CHAPTER 1

Setting Up The Work Environment
Setting up the working environment

I am frequently surprised at how rarely the working environment is mentioned when discussing colour management, since most of the useful steps are relatively simple and cost effective. A failure to properly arrange your work area won't undo the good work up to now but it can certainly cause significant frustration during the post production process.

To explain this very simply, the colours that surround us directly affect our perception of what is neutral. When you work in a room that contains mixed colours, contrast and illumination it plays havoc with your perception of colour, leading to unintended tonal adjustments that often result in unsatisfactory images. All this explains why some photographers are permanently stressed when the final image never looks right in print despite calibrating their display.

The solution is therefore to remove as much colour and distraction as possible from the surrounding area and your peripheral vision. Good colour management exists in a grey world where all the attention should be focussed on your colour images. Although most of us are remarkably good at seeing very subtle changes in tone and colour we are also terribly prone to shifting perceptions of what is correct, so we quickly adjust to situations and imagine them as being acceptable even if they initially appeared wrong.

Have you ever watched a TV where the picture looked too saturated or perhaps too cold but after an hour it seemed to be OK? That was your eyes adapting to the situation and eventually accepting it as normal. The same thing happens with our monitors and the room we are working in but unfortunately it leads to poorly controlled colour editing because we end up making invalid decisions based on the environment around us.
Room colour

Some of you may have visited professional photo labs and noticed the retouchers were surrounded by dull grey walls or at least I hope they were. Some will have just painted them a generic matte grey but the better ones may have gone for a specific grey called Munsell N8, which is not simply a black & white mix, but contains an equal mixture of colours found in the rainbow spectrum i.e red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet.

![Munsell N8](image)

The advantage of Munsell N8 is that light reflected from this specific grey will remain completely neutral, whereas other colours will cause cold or warm colour shifts under differing light conditions. A matte finish neutral paint like this will also minimise the degree of colour pollution derived from reflected objects like those bright yellow shelves behind you or the red chair you are sitting in, though I really hope you will change them if that is the case.

You are unlikely to find a tin of Munsell N8 paint at your local hardware store but you can certainly locate it at online specialists if you do a web search and while the cost is higher than normal paint it's definitely worth considering if perfect colour is essential in your workflow.
Professional retouchers will choose this in a heartbeat and I know how beneficial I found it after repainting my own workspace. It cuts out a large part of the peripheral distractions in your space, allowing unhindered attention on the display without having strange colours reflecting on the screen’s surface. The benefits cannot be ignored for colour critical work.

The only real question therefore is whether you are prepared to paint your work area grey and make other changes for the sake of better colour output. I suspect most will settle on plain white and perhaps remove that poster of the eye-catching red Ferrari but if you have a dedicated work area and the possibility to paint it matte neutral grey I think you’ll be happy with the result and it really impresses visiting clients.

As a photographer who has worked in all sorts of situations I can offer suggestions and hints on how best to arrange your working environment but ultimately you have to find a solution that is practical for your needs and fits in with your lifestyle. Personally I’d like to drive an E Type Jaguar but everywhere I look there are speed cameras, rising fuel costs and my wife will only drive a small automatic.

What you really need to avoid are rooms with bright yellow or mauve walls, green curtains and uncontrolled daylight. Throw in some hideous patterned carpets and even the most mild mannered photographer will soon bear a striking resemblance to Jack Nicholson with an axe in “The Shining”. I sometimes think it was colour management issues that caused his real anger...

Now if the above description sounds at all familiar and especially the desire to start wielding an axe I suggest you take a good look around your room and think seriously about the changes you can make so it becomes a stress free environment for producing beautiful colour images.

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A suitable working environment for colour editing
Not so great...
Ambient considerations

There is no doubt that if you take this to extremes it can become very geeky, so I think we need to keep a sense of perspective that reflects a practical approach to what can reasonably be done without going completely overboard.

I'll bet not many of you know for example that as a room gets physically colder the display's colours tend to become warmer and vice versa. The more professional display's from Eizo include a built-in sensor that automatically compensates for this but for most of us it simply means that it's helpful if we can maintain a reasonably consistent room temperature.

Many of the points listed in the section under monitor maintenance are also directly related to the working environment, such as controlling the heat, humidity, electromagnetic interference and power supply, which all play their part in creating the ideal environment for good colour management. Sticking with the very practical approach in this book I simply suggest...

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