



(Architectural color sampling of high, median and low hue, saturation and luminance indexed by time period.)

Where does Architecture reside?

It's that time of year when kids get out of school, BBQs are fired up in backyards and home improvement projects get underway. When I was a kid in high school, to make some pocket money in the summertime, we would find a house in the neighborhood with peeling paint and spend weeks scraping, priming and painting siding and trim. These days you won't find kids doing such things, wood siding and trim has been replaced with vinyl and aluminum.

Vinyl siding doesn't peel, but after several years of exposure to the sun, colors begin to fade. And often, before that happens homeowners tire of their house color and long for a makeover. This got me thinking about the changing colors of American homes over the years. What makes preferences shift? For example, from the mid-century modern pastels to the brighter palettes that followed in the seventies and eighties.

I did some research and indexed the major historical periods of architectural styles starting in the sixteen hundred colonial days, all the way to the current time period. What I found was quite interesting. The range of popular colors slowly narrowed during the early years, reaching its tightest point in the mid eighteenth hundreds during the Greek Revival. Then the Victorian era came along and colors exploded, reaching a peak at the turn of the century during the Art & Crafts movement. Since then, they have declined again through the twentieth century, transitioning from Art Deco to Modern to Post Modern.

Following this trend in color hue was color saturation - the intensity of a color on a scale from its most vibrant pure form to its absence as a gray tone. Saturation decreased as well during the Greek Revival period. But then after, colors gradually increased with intensity until the middle of the nineteenth century, when they started to trend back into the more muted palettes of the present. So it seems, we are currently in a period of declining color variety and vibrancy.

This doesn't answer the question as to what causes our preferences to shift. But, looking at the colors comparatively, sequenced in chronologic order, it was easy to see ties between colors in adjacent periods as they shifted slightly in saturation, either up or down. Since periodic change is a human condition as we tire of the same after some time has passed, it is no surprise that a color may become dull to our eyes and a brighter version may become more appealing. In this way, it makes sense how many of the colors shift as saturation is trending over time upward or down as a whole.

Recently I visited the home of a prospective client who owns a house built in the eighteen hundreds. True to that period, the foundation was made of irregular shaped sandstones puzzled together with a grape vine mortar joint. The cedar siding, a full ten inch exposure, was painted a deep slate blue. Not likely the original color from the period it was built, but it complimented the property nonetheless. I was asked to help them add a bathroom to the first floor, something typically missing in a house of this age. Back then, plumbing had not found its way indoors.

Along with a bathroom, there were a few other requests to modernize and that is where an architectural dilemma arose. To the homeowner, this was not one the first farmhouses in the area, a rare dwindling example historians seek out. This was their home where they plan to raise a family and functional efficiencies are more of a concern at this point in their lives. Yet as an architect, I see the historic significance of this house as it stands. Is my responsibility to the people hiring me to make changes or to the structure that deserves preservation?

This situation is not uncommon as culture continues to evolve and is juxtaposed onto things made of a particular time and place. The homeowner of this house will likely not be the last family to live within these walls. Generations will follow and eventually one of them will value the historic materials and details, which by then may be long gone. Should the current family simply be stewards, temporary occupants of a house that will see centuries of homeowners come and go? Or do the needs of a growing family that have mortgaged hard earned money outweigh its history?

To be honest, I don't know the answer to this question. My views have gradually formed over the years, to believe architecture resides in the inhabitant not the structure. Akin to *beauty is in the eye of the beholder*. Moments in a house are shared, but experiences are individualized. Each person treasures their own personal memory from a moment. Their perception defined by their relationship with the people, event and space in that moment. Each is unique and therefore the house is something quite different for each person living there.

So in reality, the home in which we live is not the house, but someplace in our minds. The things in our daily lives – a back door squeak, a faucet needing a familiar touch to turn off, sunlight cast in the same corner each morning – these are the things that define a home. And yet, they only become meaningful to the person living with them over time. When that person leaves the house, their home goes with them in their memories, not deposited in the structure they left behind.

Maybe this is why a family living in a deep slate blue house today does not inherently perceive the same farmhouse from the nineteenth century. The meaningfulness of the farmhouse was held by those who used it back then. The daily things that make a house a home, the essence of architectural space, is therefore within the memories of those who live within the space, not something inherent to the space itself.

This is how I have come to see it. In this context, the idea of historic preservation would place more importance on those lives and memories from the past over the lives of those living in the structure today. An attempt to capture a moment, a time capsule, a museum, no longer a home. Yet in this case, the present owners seek a home. I guess this is why so few farmhouses remain from hundreds of years ago, more families seeking homes than historians seeking time capsules.

Not sure if this is right, but I suspect what remains of the farmhouse materials and details may seep into the memories of the current homeowner, as they go about their daily life. The squeak of an aged timber floor will become a familiar sound as they cross the room. Maybe these small things, nuances in our perceptions, are the saturations and that carry on in a house as the colors on the surface change with each new inhabitant.

Matthew Schlueb is a registered architect and owner of SCHLUEBarchitecture. For questions or comments, contact Matthew at nhm@finalmove.com. This article is part of an ongoing series addressing architectural issues for homeowners.

April 30, 2015 02:46PM, Published by North Hills Monthly Magazine, Categories: [Home+Garden](#)
<http://www.northhillsmoonthly.com/2015/06/01/73213/where-does-architecture-reside>