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In praise of beige: It's time to embrace our love of decorating with this 'bland' hue

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Special to The Globe and Mail

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We need to talk about beige.

As the most-maligned neutral on the paint deck, beige has a lot of baggage. Named for the French word for the colour of natural wool, beige is the only shade that can claim “drab” as a dictionary-approved synonym. “Boring” and “insipid” make the list, too. Describe someone’s home as “builder beige,” and you might as well rip up your dinner invitation and set it on fire atop the coffee table.

In spite of all this, beige is a colour that demands discussion. That’s because there is a growing disconnect between the homes we think we want and the homes we have.

“What colour should I paint [insert room here]?” is the No. 1 question asked by readers of Canadian House & Home magazine, confirms its editor, Suzanne Dimma. Yet, statistically speaking, we know those same readers are living in rooms that are white, grey or beige, and will continue to do so – not that there’s anything wrong with that.

Lately, there is mounting pressure for us to decorate with more exuberance. My social media feeds have been awash in rainbow hues, and it had nothing to do with the recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling on marriage equality.

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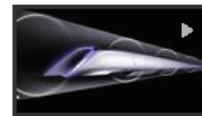
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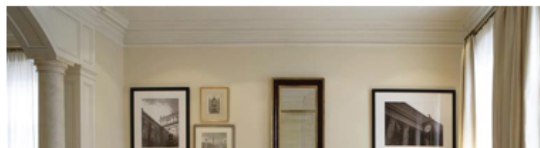
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A living room by Philip Mitchell looks fresh today, thanks to a mix of traditional and contemporary furniture, muted prints and eclectic artwork. (Tim McGhie)

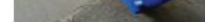
“We wanna see you be brave!” encouraged a tweet from the online decorating destination lonny.com. “These candy-colored sofas will help you say goodbye to greige.” That feels like a lot of pressure, I thought as I sat on my grey-brown sofa. The decorating magazines I follow chimed in with “6 paint colors you only think you hate” and “5 apps that’ll help you solve any color challenge.”

Other tweets promoted a new coffee table book by the Athens, Ga., artist and textile designer Susan Hable, *A Colorful Home*, which celebrates a life boldly lived across the spectrum. Hable, it turns out, is on the board of the Color Association of the United States, an organization with a mission to “capture and deliver color value to businesses and educators and empower color conscious decisions.” To open the association’s website is to encounter a series of arresting full-page images, from a glowing magenta room to a spiralling, multihued helix.

Its northern affiliate, the Colour Research Society of Canada, has a more sedate Web presence: an inoffensive white landing page with muted colour blocks.

If that’s not a metaphor, I don’t know what is. Even in our attempt to stake a claim for colour, Canadians are standing on neutral ground.

“We definitely play it safe in contrast with our empirical European and brazen American counterparts,” says Colette van den Thillart, the Canadian creative director of NH Design, a London firm established by decorating legend Nicky Haslam. “Canadians don’t really encourage large personalities or eccentric expression, and culturally – in the arts in particular – I fear it has meant a bit of middle-ground beige thinking.”



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A monochromatic living room in New York's Time Warner building, executed by NH Design, gets its drama from architectural detailing. (NH Design)

Market research confirms these home truths: Canadians buy big-ticket furniture items in shades of grey: Both West Elm and IKEA report that their bestselling couches are upholstered in Feather Grey and Dansbo Dark Grey, respectively. And when we paint our walls, we overwhelmingly gravitate toward – you guessed it – neutrals.

The gallons don't lie: Benjamin Moore's top two colours in 2014 were White Dove and Revere Pewter. And 38 of CIL's 50 top-selling paints in 2014 were greys and beiges. Brand manager Alison Goldman says that in the company's history, neutrals have always outperformed bright colours in Canada, and she doesn't see that changing any time soon.

TV personality and design expert Tommy Smythe, of Sarah Richardson Design, chalks it up to classic commitment phobia. "It's not for lack of education or sophistication or taste that we default to what's easy – it's for lack of courage," he says.

When it comes to bright interiors, Canadians are theory-rather-than-practice voyeurs. "Each year, we get a lot of letters from readers who want to see more colour on our pages," says House & Home's Dimma. "But the reality is, we don't come across many houses that feature colour done well."

A-ha! So we do want a splash of colour – as long as it's on someone else's walls.

I'd like to propose something radical: Let's stop fighting our instincts and embrace our tasteful, enduring and comfortably chic palette. Let's love the homes we're in.

White and grey make co-habitation easy, after all. Alternately fresh and moody, these colours are the ultimate supporting players, highlighting the items inside the room – from the rugs to the treasures acquired on your travels – instead of drawing attention to the colourful walls.

"When used properly, neutrals transcend periods, from

traditional to contemporary and everywhere in between, and can create the most comfortable and inviting feeling in a space,” says Philip Mitchell, a designer with offices in Toronto and Chester, N.S.

Last month, Mitchell caused a stir at the prestigious Kips Bay Decorator Show House in New York City, installing grey toile wallpaper up the multifloor spiral staircase of the Arthur Sachs Mansion and layering about 300 pieces of art on top. “A glorious gallery of miscellany,” praised *Architectural Digest*. Why was grey his go-to? “It was the perfect backdrop for the diverse collection of artwork I planned on hanging in the space,” he explains.



Soft pinch-pleat drapes and creamy beige walls welcome the light and ocean views of this Mitchell-designed room in Chester, N.S. (Katie Crane)

For those who find grey too cool, there is always, yes, beige – publicly shunned but privately beloved. To understand its enduring appeal, consider the words of American interior designer Albert Hadley, who counted Paleys, de la Rentas and Gettys as clients. “Beige is atmosphere,” he wrote. “It’s bisque, it’s ivory, it’s cream, it’s stone, it’s toast, it’s cappuccino. It’s, well, it’s magic.”

Picking up on the poetic nature of Hadley’s endorsement, van den Thillart explains beige’s versatility in orchestral

terms. “It’s about rhythm. All schemes are like musical compositions, so they need the crescendos of original thoughts and the diminuendos of beige thoughts,” she says. “And the whole point of beige is that it looks good with everything. Add some red lampshades, some burnt orange throws, white pillows in the summer, emerald green in the winter – you cannot go wrong.”

Smythe thinks it’s time to toss out the bland-beige trope, once and for all. “When I walk into a beige room, my eye goes to the texture, depth and shading of the architecture. I see the geometry and detail of the accent pieces,” he says. “If you say, ‘beige is boring,’ maybe you just need to look again.”

So go ahead, paint your rooms with bold strokes if you like. Experiment with cobalt blue, flirt with mango, dabble with marsala. But if you should find yourself craving the comfort of neutrals, and running back into the familiar arms of your old friend, beige, know that you’re not alone – and never, ever boring.

Beyond the pale

Design experts share their best advice for injecting wow factor to neutral rooms.

Choose the right base: “A good beige has a whisper of violet or caramel, or something that makes it complex,” says Colette van den Thillart, of NH Design. “Once you find a complex beige, you can play with lacquer, gloss and metallic accents, which take it beyond the obvious.”

Introduce different finishes: “Stained woods, stones and metals will stand out from a neutral backdrop,” advises Philip Mitchell.

Use every plane of the room: “It’s not enough to address the walls,” says House & Home editor Suzanne Dimma. “Consider the ceiling, floors, furniture and shelves. Layer in texture the same way you’d add accessories in fashion.”

Try one courageous move: “Add something that feels a bit off-kilter,” says Tommy Smythe. “Think about doing the fun version of beige where the walls are neutral but every other choice is impactful.”

Beth Hitchcock is working on her first book, a decorating memoir. She lives in Toronto.



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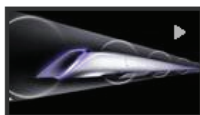
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