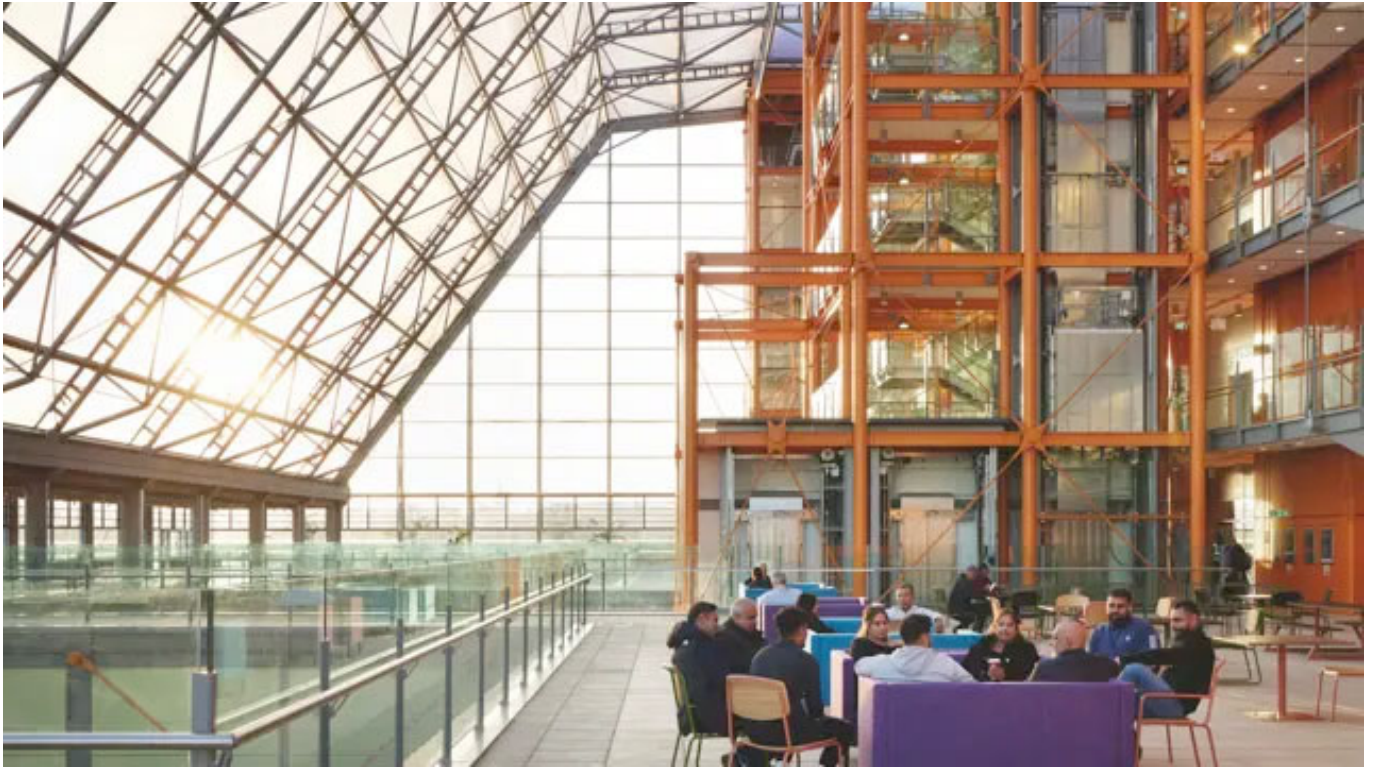


What is the true impact of colour on wellbeing?



Credit: Jack Hobhouse, courtesy of Cagni Williams

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Colour is among the most potent design tools – but one that architects can underuse. A roundtable hosted by RIBA and Dulux discussed ways to harness the power of colour across a range of settings

Is colour perception objective or subjective? Should certain colours always be avoided? And how can colour be used to aid wellbeing? A RIBA roundtable, in partnership with Dulux Trade, gave architects and designers the opportunity to discuss the use of colour as a potent design tool, whether to trigger memory and emotion, ramp up drama, or assist in navigation and understanding.

“Colour is so powerful,” said Danielle Patten of the Museum of the Home, describing how it is one of the first things that people mention when asked to remember their home. Yet architects, unlike interior designers, are rarely taught about colour theory as part of their education, judging by the experience of participants at the roundtable.

Instead, Catrina Stewart of Office S&M recalled having to justify her colourful work at university while peers were never asked about their less vibrant choices. So often, she said, colour is feared and seen “as a big risk” and so avoided.

“It’s harder to use colour well than to take that easy decision,” added Alexander Turner of [Studio MUTT](#). “There isn’t a set of rules because it’s so specific to place.”



At Birmingham’s Midland Metropolitan University Hospital, Cagni Williams opted for warm “architects’ colours” rather than typical NHS hues. | Credit: Jack Hobhouse, courtesy of Cagni Williams

Is colour perception objective or subjective?

Russell Whitehead of [2LG Studio](#) remarked on how few projects shortlisted for awards he’d judged recently had featured colour. “It was astonishing how much was just a blank white canvas with natural materials. People just are not using it in these prestigious buildings”.

That can’t be said of the roundtable participants, who shared examples of bold use of colour across sectors from healthcare and education through to residential. There was much discussion over whether perception of colour is objective or subjective, and whether there was a case for avoiding certain colours – for example red, the colour of blood, in healthcare settings.

Charlotte Conroy of [SODA Studio](#) said one client had asked her practice to avoid the use of yellow on the grounds that it could incite violence. White, meanwhile, has been discouraged in prisons as inhumane, according to Dulux’s Dawn Scott.

Angela Bardino of [Jacobs](#) described how opinions on colour vary geographically across the global firm. Context is also critical to colour perception. Alexander, whose practice works extensively in museums and galleries, talked about the impact of factors such as room size, orientation, windows and exhibits. Catrina advocated thinking about colours in palettes. “I think it’s also important to not think about colours as individual colours. One colour will look very different and feel very different if it’s alongside another”.

According to Dawn Scott, colour perception is both subjective and objective. “We can measure light reflectance values (LRVs), but then there is the subjective piece as well around how we perceive colour. And I’m particularly interested in that now with a neurodivergence lens,” they

said, adding that colour vision deficiency, and changes to the eye due to ageing, are also factors in different perceptions, including for those with dementia.



MEplace Islington by Office S&M | Credit: Megan Taylor



Calming colours complement natural materials at the MEplace nursery in Islington designed by Office S&M | Credit: Megan Taylor

Putting colour in context

For Nimi Attanayake of [Nimtim Architects](#), the use of colour creates joy, and is driven by context, engagement with stakeholders, and the project narrative, to create a “meaningful attachment” for people. “We spend ages thinking about what the context is, what story we’re trying to tell... it’s about knowing that those colours work within what you’re trying to do as a concept, and that’s what leads you to make the decision”.

Mark Coffey of Oberlanders Architects talked about how the wealth of guidance for healthcare projects, including the effect of colour on various health conditions, could be “overwhelming and often misinterpreted”. Their approach is to draw on the context of the landscape and community to create a sense of connection. “Whatever colour is applied to any of our buildings, what’s most important is that the community feel like they got a sense of ownership,”. While they believe that no particular colour is wrong to use, having a single colour can polarise views, while developing a “tapestry” of relevant colours can bring communities together and be “healing”.

Laura Carrara-Cagni of Cagni Williams described how she had researched colour in order to have a more scientific approach to choice, something that has been “incredibly useful” when talking to clients. This includes the use of harmonic colours to help other hues shine. For her, a more psychological attitude to colour comes after this more scientific reasoning. They described a recent hospital project where orange was chosen after the structure changed from timber to steel; previously, yellow had been proposed to complement the timber. This provided a useful rationale in response to some perceptions that the colour related to a particular faith, or one of the local football teams.

Sometimes, really simple colour moves can be effective; Angela described the use of different coloured curtains for around the beds in a children’s hospital to those in the treatment rooms, which may have negative associations.

Lee Bennett of Sheppard Robson remarked that colour was not included in the BB103 guidelines on school design. While they agreed that colour can have a huge impact, for him this is less important than the fabric of the building, for example the use of timber in classrooms. For Catrina Stewart, however, colour is always a fundamental part of a project. “We’ve always seen colour as a sort of building material that’s just as important as bricks and mortar,” she said.

The discussion considered designing for neurodiversity, including in workplace settings. Morag Morrison of Hawkins\Brown advocated presenting a palette of colours that work well together, and using different proportions of these within the workplace to give choice. “You can develop calmer bits of the palette for more focused working, or use colour in a vibrant way for more social spaces,” she said.

Looking to the future

The chair, RIBA’s Chris Foges, wondered whether repeated exposure to our colour-saturated digital world might affect approaches to colour. This struck a chord with Russell Whitehead, who said they were already feeling a shift towards more natural and muted colours: “I am actually craving some calm myself”.

Not that panellists were in any real danger of shunning colour. “For me, the idea of being devoid of colour is so negative,” said Nimi Attanayake. “Colour – whichever it is – should be celebrated”.



Colour will welcome patients at the Cambridge Children's Hospital by Hawkins\Brown | Credit: Hawkins\Brown

Panellists

- **Nimi Attanayake**, Director and co-founder, [Nimtim Architects](#)
- **Angela Bardino**, Senior associate director, interiors, [Jacobs](#)
- **Lee Bennett**, Partner, [Sheppard Robson](#)
- **Laura Carrara-Cagni**, Founding director, [Cagni Williams](#)
- **Mark Coffey**, Partner, [Oberlanders Architects](#)
- **Charlotte Conroy**, Senior interior designer, [SODA Studio](#)
- **Morag Morrison**, Partner, interior design sector lead, [Hawkins\Brown](#)
- **Danielle Patten**, Director, creative programmes and collections, [Museum of the Home](#)
- **Catrina Stewart**, Director, [Office S&M](#)
- **Alexander Turner**, Director, [Studio MUTT](#)
- **Russell Whitehead**, Co-founder, [2LG Studio](#)

Chair

- **Chris Foges**, Contributing editor, RIBA J

Colour expert

- **Dawn Scott**, Senior colour designer, [Dulux](#)