



**SEEING RED:** the controversial house in Mountain Crest, outside Phoenix

## CULTURE AND COMMERCE

The color of a house is a sign of owner individuality—and a test of neighborhood tolerance.

# Paint of View

BY VIRGINIA POSTREL

In the classic children's book *Mr. Pine's Purple House*, first published in 1965, the title character faces a problem familiar to many residents of new developments: His house looks exactly like all the neighbors' houses. "A white house is fine," said Mr. Pine, "but there are FIFTY white houses all in a line on Vine Street. How can I tell which one is mine?" As the title suggests, Mr. Pine solves the problem by painting his house purple, inspiring his neighbors to adopt their own colors:

Now there are fifty houses on Vine Street. There are red houses, and green houses, and brown houses. There are yellow and pink houses, and there are some white houses, too. But there is just one purple house on Vine Street ... And that is Mr. Pine's purple house!

The book, says its author, Leonard Kessler, tells kids, "It's OK to be different. You can find your own way, and purple seems to be a fine color to paint a house." Kessler, whose license plate reads MR PINE, loves purple. He has three pairs of violet-hued shoes—lavender, magenta, and purple—and a lavender studio with

one striped wall that he says "looks like a circus." The inside of his home's front door is painted purple, too.

But Mr. Kessler doesn't have a purple house. The homeowners' association in his Sarasota, Florida, neighborhood would never approve. It doesn't even allow white buildings. The outside of Kessler's two-story condo is covered with demure beige shingles, just like every other building on the street. "Mr. Pine escaped the white houses," says Kessler, "but now they're all beige."

Attitudes and institutions have changed since Mr. Pine's day. Courts have given local governments broad authority to enforce aesthetic restrictions once considered outside legitimate police power. A 1993 survey found that 83 percent of American cities and towns had some form of design review to control building appearance. Today's offended neighbors have legal remedies, including retroactively changing the rules. In 2003, for instance, when a man in Lauderhill, Florida, painted his house deep purple with gold trim, outraged neighbors demanded—and got—a new city ordinance establishing an

official color palette and giving him three years to repaint.

Most paint regulations, however, are private, enforced through contractual arrangements like the ones governing Kessler's Sarasota neighborhood. The number of Americans living in some sort of community association has jumped from 2.1 million in 1970 to 57 million last year, and a third of all housing units built after 1970 are governed by homeowners' associations. Although residents may chafe at the restrictions they impose, homeowners' associations meet a real demand: They not only manage common areas like golf courses or condo roofs, but also give neighborhoods a predictable visual character, something many home buyers are willing to pay extra for.

As the economist Robert H. Nelson writes in *Private Neighborhoods and the Transformation of Local Government*:

Many Americans seem to prefer a de facto private status for their immediate neighborhood environment—putting the neighborhood in the same category as their automobile, furniture, and other private possessions.



Environmental consciousness extends to the color of front doors and the placement of basketball hoops. People see their entire neighborhood, not just their own home, as an extension of their identity.

But while individuals can choose their own cars and sofas, neighborhood design must happen collectively. Hence the growth of aesthetic conflict. What one person considers obvious common sense, another finds repressive or boring. After a fresh coat of fuchsia paint appeared on a Brooklyn brownstone last fall, a commentator on *Brownstoner.com* wrote, "Someone call Landmarks ... and the firing squad." (Unfortunately for the would-be decor dictator, the Park Slope brownstone was first painted pink in 1968, before the area was designated a historic district, so the city's Landmarks Commission can't in fact outlaw the color.) Another Web site pundit, though, wrote, "This house has always rocked." Such neighborhood controversies demonstrate just how much people disagree about what's appropriate or attractive. Not only do tastes in colors differ, but so does the taste for variety.

Is an outré paint job, like an unkempt lawn or a car on blocks, a blight on the landscape and a violation of middle-class norms? Or is it just another form of self-expression, acceptable as long as it's well executed? Neighbors disagree. "Which side are you on?" asks a couple driving through the Mountain Crest neighborhood in the Ahwatukee Foothills of south Phoenix. Like me, they're checking out the "Sedona red" house that has the neighborhood in an uproar. The most striking of several deviant paint jobs in the enclave of 109 stucco-clad homes, it's more terra-cotta than fire-engine. The color does match the Sedona hills, suiting the desert environment. But among the neighbors' sun-bleached creams, it stands out like a slab of rare prime rib on a vegan buffet.

To enforce a more uniform palette, several neighbors tried to reconstitute a dormant design-review committee, filing a "notice of noncompliance" with the county. The red house's owners responded with a lawsuit. Debate on the

neighborhood's Web site got so nasty that the home page now greets visitors with a "SORRY WE'RE CLOSED" sign:

This web site has reached the end of its useful life ... Recently, it has served no purpose other than to reflect negatively on the neighborhood and its residents.

In response to newspaper articles on the controversy, *Arizona Republic* readers posted more than 14 pages of impassioned comments on the paper's Web site. Says Rodney Rohrmann, a real-estate agent who has lived in the neighborhood for eight years, "Now we literally have neighbors who hate each other."

Like many in the neighborhood, Rohrmann chose Mountain Crest because it offered large, relatively new houses with no homeowners' association. Mountain Crest home buyers agree to "covenants, conditions, and restrictions," better known as CC&Rs. With no enforcement body, however, the CC&Rs function more as guidelines than as regulations. The neighborhood attracts buyers who want to keep campers and boats in their driveways, for instance, even though the CC&Rs specifically forbid doing so. One of the neighbors who joined the reconstituted design committee says he, too, chose the neighborhood because it had no association. His old association used to annoy him with notices when he left his trash can out for more than 24 hours while away on short business trips.

In theory, the real-estate market should accommodate different tastes for regulation, just as it offers different house sizes, architectural styles, financing plans, and carpet colors. Home buyers do sort themselves out, at least to some extent. But there's a problem: Most people don't want "regulation" or "no regulation." One wants strict color rules but no restrictions on campers. Another wants tough action on trash cans but laissez-faire on paint. Yet another prefers a no-pets rule and a large but limited paint palette. The number of possible combinations grows exponentially, making it impossible to please all the people all the time in developments of a reasonable size. Compromise is a must.

Like Leonard Kessler, people who live in communities with strict but well-defined rules usually accept them, with occasional grumbling. They know they could move elsewhere. Homeowners and developers both have a financial interest in keeping the rules from becoming so oppressive that they scare off future buyers. Responding to market pressures and changing tastes, many communities expand their paint palettes over time.

The nastiest controversies arise in places like Mountain Crest or Lauderhill, where some homeowners expect the freedom to choose their own colors. People who like wild colors—or simply want a more stimulating and varied environment—need somewhere to go. When they find such an enclave, they don't expect it to rise up and regulate them when the painting's done. But particularly in Sun Belt cities where associations predominate, offended homeowners who live in unregulated areas often assume that they too have, or should have, a right to control their neighbors' design choices. As an *Arizona Republic* reader, commenting on the Mountain Crest controversy, writes:

No one who has worked their whole lives to own a nice home would ever want to live next to a purple, red or rainbow house ... Being neighborly means just that, think of what your neighbors might feel instead of being so selfish.

The selfishness goes both ways, however. That purple house may be the life's dream of its owner. It's just as important for people in less-regulated communities to stick by their tolerant norms as it is for people in strictly controlled neighborhoods to obey their rules. You put up with their paint, so they'll put up with your camper. "To me," says Rohrmann, "that freedom is more valuable than the possibility of a person painting his house an obscure color that I might not necessarily like." Besides, if you really hate it, you can always move to a subdivision that allows only beige shingles. ▀

Virginia Postrel is an *Atlantic* contributing editor and the author of *The Substance of Style* (2003) and *The Future and Its Enemies* (1998). Her blog, the *Dynamist*, can be found at [www.dynamist.com/weblog](http://www.dynamist.com/weblog).