Berkeley-based design consultant Laura Guido-Clark is a much sought-after expert on designing the "skin" (color, material, and finish) of consumer products. Over the past 20 years, her clients have spanned a broad range of industries and have included such leading companies as Coalesse, Kodak, HP, Brandrud, Samsung, Flor, Mattel, and Toyota. 3D invited Delphine Hirasuna, Laura's longtime friend, to talk with her about the art and science of forecasting colors and finishes that resonate with consumers and lead to success in the marketplace.

3D: Of all the design disciplines, yours seems the most esoteric. Could you give me a simple explanation of what you do?

LG-C: We are all about surfaces—the color, finish, and material that make up the skin of a product.

3D: Is this strictly an intuitive process? Or is it like a fashion designer decreeing that this season chocolate brown with lots of bling is de rigueur? Or do you somehow divine the conscious and subconscious mood of consumers? Do you take your cues from consumers or do you tell them what they should want? How do you arrive at your conclusions?

LG-C: No, we don’t make color and finish decrees from on high. We try to think ahead of the curve by gauging emotions throughout the country. Although part of what we do is intuitive, we conduct a lot of research to assess where things are going and what would be appealing. We follow an analytical process that we call “climatology.” By that, I mean that we take a temperature reading of political, emotional, social, and economic influences that are having a profound effect on everyday life and the experiences of individuals, communities, and businesses. The results of this analysis help us to develop a design solution that speaks to what consumers are craving. Color is an important part of well-being.

3D: What is the color climate this year? What colors and materials have emotional gravitational pull?

LG-C: We are in a time of deep introspection and fear is running as an undercurrent, but hope is what keeps us going. Optimism is the polar opposite of despair, and we will see people drawn to colors that reflect that reaching out for a brighter future. Deep, vibrant, and saturated colors such as raspberries, yellows, oranges, royal blues, and purples are important. You are also starting to see a softening of the palette with grayed pastels—perhaps our way of landing softly in tough times. People are also being drawn to pliable materials such as wire and sculpted metals that show flexibility and a willingness to bend and change. We will be mixing more metals in unique ways and breaking rules as we come to terms with a new way of thinking. We also expect that earthy textures, woods, deep piles, and fabrics with a rich, tactile surface will be more appealing as people seek to make their homes feel like they are cocooning and safe from outside forces.

3D: How do you go about researching these forces?

LG-C: I work with a small group of talented industrial and graphic designers and market researchers. Some are global, some are based here. I have incredible resources for research that have taken a good while to cultivate. I also am a big reader of newspapers, books, and magazines and spend hours on the Internet. Most of all, I enjoy real-life observation. When I was young, I didn’t know if I wanted to be a doctor or a designer. I have always appreciated the power of observation, the importance of understanding something on a deeper level before making a diagnosis. I have never looked at color as something you just apply. There has to be an understanding of where it is going, what kind of environment it will exist in. We try to approach every project from a fresh standpoint without any preconceived notions. We are open about what we don’t know. If the product is for adolescents, we aren’t going to pretend that we are 13 and know the viewpoint of a 13-year-old. We go out and gather information.
3D: Over the years, you’ve worked for so many different types of industries—textile, automotive, electronics, contract furnishings, household appliances. You’ve accumulated a wealth of knowledge of raw materials and processes.

LG-C: Yes, we are lucky to be diverse in the way we apply materiality. I think that the great part is that it keeps our studio fresh and allows us to understand that there are deep relationships between one another.

3D: Are there color traditions within industries?

LG-C: I don’t think there is a fixed color tradition, except, say, if you are working on Barbie for Mattel, you could never eliminate pink. Nor should you think that the manufacturing line at a car company is going to shift to bright pink cars. Everything is contextual. Everything must be approached with a set of questions, research, and a fresh eye.

3D: It seems that I heard you once say that you don’t believe in color trends. Could you elaborate?

LG-C: It isn’t that I don’t believe in color trends. It is just that my business is based upon deeper meaning and giving my clients a longer lasting relevance. Trends have a place, typically with shorter cycles that come and go. However, the Internet has caused things to cycle much quicker.

3D: How far out do you have to look when forecasting colors and finishes?

LG-C: For most products, about a year to two in advance. For the contract industry, you have to think it has to last 3–5 years. For automotive, you work 5–10 years out.

3D: Lately there is a lot of talk about sustainability and eco-design. What are your thoughts?

LG-C: I believe that eco-design is the future. It will become expected and inherent in products. When it comes to color, it used to be that the dyes for eco were not beautiful, but we have made amazing progress. We can now be eco and enjoy the psychological and emotional benefits of good color.

3D: Must of your clients serve global markets. Are there certain colors that you consider universally hopeful, sad, calming, energizing or is that an individual or cultural preference?

LG-C: Colors have universal emotional meaning, but that could be quickly changed if you have a personal experience with a color. There are cultural connotations to color, too. White is appropriate and symbolic for weddings in the United States, but white may not be used in other Asian cultures. It would be hard to convince anyone who had a bad experience with a color to like it again. Blues are hopeful and expansive, green is calming and energizing, but red can be energizing too. It depends on the dose and where the application is.

3D: One last question. How does one go about establishing herself as a colorist?

LG-C: I have a BFA in interior design. I think you establish yourself as a colorist with deep passion, a willingness to delve in and understand, and a desire to create change and meaning through hue and materiality.

In addition to writing for Fortune 500 companies, Delphine Hirasuna is editor of @Issue: Journal of Business and Design and the author of several books, including “The Art of Gaman,” which will open as an exhibition at the Smithsonian American Art Museum on March 5, 2010.

PHOTOS: Coalesse showroom at Neocon 2008  
The color, material, and finish palette demonstrates the blurring of live work where the outdoors is invited in. Warm and inviting, the spaces make you feel welcome and at ease.  
Photographer: Brian Miller, Steelcase