

Features

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Controlling Visual Energy via Color

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Research shows that over 80% of what we buy is based on color. Whether it's a new car, sweater or shrubs for the backyard, color impacts us intensely. Everyone has a favorite color and everyone has colors they don't like. As a designer, making sure you're emphasizing your client's favorites and avoiding their dislikes is a smart first step to approval of the entire design.

Clockwise: Warm colors advance and add visual energy and punch. | An example of using color manifestations is pairing this *Cryptomeria* with its orange-ish leaf edges against brick. | A simple color scheme using cool colors is a great choice for hot weather.

Next, understanding the emotional effect each color has on us is important. Warm colors (red, yellow and orange) create energy, excitement and warmth. They're great for social places like patios and dining areas. Cool colors (blue, green, violet) are just the opposite. They're perfect for meditation gardens or quiet retreats, as they promote calmness and

relaxation.

A wonderful tool to understand fundamental color theory and color combinations is a color wheel. It's been around a long time; it was invented by Sir Isaac Newton in 1666 when he put a quartz prism in a sunlit window and it separated pure sunlight into six distinct hues: red, yellow, orange, blue, green and violet. He wrapped that around a wheel.

I highly recommend purchasing an artist's color wheel from an art or hobby store. Here's a basic introductory primer: I use it often to help clients understand why I chose different color schemes. Take a look at the wheel. The outer ring represents the pure hues seen by Newton. These are divided into primary hues of red, yellow and blue, and secondary hues of orange, green and violet. As you can see, secondary hues are an equal mix of two primary hues, i.e. red and blue make violet, yellow and blue make green. Key point: Primary hues offer more visual energy and punch.

Red, for example, is a 60-mph color and is striking when used en masse. Interestingly, it also stimulates our appetite. Red-checkered tablecloths at restaurants are there for a reason! Red, along with orange and yellow, are considered warm colors. Blue, green and violet are cool colors. Blue, for example, makes us feel 10 degrees cooler than we are. Painting the bottom of a swimming pool light blue makes the water feel colder!

Manifesting success

As we move toward the center of the wheel, the next inner rings are made up of hues with another hue added. These are called manifestations and are important to designers, as pure hues are rarely found in nature. Leaves are green, but almost all have a bit of yellow, blue, purple or red as a secondary color or manifestation. Pay attention to that manifestation! One of my favorite strategies is to match that manifestation with other plants, the existing hardscape or architecture. For example, if I'm planting in front of a red brick house, I look for plants with a bit of red in them or another warm color to help tie everything together.

The next inner ring represents hues with a bit of white added. These are called tints and provide a softer, more dilute set of colors. They tend to work well in shade or at dusk to add a bit of brightness and endurance as the sun sets. They're very effective for low-light situations. Finally, the center ring is made up of hues with black added and these are called shades. They're strong colors, especially in full sun and add visual weight to any composition.

More Color Principles

Designers need to understand two important color theory terms: intensity and value. Intensity refers to the pureness of a hue. For example, the outer ring represents pure hues. They have high intensities because they're unmixed, unadulterated, nothing added or taken away. High intensity hues have high visual energy. Use them where you want the eye to linger.

Intensity is diminished if you add another hue, white or black. This dilutes the hue and reduces the intensity. Key point: Color contradictions, clashes and conflicts are the result of intensity. A high intensity pure hue overwhelms or visually clashes with a more dilute one. Think of pure orange next to a tint of red (pink). Ouch! It's like scraping your fingernails down a chalkboard.

Don't forget: Color mismatches rarely have much to do with hues. Rather, it's all about the intensity. The other term is value. Value refers to the lightness or darkness of a hue. For example, violet has significantly more value (darkness) than yellow. One way to think about this is how light or dark a hue looks if you put it on a black-and-white printer. Yellow appears as light gray and violet almost black. Value is very important when blending plants together. A favorite strategy is to take a black-and-white photo of the composition and examine the value. Does the value of the plant look similar or dramatically different from its neighbor? Little value change means they play well together. A big value change suggests plants that don't partner well.

Value also signifies visual weight. This is especially important with seasonal color. When you put plants together and seek a balanced composition, check out this scale. Violet has a visual weight of 6, blue = 5, green = 4, red = 3, orange = 2 and yellow = 1. This is useful when determining numbers of plants to buy and install. For example, if you mix orange and violet pansies to make a balanced combination, you'll need three times more orange than violet. This will provide the mix an equal visual amount of each hue. On the other hand, If you use the same number of purple and orange, the mix will feel very heavily violet.

More Considerations

Monochromatic—this color approach suggests you to choose only colors from one wedge. As one can imagine, it's the most harmonious and unifying. A container or seasonal color bed of tints, shades and manifestations of one hue always goes together. Key point: If you choose this approach, feel free to go crazy with textures and forms. Big leaves next to little leaves, shiny next to dull, offers lots of visual interest. In addition, form contrast such as an upright form next to a rounded one next to a horizontal one is eye candy if you choose a monochromatic color

scheme. Another harmonious approach that offers a bit more variety is an analogous approach. This means choosing colors from any three wedges next to one another, shoulder-to-shoulder. This provides more options on colors and plant choices, but is still very harmonious and unifying.

Finally, there's one more approach that's often the default method of many designers. Polychromatic means using all the hues on the wheel. Needless to say, this has the most potential for high visual energy and interest, as well as the best chance of conflicting and clashing. Here's the secret: Select your colors from one and only one ring of the wheel. In other words, if you just chose pure hues, that will work. Select hues with the same manifestation. If there's a bit of red or yellow or blue added to each choice, it works. Blue with a bit of red works with orange with a bit of red that works with yellow with a bit of red, etc. Staying on any one ring allows you to create a polychromatic combination that works well together.

We sell beauty! Knowing how to select and combine colors well is an essential part of that process. Don't be afraid to use a simple, traditional approach to color to ensure all your plant choices work together well. **GP**

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