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something unexpected

The 'unexpected red theory' has been creating a stir online, but is it really a way to instantly elevate your home?

FEATURE Hugh Metcalf

We are, perhaps quite understandably, a bit wary of an interiors trend that surfaces from social media. However, there's a recent export from TikTok that seems like it may be impossible to ignore in the design landscape.

You may have already heard of the 'unexpected red theory' – a term coined

by TikTok user Taylor Simon to describe the concept that a seemingly random injection of red into a room will make it look more elevated. It's not an entirely new concept, but it seems to have coincided with a mood in design to which it lends itself very well.

Red was an unlikely hero of Milan Design Week, from the dark burgundy of

the Rosso Levanto marble in the hero pieces of a number of brand showings, to a colour palette that included retro red terracotta, reimagined for 2024.

This unexpected use of red is also the calling card of some of the world's best designers, the people who are doing exciting things with colour schemes – but beware, as it's an idea that sounds easier to pull off than it really is. After all, how do you successfully introduce red into a room where 'it doesn't match at all' – as Taylor says in the viral video?

In the examples of this colour theory going viral, it's a classic, nearly-primary shade of red you'll see as the prime example of how this idea is implemented. So why red? Why not an equally shocking intervention of blue? Orange? Bright pink? 'Shades of red can really ignite a space, providing a visceral glow,' explains Yasmine Ghoniem, founder and director of YSG design studio.

'It is bold yet classic and surprisingly versatile as it goes with everything in small doses,' adds interior designer Eddie Maestri, founder of Maestri Studio. 'It adds drama and energy to a space. It's nice to incorporate a small pop of red in accessories now and then just to make sure the space comes alive.'

For Róisín Lafferty – founder of a eponymous design studio – it is red's emotive power that makes the use of 'unexpected red' so engaging. 'Colour is powerful and subconsciously evokes a lot of emotions, in particular red,' says Róisín. 'Red is bold and dominant, therefore when used, we feel it either needs to take centre stage or have strong colours, textures and shapes to work >

Complementing the warm, subtle tones of this Sydney beach house, flashes of bright red make an impact. Design by YSG



PHOTOGRAPHS (LEFT) BRUE / RUSCOE; (RIGHT) STEPHEN KARLESCH

In the hidden pantry in this kitchen designed by Maestri Studio, an unexpected red paint colour reveals an exciting surprise when opening the doors



alongside it. Choosing red tones encourages people to act and feel differently within the space – it's sexy and powerful.'

To put how these designers use red as simply 'not matching the room' is to perhaps do a disservice to how deftly they wield it in their designs. What's the difference between using red in an unexpected way and just using red?

For Róisín, this use of red is less about being random and more about it making the right impact. 'Using red as a sole colour within a space can make it appear unexpected,' she says. 'However, if using it solely it needs to appear dominant to act as a statement piece.

This can be achieved by using the colour red in a contrasting furniture style to allow it to shout, or oversizing a red piece of furniture, where everything else appears in the background yet complements this feature element.'

In the kitchen pictured below, Róisín used red as an unexpected foil to a teal. 'We introduced a dreamy natural red pigmented quartzite stone to the kitchen, creating a backdrop that entices you to touch, feel and interact with the space,' Róisín explains. 'To complement this vein-enriched stone we populated the room with subtle hints of vibrant red tones in the form of door handles and accent lights. These accents of red offset

the rich tones of rosewood timber, blending harmoniously to create a dreamlike, sensual environment.'

While Róisín's designs see red used among a kaleidoscope of other colours, for interior designer Yasmine Ghoniem it can be a powerful addition to make a palette come alive when decorating with neutrals. 'We tend to go for the warmer hues en masse, like painting a ceiling or feature wall with a velvety Marmorino or French wash finish, and save the more vibrant, brighter reds for accents like joinery trims or a feature piece of furniture for example,' says Yasmine.

For a holiday home in Sydney, Yasmine introduced a bold red element. The most unexpected might be a red kitchen tap, crowning the contemporary island (pictured on the previous spread). 'The brighter shade also activates the island with an energetic pulse, sandwiched between two types of natural stone to enhance the complementary pairing,' Yasmine says.

Another way to approach red in an unexpected way is to hide it inside part of your design – a wardrobe or cabinet, for example – for a burst of joy when opening the door. The kitchen design (pictured on the previous spread) by Maestri Studios might be the very definition of unexpected red, as the kitchen cabinet doors open to reveal a pantry painted in an energetic shade of red. 'For the hidden pantry, the use of red is just that, unexpected and bold,' says Eddie. 'When the door is open, the view of the red has a strong visual impact against the kitchen's black and white palette.'

What makes the use of red in these schemes 'unexpected', rather than carefully and considerately designed into them from the outset is hard to define, but regardless there's a clear lesson to learn from these spaces. If your room's colour scheme is feeling a little flat, why not try a bit of red? It might be just what you're missing.



Bright red handle details bring out the rosy tones of the natural quartzite used for the worktop and splashback in this kitchen. Design by Róisín Lafferty