

## W E D N E S D A Y JOURNAL OF OAK PARK AND RIVER FOREST

"So much of color is emotional," says Sandy Meade, owner of Meade Design: Creating the Perfect Color. Meade is an interior designer who specializes in finding just the right hue for a client's project, whether it's one room, an entire house, a condo entryway or a storefront.

### *The perfect shade*

*Oak Park designer Sandy Meade makes color*

By **SHEILA BLACK HAENNICKE**

We're sitting in Meade's airy second floor studio, located in her Oak Park home. I'm fascinated by the "color board" that takes up much of one wall. There she's arranged a photo of a gold upholstered chair and various color swatches in rich shades of gold and rust. The work-in-progress shows how different colors can be brought together harmoniously.

Turning her back to the wall of windows, Meade rifles through a chunky fan-deck of Benjamin Moore paint strips. Her first tip for anyone contemplating a color redo in a room: you can't tell how a color will perform just from the color strip. However, these strips are usually the starting point, one that Meade plays up in her eye-catching business cards designed to resemble paint strips in different color families, and containing inspirational thoughts about the power of color in everyday life.

"People would normally say, 'I don't want gray,'" Meade says, pointing to a mild, greenish-blue tone on one of the strips. "They might go for light aqua. On the wall it's screaming aqua."

She flips to another shade, a light gray. I look at it skeptically, and she smiles. "On the wall this one is an ethereal aqua, like frosted beach glass. I say, 'Don't be afraid of the grays.'"

Lesson number two in color consciousness: there are "clear colors," and there are "tones." Tones, which tend to be more muted, have varying amounts of gray in the pigment.

"Most of the time, getting into tones results in beautiful color with nuance," says Meade. "It makes it easier to blend with other elements, and it's not so jarring on the eyes."

A petite and stylish blond, Meade is poised and knowledgeable. The energy and excitement she conveys when talking about a project confirms the passion she has for her work.

On the day of our interview, she's a study in color compliments herself, wearing an arty T-shirt in shades of blue that accent her bright eyes. Both she and her husband, composer and physician Glenn Meade, work from their large and beautiful home.

This renaissance couple not only work with their passions—they play with them too. The Meades are training for a Latin and ballroom dance competition this month.

#### **A focus on color**

A former actor who earned a degree at the Harrington Institute of Interior Design while starting a family, Sandy worked as a full-spectrum interior designer for many years, until choosing to focus on the use of color.

"I asked myself, 'What are the most important elements in creating a beautiful space?'" Meade explains. "I concluded that color and light make the primary impact in a room."

She describes her home as a "laboratory" with rooms that represent almost any type of lighting condition, including northern and southern exposure, and even windowless. When working on a project for a client, she can test out how certain



*Sandy Meade, owner of Meade Design.*



*Photo courtesy of Sandy Meade. In the Oak Park home of Jim and Melissa Colombo, Sandy Meade developed the color palette for the family room from the tones and hues of the area rug.*

colors will perform by viewing them in the different types of light.

Which leads us to tip number three: it's all about the view. Tape that carefully selected color swatch flat on the wall of the room you plan to decorate, and step back—way back.

"You have to go to the other side of the room to 'read' the color," says Meade. This allows you to see how the room's light and other features affect the tone. I ask Meade for an example of how she reads a color, and she describes how she used her extensive knowledge of light, in connection with key outdoor elements, to decorate a living room in a high-rise condominium overlooking Lake Michigan and Navy Pier. She wanted to bring in the colors of the lake and sky, and chose a tone that the client wasn't initially wild about. However, once painted, the effect was wonderful, and "brought the lake in," Meade recalls.

As a businesswoman, Meade is very flexible in how she works with clients. She can spend as little as an hour in someone's home and present him with clear recommendations for enhancing color and light; or she can spend much longer and manage a whole home color makeover. It's all up to the client.

#### Working from a focal piece

With her focus on color and light, Meade no longer does as much of the interior design legwork of chasing down furniture, rugs and other decorating elements for her projects. She recommends that homeowners first find the pieces they love, and then come up with the colors for the walls—it's easier to find the right tone than the right piece for a room.

An example of the type of color synergy that flows from working with a focal piece can be seen in the Oak Park home of Jim and Melissa Colombo.

"The family room is an example of a color palette that originated from the area rug. We didn't work with clearly nameable colors, but muted, interesting hues which blended together to create a relaxing and beautiful environment," Meade says.

One tool Meade creates for all her jobs, whether large or small, is a "paint schedule," which lays out in detail what color (brand, name, number) was used on which surface.

Clients keep this blueprint to use whether they're doing the painting themselves or having a contractor do it. The schedule is also indispensable for doing touch-ups or to repaint in the future.

Though she emphasizes paint, Meade's work also includes tile, another surface that can be transformed by color. On the corner of her desk is a 10-inch slab of mosaic, which she handmade as a sample for the floor of a vintage Oak Park condominium. The pattern, which seems Greco-Roman in origin, is rich with terra cotta and sage accents.

Meade has collaborated for many years with Mike DiGilio, a painter who specializes in faux finishes that layer colors in various textures, giving them new qualities on the painted surface.

One example of the work the duo creates can be seen in the River Forest kitchen of Anne and John Secker that Meade redecorated two years ago.

"She and Mike came up with the technique. It looks just like suede," says Anne. "We're going to use the same technique in the living room."

The color palette that Meade created for the Seckers' kitchen is a mix of light and dark tones. "The color is a dreamy café au lait, one of the prettiest neutrals you'll ever see," says Meade. "Against this neutral background there are accent colors in red chairs and print fabrics and gray-green in the tile backsplash."

Why this color palette? "The choice of color was the final decision in Anne's kitchen," says Meade. "We had assembled all of the materials and finishes, including countertops, cabinets, tile and fabric. We wanted a classy wall treatment that would pull everything together and make it complete."

The accent colors are drawn from a piece of fabric the Seckers fell in love with, which Meade describes as having a "gorgeous collection of colors."

One of the accent colors from the kitchen, a cranberry red, will be extended into the dining room with an elegant wallpaper that is part of a project Meade and the Seckers are currently engaged in. "Because the kitchen was the first room they did, it all flows from the kitchen," says Meade.

As part of her work with the Seckers, Meade addressed light as well as color. The Seckers replaced windows to bring in more light, added wall sconces, halogen accent beams, and a crystal chandelier as a focal point in the living room.

"One of the reasons we like working with Sandy is that she wanted our input every step of the way, and she works within a budget," says Secker.

Another reason is Meade's attention to detail. Secker described a cabinet in the dining room that Meade painted with a combination of three different hues. Meade sent a sample of the final finish to the cabinet company, which sent back a door to match. The entire process took about four months.

"She wanted to make sure the color was perfect. She is a perfectionist, and it shows," Secker explains. "Everything she did we love. Everything is just so much brighter and tastefully done."

This is why people employ Meade versus just going to the paint store themselves. She brings expertise that most of us don't possess, the skill to move beyond basic color choices into a realm where various visual tones play off one another toward a unique, overall effect.

"I've accumulated a lot of experience, and it's a joy to share it," says Meade.