

The colour of cafes

Colour is a key ingredient in creating a desired ambience for your café. However, it is important to keep in mind that it is just one of the many design elements that, if used well together, can produce an exciting and memorable experience for your customers.

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COLOUR SEEMS to be one thing most people will notice and comment on, so it generates many discussions both during the design process and later when the café opens for trade.

Many think that colour choices are wholly subjective. This may be so in the case of decorating your own house. Because your café must be successful as a business, I believe a few important rules must apply.

The first rule is that you must ensure that your business stands out from the competition near you – there is little or no point in creating another ‘me too’ look. This will affect your colour choices. If you must use similar colours, make sure you use them in different ways.

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At a risk of being accused of oversimplification, the second rule is that a safe choice of colours for a café would be the one that reflects your key menu items. Let me explain. If you are running a café, as opposed to a restaurant, your menu is likely to focus on a few items only, one of them will most likely be coffee. In this case, not only you must offer good coffee, your place must LOOK AND FEEL like you do. That’s why for cafes, warm brown, cream, white colours of coffee and chocolate work so well. On the other hand, if pizza is your main menu item, you may go for reds, yellows and browns in your colour scheme.

The above two criteria are easy to use for ‘do it yourself’ café decorators. Professional designers will also consider many other aspects of colour that can dramatically affect the mood, visual impact and vibrancy of the space.



• COLOUR PALETTE

Most interiors will utilise a number of colours. The options range from a tight, restrained, tonal palette (one or two colours) to an open, broad spectrum (many colours). This decision often affects the energy of the space.

• COLOUR ADJACENCIES

A colour will have very different impact depending on what other colour(s) it is used next to.

• COLOUR VOLUMES

You can not make a decision about colours by just looking at a small colour chip. Colour volumes must be considered, ie is this colour going to be applied to large areas or is it only used as an accent. Many people think of colour in relation to walls only, however in a café environment usually the biggest colour impact is created by the furniture - chairs and tables.

• SPACE QUALITIES

Think of your colour scheme in relation to both the physical size and the shape/form of the three-dimensional space it is going to be used in.

• SURFACE QUALITIES

Consider, for example, coloured glass, painted finish and fabric – all of these may have the same colour but the effects created by these finishes are vastly different.

• INFLUENCE OF LIGHTING

Modern lights have their own colour and temperature, plus there may also be a colour interplay with the natural light. It is a two-way dependency as colours in turn influence the lighting. For example a space where darker colours are used will require more lights to illuminate it.

• PSYCHOLOGY OF COLOUR

Books are written about this subject. I find them useful to a degree. The basic principles may be correct, but they often try to work out universal ‘recipes’ for the use of colours. This, I think, is too limiting and does not allow for unexpected, individual solutions.

• THE OWNERS’ LIKES/DISLIKES

I think, this is an important factor. In theory, one must only design for the public, not for the owners. But most likely, they are going to spend more time in their café than they spend at home.

There are thousands of colour choices, so we might as well get the ones that they are going to enjoy too.

• COLOUR APPLICATIONS

These are not limited to just your interior space. One of the most underutilised colour applications is your exterior signage. If you run an upmarket restaurant, you may choose to have a very discreet signage. Some very successful ones hardly have any signage at all as they are booked many months ahead.

Conversely, most cafes operators must rely heavily on by-passing pedestrian (and often) car traffic. This is where good signage becomes critically important. Colour is a major component of all your signage. Other colour applications include napkins/serviettes, menu presentation, take away packaging and staff uniforms – all contributing to the overall experience of your cafe.