The Color Factor

Experts sound out on the best hues for your facility type

By Leah B. Garris

Color professionals associated with the Alexandria, VA-based Color Marketing Group come together in this piece to offer counsel on choosing and incorporating color into your buildings ...

The Office Environment

Study after study has shown that color influences not only mood, but wellness and productivity as well. Using bright, rich colors in combination with moderate colors or neutrals can create visual interest for visitors, define workspaces, and distinguish between various business divisions. According to Cleveland-based The Sherwin-Williams Co., color also carries important associations in the human brain that may augment or reduce perceptions of stress. Colors used in commercial office spaces 10 to 15 years ago are no longer appropriate today: With most workers now spending hours on computers each day, the constant viewing of brightly colored screens creates the need for softer, more restful colors that simplify physical surroundings. Sherwin-Williams indicates that successful color specification in the office environment relies on creating a balance between four factors: hue or color family; degree of lightness, darkness, and grayness; saturation or level of brightness and intensity; and LRV (degree of light reflected). Color used in moderation in the office environment is a good thing: It conveys a welcoming, professional environment but doesn't distract or overwhelm workers.

Decisions about color in the office should also take into account current office equipment – particularly since computer housings and other machines may be visually dominant. If older, bulkier equipment *does* exist, neutral colors can be chosen to blend in with equipment housings so they become less noticeable.

The Educational Environment

"Color [in this environment] is an effective tool for productivity, wayfinding, and behavior," says Renee Hytry, senior vice president, global design, Formica Corp., Cincinnati. "The correct colors help students become more comfortable in their surroundings and can assist to create stimulation needed in the learning environment."

Educational facilities don't follow cutting-edge trends as closely as other industries, and tend to stick with safe color schemes. "The typical lifespan of an educational facility is 30 years, and finishes are expected to wear out before they are replaced," says Hytry. Therefore, three trends are dominant: 1) primary colors slightly muted for a timeless effect; 2) nature-based colors or earth tones; and 3) traditionally based schemes of tans, blues, greens, and darker reds. "Color themes vary widely based on site location, exterior architecture, and natural and artificial lighting vs. a strict set of color rules," emphasizes Hytry. When choosing colors for your school buildings, Hytry recommends researching the school district as a client to understand more about the image they want to project.

"School systems are slowly waking up to the reality that making a school a more pleasant environment translates into more teacher/student satisfaction and, more importantly, pride. People appreciate an attractive environment anywhere, and school is no different," emphasizes James Martin, president, The Color People, Denver. As an example, Martin cites Highlands Ranch High School in Highlands Ranch, CO, a 20-year-old school that recently received a much-needed renovation. "It was dark and dull, and with all the growth in the area, [it was] feeling sorely left behind by all the new high schools being built in the county. [Color] was so well-received by everyone that the school board responded by adding more color to the next new high school [that was] built, and their latest one is more colorful yet."

Indicating that most schools are "still lost in the super-graphics craze of 20 years ago," Martin's consulting company uses bright, energetic colors in school entry areas and hallways; brighter colors in gathering areas such as cafeterias; and subdued colors in classrooms.

Martin and Hytry both agree that school colors should be taken into consideration when making color selections. "School colors are the heart and soul of a high school. All the colors used must complement them or be good background colors to show them

off," says Martin. "It's rare that the school colors are such that you want to decorate with them, as they are usually too bold and primary to be attractive when used in large amounts."

The Healthcare Environment

The majority agrees that neutrals and soft colors are most suitable for healthcare environments – for the same reasons you've heard time and time again. Certain shades and tones evoke feelings of serenity and tranquility, an important factor for both patients and staff.

Cynthia Freeze, marketing services manager, Kewaunee Scientific Corp., Statesville, NC, indicates that facilities professionals should assess the types of processes that will be done in each area of a healthcare facility before making a color selection. "Each area should be evaluated on its own," she says. For example, a healthcare lab space requires neutral colors to portray a sense of cleanliness and sterility, as well as to keep workers' minds clear and focused.

With healthcare environments having perhaps the longest life-cycle of any marketplace to consider, experts recommend keeping the financial impact of color decisions in mind. Think light, clean, and clear colors that will withstand the test of time without looking dated. Go for colors that are uplifting without being shocking.

The Retail Environment

According to Martin, the color movement in retail environments isn't so much about specific colors – but about just using color in general. "Color is the marketing tool of the 21st century. Color impacts the buying decisions for almost every product made – from the most fashionable to the most mundane. Seeing the response of their customers to colorful product, [retail owners] are taking the cue and making both the inside and outside of their stores more colorful." In terms of an appropriate color palette, Martin offers this advice: "Retail needs to be a bit muscular." Emphasizing that color needs to create the right impression regarding the merchandise being offered, he explains that the appearance of a retail facility "pre-sells" potential buyers. Using color to draw attention to merchandise is just as important as using color to create an environment that suits the mood of potential customers and the merchandise they're hunting for.

Martin recommends that facilities professionals study competitors and other retailers, paying attention to stores that occupy the same strata as their store. "Notice the nuances [that other retailers use] to differentiate themselves from similar stores of a lower or higher price point," he says.

Color is here to stay in the retail atmosphere. "It will only become more important in merchandising goods," says Martin. "To show off such up-to-date products, the retail environment must move to keep pace. Look for more trend-oriented color and more change in the physical presentation in all retail situations." **B**

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Something More

Although color palettes can energize a retail environment, provide a much-needed respite in healthcare spaces, and underscore a corporation's business image, it's oftentimes the unique characteristics and textures of materials that result in a space that is ... something more.

In a phrase that echoes "here and now," think fiber-optics.

For Abhinand Lath, founder and president of Detroit-based SensiTile Systems, a patent-pending new technology (based on the principle of fiber-optics) makes surface materials reactive to changes in light intensity and color. Due to this ability, a SensiTile™ system will respond to the movement around it by creating a dazzling set of ripples on its surface. The technology is completely passive in that it does not need to be electrically "powered"; rather, it uses daylight and ambient light as its source of power.

Lath's idea stemmed from a series of inspirations for his educational thesis. He was intrigued about bringing light features into buildings and on façades through unique channels and related the concept to an 11th-century poem about a walk through a bamboo forest. "Then, my thesis had to do with the idea of translating poetry into material," he recalls.
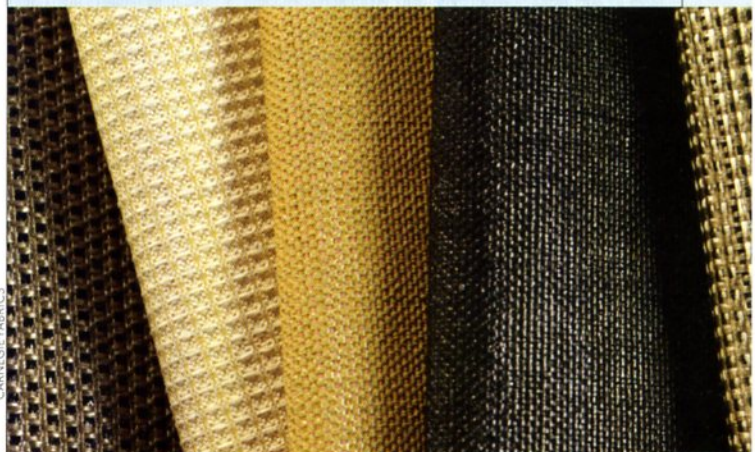
Today, the "poetic" SensiTile has been used, with mesmerizing results, in such applications as flooring, walls, and countertops.

In another product area – textiles – "fiber-optic" yarn is on its way to becoming the new material for the hospitality/entertainment and retail segments. In development are fabrics that can adapt to color changes or individual preferences based upon the concept of illumination (actually shining some type of light through or around a fabric), according to Heather Bush, creative director at Carnegie, Rockville Centre, NY. "At NeoCon World's Trade Fair [2005], where we introduced the concept, we had a lot of professionals totally intrigued with the idea," she says.

However, luminous results have been – and continue to be – a mainstay in Carnegie's Xorel line of fabrics (pictured below). Created first as a wallcovering, Xorel quickly found use in a myriad of applications, from upholstered walls and tackable panels to acoustical tiles and furniture upholstery. New patterns bring added depth and range to the product's established aesthetic versatility. *Dash*, for instance, is a softly reflective pattern with complex color mixtures in new colored neutrals, while one of its original patterns – *Strie* – combines tinted neutrals with reflective surfaces and luminously metallic colors.

Light *and* space: What could be better?

*– Linda K. Monroe, Editorial Director (**linda.monroe@buildings.com**)*

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