



Spec(tacular) Color

by DARWIN HARRISON



(top left) Color is used subtly in the work areas of Accenture's offices, but bright colorful squares mark employee gathering places. (bottom left) The vivid colors of the reception area give visitors a taste of the dynamic palette used throughout the office.



DESIGNING INTERIOR SPACES WITHIN SPECULATIVE office buildings is a common but often disparaged design project. The typical lack of appreciation reflects the dominance of design education on form, light, space, and materials. However, interior projects offer architects a rare opportunity to work with another powerful design tool, one that is often overlooked during their formal education—color.

"Spec" office spaces rarely allow designers to manipulate form. Light levels are often dictated by performance standards emphasizing uniformity. Materials may be predetermined by "building standards." The building structure limits spatial volumes outside the nine-foot height range. But within these iron-clad restrictions, designers may turn to color as a tool to transform a space perceptually. Equally important, color can be used to pursue ideas beyond the aesthetic. Color can add experiential qualities while enhancing user satisfaction, comfort, and productivity. Two recent projects, although quite different in color selections, illustrate how color can become an elemental factor contributing to a corporate identity and business plan. These examples may lead one to consider why color should be elevated to its rightful position alongside other critical design elements.

Accenture

PDR of Houston has worked on several projects with Accenture, a leading provider of management and technology consulting services, including the recently completed space for the company's Energy Accounting Outsource Center. Like many projects of similar nature, the goal was to maximize the number of people in an open-office environment. Yet, both client and PDR realized the benefits of going beyond mere space utilization by designing an environment which is comfortable, and promotes creativity and productivity. Project designer Jackie Barry says that

(right) The multi-colored tiles of Accenture's dining area reflect its use as a point of interaction for employees. Solid colors, as well as whites and metallic greys are used to keep the room vibrant but not overwhelming.

like many PDR projects, bold colors are used; but it is the compilation of a balanced palette that is the foundation of the design. Barry admits that she, like many other designers, sometimes hesitates before presenting a vivid color for a client's consideration because the client may fixate on its boldness and not realize it is to be used in moderation. For the Accenture project, Barry used her own collages as well as "Hill Street," a cityscape by contemporary American painter Wayne Thiebaud, to show not only color inspirations but also the ratio of their use. As a result, the client understood that colors would be balanced and coordinated into a comprehensive design vision. Thus, a more neutral gray carpet, coordinating pieces in black, etc., promote a setting where, despite the occasional existence of bubble-gum pink walls, one never suffers from chroma-overload. Also, the colors are used in a way-finding arrangement which allows them to become mapping devices. Each of Accenture's offices features a particular accent color, meeting rooms have another, and so on. As these spaces converge toward the public areas at the core of the space, the varied hues begin mixing together in a random collision indicative of the mix of people and functions that occur at the company's main entry point.

PDR purposefully chose this energetic aesthetic to spark the creativity of its workforce. The design firm admits that after several projects with Accenture, the client expects bold colors and PDR now must caution that overuse can lead to an environment lacking in unity and refinement. In their own words, they have created "color junkies" who repeatedly request and subsequently appreciate a work environment decidedly non-neutral in color composition.





(top left) Pre-determined materials such as the red sandstone walls and cherry wood flooring of QUP's office are the basis of the color palette used for the project. (bottom left) But the addition of rich fabrics, subtle colors, and hand-crafted glass tiles give QUP its own personality.

QUP

For the first two years of its existence, QUP operated from a nondescript temporary space. But the Austin-based Internet startup's dramatic success necessitated a move to a larger space, and the company decided that the new office should advance a successful corporate identity while also offering a better work environment for its employees. QUP's design team, led by myself, chose Research Park Plaza, a new speculative office building by STG Partners (formerly Susman Tisdale Gayle) of Austin, because its shell accommodated efficient plan arrangements. Just as vital was the building's elegant and distinct visual presence; a result of its multi-colored green glass and pale-hued concrete panels.

Once QUP selected Research Park Plaza, the company enlisted STG as associate architect to assist in the design of the offices using elements of the existing building as points of departure. Designers of spec office spaces, especially for new companies, often neglect the building's core elements in favor of creating from scratch an individual expression that usually clashes with those pre-existing conditions. But not so in this instance: the QUP design team wanted the opposite. The palette builds on several predetermined building materials such as red sandstone and cherry-wood flooring. All of this could have resulted in a space that deferred to the overall color scheme of the core building. This was avoided, primarily by using the colors only as a starting point. Multi-colored green glass was specified in QUP, but the accent wall dividers utilize one-inch thick handmade glass pieces for a more vivid and distinct expression of the colors exhibited at the exterior of the building. Green slate and cherry stains tie in without merely duplicating building standards. With QUP, colors become more saturated as they move from exterior to interior—pale yellow and muted green on the outside become vivid gold and deep olive on the interior.



(right) The coordination of elements, from paintings to paint to carpet, give the QUP offices a unified look. The result is a cohesive space that relates to the building's exterior, yet feels unique.

The coordination of all the elements was exhaustive, extending to every conceivable item including hand-selected artwork, fabric on workstation panels, and even decorative accessories. Such comprehensive coordination is typically easier to accomplish if the palette remains neutral. Yet this additional effort on the part of the design team results in a striking yet organized composition. Visitors often comment how the transition from outside to inside is seamless and obviously coordinated, yet they compliment QUP on its unique space. The space illustrates that colors can be selected in ways that do not reject an existing set of parameters yet builds upon the existing conditions to allow vivid and individual expression.

The Big Scare

"Color is scary," admits PDR principal Laurie Goodman Lampson. This is due to the expansive realm of emotional, sensory, and intellectual parameters connected to color use and perception. All of these varied and sometimes clashing factors filtered through individual personal reactions and appreciation can equate to a terribly complex decision-making process as well as an equally diverse reception of the final result. Color can certainly be a source of debate and difference but this should not imply that designers must revert to a state of chromophobia, exploring only neutral, non-objectionable palettes. As the Accenture and QUP spaces both illustrate, color can be a significant design factor particularly within environments that tend to limit other methods of design exploration. Perhaps both designs illustrate the potential of color for enlivening space and this ability extends well beyond the spec office environment. As Goethe said, "Everything that lives strives for color." ■

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