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At the large end of the range, CMU veneer units are available in sizes up to 16x24 inches to create a monumental scale for a facade. To complete the monumental look, block also are available with beveled edges to create reveals and with special shapes to form water tables, sills, or cornices. Other special units can be used to create rounded columns or curved walls. Many concrete block producers manufacture concrete masonry retaining wall units and interlocking concrete pavers. Since these can be colored to match the CMU used to construct the building, it becomes possible for a designer to coordinate the appearance of a building and the surrounding sitework. Design possibilities While the variety of CMU colors and styles available today expands the designer’s palette, the real excitement is the increased willingness of so many designers to use concrete masonry in new and creative ways. In the words of one mason, it seems like “no one is building ‘four-cornered’ buildings anymore.” Instead, computer-aided drafting is making it easier to design complex masonry patterns and special motifs. Colored CMU are increasingly popular as an interior finish material. And other designers are combining colored CMU with glazed CMU, glass block, clay brick, and other building materials in innovative ways. Of course, some designers will continue to favor the appearance of plain gray CMU. But even with gray concrete masonry, adding a little color can assure you of getting just the right shade of gray you want.
DESIGNING WITH colored masonry

Concrete masonry units are beautiful. But until today, designers and builders have been limited by the choice of colors, their limited fire resistance and other performance advantages of concrete masonry. This has often limited its aesthetic potential.

This may be changing, however, as an increasing number of architects are discovering the design potential of concrete masonry.

Statistics from the National Concrete Masonry Association (NCMA) indicate the architectural concrete masonry units are the fastest-growing segment of the industry’s production. Their share of CMU production has more than doubled since 1989.

While the architectural CMU category also includes tinted and specialized materials, in the growing use of colored CMU that has captivated the imaginations of designers, the architectural theorist, John Ruskin said over a century ago, “Color is as beautiful as its form,” and creative designers are using colored CMU to create uniquely decorated walls. Color blends can give a subtle texture to a wall or reduce the visual mass. And in many innovative projects, patterns and intricate coursing have been constructed with colored CMU to create uniquely decorated walls. These techniques are a time-honored masonry tradition and have been used throughout history. But when constructed in the larger scale afforded by concrete block, they take on a new feel that is more expressive of our current times and architectural sensibilities.

Quality control and integral color

The use of color CMU also has been advanced by improved manufacturing techniques. In the past, many builders avoided the use of concrete masonry for exterior architectural applications due to the potential for color variance and leakage. Computer-controlled color design systems together with new curing methods and better quality-control assures greater CMU uniformity and color control. In addition, high-performance water repellents can be applied to walls or added to the concrete mix. Mortar lightens as it cures; allow up to 28 days for this process to be complete. It appears that the materials and workmanship to be used will produce the desired results.

Colored concrete, mortar and masonry

Concrete masonry is an ideal material that requires little or no maintenance. This also offers an environmental benefit, since the intricate edge patterns typically used in colored CMU are acid and concrete the workpiece associated with painting and repainting.

The pigments are blended into the concrete mix before the block is formed. The traditional tincting techniques has been to manually weigh and add concentrated powdered pigments to each batch of concrete. New types of granulated and liquid pigments, combined with computer controlled dosing equipment, simplify production. Black manufacturers can program their systems to automatically blend a few primary shades of granulated pigments to produce an almost infinite range of hues. In addition, the new pigment systems are virtually dust-free, in block plant design: the most common pigments are made from iron oxide, either recycled from metal or red clay from naturally occurring deposits, then specially processed for mixing into concrete.

Early small particles of pigment blended with the cement and set as long as the concrete.

Today, with a choice of hues, architects can specify from an expanded selection of colors, textures, sizes, and shapes. In addition to such classic styles as smooth (sandblasted), stippled, flat, striated, scored and striped, there are several new color choices. New techniques are available for sandblasting, scoring and stippling techniques are available for sandblasting, scoring and stippling.

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For the private residence in Atlanta, Georgia, the Alpenglow Elementary School in Eagle River, Alaska, and the Seattle Children’s Theatre in Seattle, Washington, the use of color CMU allow the appearance of the features, the texture and the visual mass.

Colored masonry can also be made to be as beautiful as its form. By controlling the color and texture of the concrete masonry surface, the beauty of the concrete masonry surface can be especially visible on colored CMU surfaces. To maintain the potential for flexibility, durability, and beauty that is inherent in color, it is essential to realize that the materials and workmanship to be used will produce the desired results.

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Conscious of the growing international interest in colored CMU, the building tradition and have been used throughout history. But when constructed in the larger scale afforded by concrete block, they take on a new feel that is more expressive of our current times and architectural sensibilities.

The bright colors and checkerboard CMU coursing add visual flair to the entertainment district surrounding the Seattle Children’s Theater.

Prior to further cleaning, allow mortar to cure for at least three days (four in winter). For a proprietary cleaning agent to be used, follow the manufacturer’s instructions. Pre-clean the wall, test the cleaning agent on a small, inconspicuous area, and check the effect prior to proceeding. Large cleaning of this type and work should not be undertaken during the construction process. As with any natural material, some variation in appearance is a normal design feature of CMU and mortar, whether colored or not. Mortar can be tinted with the same pigments used in the CMU to compliment the base color of the brick or stone. Mortar used while wet or old in the brick/mortar mix can be especially visible on colored CMU surfaces. To maintain the potential for flexibility, durability, and beauty that is inherent in color, it is essential to realize that the materials and workmanship to be used will produce the desired results.

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Concrete masonry units are beautiful. While most designers and builders are aware of the advantages concrete units offer in fire resistance and other performance characteristics, they often overlook its aesthetic potential. This may be changing, however, as an increasing number of architects are discovering the design potential of concrete masonry.

DEMANDS AND ADVANTAGES

Statistics from the National Concrete Masonry Association (NCMA) indicate the architectural concrete masonry units are the fastest-growing segment of the industry's production. Their share of CMU production has more than doubled since 1990.

While the architectural CMU category also includes tinted and specialized CMU, this growing segment of colored CMU has captivated the imaginations of design professionals. The architectural theorist, John Ruskin said over a century ago that “architectural color is as beautiful as its form.” And creative designers are using colored CMU to create the image and express the spirit of their buildings.

Colored CMU are available in a wide spectrum of standard and custom colors and can be adapted to any design requirement. Saturate earth-tone colors can be used to blend a building into its environment, while more vivid colors can be used as an exposed finish in most climates and locations.

Since it is no longer necessary to paint or coat the units with texture-filler to avoid water penetration, the intrinsic color of the concrete masonry surfaces can be left exposed. In contrast to a painted or coated finish, exposed concrete masonry has a more natural appearance, compared to natural stones and other traditional building materials. Furthermore, not having to paint or coat a colored CMU wall simplifies maintenance and money during construction.

Additional savings accrue throughout the lifetime of the building, since colored concrete is a permanent material that requires little or no maintenance. This also offers an environmental benefit, since the entire production process typically used in colored CMUs is acoustic and contains no of the solvents associated with painting and repainting.

The pigments are blended into the concrete mix before the block is formed. The traditional mixing technique has been to manually weigh and add concentrated pigments to each batch of concrete. Newer formulations of granulated and liquid pigments, combined with computer-controlled dosing systems together with new curing techniques, can produce custom colors to meet special design requirements. The building material manufacturers have developed color-computer mixing systems that can produce custom colors to perfect any hue. This custom color mixing technique has been used extensively in the colored CMU industry.

Mortar can be tinted with the same pigments used in the CMU to complement the appearance of the building. Mortar will not affect the color of masonry units. However, mortar or color in the joints between units can be used to create visual effects. For example, mortar in joints will change the appearance of a colored wall.

In general, colored CMUs can be specified and installed in the same way as other high-quality construction materials. However, the color may also be specified as an integral part of the specification to assure uniform colors on a particular project.

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To assure uniform colors, all CMUs used on a particular project should be produced with consistent manufacturing and curing techniques and with consistent pigment systems. The entire project, or portions of the project, can be specified with consistent color. The manufacturer usually can produce custom color blends to match special design requirements.

Pigments for Integrally Colored CMU

Several factors influence the selection of a particular color for an architectural application. Pigments should comply with ASTM C979 recommendations and other applicable industry guidelines. In general, the color of the finished masonry should be specified for the project and the materials and workmanship to be used on the job. On jobs with critical appearance tolerances or unique requirements, specify a mock-up to demonstrate that the materials and workmanship to be used will produce the color selected.

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The leading pigment manufacturers have fully-equipped color control laboratories to analyze and formulate special colors for producers. Most CMU producers offer a selection of standard colors, but not just the same old block. Some, with different hues and clasts, can be especially visible on colored CMU surfaces. To minimize the potential for efflorescence, detail and the face of colored CMU. Instead, let mortar splatters harden for seven to 14 days, then remove them with a chisel, trowel, or stiff brush and water.

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Some manufacturers produce CMU with two or more concrete colors mixed together to create multi-colored, variegated, or “flashed” units. A multi-colored effect also can be achieved by exposing the aggregate in the concrete. To accomplish this, the coarse aggregate in the concrete mix is selected to complement or contrast with the colored cement matrix. In split-faced units, the selected aggregate imparts a flecked, granite-like appearance; in ground-faced or burnished-face units, the effect is similar to a terrazzo finish.

In addition to standard 8x8x16-inch units, colored concrete brick now outsell clay brick. Block in 4-inch half-high sizes are gaining popularity. And the use of lightweight aggregates also makes it feasible for masons to handle oversized block to speed construction.

At the large end of the range, CMU veneer units are available in sizes up to 16x24 inches to create a monumental scale for a facade. To complete the monumental look, block also are available with beveled edges to create reveals and with special shapes to form water tables, sills, or corbels. Other special units can be used to create round columns or curved walls.

Many concrete block producers manufacture concrete masonry retaining wall units and interlocking concrete pavers. Since these can be colored to match the CMU used to construct the building, it becomes possible for a designer to coordinate the appearance of a building and the surrounding sitework.

Design possibilities

While the variety of CMU colors and styles available today expands the designer's palette, the real excitement is the increased flexibility of so many designers in using concrete masonry in new and creative ways. In the words of one mason, it seems like “no one is building ‘four-cornered’ buildings anymore.” Instead, computer-aided drafting is making it easier to design complex masonry patterns and special motifs. Colored CMU are increasingly popular as an interior finish material. And other designers are combining colored CMU with glazed CMU, glass block, clay brick, and other building materials in innovative ways.

Of course, some designers will continue to favor the appearance of plain gray CMU. But even with gray concrete masonry, adding a little color can assure you of getting just the right shade of gray you want.

Several shades and textures of colored CMU are combined with glazed CMU and other decorative building materials to make this school an exciting environment for learning.

Four colors of CMU are used to create this mural of the San Francisco skyline on a highway sound barrier wall near San Francisco.

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