

Rainbow analysis

WHEN IT COMES TO COLOUR, THERE IS NO SHORTAGE OF OPINION. BUT IS IT ALL MERELY SUBJECTIVE OR ARE THERE THEORIES AT PLAY?

› WORDS & PICTURES: **JOHNNY TUCKER**



David Batt

Ann Noble



 **Dulux
TRADE**

The FX Colour
Design Seminar
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Georgia Burt



Stephan Oberwegner



F

rom yellow rooms that drive you bonkers, to every man and his dog having an opinion about what shades your latest project should be, the subject of colour certainly is an emotive one. The conversation at this latest FX Design Seminar ranged from the effects of colour on the psyche and whether there was any hard fact behind the anecdotal evidence, through colour's brand-enhancing qualities, to the practicalities of when and where to use it and why that seems to differ from industry to industry, and from private to public sector. Everyone does indeed have an opinion about colour, and designers are pretty sure theirs is the best!

FX editor Theresa Dowling posed the question of whether designers could and should bully their clients into choosing certain colours. 'Yes, you damn well should!' said Platform director Max Eaglen. 'You are being paid to do it. You are being paid to think about things in a different way. You have to say, "This is the reason why we are

doing it – this is the psychology behind it.”

“No matter who you are dealing with, if you pander to their desires they are losing all your experience, and you have become a foot soldier and not a general.”

Describing a presentation where the client had focused on the colour scheme and nothing else, Eaglen added: “When it comes to colour, every person around the table has an opinion and they all think they know best.”

Stephan Oberwegner, managing director of Max Bentheim, weighed in with his own experience, adding: “Design is not just throwing colour around, it is creating revenue-enhancing space. We want to create environments which are inspiring or which make people spend more money. We spend so much time coming up with these ideas and then somebody’s wife says, “We should have it all yellow!” But I guess that’s just an occupational hazard.”

Controlling clients’ expectations of the use of colour was also very much on the mind of BDG Workfutures associate Vyshali

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Stephan Oberwegner

Sardesai when she added: “In workplace design we’ve often found that if the clients’ logos are orange and blue then they want the interior to be orange and blue. The way we find brand solutions now for clients is that we say, “It’s not about the colour of your logo, it is about the brand experience.” It is more an experiential thing in terms of space and light, rather than painting the columns blue and the walls orange – because that’s what they might want you to do.”

Illustrating the point, MoreySmith associate Nicola Osborn brought up the instance of the practice’s recent work for Arup: “We didn’t use its corporate blue, we used a much warmer blue for the office environment.” MoreySmith did, however, use quite a bit of colour, because Arup’s work itself is mostly plans and drawings, and the colour acted at a foil to it rather than fighting with it.

“On the flip side of that, we do a lot of work for Nokia Design,” added Osborn. “Its work is very colourful and the company did not want to be influenced by any colour brought into the workplace, so we created a very neutral space.”

This practical side to the use of colour



Susannah Matheison

Max Eaglen



Vyshali Sardesai

had already been alluded to by Chris Grasby, director of education at HKIS: 'There is a big challenge in schools around creating interiors with the appropriate use of colour – not just about applying colour to the whole interior.'

'Where you use colour, it has to be very carefully considered in order to give the space an identity and character, but also to allow for the work of the students to be used in a strong way and shine through. So, for example, you do not want to start applying a strong blue colour to a wall where there is going to be a lot of students' work – you have to allow the place to start to speak for itself. The colour tends to be stronger in science, where the students' work tends not to be on display.'

Grasby continued: 'There is a difference in using colour to enliven a place and the use of colour where it actually creates the identity of the place. In a space that is used to profit, colour tends to get used in a really different way. You could argue that there shouldn't be a difference, but there is and that's perhaps what makes places look like institutions.'

David Batt, interior designer at Austin-Smith: Lord, agreed that there was a difference between the private and public sectors: 'We treat government offices very differently from, say, a funky Soho office. For government, it is lots of natural materials that get better with age. With the funky office, it is big, bold graphics and strong colour, and a corridor you can skateboard down!'

Most agreed with this idea of colour as an expression of brand identity, while MoreySmith's Osborn pointed out that the longevity of a project can affect the use of colour, with neutrals tending to be used where it has to last longer. BDG's Sardesai agreed with the basic public/private sector sentiment, but also pointed to a personal example that shows you can step outside of this mindset: 'Designing offices for the public sector is often not that much fun, but we proved with Southwark Council that we can design something that is bright, colourful and innovative. We used a natural architectural palette, working up its colourful brand on the vertical surfaces, which can be changed easily and not cost the earth. The council has embraced it and it shows off its brand and it works for its staff and clients – the public.'

Bringing more colour into institutions is somewhat of a crusade for Nightingale Associates' senior designer Georgia Burt: 'We are working in the mental health sector and we're finding that some colours have a very positive effect on people. We wanted to use a red wall in a psychiatric intensive care project [Norbury Ward, The King's Fund's 'Enhancing the Healing Environment' project]. Lots of people said, "Why are we using red? That's going to create more aggression." But actually, when you have a lot of people who

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Nicola Osborn

are depressed, it really lifts them up. I work with colour like an alchemist, adding a little bit here and there, and in this case they used to have an incident every 48 hours and now there is one every two weeks.

'On Norbury Ward we had the views out of the window, which brought me a lot of green, and then there was the red wall; the rest of the space was very neutral, and in the evaluation we have had better staff retention and less damage to the unit.'

Burt added: 'It is really satisfying when you see people make great progress. An evaluation was done by the chief executive and, from a very small project – which was £85,000 – we are now working on a £50m project with the same Trust.'

The psychological effects of colour came up several times during the conversation. Susannah Mathieson, Dulux Trade design studio manager, brought up this example: 'At the budget-end of the hotel market they have realised they need to do something about colour. At Premier Inn, the bedrooms used a bright purple and they came to us and said, "We need to make this purple work. We need to use this in the small space so give us some colours that will really help our brand."

'Premier Inn now realises that it can use colour to differentiate and that colours are a really important way of giving a luxury feel. Now it is starting to target the people who would spend money on a five-star hotel at the weekend.'

But perhaps the most contentious comments on the psychology of colour – or the ones that certainly encouraged the liveliest debate – came during Max Eaglen's ruminations on his college days. 'Did anybody do a foundation course where they spent a week in a different room painted a different colour?' he asked. 'I can remember spending a week in a red room, a week in a blue room, a week in a green room and a week in a yellow room. The one that really sent you mad was the yellow room – I think there obviously is a psychological impact of colour on your psyche!'

However, Ann Noble, marketing manager for colour at Dulux Trade, replied: 'I think you have to be very careful about saying that. There is virtually no substantial evidence that says this... it is probably you, actually.'

'We had a vote about which room was the worse and it was yellow!' continued Eaglen, to cries of 'I love yellow!' from other parts of the table.

Noble pushed him on what kind of yellow the walls were. 'It was a banana yellow, actually,' he replied and proceeded to furnish further details: 'At the beginning, we all talked about which was going to be the most likely room to affect to us and we agreed red.'

'In the red room, people can be quite angry, but the work tends to be better. In the blue room, the work tends to be slow, and in the green room, work tends to be chilled

Chris Grosby



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and laid-back. In the yellow room, the work tends to be completely stupid. Literally, it was rubbish!' Noble countered: 'Studies have been done and people have snatched at the facts and called for pink prisons, said that children read better in blue rooms, and that orange is best for breastfeeding.

'But when you look at these studies, your first question is, "OK, what kind of blue was it?" And they say, "I don't know." So how good is the research, and is it appropriate? Would you design a classroom with four dark blue walls? No, I don't think you would.

'I think people just jump on it because they want an easy solution. The red wall we talked about earlier [the Norbury Ward project] is fantastic, but it doesn't mean that red is an exhilarating colour, or an angry colour, or a passionate colour – it could be all of those depending on who you are.

'We did a research project two years ago to get to the bottom of this, looking at things like what colours should be used in education or hospitals, and it was virtually impossible to find an answer. What came out of it was that you can probably use any colour you like, as long as it is carefully considered, and that is where your expertise as a designer comes in.'

Another thing that affects the way we perceive and use colour, and one that Dulux is very much aware of, is fashion and trend. Sardesai commented: 'I have been at seminars before where Dulux has predicted what the trend colours are going to be. I have to say that I ignore it. It's all about unique solutions.'

But Eaglen wasn't so sure that was possible: 'I think subliminally you pick up on these colours and use them. Everywhere you look, you realise there are changing colours, set by the fashion industry, used by graphics second and 3D third, by which time they will have been refined to the point they can be used in 3D.'

Eaglen added that more than flat colour, he likes to work with light and with coloured light. He feels washing with coloured light gives more flexibility and he has used it in a number of projects.

Austin-Smith Lord's Batt then brought the conversation topic back to the health sector, adding: 'We are looking into colour-change environments for hospitals, so that you can wake up with a light mimicking the sun. We are using LEDs and all these theories to affect your stay in hospital to make a better experience.'

And as the light began to fade outside the seminar window, the session ended with the attendees contemplating the eye-popping coloured iced cakes put out on the table. Sardesai pointed out that people had been perhaps unwilling to dive in because they were unnatural – 'almost nuclear' – in appearance. That said, when the room had emptied, the cakes had disappeared... ■



Andrew Wood

The colourful dramatis personae

- David Batt**
Interior designer/Austin-Smith Lord
- Georgia Burt**
Senior designer/Nightingale Associates
- Theresa Dowling**
Editor/FX magazine
- Max Eaglen**
Director/Platform
- Chis Grasby**
Director of Education/HKS
- Susannah Mathieson**
Design studio manager/Dulux Trade
- Stephan Oberwegner**
Managing director/Max Bentheim
- Nicola Osborn**
Associate/MoreySmith
- Ann Noble**
Marketing manager/Dulux Trade
- Vyshali Sardesai**
Associate/BDG Workfutures
- Cherrill Scheer**
Director/CSA Associates
- Andrew Wood**
Managing director/
Curtis Wood Architects

Theresa Dowling



Special thanks to BDG Workfuture for its fabulous conference room



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