Lunar White Move: A Conversation with Sonos's Design Director of Color, Material, Finish



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Today, we introduce a new color for Move: Lunar White. The hue represents months of research, formulating, and testing. It also exemplifies a key tenant of the Sonos experience—that all our products work together as part of a system not only technically but also aesthetically. It was up to Kitty Suidman, Sonos's Design Director of Color, Material, Finish, and her team of experts to find a lighter tone that would allow Move to seamlessly transition between the indoors and outdoors, while still harmonizing with the rest of the Sonos system. Find out how her international upbringing and life-long obsession with color prepared her to identify the perfect shade.

Choosing the color of our speakers is anything but elementary. So Kitty Suidman approaches the challenge with equal amounts of inspiration and technical expertise. Born in the Netherlands, Suidman spent 20 years in Asia before returning to her native country to attend industrial design school. During her studies, she realized that she was more drawn to colors and materials than industrial design. Daring to follow a divergent path, she graduated with a unique portfolio that equipped her to construct a rich and varied career spanning Philips Design, Motorola, and T-Mobile. Since joining Sonos seven years ago, she's developed a rigorous yet thoughtful approach to color, rooted in deep technical knowledge that extends into chemistry and manufacturing processes. Her nuanced description of how her team landed on Move's new shade illuminates how Sonos's custom colors enable our speakers to seamlessly blend into your home-both indoors and out.



How would you describe Sonos's approach to product color?

Our approach to color starts with our approach to design. And design is about finding solutions to problems. Let's take Move as an example. As our first portable product, our problem was finding a color that allowed Move to blend in with a variety of different environments. More generally though, it's important that we deliver color that feels timeless and versatile, something that will last for a long time. We make products that endure, and color is a part of that equation.

How has color evolved at Sonos?

When I first joined, our products incorporated metallic finishes in addition to color. For example, both the black and white versions of the Play:1 have a silver grille. Starting with the second-generation Play:5, we set out to create clean, simple aesthetics by finishing the product in a single color. We want our speakers to feel less like technology in your home and more like simple, beautiful objects.

How does Sonos decide which colors to use?

It's really a simple strategic choice. Our goal is to find color solutions that blend into their environments. White has a history in the home. Black has a history in audio. Our vision was to create a simplified color language that is relevant to the way our owners live.

So if you were to put a white Sonos One and Beam next to each other, are

they the exact same color?

No, that's where my job gets interesting. Most Sonos speakers are a custom shade of black and white that we call Sonos Black and Sonos White. Sonos One, for example, is available in Sonos Black and Sonos White. However, we occasionally need to deviate from those two colors. The first time we did so was with Beam. With Beam, we had the challenge of working with a fabric grille. White fabric felt cheap, so we landed on a light grey color. However, a key aspect of our design philosophy is that each product should appear monolithic, meaning that regardless of the different materials used, the entire product should look like it's one seamless object. To match the light grey fabric, we had to tweak the white used on the rest of Beam so that it didn't contrast as much with the fabric. We call this variation Cloud White. When we developed Cloud White, we made sure it didn't stand out as a different white against the rest of our products. When you view all of our light colored speakers together, you shouldn't notice a difference. If we have to tweak a color, the entire portfolio still needs to feel cohesive.

But Move doesn't have a fabric grille, so why couldn't you use Sonos White?

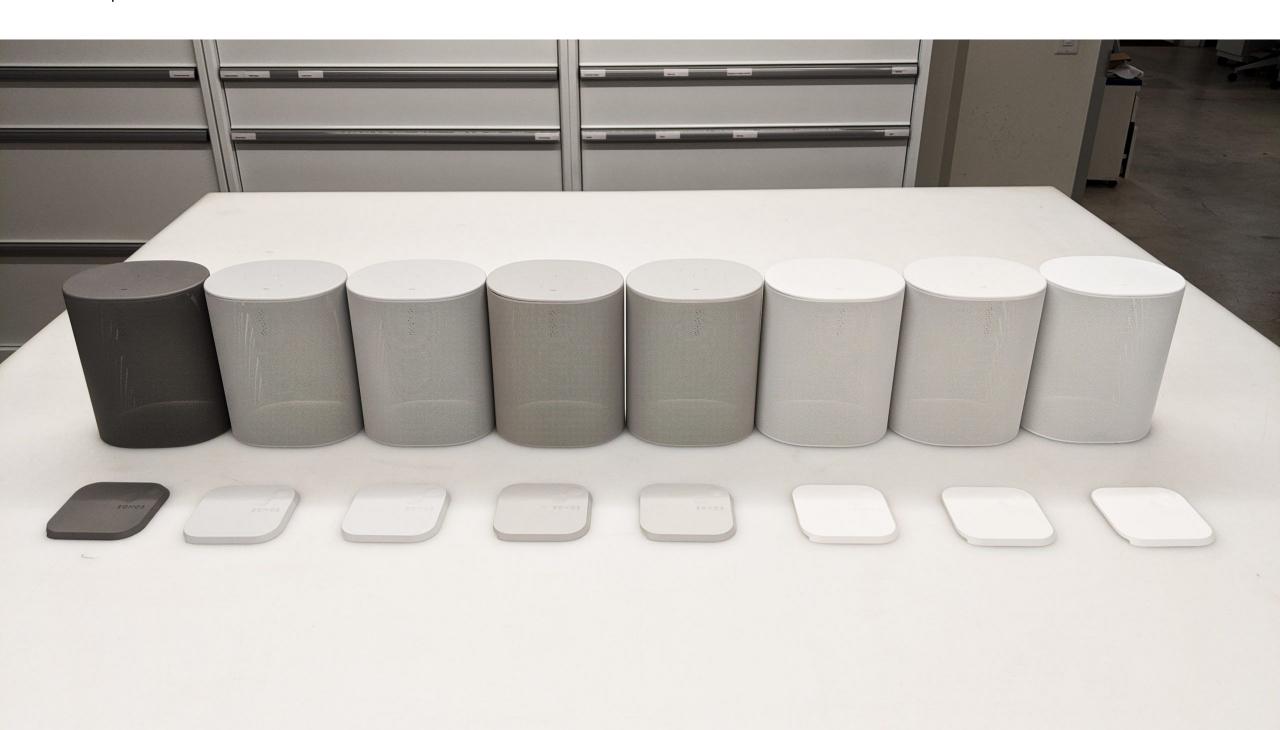
We could have. When we tested Move in Sonos White outside, it proved to be very durable. But Sonos White was specifically developed for inside the home. It's a warmer shade that feels domestic, especially in contrast to the cooler, bluer tones used in many consumer electronics. But if you see something with that same tone outside, it feels harsh and artificial. Bright white is not a "natural color," so taking it outdoors doesn't feel appropriate. It stands out too much. And that's what led us to Lunar White. Since Move was designed to be used both indoors and outdoors, we needed a color that could seamlessly transition between the two environments. It needed to feel at home in both an indoor and an outdoor space. Color should complement its surroundings.

Did you take the same approach to the black version of Move?

Yes. The darker shade of Move is not the same as Sonos Black. It's actually called Shadow Black. It's a custom color we created for the same reasons that we created Lunar White.

What was the most difficult part of developing Lunar White?

There is a translation that needs to happen when you apply a color to different materials and surfaces, whether that's plastic, paint, silicone, or anodized metal. With Move, there were 20 different parts that needed color matching. All our color development is done in collaboration with our production suppliers, so we create production recipes. Chemistry is a big part of what we do! There's also a good amount of work that goes into fine-tuning the way a color appears on various materials so that we can create that monolithic look for the product. For example, when we were applying Lunar White to Move, the power cord appeared more pink than the rest of the speaker. We had to tweak the recipe so that it all looked cohesive. We also put all of our recipes to the test through hardware verification testing, ensuring that the color is durable in terms of things like scratch resistance, chemical resistance, and UV exposure.



So it sounds like the "material" and "finish" parts of your title are just as important as "color"?

Absolutely. Most of my team's contribution to material development is done in collaboration with the mechanical engineering team. We work closely with them to make sure we end up using materials that enable us to deliver on the right color and finish for a product. And by "finish" I mean texture and gloss level, how shiny or matte a product looks. With Arc, our challenge was its curved grille. We actually had to reduce the gloss level on that product because the curvature of the grille made the finish look too shiny. Our products typically have a gloss level between 7 and 15 gloss. For the black version of Arc, it's 4 gloss.

Tell me more about your team.

I have a four-person team with two different kinds of roles on the team. Half the team is based out of Santa Barbara and really focused on strategy. They partner with our industrial design team to identify the color material finish (CMF) point of view for each product, but also how it fits in with the entire portfolio. They work with a lot of technical cross-functional teams outside of design, including the mechanical engineering, tooling, and acoustics teams. Then the other half of my team sits in China, and they are CMF developers, working on site with the suppliers to oversee the recipe development of the colors. They also track the CMF of a product from prototype to a finished product.

What qualifications does one need to join your team? Asking for a friend.

There is no CMF university! Really, the main prerequisite is having an affinity for colors, materials, and finishes. I never hire the same person or skill set twice. Most of the members of my team transitioned into CMF from a different background because it spoke to them. We have a material chemist, a graphic designer, an industrial designer, and an engineer on the team. I look for diverse skills, which brings different perspectives and a much more thorough discussion to the table. The one thing we all share is a keen eye on getting the details right when it comes to color acuity.

What's the biggest challenge of your job?

Color specifically is a very subjective topic. So the challenge is, how do you remove the subjectivity in a space where there is no right or wrong answer? One way of doing that is with trend forecasting. It's important to understand what colors are going to be relevant going forward and where these color trends are coming from. But you're not just taking fashion trends and blindly applying them to your products. You have to put them through a brand filter. You have to determine how these color trends apply to your products. Another way is to be thoughtful about the story you want to tell with your colors. It's important that you develop colors while keeping in mind how that product will launch and what the story will be behind it.

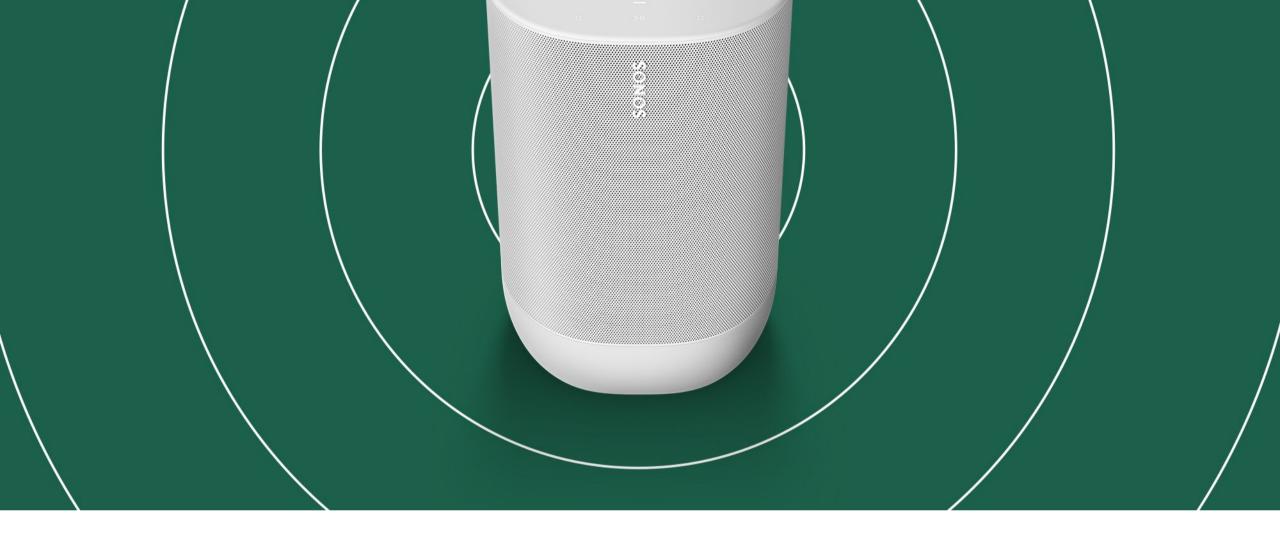
When did you first realize that you had a passion for colors and materials?

I discovered this during my university days. The school I was attending was really focused on industrial design, but I started to discover during my studies that I was more interested in colors, materials, and finishes. I studied under a woman named Lidewij Edelkoort, who is well known for trend forecasting and looking into the future. I leaned into having her as my mentor and ultimately graduated under her direction. During my final year, I had to create a project to graduate with and I did something very different than the other students at the time, which was to design materials and colors for window blinds. Rather than taking on a typical industrial design project, I chose to do something that I felt more interested in and passionate about.

How has your international upbringing influenced your work with color?

When I was five, my family moved from the Netherlands to Japan, so I spent about 20 years of my life growing up in Asia. Design is a big part of the Japanese culture. And Japan is well known for design, especially graphic design and fabric design. It's a culture that pays attention to detail when it comes to anything that is made. So I think that growing up there and being exposed to a culture with an eye for detail and design was really influential on my appreciation and fascination with colors and materials.

The result of Suidman and her team's work, the Lunar White Sonos Move, is available now on sonos.com. With a neutral tone that appears softer in outdoor environments, it complements natural surroundings while fitting in with Sonos's larger system of speakers when indoors. Suidman is already hard at work on her next project, defining the color of a new Sonos product. "Color is such a big part of my life. It's just a part of who I am," said Suidman. "Color makes me happy."



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