

Grey AREAS

PICTURE: CUCKOOLAND

A versatile neutral, grey brings a touch of elegance to any room, writes top interior designer JO HAMILTON



It's one of the most elegant neutrals and it's also the one I'm asked about most — grey. The colour has become such a go-to option that it is now a staple tone around our homes, and yet it's so often misunderstood.

I run one- and two-day interior design courses and almost without fail the question will come up: "I love grey but how do I use it best and which tone should I choose?"

Grey is a core part of today's palette around which many people are keen to develop their interiors. But, unlike some of the previous go-to neutrals, grey is a tone that I love — and I love it, not just because it can be so elegant, but also because of its diversity which allows you to go in so many different directions.

One of the worries people often have though, is "which grey to choose". Considering it comes in such a huge variety of shades, that's hardly surprising. But, when you understand why there are so many shades and the effect any particular one

might have on a room, it becomes a whole lot easier to decide which is right for you.

Essentially, grey comes in a spectrum of shades ranging from warm to cool. A pure grey is simply a mix of white and black in varying degrees, but when warmer colours — pinks and yellows — are added the effect is much warmer.

Similarly, when a grey has cooler tones added — blues or greens — the temperature drops, giving a very different feel to the scheme.

So what does this mean for us when we're putting a design together and what do we need to consider?

Most of us will have a room that is north-facing or doesn't have an abundance of light, making it feel a little on the chilly side and a bit less comfortable and homely than sunnier spots.

The right shade of grey can really make the difference. A warm grey will bring in a lovely warmth to help reset the balance. Sometimes these tones are dubbed 'greige' for their grey/beige quality but don't let

this put you off, they have a very important place in your interior design toolbox.

However, where these greys aren't being used to purposefully warm an otherwise cold space they can also be used to balance cooler texture choices; antique glass mirrors, metals and cool-toned marbles, for example.

You don't need to find a reason to use them, of course. Regardless of anything else, they are wonderfully welcoming and soothing, so any room will benefit from them.

Cool greys have the contrasting effect. They have a silvery-cool to them, making them very effective in creating an open, airy feel, and they're great at making a room appear larger. They have an understated elegance to them which makes them a pleasure to work with and are fabulous in period houses — Little Greene's *Inox 224* (pictured opposite page; *littlegreene.ie*) is a stunning example.

As with all things interior design, however, balance is key. Cool-toned greys, tend to have a lot of blue in them and can

consequently make a room feel cold. So warmer textures are important and there are many ways to do this.

Firstly, by using layered fabrics. Layering fabrics is simply a matter of choosing a range of fabrics and textures that work well together without being too matchy-matchy. The next job is to decide which will look best where; cushions, sofa and armchair fabrics, window dressings, etc. An uncontrived mix of hand-woven linens, plush velvets, softly patterned prints in varying scales and so on, will add a lovely soft feel to the space.

Rugs are another great way to add texture and there is a vast array of fabulous options to choose from depending on the effect you want to achieve. Wool has a soft, matt finish; silk has a stunning shimmer to it but it's not a cheap option. Viscose and bamboo, among others, are much kinder on the pocket and will have a very similar effect.

Wallpapers can be lower down on the list for some, but they are right at the top

of mine! They have a lot to offer in the quest for a homely vibe.

A well chosen, textured paper is much more comforting than paint and there's something for everyone, ranging across the board from silk or straw, to man-made textures with pattern and shape.

Once you've decided which tone is best for the space, next on the agenda is styling. The beauty of grey is its ability to cross the borders of different styles with such ease. It can be classic and elegant; it can be modern and contemporary; or it can be natural and calming and whichever you opt for is very much a matter of personal taste — there's no wrong choice.

For an earthy look, just mix your grey palette with whites and complement these with natural materials such as bleached oak, limestone or white-toned marbles, hand-woven linens, and natural fibre rugs like coir or sisal.

If you're opting for a neutral scheme with lots of greys and whites, it might be worth looking for a few sculpturally shaped furniture or lighting pieces to add interest and prevent the room looking bland. Greys and neutrals are a great backdrop for showing off cool accessories, too. Choose a contrasting tone on the wall behind the piece to really allow it to stand out.

As with any scheme, adding colour will give the scheme a bit of personality and you can ramp up the effect depending on how much you use. It's very much a case of anything goes against a backdrop of grey



PICTURE: MINDTHEGAP

thoughtfully framed, could become a real centrepiece.

Black and white textures and geometric patterns are a nice option, too, and can be quite dynamic alongside your pop of colour, even if you just add it with a cushion or two.

I always say that the success of any scheme is 80pc lighting, so don't forget to bear this in mind, taking time to look for fittings and lights that will add visually, rather than just provide a functional element. We've established that grey makes a great backdrop for sculptural pieces and the contrast between its soft muted tones and the warm glow of a sculptural, bronze or brass feature light can be quite dramatic.



PICTURE: LITTLE GREENE



PICTURE: NEPTUNE

Make sure to think about mood lighting, too, for evenings snuggled up on the sofa. Warm white light from a low-level table light, discreetly placed LED tape lights or even just candlelight will carry your warm feel successfully late into the evening.

Jo Hamilton is an ambassador for House 2018, the high-end interiors event run by INM, publishers of the Irish Independent. She will be appearing on the Inspiration Stage at Dublin's RDS from May 25-27. See house-event.ie.

Next week: Jo's new design classics

but inky blues and powdery pinks work particularly well and are current colour choices at the moment.

Coral tones are also very much on-trend right now and are a great choice for really bringing your grey to life. If impact is your

thing, a sculptural feature chair in a strong tone can look super cool.

I talk a lot about art and today is no exception. A powdery-grey base makes the perfect showcase for your favourite piece of art. A really good pop of colour,

house

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