



Mediating Space with Colour

Embrace unique interior details

By Sylvia O'Brien

Photography Larry Nicols, www.2kgrafx.com

This article addresses strategic use of interior colour to maximize and benefit complicated spaces, not only in condominiums and modern single-family dwellings, but also in retrofit 'add ins' to older architecture.

New construction is a given in our ever expanding urban centres, with the demand for condominiums being the most prevalent. Unlike the single-family dwelling, a series of interconnected homes (i.e., condos) means unique design issues occur on a regular basis. Cladding the various systems needed for utilities naturally creates a series of long box-shaped housings that impact the interior. In the case of a retrofit structure, an existing (sometimes traditional) room may be transformed with a new design feature, born of a challenge.

A general assumption is that with open concept or unusual features, it's best to paint one colour throughout. I strongly disagree with this idea. What makes a good hall colour probably won't make a good living room, sunroom or kitchen colour. As colour is completely defined by the light source that hits it, it's of key importance to introduce the best colour for each space and have a main colour, what I like to call 'the mediator,' running through and connecting the other tones.

Here are a couple of examples to illustrate a strategy to embrace the unique detail ... rather than hide it.

Condo with mezzanine and exposed concrete

This new build double-height condo required a main colour that would work well with the exposed concrete ceilings and wall (Photo 1 opposite page). The utilities structures were positioned such that one started from the floor in the bottom level, carried all the way up to the ceiling of the mezzanine level, then took a right turn and flowed across the top of the upper level window in one continuous line.

Below that bulkhead (Photo 2 below) is a second bulkhead to house electrical. The puzzle? How to integrate these two colours gracefully.

As you can see in Photo 2, we painted the lower bulkhead the same rosy brown as the bedroom accent wall, and the upper bulkhead maintained the main colour from the first level. Throughout that condo space were other prominent colours, but they were tied together with that main colour, a contemporary yellow-green. The main colour was chosen to act as a foil to the cool tones of the concrete. Warmth in interiors is something inhabitants crave. Other colours in the palette of this project included an earthy red for powder room walls and ceiling, a dark grey for the accent wall in the mezzanine office, and a jute colour for the master bath walls and ceiling, all of which worked well with the main yellow-green. This main colour covered approximately 65 per cent of the overall wall space. The result was a unique and interesting interior with maximum use of colour dynamic.





Reinvented rowhouse / dining area / master bedroom

This project was an old rowhouse retrofitted with a modern interior. A thoughtless renovation in the 70s had removed all semblance of the original character of the home.

This is a great example of how to deal with design dilemmas. Upton Design/Build in Toronto was given the task of creating a modern, interesting and multifunctional space throughout.

Look at the beautifully proportioned staircase (Photo 3 above) showcased by the red accent wall as a backdrop. Doesn't it look like a sculpture? If it were the same colour as the wall it's mounted on, its impact would be diminished. In this case the neutral tone of the staircase is the mediator, and flows through the rest of this level. The red wall is the feature, spanning both the ground and second levels.

In this same project, the plan included reclaiming the attic above the bedroom to expand the space. The designer, Nick Upton, incorporated a barrel ceiling

(Photo 4 facing page). When I spoke to Upton about this aspect of the renovation, he talked about the design challenges involved. First he removed collar ties and replaced them with steel tension rods. The structure was over 100 years old and as a result there was not a straight line anywhere. As he raised the floor, created a ventable space below the roof and started to build the shape of the room, the concept of a wave shape at the peak became a brilliant solution as well as a pleasing feature.

In this case the dark steel blue is the main colour. The silver-coloured wall and ceiling helps to articulate the wave feature. Note the chartreuse green in the open closet. This hit of colour creates a dramatic solution for the homeowner's concept of an open storage space.

In concept, I like to make allies of these building/design idiosyncrasies. I think of these unique interior spaces as 'inside out' sculpture, and the colour is the tool to bring out the distinctive personality of each one.

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