

Thursday, 14 June
9.00-11.45

Track: Mediations
Venue: *National Library, Auditorium 3107*

RETHINKING ARCHITECTURAL COLOUR

Session chairs:

Conor Lucey, University College Dublin
Lynda Mulvin, University College Dublin

Just as early modern ornament and decoration has in recent years reclaimed its place in serious architectural discourse, confirmed by sessions and papers at recent meetings of the Society of Architectural Historians, the European Architectural History Network, and other forums and publications, so the status of colour remains to be fully addressed. Recent and ongoing research initiatives such as 'Saturated Space', run jointly by the Architectural Association and the Università luav di Venezia, signal a burgeoning interest in the decorative and ornamental properties of architectural colour; but the emphasis here has been squarely on contemporary practice. Other interdisciplinary projects, such as the 'Progress in Colour Studies' series of conferences and publications at the University of Glasgow, with its focus on linguistics, psychology and anthropology, have yet to attract histories of architecture, ornament and interior decoration to its otherwise broad roster of academic disciplines.

This session proposes to address the various roles and functions of colour in architectural design and decoration by widening the field of enquiry. As it stands, the established scholarship on architectural colour may be divided into two discrete Eurocentric strands, broadly characterized as 'intellectual' and 'material'. While archaeological excavations during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries revolutionized the modern understanding of architectural colour in the classical world, so it initiated a complex and wide-ranging theoretical literature from practitioners including Jacob Ignatz Hittdorff, Gottfried Semper, Bruno Taut and Le Corbusier. In more recent decades, research based on the empirical evidence from conservation and supplemented by archival sources, perhaps exemplified by the publications of Ian Bristow, has provided the basis for the material reconstructions of colour schemes long lost to the historical record.

Is the European conceptual tradition undermined by the increasingly scientific approach methods used in architectural conservation? Are there consonances between Western and non-Western approaches to colour? Tallinn is a particularly appropriate place to explore approaches to historic architectural colour, given its UNESCO heritage designation and the comprehensive 'Cultural Heritage and Conservation' programme offered by the Estonian Academy of Arts.

We invite papers that consider colour's intrinsic (ornamental) or extrinsic (decorative) relationship to form, that present new conservation-led research which challenges received orthodoxies about the role of colour in the articulation of exterior ornament or interior space, or that introduce theoretical approaches long overshadowed by the dominance of the Western European literature on architectural design.

PAPERS

The Colourful Middle Ages?

Anneli Randla, Estonian Academy of Arts

This paper will present some recent findings regarding the decorative colour schemes employed in medieval churches in Estonia, studied by the Department of Conservation at the Estonian Academy of Arts. The questions raised concern the function of medieval murals (as both extended architecture and meaningful symbols) and their re-interpretation after the Reformation, the character of later colour schemes and the

eventual whitewashing of church interiors in the twentieth century, and the influence of these changes on the perception of ecclesiastical space.

The materials and techniques used for creating these decorative colour schemes will also be discussed in their historical contexts. The forensic study of tool marks and paint layers, together with chemical pigment analysis, have revealed important information which compensates for the lack of substantive written evidence. In some rare instances, these material findings in fact complement the documentary evidence.

Different imaging techniques for better understanding and visualizing historical colour schemes, both for academic research and for the presentation of the results to a wider audience, will also be discussed: digital reconstructions, 3D models, and *in situ* demonstrations are just some of the opportunities for raising awareness of this important aspect of medieval ecclesiastical architecture.

Pioneer Polychromy: Geology, Industry and Aesthetics in Irish Victorian Architecture

Christine Casey, Trinity College Dublin

This paper will consider the impetus to Thomas Deane and Benjamin Woodward's Museum Building at Trinity College in Dublin (1854–1857), a landmark in the employment of polished polychrome stone, and considered by John Ruskin as 'The first realization I had the joy to see of the principles, I had until then been endeavouring to teach'. This revolutionary building is not simply a precocious instance of Ruskinian influence but rather represents the convergence of burgeoning industrial and scientific forces together with a richly eclectic historicism. Economic initiatives to exploit Ireland's rich deposits of polychrome stone, improvements in transport infrastructure, contemporary exhibitions of geological heritage, publications on architectural polychromy, together with a burgeoning poetics of marble architecture in Europe, created the seed-bed for Deane and Woodward's remarkable design. This paper will explore the pragmatic and formal contexts for the Museum Building's pioneering polychromy, and will consider its impact on Victorian architecture in Britain and Ireland.

Ornament Without Ornamenting: Whiteness as the Default Materiality of Modernism

Susanne Bauer, Norwich University of the Arts

The terminology of the 'modern' is frequently attached to characteristics such as 'rational', 'utilitarian', 'functional', 'clean' or 'clear'. The colour white – incessantly and conveniently linked to all these characteristics – seems to be both the product and the expression of Modernism, and whiteness thus becomes its default materiality.

The argument about whiteness in architecture overlaps with the argument about ornament. One could argue that the prohibition of ornament would essentially mean the abolition of applied colour, that a modernist building should stand undressed in a mode of literal honesty. Ornamentation, like colour, should be swept away by a revolutionary inauguration of transparency. Paradoxically, the sign for this transparency was whiteness. The confusion upon which this narrative rests centres on the confusion about colour and ornament on the one side, and the colour white on the other.

Both colour and ornamentation are treated as ways of dressing a building. A coat of white paint, on the other hand, serves to avoid ornamentation. The modern use of whiteness is therefore not only a symbol of modernism but also a symbol of a non-existent object – of no dressing. Yet, according to Mark Wigley, the modern default materiality is just that, a way of dressing a building, and a white coat of paint is therefore a transparent mode of ornamentation. However, these logical contradictions represent no obstacle to the general sense that a white building is not only modern, but also corresponds to the overall demands of a modern architecture without ornamentation. The investigation into the default materiality of whiteness of modernism therefore serves as a tool into the overall analysis of the understandings of ornamentation.

A New Chromatic Vision: The Early Impact of Colour Photography in Architecture

Angelo Maggi, Università Iuav di Venezia

On 28 April 1952, a crowded audience attended a lecture at the RIBA by the American architectural critic and photographer G.E. Kidder Smith, who surprised them with a superb selection of colour transparencies of Italian architecture. The *Architectural Review* editor J.M. Richards wrote afterwards: 'If only one had coloured photographs like Mr. Kidder Smith's readily available, and technical resources to reproduce them, architectural publications could be very much livelier and do a more worthwhile job in bringing architecture on the printed page than is possible at the moment.' This anecdote makes us rethink the role of colour photography in the representation of architecture, a subject that has remained under-investigated in architectural historiography.

Attempts to develop colour photography had been undertaken since the invention of the medium, but it was only with the introduction of the Kodachrome transparency film in 1935, followed by Kodacolor negative stock in 1942, that a major breakthrough was achieved. Although these processes later became mainstream in architectural photography, there has been no clear account of its origins in practice. The aim of this paper is to explore the connection between the chromatic values of architectural design and its visual transmission in the early phase of modernism. Colour photography had an undeniable impact on architectural colour in practice: colour photographs in books and periodicals published between the 1940s and 1960s clearly influenced the use of colour in architectural design. Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye was almost exactly as monochrome as the many black and white photographs taken of it. This kind of imagery was spawning an architecture deficient in chromatic values. But some architects, such as Gio Ponti, Ettore Sottsass and Giorgio Casali, went beyond the established monochromatic representation of their buildings and in their pictures and articles for *Domus* magazine considered colour in a new way.

The factual representation of architectural colour had in fact long been desired by architects in professional practice. Many architects travelled with two cameras: one for shooting in black and white, and another to record coloured architectural surfaces and interiors. One of these was Bruno Morassutti, who spent a long period at Taliesin West looking deeply at Frank Lloyd Wright's colour schemes. Morassutti's visual legacy is only one of the many examples of colour photography informing an understanding of architectural colour in its historical contexts. Konrad Gatz and Wilhelm O. Wallenfang's book *Color in Architecture: A Guide to Exterior Design* (1960), is a significant volume that makes the point of how colour photography interpreted and transmitted architectural colour. Translated into several languages, it has never been considered as a photo-book where the medium expressed the increasingly polychromatic nature of contemporary architecture. This paper will contend that the visual representation of architecture in colour was more than an analytical tool: it had an important role in the historical development of our general knowledge and provided information on the character of modern architecture, helping to define a more rounded approach to architectural design.