The Beige Conundrum

Alma Crawford-Mendoza

University of Massachusetts Amherst

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The Beige Conundrum

A Thesis Presented

by

ALMA CRAWFORD-MENDOZA

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

May 2021

Department of Architecture
The Beige Conundrum

A Thesis Presented

by

ALMA CRAWFORD-MENDOZA

Approved as to style and content by:

_____________________________________________________________________

Timothy Rohan, Chair

_____________________________________________________________________

Stephen Schreiber, Department Head
Department of Architecture
ABSTRACT
THE BEIGE CONUNDRUM
MAY 2021
ALMA CRAWFORD-MENDEZA, B.F.A.,
UNIVERISTY OF MASSACHUSETTS, AMHERST
M. ARCH., UNIVERISTY OF MASSACHUSETTS, AMHERST
Directed by: Timothy Rohan

Color is an essential part of everyday life, but it is often not given the consideration it deserves. Simply, waking up in the morning and pulling on a pair of blue jeans and a white t-shirt is an example of a decision made about color. What behooves a person to dress in a certain color? Is it related to their mood? Is it related to the kind of work they do? Similar questions can be asked about the exterior color of a person’s home. Why did they choose that color? How do they feel about their house’s color? Did they choose its color? Did they choose the color because it looked harmonious with their neighbor’s house? Is it fair to wonder whether there is a discernible reason behind every color decision that is made?

The prevalence of the unassuming color beige on residences throughout Western Massachusetts and the curiosity to know why it is so common, was the specific impetus for this project. Why has beige, in particular, been selected as an acceptable house color? Moreover, why aren’t other colors like pink or orange, often seen on houses? There are regional, historical, and larger cultural investigations that can shed light on why some colors are favored over others.
It must be acknowledged that to dwell in the realm of color, is inevitably to dwell in the realm of opinion. This project seeks to explore color in a conciliatory, strategic manner, that does not polarize those who prefer one color against those who do not. Rather, a case is made for how color’s treasure trove of untapped potential can be given a greater purpose amongst the built environment.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Research Questions</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. TERMINOLOGY</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Relevant Terms</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. COLOR THROUGH HISTORY</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 The Roots of the Beige Trend</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 A Colorful Breakthrough</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Color in Western Culture</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Controversy in the News</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. HISTORY OF COLORS</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Color History and Associations</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Blue</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Purple</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Green</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Red</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6 Orange</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7 Yellow</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8 Black</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.9 Pink</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.10 Brown</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.11 Beige</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.12 Color and Emotions</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td>PAGE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. PRECEDENTS</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Relevant Precedents</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. PROPOSED DESIGN STRATEGIES</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Entry Door Color Study</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 Proposed Residential Color Strategies</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 Vanish</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4 Emphasis</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5 Hide</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6 Dapple</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.7 Levitate</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.8 Hierarchy</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.9 Contrast</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1 Conclusion and Applications</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1: Color Research Flow Chart</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2: Sherwin Williams “Color Through the Decades” Collection</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3: 1960s Advertisements</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4: Color Associations Diagram</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5: Schulman House Before &amp; After</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6: Schulman House Color Analysis 1</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7: Schulman House Color Analysis 2</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8: Wells-Thorn House Color Analysis</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9: Color Wheel</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 10: Entry Door Color Study</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 11: Color Strategy 1 – Vanish</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 12: Color Strategy 2 – Emphasis – View from Street</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 13: Color Strategy 2 – Emphasis – View from Parking Lot</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 14: Color Strategy 3 – Hide – View from Street</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 15: Color Strategy 3 – Hide – View from Backyard</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 16: Color Strategy 4 – Dapple – View from Street</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 17: Color Strategy 5 – Levitate – View from Street</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 18: Color Strategy 5 – Levitate – View from Front Yard</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 19: Color Strategy 6 – Hierarchy – View from Street</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 20: Color Strategy 7 – Contrast – View from Street</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 21: Color Strategy 7 – Contrast – View from Front Yard</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.1 Introduction

Beige is a color defined as being a light grayish-yellowish brown. (Merriam-Webster n.d.) The color can be commonly found on rural residences throughout Western Massachusetts. If not beige, homes are often gray, white or a muted, pastel color. There are undeniably outliers that do not conform to this beige trend; however, the predominance of beige is something that desires further exploration. Why beige? Why is this color readily embraced throughout Western Massachusetts residences? To find the answer it stands to reason that there are both local and larger cultural explanations.

Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-52), an American horticulturalist, landscape gardener, architect, and author, who resided in New York state in the early and mid-1800s, wrote several books regarding country residences. Of longstanding influence, these books provided guidance for homeowners on which colors to apply to the exterior of their home, one of those colors being beige. Paint companies in the 1800’s were also highly influential in dictating the trending colors for home exteriors.

Looking more broadly into western culture and its history, colors have been found to be continuously reviled and diminished. (Batchelor 2000, 22) Cultural bias, societal associations, assumptions, and in some cases simply subjectivity has been the basis for how a certain color was
judged acceptable or not. As seen in fashion trends, colors come in and out of style, in and out of favor. Some colors have maintained relatively positive reputations since their pigment was first created, and others have been notably despised.

The intention of this project is to acknowledge the history of colors in western culture and specifically explore how the color beige rose to such popularity. Some homeowners may simply prefer neutral colors like beige, they may find them less offensive or less distracting than vibrant colors. Everyone has their own partialities, and it is not the intention of this project to impose upon anyone the colors that they should like. Rather, this thesis endeavors to provide possible explanations for how we feel towards color today and provide unconventional ideas for how color can be further integrated onto the exterior of a country home. Color is an often-under-utilized tool in the homeowner’s and designer’s toolkit; the series of color studies and strategies proposed at the end of this document demonstrate a variety of ways in which color can be further utilized.
Figure 1: Color Research Flow Chart
(By Author)
1.2 Research Questions

~ Why Beige? Why are many residential buildings in Western Massachusetts often clad in muted colors such as beige or gray?

~ Is there a cultural fear of vibrant and bold colors that has created this preference for beige?

~ How can more color variety be strategically and affordably incorporated into residential facades?
2.1 Relevant Terms

The glossary below, seeks to define the main color-related terms that will be mentioned throughout this document and serve as a reference for the reader.

**Achromatic** – lacking any hue.

**Balance** – the state of composition when there is an appropriate amount of both unity and complexity of the design.

**Camouflage** – the manipulation of color to make one thing blend into another, such as animals who blend with surroundings to hide from predators.

**Contrast** – the amount and type of difference between two or more color.

**Harmony** – a state of compatibility in color hues.

**Hue** – the relative position of a color on the color circle: the redness, blueness, or yellowness of a color.

**Illusion** – the act of using color to make one see something that does not exist.

**Intensity** – the purity of a color, or the degree of hue characteristic of a color.

**Monochromatic** – a combination of colors in one hue.

**Muted** – used to describe a color that is soft and restrained or dulled from fading.
**Neutral** – a condition of color that appears to have no discernible hue (i.e. gray, white, or black).

**Palette** – any combination of colors organized for a purpose.

**Psychedelic color** – a group of highly saturated colors, including fluorescents, that were popular during the 1960s.

**Primary Colors** – the three basic colors that can be combined to form all others. In pigment they are red, yellow, and blue.

**Saturation** – the degree or strength of hue in color: intensity.

**Secondary Colors** – the three colors created by mixing each of two primary colors. In pigment, they are orange, green, and purple.

**Shades** – colors of hue mixed with black.

**Tint** – colors of hue mixed with white.

**Tone** – colors of hue mixed with gray.

**Transparency** – the condition in which one color appears to be visible behind another.

**Value** – the lightness or darkness of a color. (Kopacz 2004, 279–84)
3.1 The Roots of the Beige Trend

The English novelist Charles Dickens, visited Worcester, Massachusetts in 1842; upon arrival he commented that “all the buildings, looked as if they had been painted that morning…Every house is the whitest of white; every Venetian blind the greenest of the green (Moss 1981, 9).” The color white was the most popular paint color found on homes in the United States from the late 1700’s up until Dickens visited in 1842. (Moss 1994, 77) At the time, white pigment was typically made from mixing white lead and linseed oil and was seen as being durable and having a clean and fresh appearance. (Moss 1981, 9) There was one voice who spoke vehemently against this ubiquitous white trend on residences, his name was Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-52).

Downing was a landscape gardener and horticulturist from New York state who wrote several books, many of them providing guidance for landscaping and gardening. His book *The Architecture of Country Houses (1850)*, however, delved into aesthetic architectural aspects of the home, for example, the appropriate exterior colors that should be applied to houses. Downing believed that homes in the country should be painted colors that harmonized with and blended in with their environment. (Downing 1850, 199) He found white to be jarring and too conspicuous amongst green natural surroundings. His prescribed method for choosing the color of a home was, “to avoid all those colors which
nature avoids. In buildings, we should copy those that she offers chiefly to the eye—such as those of the soil, rocks, wood, and the bark of trees—the materials of which houses are built. These materials offer us the best and most natural study from which harmonious colors for the houses themselves should be taken (Downing 1850, 200).” Downing neglects to mention how changing seasons would invariably affect the harmony between a house and its surroundings; white, in fact, would arguably be the most harmonious color for a house in winter, when white snow is covering the ground. Downing’s lack of consideration for seasonal color change, highlights the insurmountable challenge of creating a prescribed method for color application, it simply cannot be prescribed.

Even so, Downing goes on to propose a replacement for white, which he describes as “soft and quiet shades called neutral tints, such as fawn, drab, gray, brown” he states that “positive colors such as white, yellow, red, blue, black, etc. should always be avoided (Downing 1850, 202).” In support of his argument for neutral tints, Downing includes a quote of William Wordsworth’s, an English poet, who also had decided views on what colors were appropriate on homes. Wordsworth was specifically fond of the color between a “cream and a dust color”, which Downing agrees is the “safest color, for general use (Downing 1850, 203).” It can be surmised that the color Wordsworth and Downing advocated for in the mid-1800s was what is known today as beige. Downing ardently believed that if his suggestions on house color were adhered to, “one may have the pleasure of travelling over our whole country, without meeting a
single habitation of glaring and offensive color, but see everywhere something of harmony and beauty (Downing 1850, 206).” This impassioned encouragement of Downing’s to paint the country home beige or similar tints, marked a pivotal moment in United States color history where white was reconsidered as being the obvious paint color for a home.

To illustrate the influence Downing’s color guidance had on homeowners, Figure 2, features the most popular Sherwin Williams interior and exterior paint colors from the 1850’s through the 2010’s. This curated collection of color swatches was compiled to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Sherwin Williams paint company. The color swatches representing the years from 1850 to 1880 (also known as the late Victorian era), nearest to when Downing’s book was published, has a distinctively beige theme. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that Downing’s determined manifesto against white had a certain level of success.
3.2 A Colorful Breakthrough

Still examining Figure 2, it can be observed that in decades following the 1880s, more color variety became popular. Namely, the 1960’s palette was comprised of extremely vibrant colors; the palette was ripe with saturated oranges, yellows, pinks and purples. Catriona Gray, author of House and Garden’s *Sixties House (1860)*, explains how design in the sixties, “became increasingly youth-oriented, incorporating a playful, throwaway element that was designed to appeal to the new generation of baby-boomers (Gray 2016, 8).” Gray attributes the polychromous aspect of the sixties to the “close relationship between popular culture and design (Gray 2016, 10).” Musicians, visual artists, furniture designers, and interior designers cross-pollinated their different disciplines, creating an all-encompassing color intervention. As demonstrated in Figure 3, appliance manufacturers even caught on to this chromophilic trend. General Electric offered an avocado green refrigerator; Frigidaire sold a deep blue electric range and Amana, another appliance manufacturer, sold a line of decorator refrigerators that had three hundred and twenty-nine colorful designs available, patterns ranged from stripes to faux wood, flowers to zig-zags. (Click Americana 2019)

As trends come and go, so did the bright colors of the sixties. Figure 2 reveals how even by the 1980’s, the preferred paint colors were significantly more muted and desaturated than those of the sixties. It could be speculated that
the rejection of bright colors following the sixties was apart of a larger political agenda to denounce the countercultural hippie movement where hippies “grew their hair long, experimented with drugs, and-thanks to the newly-accessible birth control pill-practiced “free love” (Editors n.d.) This speculation, specifically tying color to drug use, is further explored in the following section where David Batchelor is discussed, a writer who sought to understand why color has been routinely diminished in western culture.
Figure 2: Sherwin Williams “Color Through the Decades” Collection
(Diagram by Author, Images by Sherwin Williams website)
Figure 3: 1960s Advertisements
(Images by Click Americana)
3.3 Color in Western Culture

Upon visiting a house with an interior that was so emphatically white he found it both aggressive and accusatory, the Scottish writer and artist, David Batchelor sought to better understand the personal offense he felt when confronted with this total whiteness. (Batchelor 2000, 10) Batchelor’s intrigue with the monotonous white palette, caused him to question whether this house was simply a celebration of the color white or if it was the opposite, a forceful rejection of all other colors. Batchelor formed an argument that “colour has been the object of extreme prejudice in western culture,” and that the prejudice has manifested itself amongst many professions including, “philosophers, artists, art historians and cultural theorists (Batchelor 2000, 22).” He supposes that underneath this prejudice is naked fear, “a fear of contamination and corruption by something that is unknown or appears unknowable.” (Batchelor 2000, 22) Batchelor’s suspicion of this fear, bore the term chromophobia, meaning fear of color.

Even though, Batchelor’s arguments are in the realm of speculation and are incredibly generalizing, it helps in thinking about whether this “chromophobia” is a possible explanation for the whiteness that existed on American homes at the time Charles Dickens first visited in 1842. Downing, may have advocated for colors other than white, but his color suggestions remained generally muted and tonal; he was careful not to propose any color that may be seen as “offensive.” (Downing 1850, 206) When the color beige is discussed in
various literature, it is often accompanied with the description of being “inoffensive”. Who are we trying to not offend? Batchelor may surmise that those with chromophobia are the people that would take offense to colors other than beige.

According to Batchelor, color has been marginalized in western society by two different methods, the first being that of making color “the property of some ‘foreign’ body”, for example, “the feminine”, “the infantile”, or “the vulgar”. (Batchelor 2000, 22–23) The second method is to represent color as something superficial or simply cosmetic. (Batchelor 2000, 22–23) Thus, there are many societal stigmas and roadblocks that Batchelor sees as preventing us from embracing color. When considered, how often are we given license to choose the color of our environment? When buying a car, can you choose to have your car painted any color of the rainbow, or are your options limited to those made by the manufacturer? When moving to a new apartment, are you encouraged to paint the walls a color you find inviting or do you sign a form that requires you to keep the white walls exactly the way they are? These are just two examples of how color choice is both limited and censored in our society.

In addition to being marginalized, Batchelor also sees color as having been associated with a fall or descent in society, “a fall can be trivial or dangerous: falls have a place of honour in comedy, in the circus, in tragedy and in melodrama. A fall may be biblical or farcical or, perhaps, both. Many of the different stories of the descent into colour are stories of a fall from grace (Batchelor 2000, 24).” In
contemporary culture, Batchelor has found drug use and the use of color to be associated analogously with falls in society. As briefly discussed above in the section *A Colorful Breakthrough*, the hippie movement involved people wearing colorful tie-dye clothing and the use of psychedelic drugs. The effect of psychedelic drugs, having been described as involving a visual “intensification of color (Batchelor 2000, 31),” supports Batchelor’s argument that color and drugs have been similarly ranked as morally reprehensible.

It is reasonable to conclude that chromophobia can be found throughout western society. The following section discusses some of today’s neighborhood house color restrictions and the actions that have been taken against those that have pushed against those boundaries.
3.4 Controversy in the News

Chromophobia can be found amongst residential neighborhoods across the United States. A prime example being in July of 2020, when a homeowner in Moline, Illinois who had painted her home in rainbow hues received a letter from a city official requiring her to repaint her house to match or be “similar to other houses on the block (Associated Press, 2020).” If the homeowner did not make these changes, she would be faced with a fine of $750 per day. Refusing to back down, the homeowner created an online petition, collecting roughly 17,000 signatures from people around the world, all in support of her leaving the house as is. Luckily, the city lifted the order, and she was not required to repaint. As the homeowner so eloquently put it, “variety is the spice of life. What a dull world it would be if we all looked the same (Associated Press 2020).” Though in the end this is an uplifting story, it is also distressing how polarizing the sentiments around color still are today. Many people are personally offended by color and have no problem with taking lawful action to remove it.

In Lauderdale Lakes, Florida, there is a city ordinance that lists 200 different hues that are permissible as principal colors on the exterior of a home. (Campbell, 2000) There are also rules regarding which colors can be used as accent colors and which as trim colors. The city’s community development director, explained that this ordinance will ultimately “improve the way the city looks” as well as setting a “standard of uniformity that commissioners feel is respectful to the neighborhoods (Campbell, 2000).” The ordinance itself at one
point states that “the use of garish and uncommon colors in a residential environment tends to disrupt residential character and harmony of the environment (Campbell, 2000).” This statement sounds uncannily similar to Downing when he said that without “glaring and offensive color” there would be “everywhere something of harmony and beauty (Downing 1850, 206).” There was in the 1800’s and there still is today, a need to control color as if it were an unruly child in need of discipline.
4.1 Color History and Associations

Tracing a color pigment back to its inception, when it was first made from grinding the bodies of insects or since it was the surprise result of a failed chemistry experiment, can be an illuminating investigation. Often color pigments, that were rare or difficult to produce gained prestige amongst the wardrobes of the elite or royal classes. Conversely, pigments that were common and easy to produce were often assigned to the clothes worn by the working class. Could thirteenth century associations between color and economic class still be affecting how we think of color today?

This chapter briefly examines the historical and societal associations of several commonly known colors. Figure 4 accompanies this section as a visual representation of the research compiled. The diagram exhibits some of the many contrasting associations each color has had since antiquity in Western Europe and the United States. Many colors share associations, in such cases the dotted line arrives at the same word in the diagram.
4.2 Blue

“It seems blue, once considered the color of degenerates and barbarians has conquered the world (Clair 2017, 181).”

Up until the eleventh century, the color blue was notably absent in western European art and architecture. In his history of the color, the medievalist historian Michel Pastoureau claims that it appeared that until then the “hue simply did not exist (Pastoureau 2018, 37).” This absence could be interpreted as being the result of the lack of skills and knowhow people had at the time to create blue pigment and it could also be the result of the aversion some westerners had towards blue, specifically the Romans. (Clair 2017, 179) As techniques were developed for extracting pigments from cobalt and ultramarine stones as well as from indigo plants, the color steadily rose to a higher regard. (Clair 2017, 180) Studies have shown that since World War I, blue has ranked the West’s favorite color, a popularity that was significantly buoyed by the emergence of the jean industry in the 1870s. (Pastoureau 2018, 168-170) Perhaps, due to its neutrality and peaceful reputation, blue remains the most popular color in Western Europe and the United States today.
4.3 Purple

“This is the purple for which Roman fasces and axes clear a way. It is the badge of noble youth: it distinguishes the senator from the knight: it is called in to appease the gods. It brightens every garment, and shares with gold the glory of triumph. For these reasons we must pardon the mad desire for purple (Gage 1993, 25).”

Even though purple is by no means as popular as blue today, there was a time in Roman history when purple was held in higher regard. It was the imperial color. This great esteem was primarily influenced by the difficult production process needed to create a purple-colored pigment. In late 48 B.C., Tyrian purple was made from both an arduous and expensive process involving shellfish secretions and a vat of stale urine. (Clair 2017, 162) When Tyrian was the only means of making purple in Rome, the color was associated with opulence and was therefore exclusively reserved for royalty. (Clair 2017, 160) As alternative methods for making purple pigments were discovered, the color became accessible, common, and is no longer a novelty.
4.4 Green

“Green is healthy, invigorating, robust. It is free and natural, ready to fight against all artifice, any obstacle, all authoritarianism (Pastoureau 2014, 221).”

The knights of the Arthurian legends each wear a color indicative of their goodness or their wickedness. The red knight typically has evil intentions, the white knight is inevitably good, and the green knight is “frequently a youth whose insolence and audacity create disorder (Pastoureau 2018, 59).” Even today, green still retains a reputation of being the color of youth and inexperience, for example, a horse that has little to no training is commonly referred to as “green”. (Fabus 2019) Being the color of the leafy parts of plants, green often denotes organically grown produce in grocery stores and is generally associated with environmentalism. As shown in the Sherwin Williams 150th Anniversary collection (Figure 2), the paint color Avocado Green was notably embraced in the 1970s, a decade known for the earth movement. During the 1970s, appliance manufacturers such as Frigidaire, went so far as to offer an entirely green refrigerator. (Figure 3) Given the ever-growing necessity for sustainability and environmentally friendly living in today’s world, could green be a color of the future?
4.5 Red

“It was with red that humans did their first color experiments, achieved their first successes, and then constructed a chromatic universe” (Pastoureau and Gladding 2017, 14).

Red has the longest and fullest history of all the colors; red pigment can first be found in Chauvet Cave in France where it was used to draw a bear on the cave walls. (Pastoureau and Gladding 2017, 17) In the Middle Ages, red had various contradictory associations, when worn, red evoked power, however it was also symbolically linked with sin and punishment. (Pastoureau and Gladding 2017, 73) As mentioned in the paragraph summarizing green, the red knight in Arthurian legends “generally ‘had’ evil intentions or a demonic aspect (Pastoureau 2018, 59).” In the west, in the Middle Ages, red was also associated with sex and prostitution. (Clair 2017, 136) Later in the 1900s, red gained a political identity as well, it was named the color of communism. This political affiliation added complication to wearing or displaying the color red, there was now an added fear of being called a communist. (Pastoureau and Gladding 2017, 175) Despite, the plethora of both negative and positive associations red has had, it is incontrovertible that today it is still the “strongest color symbolically (Pastoureau and Gladding 2017, 192).”
4.6 Orange

“Orange is like a man, desperately trying to convince others of his powers

(Salisbury 2015, 149).”

In comparison with the two primary colors that comprise it, red and yellow, orange’s past has not been as symbolically significant. The word orange, in fact, didn’t exist in the English language until the sixteenth century, previously, the color was referred to as yellow-red. (Clair 2017, 93) Other than sharing a name with the popular citrus fruit, the color orange is commonly seen in contexts where its visibility is advantageous; traffic signage, toxic chemical warnings and prison garb being a handful of places. In his book, Yellow: The History of a Color, Michel Pastoureaux reserves one chapter for discussing orange. The art historian doesn’t hide his firm dislike for the color, he recalls how “in the 1960s and 1970s, with the laudable intention of “making life brighter,” decorators and designers introduced much orange into everyday life, sometimes in combination with sharp (apple green) or incongruous colors (chestnut, silver). What seemed amusing inventive, even jubilant at the time strikes us as vulgar or difficult to bear today. And the idea that a color or color combination can “brighten up life” is naïve (Pastoureaux 2019, 205)” Pastoureaux’s fiery sentiments against orange expresses how difficult it can be to discuss color without inserting personal bias. Even though, orange lacks in symbolic meaning, there seems to be a consensus in western culture that orange is simply disgusting and must be kept in the few contexts where it is appropriate.
4.7 Yellow

“Yellow leads a roving, versatile life (Le Gallienne, 1896).”

In 1890s London, the artistic journal “The Yellow Book” was considered notorious because it published the work of those maligned as sexually deviant, such as Oscar Wilde, a poet and playwright of the time. (Clair 2017, 63) Due to such associations, yellow itself was seen as synonymous with the scandalous and the transgressive. Amongst the clothing worn in the late nineteenth century, yellow was again considered disgraceful, in fact “a man would never wear yellow unless he wanted to draw attention to himself and deliberately transgress social codes (Pastoureau 2019, 186).” To challenge yellow’s negative associations, Impressionist painters and later Fauvist painters embraced the color and used it abundantly in their work. (Pastoureau 2019, 197)

Western culture has contrastingly coveted the color yellow, in the context of blonde haired women: waitresses with blonde hair have been found to receive larger tips than those with any other hair color. (Clair 2017, 67) Like orange, yellow has also proven to have useful visibility in the context of traffic signage and transportation; both school buses and taxis are commonly yellow. It is hard to say what role yellow will have in the future, if the essayist Le Gallienne’s quote is any indication, it will continue leading a “roving, versatile life (Le Gallienne, 1896).”
4.8 Black

“Despite the ubiquity, black has retained both its popularity and its fresh, challenging modernity (Clair 2017, 263).”

Black has often had a negative connotation, it has been equated with darkness, sin and death (Pastoureau 2008, 20). From the year 1000 through the Middle Ages, art commonly portrayed the devil as being the color black. In the late Middle Ages however, black gained some notoriety amongst royalty, this was namely due to significant progress in the fabric dying industry, which allowed for a greater range of black shades to be produced (Pastoureau 2008, 78). In the early twentieth century in the United States, Protestant values were invoked on many mass-produced items, restricting their color to either be white, black or greys and browns. (Pastoureau 2008, 174) Henry Ford, for example, the founder of an American automobile company in the early twentieth century, refused to have his cars painted in any color but black (Pastoureau 2008, 175). Today, black is neither considered the most popular nor the most reviled color, rather it seems to have gained a neutral, and in many cases an elegant, ranking amongst western society.
4.9 Pink

“Whether it connotes a sense of glamour, eroticism, girlish nostalgia, or male
elegance, pink always stands out from other colors, making it a special color

(Steele et al. 2018, 189).”

Faded red, also known as pink, has a complex and confusing history. Since the 1700’s, there has been dispute on whether pink should be worn by girls or boys. It is unclear why a gender binary has so often been assigned to pink opposed with blue, nevertheless there does not seem to have been a consensus. In a trade publication in the early 1900’s, the binary is affirmed in favor of pink over blue being a more appropriate color for boys because it is a “more decided and stronger color (Clair 2017, 115).” However, by the 1970’s, the binary began to flip in favor of pink being a far more feminine color than a masculine one. This flip was buoyed by Barbie dolls, which “adopted sparkly clothes in a bright artificial color that became known as “Barbie pink” (Steele et al. 2018, 72).” In the early 2000’s however, the jury was still out on the gender best suited for pink, a Baltimore Sun headline read “Real Men Wear Pink,” and so it was that wearing pink was also seen as a way for men to show “confidence in ‘their’ masculinity (Steele et al. 2018, 84).” An especially curious part of pink’s past that bears mentioning, is the story of Baker-Miller Pink. An experiment was done at a prison in Seattle, Washington in 1979, where all the walls were painted pink. Following this pink transformation, the number of violent incidents decreased incredibly. (Clair 2017, 118) This phenomenon was tested again in a 1991 study, where the
“blood pressures of emotionally disturbed participants” were found to be reduced when they were inside a pink-painted room. (Clair 2017, 119) Pink’s aggression reducing qualities will hopefully be further explored and seriously considered in future.
4.10 Brown

“It may be symbolic of the rich soil from which we get our food, but we will never show brown our gratitude” (Clair 2017, 237).”

Being the color of mud, brown has often flown under the radar. In the fourteenth century, brighter dyes were more expensive and harder to attain, therefore hues like red were reserved for the wealthy. Duller brown garb was cheaper and easier to make, so it was assigned to the lower classes. (Clair 2017, 239) Despite, its humble reputation, brown has a long history, nearly as long as the color red. Brown was one of the “first pigments used by humankind,” as shown in prehistoric cave drawings. (Clair 2017, 237) Possibly, one of the most useful qualities to the color brown is its ability to camouflage in natural surroundings. This quality proves both useful on buildings and in clothing when the goal is to blend in.
4.11 Beige

“The hope is not that everyone will like ‘beige’, but that it won’t offend anyone. It could be the concept-color of the bourgeoisie: conventional, sanctimonious, and materialistic. (Clair 2017, 59).”

The word beige originated from France in the mid-nineteenth century “where it referred to a kind of cloth made from undyed sheep’s wool (Clair 2017, 58). The word for the cloth, became the word for the color as well, thus emerged the color beige. Despite its unassuming presence, beige has arguably dominated the building industry, namely residential buildings throughout the U.S. The paint color itself is rarely called beige. It has been replaced by names like “Evening Barley”, “Brushed Fossil” or “Rope Swing”, all in efforts to either conceal the fact that these are all just slight variations of beige or to avoid saying the word beige, which marketers have said has an unpleasant sound to it when spoken. (Clair 2017, 58) Somehow, beige has become the default color choice for many, a ranking that was not achieved out of personal preference but simply on a basis that it will not challenge anyone’s comfort level.
Figure 4: Color Associations Diagram
(By Author)
4.12 Colors and Emotions

In addition to the emotional, historical, and societal associations with different colors explored in Figure 4 and this chapter, there are also some who believe that there are physiological responses to color. Warm colors such as red, orange, and yellow are said to be stimulating and aggression inducing, while blue and green invoke calmness. (Gallagher 1993, 50) Some designers have gone so far to say that the energizing quality of warm colors are more appropriate for introverted personalities and the soothing quality of cool colors for extroverted personalities. (Gallagher 1993, 50) Though there may be some truth to these claims, they are largely speculation. No matter how many people seek to understand how exactly colors effect humans, there can never be a hard and fast rule that can be applied to everyone. As the psychologist Ulrich Beer states, “no one can encounter it (color) and stay neutral…we have sympathy or antipathy, pleasure or disapproval within us as soon as we perceive colors (Beer 1922, 11).” Fully acknowledging how unavoidably subjective and controversial color is, the following chapter will explore how color has been intentionally and effectively applied to residential facades.
5.1 Relevant Precedents

It is one thing to paint a house a mélange of colors, intending to make a statement, it is another to intentionally choose the color palette and the color placement to create a strategic effect. Michael Graves (1934-2015) was a postmodernist architect who grappled with color in many of his projects. Amongst the residences he worked on, there is one house that demonstrates careful color consideration and application. The Schulman House is located in Princeton, New Jersey. Figure 5 depicts the house both before and after undergoing Graves’s renovations in 1976. The renovation consisted of a new sunroom addition off the right side of the house, along with the installation of a chimney and two walls that obscure the side yard from passersby’s view. Graves deliberately increased the size of the siding facing the street to create a “forced perspective which accentuates the new entry (Graves 1982, 91).”

![View of original house from street](image1.jpg)  ![View of house after renovations](image2.jpg)

Figure 5: Schulman House Before & After
(Photos by Graves 1982 and Twitter)
For the sake of this analysis, the focus will be on the paint color and its unique application rather than on the structural changes made to the building. Put in Grave’s own words, “the addition has been polychromed to reflect its relation to the garden or landscape. An attempt was made to root the building in the ground by placing the representation of the garden, dark green, at the base of the façade (Graves 1982, 91).” Along with the dark green wainscoting, a portion of the façade is painted a lighter green, the green does not conform with the shape of the house, meaning it does not completely cover the gabled end. The portion of the facade that remains white could be a homage to the original house, or it could be an exercise with positive and negative space; the green being positive and white, negative. As shown in Figure 6, the light green steps down with the architecture, forming an arrow-like shape, possibly gesturing to the right? The beauty of color is it can be interpreted differently by everyone, the analyses shown in Figure 6 and 7 are by no means the “right” way to see this color application. The examination of this precedent helped to provide material for a color application toolkit that could later be used in this project’s design approach.
Green color block contrasts with white siding

Transition from normal to abnormal

Dark terracotta trim acts as an outline or a frame that contains a shape

As the green steps down, the house seems to gesture to the right

Color is used to create 2-D shapes

Corbel arch shape repeated with same color

Is the corbel arch shape a commentary on ancient construction methods?

Dark greenish blue wainscot causes shrubbery to disappear

Is the dark greenish blue a rudimentary representation of shrubbery?

Color breaks the facade into visual quadrants

With this strategy, color could also be indicative of the interior spaces

The white portion of the facade becomes negative space

As a result of the green color, white becomes a shape

Lapped siding increases in width to accentuate perspective

Figure 6: Schulman House Color Analysis 1
(Diagram by Author)

Figure 7: Schulman House Color Analysis 2
(Diagram by Author)
A local precedent that has also proved useful in demonstrating color application strategies, is a house belonging to Historic Deerfield. Located on the main street in Deerfield, Massachusetts, the Wells-Thorn House (1747) stands out from its surroundings with its stunning “robin egg blue” color. (Historic Deerfield Website, n.d.) The former owner of the home, an attorney, sought to gain more recognition in the town by painting his home, which also served as his professional practice, a striking color that could not be missed in 1803.

The Wells-Thorn house demonstrates how color can have utility; in other words, there can be a functional reason for choosing a certain color. A strategy such as this can be applied to any home, perhaps painting a private portion of the home a less obvious color and the entrance a brighter, more eye-catching hue can delineate public vs. private space? The private portion of a home could be a color that detracts attention, the natural brown color of the back of the Wells-Thorn house, for example, serves a function of concealing it and camouflaging it within its surroundings. Therefore, color choice can be a useful tool with wayfinding and giving a building a readable “language” per say that can be understood by a visitor.

The entry door on the Wells-Thorn house is worth mentioning because even though it is prominent and centered on the street-facing façade it is monochromatic with the surrounding cladding. This strategy proves effective in making the door disappear and potentially giving visitors hesitancy to approach.
The following chapter begins with an entry door study, the first strategy being inspired by the Wells-Thorn House, it is called “Monochrome.”

Figure 8: Wells-Thorn House Color Analysis
(Photos and Analysis by Author)
6.1 Entry Door Color Study

Delving into color application strategies is a daunting prospect. Not only, is color subjective and controversial but the number of colors and color combinations available seems infinite. To ease into the vast expanse that is color, the following study explores color within the limiting factor of a gable end of a house, assuming there are no windows, and the door is centered on the façade. These 27 strategies tend to fall into two categories; there are “statement” doors and “camouflage” doors. Naturally, “statement” doors are those that seek attention and “camouflage” doors, disappear amidst the façade.

Strategies such as “statement”, “accentuate”, “stripes” and “glow” use color, in this case a visible color like yellow, to draw attention to the entry. “Monochrome”, “Grid”, “Cruciform” and “Dapple” are a handful examples of how color can be distracting and deceptive and can ultimately cause a door to disappear within its context. “Gesture” and “Arrow” are unique because they attempt to develop a legibility that a visitor would understand as meaning they should travel to the right rather than proceeding through the main door.

The color choice in the following door studies is representative and by no means the only colors that could create the same effect. “Contrast” for example
could create a similar effect with any other two colors that are the same distance away from each other on the color wheel. As shown in Figure 9, red and blue-purple are two pie slices away from each other, therefore an equivalent level of contrast could be achieved with yellow and blue-green or orange and red-purple. Similarly, the “Vortex” effect could be achieved with any number of different colors; the door could be red, for example, and the red could gradually desaturate towards pink and then white. In conclusion, the following entry door strategies act as a visual stream of consciousness, that is open for interpretation.
Door Study

Figure 10: Entry Door Color Study
6.2 Proposed Residential Color Strategies

In no particular order, the following color strategies attempt to exemplify how color could be incorporated on an existing home one might see in Western Massachusetts. Each sketch is accompanied by a free-verse poem that loosely summarizes the strategy employed. The strategies are intentionally kept conceptual, for the purpose of demonstrating the flexibility of color. As a whole, the concepts encourage homeowners and designers to further consider color as a tool for creating any number of effects on a façade. Color can evoke a feeling, relate a building to its context, direct visitors in a direction, or add a playfulness to something that might otherwise seem mundane.
6.3 Vanish

Upon a hill, beside an oak grove, the house

Echoes the scenery

With rhythm and color

GRAY inspired by the trunks of adjacent trees

LIGHT BLUE reiterates the sky beyond

DARK GREEN wainscoting blurs the line between earth and wall

In winter and summer, when the sky is clear, the house

May seem to vanish, engulfed by the bucolic backdrop

Figure 11: Color Strategy 1 - Vanish
6.4 Emphasis

A house may have many additions
New portions that have been built-on over time
Perhaps, the main entry is not where a visitor would expect?
The entry does not face the street,
Rather it faces the parking lot
A visible color, such as ORANGE
Can guide the eye
Can gesture
Can emphasize one entry over another

Figure 12: Color Strategy 2 – Emphasis – View from Parking Lot

Figure 13: Color Strategy 2 – Emphasis – View from Street
6.5 Hide

As seen from the street, the house is a humble BEIGE

It fits in,
No attention is drawn to itself,
Conformity
Colorful expression is

Hidden from the street, privately, BEIGE transforms
Into YELLOW, RED, ORANGE, and PURPLE

What if, slowly, over time, the vibrant colors were to creep
around to the front of the building?
A subtle but gradual BEIGE interruption
6.6 Dapple

Color can be playful and arbitrary,
A house clad in shingles, slate, or brick
Has potential for the dappling of hues
Varying hues do not need to be constricted only to walls,
They can crawl off the building, onto a walkway
Uniting façade and ground

Figure 16: Color Strategy 4 – Dapple – View from Street
6.7 Levitate

One part camouflage, one part vibrancy
The first floor is painted GREEN
It disappears amongst the hedges
The second floor is painted ORANGE
It draws attention, stands out
The roof may be standing seam metal panel
Painted ORANGE
The house is a split-level style
However, color seeks to redefine the massing, suggesting levitation
6.8 Hierarchy

In groups of buildings,
Color can signify the importance of one
Over another
In this instance the ORANGE building
Is the most prominent, most visible
While the furthest building vanishes
Is camouflaged in the tree line

Conversely, if painted the same color, groups of buildings can be made equal
6.9 Contrast

BLACK can be seen as an abyss, a void
The BLACK entry door disappears
Discouraging visitors?
Attention is drawn to the contrasting hues
MAGENTA and BLUE pop forward
When boldly applied, color can transform

Figure 21: Color Strategy 7 – Contrast – View from Street

Figure 20: Color Strategy 7 – Contrast – View from Front Yard
7.1 Conclusions and Application

In Western culture, authors who have written about art and architecture often refer to color as being equivalent to a wild animal, out of control and dangerous. It is astounding how much energy has been exerted to tame and break color, as one would a wild horse. This thesis does not seek to control color or put it in a box. The strategies proposed are intentionally loose and open-ended, not prescriptive. Color involves too many emotions to prescribe certain colors for specific buildings. Someone like Downing, thought he had figured out the ultimate answer to what colors should belong on country houses; anyone who thinks they have discovered the “right” color has grossly misunderstood what color is. Color is a different experience for everyone, each person’s eyes see color differently, each person feels their own emotional response to color, and each person has their own personal collection of biases associated with color. It is about time that color be embraced in all its indefinable and unpredictable qualities, rather than constricted and reserved for contexts deemed “appropriate” by society.

Even though, this project took a conceptual approach on how to incorporate more color into home exteriors, there are a few practical tips that can be shared for those interested. Firstly, it bears mentioning that the standard colors available for vinyl siding and fiber cement siding (common cladding
materials for residences throughout the U.S.) are typically limited to whites, beiges, and grays. There are often only a handful of hues to choose from, possibly a red or a green, but what if these are not the colors you are looking for?

The color application strategies proposed in this project are all examples of how different colored paints can transform a building’s exterior. Paint is a relatively affordable product that can have a considerable impact. It is not widely known but vinyl siding’s original color can be painted over with an exterior paint. (Formisano 2020) There is no need to prime the vinyl siding before painting unless it has noticeable dents or deterioration. (Formisano 2020) Fiber cement siding’s original color can also be painted over with an exterior paint. Therefore, there is no need to conform to the color palettes that have been imposed by building cladding manufacturers, with a bucket of any color paint and a paintbrush, an existing house can be given a new, fresh identity.

It could be seen as a drawback that once paint is applied over vinyl or fiber cement cladding, more maintenance may be required, however, this drawback can also be seen as an opportunity. (Formisano 2020) There is no need for color to be static, it can transform over time. Once paint begins to peel, the options are limitless for how the house can be re-painted the second time. Why not embrace the transience of paint and consider it a chance to further experiment with the versatility of color?
BIBLIOGRAPHY


