Color Choice Not Black-and-White

by Gordon Tully

"So you've decided on the Navajo white straight from the can?"

This may seem like the ultimate in zany ideas: an article on selecting colors in a black-and-white magazine. But there is as much to say about this subject as there is to show.

Appearances Can Be Deceiving

For a seaside house, I once chose a traditional sky blue for the ceiling of a large porch. I used that same color on the sloping soffit of a roof and the vertical inside surface of the fascia. You could see all three places from one spot — and they appeared to be three different colors: one greenish blue, another dark blue, and another sky blue. This was true in every light.

This is an extreme example of the general principle that the same color can vary dramatically in appearance. The color we see depends on:
• The color of the light illuminating the surface.
• The intensity of the light.
• The colors of surrounding materials (which reflect onto the surface).
• The orientation of the surface.
• The weather (if in natural light).

Thus, an off-white shade on a west-facing wall might look completely different from the same color applied to a southern soffit.
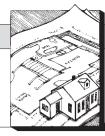
What can you do about this?

Since most of these differing perceptions of color are uncontrollable, it doesn't make any sense to change the paint color in order to even out the appearance. If you get it right this morning, it will be wrong tomorrow afternoon. Just choose a color and stick with it.

But it does pay to try samples in various orientations and light conditions before you make a decision. I've found this especially important for blues and greens. Choose a surface for the samples that is closest to average light conditions, not one deep in shadow or always in bright sun. Look at samples in their true orientation — tilted for roofs, flat for floors, and vertical for walls — so they pick up the right reflections. When you can, try the samples in the space you're decorating.

Materials Make a Big Difference

Both the gloss of a paint and the character of the material being painted will profoundly affect the appearance of colored surfaces. Glossy paints, for instance, pick up reflections from their surroundings. If the environment is darker than the paint, the paint will seem darker; and vice versa. In the typical room, glossy white paint will seem gloomier than matte white, while glossy black will seem livelier than matte black.

If the surface to be painted is irregular or textured, glossy paint will highlight any unevenness (such as a poor tape job), while matte paint will suppress it. That is why cautious contractors ban semi-gloss paint from ceilings: it highlights all the inevitable imperfections.

Sometimes you can use the highlights of glossy paint to advantage. One of my favorite houses is a shingled Cape Cod design painted glossy black. The shiny paint brings out the shingle texture in a classy way.

Paint samples from books are a good place to start when choosing colors. But the samples are on paper and are very small. They often look completely different from the finished product. I have learned to choose a variety of colors and have them applied to the materials in question at the site before deciding. This can be a hassle, but the results are worth it.
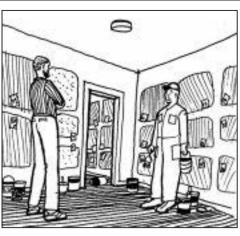
Choose Fixed Colors First

Paint and wallpaper come in an almost infinite variety, while many other materials offer little choice. Before you choose paint or wall coverings, then, you need to select the fixed colors of unpainted materials.

Outdoors, the choice of a roof color is usually the most important color decision. Roofs last a long time, which means the roof color will affect other exterior color choices for many years.

First, choose a style of roofing (double or single layer, length of warranty, type of tab). Then look at colors in that available style from several manufacturers. This is no place to nickel and dime: look at the whole range of acceptable brands. Look at samples to get a general idea of what you want. Then buy a bundle of each color you are considering, truck them to the site, and lay up a 4-foot by 4-foot sample of each color. Roofing costs about $12 a bundle, so for about $100 you can get quite an education.

One thing you'll learn is that most roof colors are made from several different kinds of stone, mixed in varying quantities in an effort to maintain a consistent overall color. Unfortunately, the machines used to sprinkle the stone on the moving asphalt are not very precise. If the contrast is high between mixed colors, you can end up with awful "blendes," which look as if someone had airbrushed the color on the roof. If you dislike this blotchy appearance as much as I do, the goal of your color search is to find a subtle blend with the overall color you want. Generally, whites, blacks, reds, and greens are the most uniform colors, while the middle tones are the blotchiest.

Once you've chosen a roof, add in the other fixed outdoor colors, such as any stone, stained or natural wood siding, trim, or window frames, flashing, gutters, or brick. (Choosing brick deserves an article in itself.) When you have narrowed the options for these fixed colors, you can choose the paint colors.

Indoors, it again pays to begin with the materials that offer the fewest options. If you're using resilient or wood flooring, start there, since these materials come in relatively few colors and tones. As with roofing, look at flooring in large areas. Buy a box of each resilient tile you are considering, or look at full-floor samples in a showroom. Look at finished wood, not raw wood: you can imitate varnish by wetting the sample.

Collect samples of all materials with limited colors: carpet, wood, tile, wood flooring, resilient flooring, and resilient base. Work with these until you have a good scheme; then start on the paint and wallpaper. Make sure you look at the materials and colors in realistic light conditions: combinations of fluorescent, incandescent, direct and indirect sun.

Working with Paint

Paint gives you tremendous flexibility. Let's take an example: choosing an off-white interior wall color.

First, choose the gloss; most of the time, it will be satin eggshell. Next, look at the "standard" off-white colors. If you don't find just what you want, look at the full range of color samples — that is, don't look only at colors labeled "off-white," but at reds, yellows, greens, and so on. You can use one of these to come up with your own tinted off-white.

To do this, paint four-foot square samples of your chosen stock colors side-by-side on the same wall, let them dry, and have a look. When you've narrowed it to two or three, try cutting these with white in varying proportions: two-to-one, three-to-one, and so on. You might end up with ten or more samples before you find the wall color you want, but the resulting tinted off-white should be well worth the trouble, especially if it works well with flooring or other fixed colors.

This method also gives you the option of further dressing up the paint scheme by using different shades of the same color for walls and trim. Suppose you've chosen a wall color that's two parts white to one part stock color. You can paint the walls with the two-to-one mix, and the trim with either the stock color or a one-to-one mix. This provides a nice contrast while maintaining the color scheme.

Outdoors, the process is much the same, except that you should be more cautious about mixing different color paints or stains. You might compromise the paint chemistry and durability. Get some advice from paint consultants or manufacturers' technical staffs to make sure you don't mix a brew that breaks down under the acid rain and ultraviolet light that stress outside paints. And make sure you apply the samples to the actual materials to be painted, not a smoother or rougher surface.

Look Around, Ask Around

It pays to keep your eyes peeled or to deliberately seek out a color scheme similar to one you're considering. I once found myself wandering all over the neighborhood with a roof sample in my hand, trying to discover what this color really looked like when spread all over a roof.

For historical color schemes, a number of consultants can help you be practical, authentic, and in good taste when tarting up a "painted lady." One of my general rules is to never paint a house green, because green paint usually looks phony next to the natural greens of plants; yet I know of a wonderful paint job in Cambridge, Mass., created from five shades of green under the supervision of a noted paint consultant, Susan Maycock.

Don't Delay

Most color decisions are made hastily, as the painter stands impatiently with brush in hand. Leaving enough time to examine at least two or three rounds of dry samples in various lights will help you find the perfect color scheme. ■

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