

HOME

& Garden

WINE COUNTRY GETAWAY

Deep reds and olives in Tuscany-like light

CONDO IN THE CITY

Neutrals reign — but rule out gray, silver in the fog

HOUSE IN THE SOUTH BAY

The farther from the city, the more saturated the color

MOVING TO HOLLYWOOD?

Plastic L.A. gets plastic color — try fuchsia

BAY AREA SHOWS ITS COLORS

WE ALREADY KNEW ABOUT THE MICROCLIMATES, BUT DESIGNERS SAY THERE ARE MICROPALETTES TOO

By Susan Fornoff
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Designers lined up in the hall of the Galleria last week at the San Francisco Design Center's Winter Market for a chance to hear Benjamin Moore color specialist Mary Hoffman speak on the shades of 2007 and 2008. Hoffman, overwhelmed, held up her cell phone to photograph the crowd on the waiting list.

"We never thought we'd have so many people want to hear our presentation," she said.

The demand might be less in other cities Hoffman visits, but in the Bay Area, color captivates its audience in a complex way. From the Tuscan shades of the Wine Country to the earthy neutrals of San Francisco to the almost Southwest-like saturation of the South Bay, palettes shift with architecture, weather and lifestyle, along with fore-

The best-selling Aura paint colors at Benjamin Moore's 6-month-old San Francisco showroom, from left: Kona, Gardenia, Chambord, Frappe and Dinner Party.

casted trends.

The land of the microclimate has become the home of the micropalette, where crossing a bridge can transport one into an entirely new zone on the color wheel.

"I hardly ever cross any bridges, but I do projects from San Francisco to San Jose," Menlo Park designer Bonnie McGregor said. "When I sat down and looked at it, it was very clear to me that the farther south we go, the more saturated color becomes. All of my neutral projects are in San Francisco. My guess is that it's about the weather. In the Southwest, in places like Arizona and New Mexico, even L.A., people meet the sun with more saturated color. We expand on that here."

San Francisco's neutrality is a bright one, says San Francisco Decorator Showcase regular Steven Miller, who has satisfied clients all around the city, as well as in the

Wine Country and Los Angeles. "I don't think people in San Francisco are using grays and grayed-out colors," he said. "In the city, you want lighter, brighter colors to offset the drab of the fog."

Miller fell in love with a brownish gray at a show in Paris recently, but, he said, "it's a hard sell in the Bay Area and a hard sell as a designer, because you have to warm it up." A colorful guy himself (current faves

► **COLOR:** Page G4

The new 144-color Affinity palette by Benjamin Moore has a foolproof design: Pick three at random, and they'll all work together.



Hues in Benjamin Moore's Affinity Colors include, from bottom, Deep in Thought, Barrista, Firenze and Aplomb.

NOISE OF THE CITY QUIETED BY COLOR

► **COLOR**
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are yellow-greens — jalapeno and olive moss), he seems to prefer the rich colors he sees in Marin and the Wine Country, which he says remind him of Tuscany.

Second-generation painter Matt Jessee, whose Oakland company, M.B. Jessee, does interiors and exteriors all over the Bay Area, says he's been putting some grays in San Francisco — but in downtown lofts, not older homes.

"I think what I'm seeing is that color is more a function of the style of home and its architecture," Jessee said. "I've worked in several of the new towers off the Bay Bridge, modern condos with a lofty feel that lend themselves more to contemporary and vibrant colors, and some metallics. I'm not sure it's about weather as much as style.

"But in Piedmont, where the houses are very much like the ones in Pacific Heights, we have been using a lot of pale sage green, which is a cooler color. And we don't typically use that in San Francisco, where we're using warmer colors, especially a lot of deep reds and rich burgundies."

Catherine Macfee used one of the latter, which she described as a "chocolate persimmon," to cozy up an artist's retreat she created for the latest San Francisco showcase house, 3701 Washington St. (still on the market, at a price reduced from \$15.5 million to \$14.25 million).

"The colors were inspired by what I envisioned the tones of a classic, bohemian men's city club would be," said Macfee, whose office is in Orinda. "I wanted the room to be dark and rich, as an old

library would feel, with walnut paneling and the warm, deep-hued, inviting colors of an aged leather-bound book."

A similar shade to the one Macfee used — and those Jessee has noticed — is among the five best-selling colors at the Benjamin Moore showroom at the Design Center, according to manager Rachel Elliott. It's called Dinner Party. The other four: a plum-tinged brown called Chambord, a chocolate called Kona (Jessee thinks chocolate is the next big thing), an off-white called Gardenia and a yellow-base beige called Frappe. (How the companies match names to paints is another day's story.)

Those are all from the company's new Aura paint line, which isn't just covering walls as the local designers' fave but also is knocking walls down for consumers who would otherwise run away from a \$55-a-gallon price tag. Unlike most paints, which are full of volatile organic compounds that can reduce air quality, Aura is made without solvents, with a technology that creates maximum impact in only one or two coats, and in a 144-color palette that makes it virtually foolproof to make a pleasing match.

"They're amazing," said South Bay painter Malinda Thompson. "Often it will take three to five coats to get really good color, what you get from Aura in one or two coats."

Thompson does a lot of work in the houses of Atherton and Menlo Park, which she says have a certain color palette of earth tones, cocoa and blue indigenous to "high-end, elegant neighborhoods."

"There's a color I've seen in Menlo Park that I've never seen in

San Francisco," Thompson said. "That's a Mendocino blue, a classic, super-dark blue that I've seen in tile that's hard to achieve on a wall."

That would probably be a bit too cool (and not in a good way) for most San Francisco walls. Maybe even a bit too noisy. McGregor, the Menlo Park designer, theorizes that the softer palette in San Francisco has as much to do with the city itself as anything else.

"The environment in San Francisco is so colorful and frenetic itself, there's no need to supply much color on the walls of homes," she said.

Yet another theory about the San Francisco micropalette was advanced by Hoffman, a Chicagoan who travels the world with an eye toward color.

"What I really see here," she said, "is the earthiness, we use the term natural neutrals for the colors you see in San Francisco, embracing the environment."

Steven Miller applies that observation very personally: San Francisco is earthy, while Los Angeles is . . . fuchsia!

"It breaks down the way one would view the demographic, with Northern California earthier," he said, choosing words carefully. "Southern California could be characterized as, perhaps, more artificial."

Tinseltown, too, loves its colors — which is one reason Benjamin Moore chose San Francisco and Los Angeles as launching pads for Aura. It makes its way to the East Coast next month, a rare reverse route for the design trade.

E-mail Susan Fornoff at sfornoff@sfchronicle.com.