

# Los Angeles Times

## Home decor leaning toward many shades of gray



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he graying of America has hit home — in its kitchen cabinets, bathroom counters and bedroom walls.

The white-on-white look has had a lock on home interiors in recent years but is becoming passe, tastemakers have decreed.

In its place, various shades of gray are gaining ground, or so some authorities contend. Others are pushing a different kind of neutral, more beige or brown, while still others are going for pastels or something even brighter.

Choosing the colors we live with is more than a question to ponder while standing in front of a rack of paint chips. It's big business.

White's fading domination has left color experts wrestling over the next hot hue — a subject that fuels an entire industry of color prediction and consultation.

Builders, designers and manufacturers need to know where home color preferences are headed so they can plan products that won't hit the market for months. And unlike a fast-fashion sweater that gets discarded after a season or two, these home-based shades tend to hang around for a very long time.

"You would never buy meat that is the wrong color," said interior designer and color stylist Mark Woodman, immediate past president of the Color Marketing Group, an influential color-forecasting organization based in Alexandria, Va. "Up to 85% of the consumer decision is based on color."

To come up with 60 hues for a worldwide palette last year, select members of the nonprofit trade organization discussed 3,000 colors, he said. "It's an endless internal research project by forecasters who are fascinated by color and want to make good business decisions."

Color specialists weigh factors beyond beauty such as the state of the economy, the psychology of the times and the tenor of youthful rebellion.

"There is a lot of effort, time and money spent on creating new colors," said David Bromstad, who hosts HGTV's "Color Splash."

The interior designer is a creative consultant for DuPont's Corian and Zodiaq brands, helping select colors for kitchen and bathroom countertops that buyers live with for years.

"I am all about using trending colors in your space, but I would keep the cabinets and countertops classic," Bromstad said. "Having a neutral color palette with pops of color throughout, using pillows or throws, is a safer way to go."

Debra Mednick, home industry analyst for market research company NPD Group, said color prognosticators for residential products "have to go pretty conservative to have a wide appeal."

After all, no one wants to relive the avocado refrigerator horrors of an earlier era.

The wild cards in the color equation are the millennials,

Mednick said. The notion "it's not your mother's" appeals to this group, which may opt for choices outside the mainstream.

"Color is tricky," she said, "because you have to find the right one."

In kitchen appliances, for example, white has been a bestseller, but it is often associated with lower-end quality and discounted prices. Metallics that cost more have more cachet.

Gray got the vote as the most popular color choice in kitchens and bathrooms this year, according to a trends report from the National Kitchen & Bath Assn.

A recent bulletin to members from the Color Marketing Group highlighted a warm gray "caressed by chocolate" that the organization dubbed "Maybe."

In the parlance of pigment, "'Maybe' is not a wishy-washy neutral. It takes its strength from a world that is pondering its next steps," the group's Color Alert noted, showing the tone in use as a car finish and a stool seat, among other things.

When home building and design industry representatives gathered in Las Vegas a few months ago, gray tones were prominent in cabinetry and counter displays throughout the 650,000 square feet of exhibit space. Appliances also got the gray treatment, but surfaces went beyond stainless to include metallic shades such as dark platinum.

The 1,700 exhibits at Design & Construction Week 2014 also showed colors that pulled brown or beige, such as the wood stains in the Pumice line offered by cabinetmaker Dynasty by Omega.

"The colors combine gray and beige," said Maria Stapperfenne, president-elect of NKBA, a trade group. "I like to call it greige."

Based on historical trends, the manager at Tewksbury Kitchens & Baths in Whitehouse Station, N.J., has a theory on why this subdued palette is in vogue.

"Gray is popular when we feel secure, things are moving fast and we feel good about our futures," Stapperfenne said. "People are looking ahead."

Sherwin-Williams has gone so far as to call gray "the new black" in its color campaign — plus a lot of other names.

Its 2014 paint shades include Agreeable Gray, Earl Grey, Peppercorn, Gauntlet Gray and classic French Gray. Its color of the year, Exclusive Plum, looks like violet with at least two grandparents from the gray family.

But not all color connoisseurs are buying into gray.

The most popular kitchen colors displayed on Houzz, a Palo Alto-based website that helps homeowners share ideas and connect with design professionals, are white, beige and neutral.

In bathrooms, according to a Houzz Bathroom Trends Study, white cabinets are in the forefront.

The New American Home, outfitted in nearby Henderson, Nev., in conjunction with the show, was decorated in beiges and browns in line with the "new neutrals" being touted this year.

The design industry experts at Pantone, which calls itself "the world-renowned authority on color," went out on a stalk naming the pinkish purple Radiant Orchid its 2014 color of the year. While that may apply to clothing and lipstick, reds and aquas were more common accent colors on the floor of the Las Vegas Convention Center.

Another color authority breaking out of the gray box is Benjamin Moore & Co.

"At the end of last year, we saw furnishings and beddings tipping toward pastels," said creative director Ellen O'Neill. So the paint company created a palette of 23 new colors for this year in collaboration with bathroom fixture maker Kohler.

Among the new hues are Peach Parfait, Fruit Shake, Lavender Mist, Caribbean Teal and Iced Mauve.

It's a subtle shift.

"People are insecure about being accused of having bad taste," O'Neill said. "But they wanted color back."

That sentiment may explain the name of the sky-blue shade that Benjamin Moore selected as its color of the year: Breath of Fresh Air.

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