

Housing and Society
Vol. 13, No. 1, 1986

A Design Note on:

COLOR PLANNING IN NEW RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a color planning procedure for use in new residential subdivision designs. Devised by the author, the procedure was used by one developer in various subdivisions in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, over a period of three summers. The response and cooperation from the housing consumers in the development is good. While the procedure did not add significantly to the total cost of the housing developments, it did add a very positive aesthetic element.

INTRODUCTION

Residential subdivision design has greatly improved since the 1950s when monotonous tract development prevailed. Even though most of today's subdivisions look better than those of the past, they tend to have one common undesirable characteristic. They look bare and unfinished. Most subdivisions lack the needed texture supplied by mature trees, greenery and shrubs associated with older, more established neighborhoods. Vegetation acts simultaneously as a visual tie and a buffer between houses reducing the need for close attention to neighboring color and form.

Early house styles evolved within the limits of available local materials. This produced a visual harmony despite the diversity of form and/or adequate vegetation. Designers are beginning to study and understand a few of the complex considerations that go into creating new environments with color (Birren, 1969).

The purpose of this paper is to describe the steps that can be taken to compensate aesthetically for the lack of mature vegetation in new housing developments. While the color procedure described in this paper does not add significantly to the cost of the development, it can produce 1) better linkage between houses, 2) enhancement of the exterior appearance of individual houses, and 3) blending of structures with the landscape. Buildings, in visual terms, are not observed in isolation. They are perceived within the wider setting; in this case, the housing development.

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The plan proposed in this paper is based on the strategic use of color. It starts with establishing a color palette for the subdivision. Each new home buyer chooses from a preselected range of colors. As houses are built, sold and painted, the color palette is established. This existing organization of color relationships subconsciously influences incoming buyers in their choices, thus perpetuating itself (Birren, 1972; Doyle, 1980). Because the color palette establishes color value as well as hue, it is relatively easy to shift visual emphasis (Porter, 1981).

After this color procedure is initiated, the next step is to provide information to new home buyers assisting them in decisions regarding placement of exterior color. This step can be done through the distribution of a short pamphlet on color. The pamphlet should highlight some of the color principles that can be used in exterior design.

It should be organized so that the pamphlet is easy to read and includes the following types of information:

1. A house is a color composition with specific components to be emphasized. Choice of color is determined by house size and configuration.
2. Warm colors, such as red, orange and yellow, can be seen at a greater distance and attract more attention than can cool colors. They tend to dominate a composition and appear to occupy more space.
3. Warm colors should be reserved for areas of focus and/or emphasis (Faulkner, 1979). Facia boards and foundations are not appropriate areas of focus.
4. A spotty look can be avoided by painting trim areas in colors with minimum contrast to the body color of the house.
5. Cool colors, such as blue, green and neutral tones, can be tolerated in greater amounts (Faulkner, 1979). Because they attract less attention, they are often good choices for the body of the house.
6. Selected colors should compliment and contrast with neighboring houses.
7. Because contrasting colors create clearer outlines than related hues (Faulkner, 1979), extreme color contrasts on the trim areas could cut up the exterior line of the house.

The pamphlet should also include the following properties unique to white and/or dark color:

1. Light colors reflect more light than do dark colors and, therefore, increase the apparent size of an object.
2. Light colors may appear further away than dark colors.
3. Dark colors, such as dark green or brown, inhibit perception of form. They may diminish both apparent size and general outline of a structure.
4. Dark colors usually contrast less with the landscape affecting whether the structure blends in or stands apart from its surroundings.

In addition to the color pamphlet, there must be an appropriate technique for executing this process of color coordination in subdivision design. Because people have a strong desire to participate in decisions affecting them (Deasey, 1974), the process for putting this plan in place is very important to its success. While the plan can be formally written into a covenant or more informally presented as a "suggested color plan", the latter technique is more effective. There is no need for this decision-making process to be contest of wills between the developer, client and realtor. Because most consumers are interested in house value and resale possibilities, they respond well to considerations of "overall development image." While the design of the plan is carried out by the housing consultant, the merit of the plan is usually explained by the realtor for the development since he/she is the one selling the house.

Two important tools used in explaining the color plan include a set of slides and a color wheel or color chart. The slides consist of other houses in the development using the plan, or in the case of the first in-movers when there are no existing examples, other developed areas that illustrate the process. The slides are a good tool because they can be used with relative ease and minimum expense. Although realtors often "drive-around" with clients to look at other houses in the area, the slides are more useful because they can be viewed for prolonged periods of time if necessary and the buyer can come back to them several times.

The color wheel, given to the buyer to use, should include a set number of permitted body and roof colors, such as six basic colors in addition to natural siding. The six predetermined body colors establish color range and value and can be used in different combinations throughout each block. Body color on one house can become the trim color on another house with no adjacent houses painted similarly. Roof colors are then coordinated with the body color of each house (see Figure 1).

In the overall plan, positive house colors and neutral tones should be alternated. Positive and more dominant colors, such as blues, cedars or yellows, should be separated by light, neutral tones, such as ivory, tan, grey-green or natural wood siding. In each instance, trim should blend with the body color because it would be in the same value. Choices made for trim areas, such as doors and windows, should offer some contrast to articulate the exterior

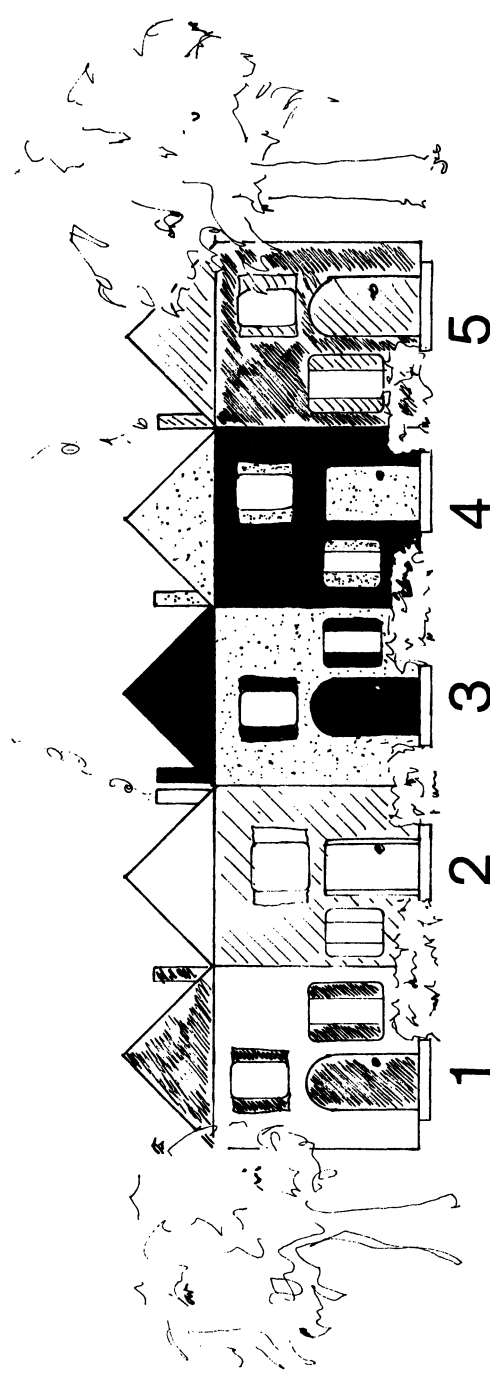


FIGURE 1. COLOR RELATIONSHIPS

Body color of House 1 is the trim color of House 2; The trim color of House 3 is the body color of House 4 and the body color of House 5 is the trim color of House 1.

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elevation. Because the trim color of one house may be the body color of another, it would act as a visual tie with other homes on the block. This technique takes advantage of the color theory that the eye follows identical color spots (Birren, 1969).

Masonry trim, if it is used, should carry one of the color tones used in either trim, body or roof color. The eye is drawn to points of color and textural contrast. Therefore, if masonry trim is used, it should blend with the siding color to avoid creating unintended patterns that break up the elevation of the house. Areas of architectural interest should, however, be set apart from trim areas and treated in a more powerful way.

SUMMARY

Successful color coordination among houses in a newly-built development can occur only if the developer has a color plan early in the building process and has a method for initiating the plan. It works best when the realtors for the development control the execution of the plan since they have an overview of what is being built and sold. In most cases, colors used on the first houses painted will set the color palette for the new neighborhood. Roofs and masonry have comparatively long life, so that aspect of the color palette remains relatively stable.

Once trees and shrubs mature and the bare look has disappeared, the importance of a high degree of color coordination is diminished, but will continue to add to the aesthetic quality of the neighborhood.

Three major advantages of using a color plan in new residential subdivision design are: 1) individual homes are enhanced by color-linked adjacent homes; 2) the housing area has a cohesive quality inherent in good subdivision design; and 3) good color relationships create visual interest that can substitute for the lack of aesthetic qualities typically contributed by mature vegetation and extensive landscaping.

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