

The nature of colour

Our perceptions are unique, individual

BY IRENE TURNBULL

Selecting colour for our homes is daunting for many people as they struggle to transfer it from market to home. The problem isn't lack of choice – technology and a competitive marketplace provide for unlimited possibilities. The dilemma lies with our confusion and misunderstanding of the very nature of colour itself.

Generally we think about colour as being something “out there”.... external to ourselves and portable — such as paint in a can, or fabric on furnishings. We're led to believe that these colours, via their application as finished goods, are easily transferable — that what you see in a magazine or on a paint chip in a store will simply copy to “home.” So why doesn't the sofa fabric we chose from the sample look the same in a large finished piece, nor does it match our rug or draperies? And the paint we just spent two days applying to our living room walls looks like “a mustard plaster.” They didn't look like this in the store or the latest decorator magazine.

The answer is simple. Colour is not “out there”... it is not a static commodity. It's an emotional response that takes place in each of us as we interpret the experience of light connecting with an object through our own filtering system. Light is really particles of electromagnetic energy travelling in waves of varying lengths. Through a connection between our eyes, which act as receptors to capture specific light frequencies (namely red, green and blue), and a complicated neuro-network of communications, this energy is transported to the brain where, based on our perception, it is converted to coloured images. But no two people are wired the same. We all don't see the same light waves and we certainly don't all share the same life experiences. So how can we expect to see the same colours or have the same feelings about them as someone else?

The experience of colour also is dependent upon light, which



we know is always changing both daily and seasonally, not to mention artificial vs. natural. There must be an object for the light to “hit,” and of course, an observer to process the information. It's the intrinsic makeup of all three in combination that results in the experience of colour.

Objects reflect, absorb or transmit light, which determines the degree of transparency and ultimately how much colour they have. The finish of an object's surface — whether smooth or textured, shiny or matte, how dense or transparent — all affect whether light will be absorbed or reflected, thus affecting the experience of its colour. Since light appears to travel in straight lines when its pathway is blocked shadows will appear where light is not reflected — again altering the observer's perception of colour in the unlighted area. The lesson here is that the shape of an object can affect how its colour is perceived.

Finally, the perceptions of the person processing this “colour” information is what deems it to be favourable or not. These perceptions are formed in numerous ways — our connection with Nature, our cultural influences and the day to day events of our lives — but essentially they reflect the beliefs we hold close. Our memories and feelings about past events influence our colour responses, whether we realize it on a conscious level or not. We remember in pictures and our brains pay attention to repeating patterns of information. Good or bad, happy or sad, colour is about feelings. **LSL**

Irene Turnbull has been creating award-winning spaces that people love all around Lake Simcoe for more than 25 years. For more ideas, visit her website at turnbullinteriors.com.

TIPS FOR GETTING COLOUR RIGHT

• **Light Matters** Its source, direction and clarity affect colour. The time of day and seasons of the year cause colour change as will the shape of objects light comes in contact with. So, take photos and study light patterns before you begin your decorating project. We tend to think that light is always coming from above — you might be in for a surprise. Check colour in all changing conditions. Don't choose colour without referencing it in the light where it will be experienced.

• **Surface Matters** Shiny objects reflect light. Matte finishes absorb and tend to look duller. The more reflective an object the more three dimensional it appears. Glossy finishes look darker than matte. Finishes with a “pile” or “nap” like velvet or suede may appear to be several colours because they reflect light directionally.

• **Contrast Matters** The degree of contrast we enjoy between colours influences whether we paint our walls and trim the same colour or not — whether we enjoy monochromatic colour schemes or vibrant

displays of complimentary opposites. The more contrast there is between colours the more defined the edges between them become. So if you want something to stand out, increase the contrast between them.

• **Look to Nature for colour guidance.** From early morning to the setting sun, you will be able to follow the patterns of changing light and its influence on colour. The changing seasons and the multiple combinations from monochromatic shades of green forests to vibrant garden flowers and blazing autumn landscapes.