How to Choose COLORS

There are no rules, but a bit of color theory and some expert tips will make your decisions easier

BY AMY KRANE

So the sheetrock is up and you're faced with a blank slate. You may be overwhelmed by the seemingly endless choice of colors, not to mention paint brands and finishes. You may doubt your design chops, fretting over which color "goes with" which, thinking there is only one answer. It can be paralyzing.

Choosing paint colors presents a challenge for homeowners and building professionals alike. I am trained as an architectural color consultant, but you don't need to be a trained colorist to get architectural color right. Understanding some basics about color—how to combine colors, how light affects them, and how the human eye responds to color generally—should give you the confidence you need.

Hard-and-fast rules don't work when choosing color. Each set of environmental variables presents options that work, but as one variable shifts, they all do. The number-one thing to remember is that every person comes to the painting party with their own individual likes, dislikes, and color associations that are just as important as (if not more than) any guidelines. Nevertheless, here are some fundamentals to get you started.

### Repetition creates flow, cohesion, and balance

Flow refers to how we perceive our movement through a space. Is there a feeling of natural progression as we move from room to room, or does a color choice stop us in our tracks? There should be a pleasing rhythm to color placement as you advance through a house. Like the movement of water, we want to experience a home in a fluid way. Repeating colors or using variations of a few different hues helps with flow.

Cohesion is achieved when there are recognizable color relationships employed in the color choices. Using complementary or analogous combinations creates integration between colors in a room as well as the whole house. For example, if a yellow-green is used for the walls of a home office and across the neutral hallway sits a yellow dining room, the analogous relationship between these two colors ties the rooms together and helps unify the color palette.

Balance means the distribution of color feels even-handed. If the whole house has light or neutral colors, but there's one public room that is saturated or dark, the palette won't feel cohesive or balanced. (Nonpublic rooms where doors stay closed like bathrooms and bedrooms don't really count here.) Mixing warm and cool colors in a space helps with balance because you're using colors from opposing sides of the color wheel, which offset one another.

To enhance all of these effects, use colors more than once throughout a home. A home with a different color in each room feels chaotic and unbalanced. Choosing a few hues and employing different tones and shades of each throughout the home provides flow and cohesion. To make the choices easier, make public arteries such as hallways a neutral color to help with balance and flow. You want to have visual breath-
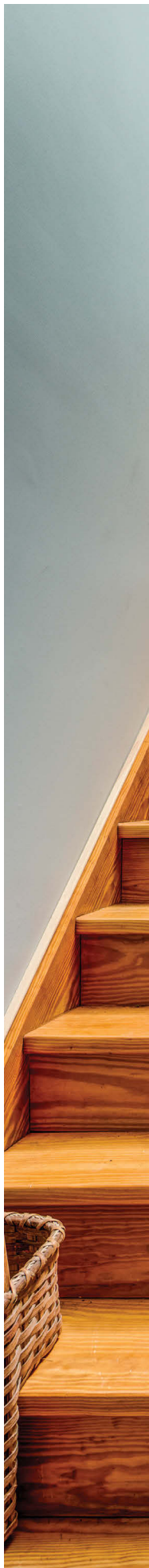
HOT AND COLD
Mixing cool gray walls with warm-colored wood and terracotta tile creates balance.

KNOW THE LINGO

COLOR A natural phenomenon of the human vision system. A color has three components: hue, value, and saturation. Put those three together and you have a specific color.

HUE The major determining characteristic of a color. Red, green, and blue are hues.

VALUE How light or dark a color is

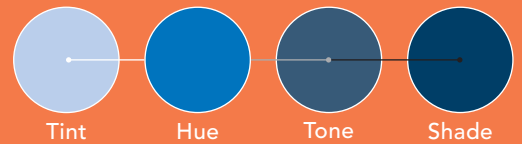**SATURATION** How pure a color is. Saturated colors are clearer visually.

High Saturation   Low Saturation

TINT Add white to any hue and you have a tint.

TONE Add gray to any hue and you have a tone.

SHADE Add black to any hue and you have a shade.

Tint   Hue   Tone   Shade

MUTED COLORS Desaturated colors that are "grayed down." You can still see what colors they are, but they are not bright and clear.

NEUTRAL COLORS Neutral colors are desaturated (grayed down and/or lacking colorfulness) and typically include grays, whites, off-whites, blacks, creams, and beiges. While no one color can really work well with every other color, those colors that seem to go with most other colors are called neutral.

ing room so the house won't seem like a kaleidoscope of distinct hues butting up against each other.

That said, since humans have walked the earth, they have been surrounded by a natural environment that varies moderately in hue, value, and saturation, and a home should reflect this variety. Homes in which the rooms are monotone may appear elegant in terms of our modern vernacular, but they create understimulating spaces without the variety we need to feel good indoors. Over time, such spaces can have psychological, emotional, and physiological effects, including feelings of anxiety—quite the opposite effect one would suppose a seemingly tranquil, single-color space might evoke.

Dark colors add drama in the right conditions

So much about the outcome of using dark colors is based on how much natural light the room gets and how big the room is. Most people feel better in light environments, but strategically employing some darker shades can add real drama to your home. In general, dark and warm colors advance toward you, absorbing light and making a room feel smaller, whereas cool and light colors do the opposite.

For example, a dark ceiling feels lower than a light one. But the amount of natural light the room gets greatly affects how the room feels to be in and how dark the color appears. Deep-charcoal walls can feel cavelike, but if the room has several windows unobstructed by window treatments, the natural light pouring in will send your eyes straight out to the exterior, preventing claustrophobia. Drawn drapes in this same room will make it feel completely different—because your eyes can't travel outdoors, the dark walls will feel palpable and close. A whole house that's dark can be overwhelming to live in. A small powder room without a window, on the other hand, can be a good spot for a dark hue. No amount of white paint will make this room feel light, so embracing the dark and going for drama is a good route.

Sheen determines how color looks and wears

The higher the sheen (shine), the more durable the finish and the easier it is to clean. But shine adds reflection, and this distorts the appearance of the color. Less-glossy walls give you a truer rendition of the chosen color without the high-shine reflections, so I always opt for the least-shiny finish that will function as I need it to.

Higher-sheen finishes also make surface imperfections appear more pronounced, so high-gloss walls or ceilings not only produce reflections all over, creating poor visual ergonomics and discomfort, they will also reveal every bump and dent on the surface. I advise flat paint for ceilings and washable matte for every room except kitchens and bathrooms, which are washed more often so eggshell is a more appropriate sheen. If you have little kids' hands touching walls, you'd be well-advised to make hallways, stairwells, and kids' bed-

rooms eggshell too. Millwork and trim ought to be a higher sheen than the walls, so pearl, satin, or semigloss all work.

When color-testing paint colors (more on this below), make sure to test in the finish you plan to use.

Brightness affects mood

The terms *clear* and *muted* refer to a color's saturation. Muted colors are comfortable and easy to live in, but some think they look "dirty" because they are typically dulled down by gray. Personal taste plays a big role in choosing color saturation.

Whether you prefer muted or clear colors will dictate the colors you should choose, but keep in mind that as a color gets clearer and more saturated, it gets more uncomfortable to live in. Being surrounded by very bright colors becomes stressful for most people, raising heart and respiration rates. Bright yellow or red walls may look exciting on a magazine page or computer screen, but four high-intensity-color walls should be avoided. Using a bright color in limited doses, such as on an accent wall or in your home's décor, is the best way to

NOT TOO DARK
Dark or saturated colors require restraint and careful consideration so they do not appear overwhelming. Neutral colors in adjoining spaces offset the dark blue of this dining room.

include one in your interior. The colors you surround yourself with play a big role in how you feel in a space. There's a direct path from color to emotions.

Remember, if you don't like muted colors, you can adjust a color by adding white or black, making it lighter or darker.

"Exact" matches don't work

Of all the rooms in the house, kitchens and bathrooms have the most fixed finishes, which play into color choice for the rest of the room. I always advise clients to start with the existing or planned finishes before choosing paint color for these rooms. There is a seemingly endless variety of paint colors, but more limited choices for countertop, tile, cabinet, and vanity materials. In a new build or renovation, choose the fixture materials before the paint color. Your goal is to choose a paint color that blends or contrasts pleasingly with the fixture colors, not one that matches. You'll never find the same exact color in different types of materials. For example, white paint doesn't look the same as white countertops or tile. If
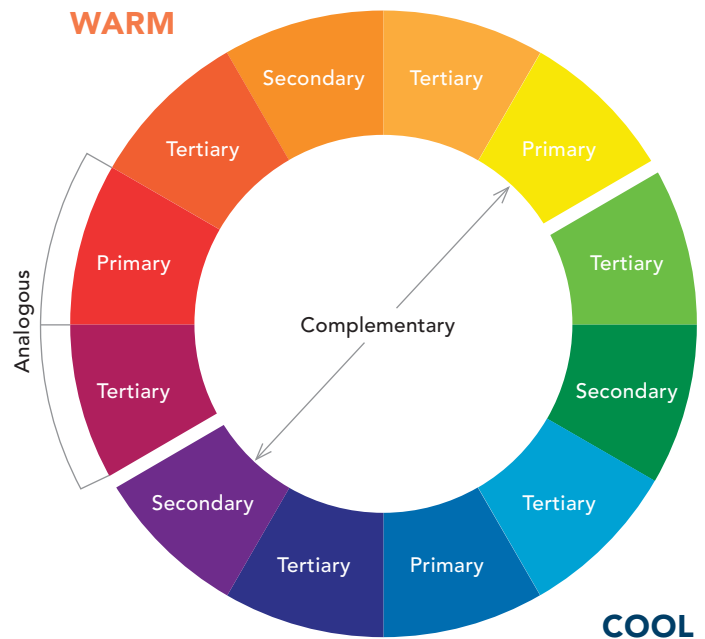
WORK IT OUT ON THE WHEEL

The color wheel is a chart that represents the relationships between hues.

PRIMARY HUES The three unique hues: red, blue, and yellow. No other hues comprise their makeup. They sit equidistant from one another around the wheel.

SECONDARY HUES The three hues that are comprised of the two primary colors they sit between: orange (red and yellow), green (blue and yellow), and purple (blue and red).

TERTIARY HUES The six hues that are created by mixing equal amounts of the secondary and primary hues they sit between.

COMPLEMENTARY COLORS Colors that sit opposite one another on the color wheel, sharing nothing in common. If the pigments of complementary colors were mixed, they would cancel each other out, creating a grayish, brownish black. But if these opposite colors are used near one another, it creates what I call an "energized harmony"—they enhance one another. All variations of these colors create this effect: A citrusy yellow-green and dark red will complement one another, as will a muted gray-blue and a burnt orange. They don't have to be saturated versions of the colors to work beautifully together as complements.

ANALOGOUS COLORS Colors that sit next to one another on the wheel and share at least one hue in common. Blue and green are analogous colors—"color cousins," as I call them—since green is made up of blue and yellow. Using color cousins in the same room or in adjacent rooms is a no-brainer because the shared makeup of the colors guarantees they work well together.

you try to match exactly, you run the risk of choosing colors that actually clash and look obviously off. You want enough variation between the fixtures and the paint to successfully blend or contrast. Choosing colors from the same hue family (i.e., both blue-grays), with one darker, lighter, or more saturated than the other, works well to create a blended look. A blue-gray used next to a red-gray could look off.

Trim color matters too

There are different ways to approach painting the trim in a home. Using white or off-white is very traditional, and when paired with different wall colors, white trim produces a crisp look. In historical homes with wide moldings it is common to use another color altogether to highlight the trim. Sometimes moldings aren't special enough to highlight, or you want to give decorative molding a seamless, modern look. In that case, match the trim color to the wall color, but in a higher sheen. If your trim color changes from room to room and you're not worried about continuity, then consider matching kitchen trim to the cabinet color for a unified look.

Test, test, test

Don't skip the last step in the color-selection process: testing. Even hanging large paper swatches of the colors you're considering doesn't replace painting the wall itself as a test. Apply a 2-ft. square of the color—two coats—in the sheen you plan to use, then observe over the course of a few days, in all light conditions and times of day.

All the colors that exist in a room will affect how a paint color appears, but the biggest factors are the light in the room and the floor color. Northern light is steady and cooler. Western afternoon light is intensely yellow. Red-toned wood floors like mahogany affect the appearance of a wall color differently than yellow pine. The color temperature (measured in degrees of Kelvin) of the bulbs used in the room will also affect the appearance of the wall colors. Daylight bulbs (with color temperatures from 5000K to 6500K) are blue, reinforcing cool paint colors and muddying the look of warm ones. Bulbs labeled soft white, with a lower color temperature (2700K to 3000K) cast a warm yellow glow and have the opposite effect on paint colors.

There are color professionals you can hire to choose colors for your home. They are trained to choose palettes that suit the architectural style of the space and the temperament and desires of the homeowners. But being able to successfully create a color palette oneself should engender a real sense of accomplishment, so toss away your fear of making a mistake and go for it. □
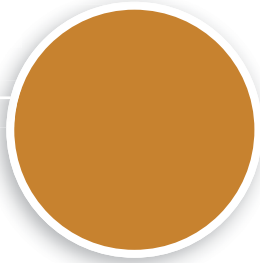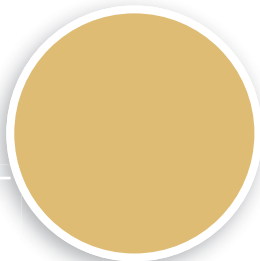
Amy Krane is the founding designer at Amy Krane Color, based in the Northern Hudson Valley of N.Y. Photos by Carl Bellavia.
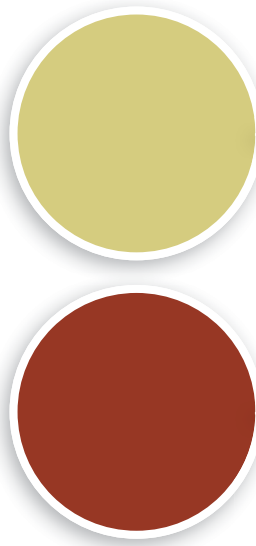
OPPOSITES ATTRACT
Color relationships go beyond just the paint on the walls. Here, the yellow-green walls of the office play counterpoint to the complementary deep red in the décor.
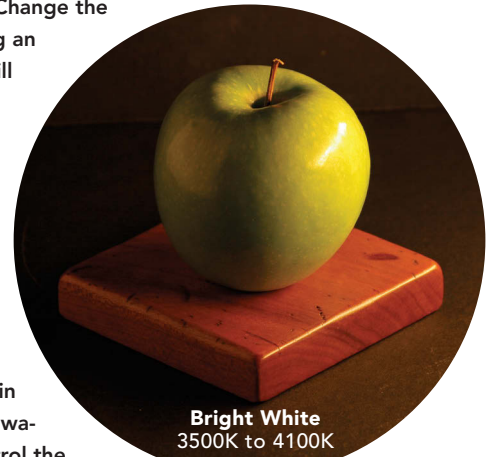
LIGHT IT UP

A green chair looks green because it absorbs the visible light waves of all colors in the spectrum but reflects the green waves. Change the light we're viewing an object in, and it will appear a different color. We see this phenomenon all the time when choosing paint colors. It's the reason a color chip looks different in the paint store than it does in your bedroom. Nowadays, you can control the type of light in your room with your light bulb. Light bulbs with a lower Kelvin number give off warmer light, whereas a higher Kelvin number means cooler light. Here's what that looks like in real life.

Daylight
5000K to 6500K

Bright White
3500K to 4100K

Soft White
2700K to 3000K

TIED TOGETHER
To achieve cohesion between two spaces, use analogous colors like the orange and yellow that flows from this dining room into the hallway.