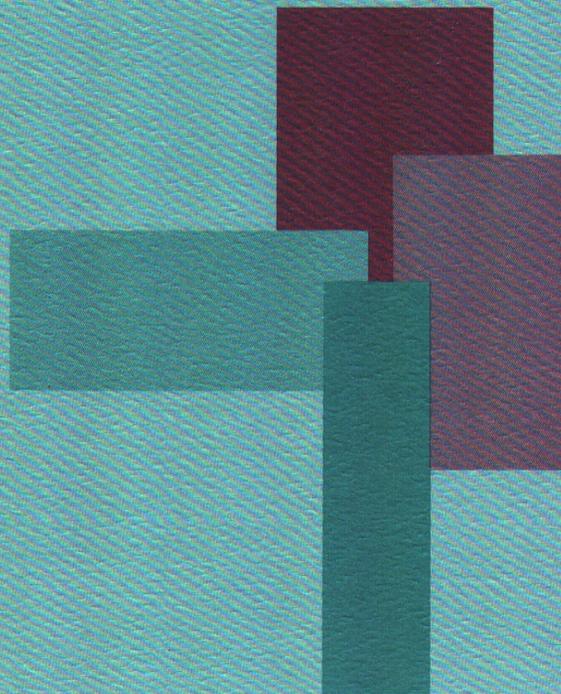
COLOR HARMONY

You seldom have an opportunity to start from scratch and develop a color scheme for a total room space more than once or twice in your lifetime. Your color decision most often involves coordinating a new color into an existing scheme when replacing a furnishings item or buying something new. How do you decide what color to select?

Color harmony is created by achieving a balance between color similarity and color contrast.

There is harmony among colors in a room when there is enough similarity between the colors to enable the eyes to wander rhythmically about the room, sensing a feeling of oneness between the furnishings and the space they occupy; and there is enough contrast between the colors to stop the eyes and hold their attention, for a moment, on items of interest.

If you are satisfied with the color harmony in your room, you will want to introduce a color that will maintain this harmony.

If you are dissatisfied with the colors in your room, it may be because there is too much similarity or too much contrast between the colors:

If the room seems bland, monotonous, lifeless, it is because the colors are too similar, too much alike, there is not enough difference between the colors, not enough color contrast.

If the room seems disorganized, confused and disturbing, it is because the colors are too different, they have nothing in common with each other. There is no color similarity, no color-relatedness.

To maintain or improve the color harmony in a room, introduce a color that will show some similarity and some contrast with the existing colors.

COLOR SIMILARITY

Related colors have a bond of similarity because they have a **hue** in common.

6

When used together, related colors create a feeling of unity: yellow-green, yellow-orange and green create a feeling of unity because each color contains yellow.

There also can be similarity between colors which do not have a hue in common; there can be a bond of similarity between unrelated colors:

Pastels of red, yellow, blue, green, orange and purple are similar in one way—they are all light. If they were all dark, they would still have a similarity even though the actual hues are unrelated. This quality of lightness or darkness, which every color has, is called **value**.

Unrelated colors with similar values are harmonious because they have some degree of similarity (value) and some degree of contrast (hue).

Unrelated colors that are strong, forceful and full of hue also have a bond of similarity because they are all bright. Unrelated colors that are weak or grayed are similar and create a feeling of unity because they are all subtle, soft, dull. This quality of saturation or purity, which every color has, is a quality of **strength**.

Unrelated colors with similar strengths are harmonious because they have some degree of similarity (strength) and some degree of contrast (hue).

COLOR CONTRAST

Colors contrast with each other when they are unrelated in hue—when they do not have a hue in common. Blue and orange are unrelated hues and they create contrast when used together.

There also can be contrast among colors that are related in hue:

Colors that are related in hue may show contrast in value. Cream (light yellow), olive green (dark yellow), orange and brown (dark orange) are related colors (each contains the yellow hue) that show contrast because they differ in lightness and darkness. Tints and shades of one color also show contrast because there is a noticeable difference in lightness and darkness. For example, pink (light red), cherry red (medium red), and maroon (dark red) are members of one hue family (red) that show value contrast.

Related colors with light-dark contrasts are harmonious because they have some degree of similarity (hue) and some degree of contrast (value).

Colors that are similar in hue may also show variety or contrast in degree of purity or saturation. Peacock blue

and sea green are members of the same color family (blue green), but differ in saturation or strength: peacock blue is bright, forceful; sea green is grayed, softer.

Related colors with variation in strength are harmonious because they have some degree of similarity (hue) and some degree of contrast (strength).

SUMMARY

Your goal in coordinating colors is to achieve a balance between color similarity and color contrast. A simple illustration can be used to balance hue, value and strength, in varying degrees, to create color harmony.

Color harmony can be created with related colors if there is some contrast in value and/or strength

hue		value/strength
SIMILARITY	▲	CONTRAST
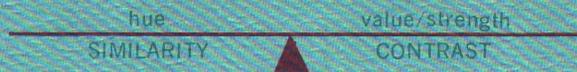
Color harmony can be created with unrelated colors if there is some similarity of value and/or strength

value/strength		hue
SIMILARITY	▲	CONTRAST
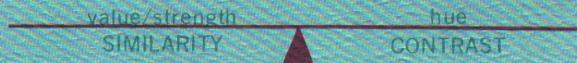
CONTROLLING COLOR

There are various ways of coordinating colors to achieve a harmonious balance while creating the mood you want in a room.

Mood refers to the aesthetic and emotional influence or effect of surroundings upon one's feelings and perceptions.

Some moods depend upon a strong feeling of unity: the quiet, restful, peaceful mood. Other moods depend upon strong contrasts: the cheerful, gay, lively mood that lifts your spirits and encourages activity.

It matters less what hues you choose than what values and strengths of the hues.

Related colors do create a feeling of unity; but if you introduce sharp value contrasts and sharp intensity contrasts, the effect can be lively and gay. Unrelated colors do create a feeling of contrast, but when unrelated colors that are grayed and have similar values are used together, the effect may be quiet and restful.

SIMILARITY AND CONTRAST

HARMONY WITH RELATED COLORS

It is easier to obtain color harmony in a room when using related colors if there is some value contrast:

hue	value: light to dark
SIMILARITY	CONTRAST

1. For a quiet, peaceful, restful mood with a feeling of close unity, use a predominance of related colors in soft, subtle, grayed tones; include some light and some dark colors for contrast:

hue: o, yo, yg*	value: light to
strength: subtle, muted tones	medium to dark
SIMILARITY	CONTRAST
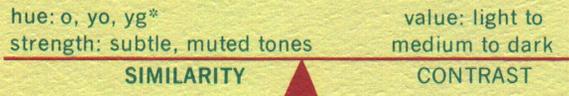
*hue names are indicated by letter: o—orange; yo—yellow-orange; yg—yellow-green; g—green; b—blue; ro—red-orange.

EXAMPLE:

Background

Floor—dark, dull yellow-orange

Wall—medium, dull yellow-orange

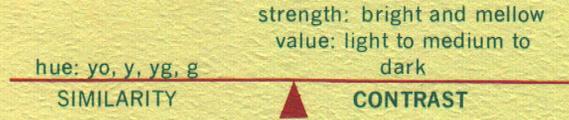Draperies—light, grayed yellow-orange

Furnishings

Sofa—muted print of dark, dull orange; light, dull yellow-orange; dark, dull yellow-green.

Chair—dark, mellow orange

Wood—walnut

Accessories

brass, bronze, red-orange, green

2. For a livelier, gayer, more active mood, use bright, clear, related colors in medium and large amounts; in-

clude some weak colors along with some light and some dark colors for contrast:

strength: bright and mellow
value: light to medium to

hue: yo, y, yg, g — dark

SIMILARITY ▲ **CONTRAST**

EXAMPLE:

Background

Floor and walls — light, soft yellow

Draperies — white floral motif on bright yellow-orange yellow, yellow-green striped fabric

Furnishings

Sofa and chair — same fabric as draperies

Storage chest and desk — dark, bright green

Accessories

soft yellow, bright red-orange, white

HARMONY WITH UNRELATED COLORS

Unrelated colors go well together when one color dominates in amount, or when small to medium amounts are used against a neutral background.

It is easier to obtain color harmony with unrelated hues if you use colors with similar values and similar strengths:

value/strength — hue

SIMILARITY ▲ CONTRAST

1. For a feeling of close unity with unrelated colors, use a predominance of soft, grayed tones and avoid sharp value contrasts:

value: light to medium
strength: dull, grayed tones — hue: b, o, yo

SIMILARITY ▲ CONTRAST
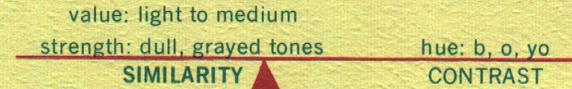
EXAMPLE:

Background

Floor and walls — light, grayed blue

Draperies — floral print of medium value grayed blue, light, soft yellow-orange and white.

Furnishings

Sofa and chair — light, dull yellow-orange

Two upholstered chairs — same fabric as draperies

Fireplace — medium value, grayed blue

Accessories

soft, light, yellow-orange; dark, dull orange.

2. For a more cheerful and stimulating mood, use bright clear unrelated hues with similar values:

value: light to medium dark   hue: b, o, yo
strength: bright, bold, clear

SIMILARITY   ▲   CONTRAST

EXAMPLE:

Backgrounds

Floor—light, grayed yellow-orange

Walls—printed wall paper with bright, light yellow-orange and white motif on bright, medium value blue background.

Windows—warm, bright orange shutters

Furnishings

Sofa—bright, medium blue sofa

Chairs—dark blue and white check; bright yellow-orange of medium value

Accessories

dark, bright blue; light bright yellow; bright orange; white

3. For an exciting, bold, dramatic mood use forceful, vibrant unrelated colors and introduce sharp value contrasts:

hue: o, ro, b
strength: forceful, vibrant   value: light to medium to dark

SIMILARITY   ▲   **CONTRAST**

EXAMPLE:

Background

Floor and wall—white

Furnishings

Sofa and chair—medium value, bright orange

Chair—dark, bright blue

Accessories

dark, bright blue; dark bright, red-orange; white

11

SUMMARY

In selecting and coordinating colors in a room interior, let your guide be the atmosphere you want your home environment to express.

The choice of colors, amounts used and placement of colors in the room all contribute to creating a desired effect.

Rooms that are quiet, peaceful and restful have a predominance of color similarity.

To create this atmosphere use:

—Closely related colors
        or
Contrasting colors with similar values and subdued strengths, with one color dominate in amount.

—Large amounts of quiet, subtle colors; limited amounts of bright colors.

—Small scale patterns
        or
Large scale pattern of soft, closely related colors.

Rooms that are gay, lively, sparkling have a predominance of color contrast.

To create this atmosphere use:

—Contrasting colors in medium or large amounts
        or
Contrasting or related colors in medium amounts against a neutral background
        or
Related colors that are bright and bold.

—Sharp dark-light contrasts.

—Large amounts of bright, strong colors
        or
Medium amounts of bright, strong colors against a neutral background.

—Large scale patterns with strong contrast of hue or value.

12