Silenced by Coloured Light

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ABSTRACT
The 19th of March 2011 would have marked the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Futuna Chapel, in Karori, New Zealand. Events however have overtaken the chapel: in 2000 the Fellowship of Brothers who commissioned it, deconsecrated the chapel due to a falling membership. They sold the whole site to developers, and Futuna now finds itself surrounded by 90 housing units. A body calling itself “The Friends of Futuna Charitable Trust” has since purchased Futuna and is currently raising funds to restore the building. However, the question remains, what use can a such restored building be put to, given that it is no longer a religious space? This paper looks to various texts of writers, artists and architects, to look for a possible answer. Keywords: Barragan, Coloured Light, Futuna Chapel, Rothko Chapel, Turrell.

1. INTRODUCTION
Today we like to recycle, reuse, and, (in this case), reinvent to stretch our limited resources. It would be easy to treat a space regardless of its past history as nothing more than a mere shelter, by renovating and occupying it. A greater challenge would be to honour a building’s history and purpose in a meaningful and ongoing way. It is the intention of this paper to discuss and show how this could be done. This paper’s case study is The Futuna Chapel, at 62 Friend Street, in Karori, Wellington, New Zealand. It was commissioned by the Brothers of the Society of Mary to commemorate “the martyrdom of St Peter Chanel on the French Polynesian Island of Futuna, in the Pacific, (28 April 1841),” [1]. The Chapel was designed by the New Zealand Maori Architect: John Scott. The “glass” windows were designed by artist: Jim Allen. Consecrated and opened on the 19th of March 1961, this Chapel functioned as a religious retreat until it was “deconsecrated around the time the Brothers sold to the developer in 1999,”[2]. This paper’s concept is to investigate some of the central themes of the chapel: the coloured light and the stillness of such a scared space. To show through precedence, via writings of various writers, artists and architects how this deconsecrated chapel could be used as a “coloured light-retreat.” It would be a place and space for people regardless of their beliefs or non-beliefs, to savour the delights of coloured light for its own sake.

2. PRECEDENCE
The interest in natural light, and allowing lots of it into built interiors, was one of the foundations of Modern Architecture. The use of clear float glass with its transparency, as a way of linking the inside to the outside epitomised what
a “modern” space was.  
But what of coloured light?  

In Chapter 106 of *Glasarchitektur* by Paul Scheerbart, (first published in 1914), exclaims: “More coloured light!...We must not strive to increase the intensity of light – today it is already too strong and no longer endurable. But gentler light is worth striving for. Not more light! – ‘more coloured light!’ must be the watchword,” [3].  

These words could still apply today where too much glass has made for mundane spaces, (such as glass offices), that rely on the external environment for only interesting reflections.  

“Scheerbart [also] published *Der Lichtklub von Batavia: Eine damen-Novelle* (*The Light Club of Batavia: A Ladies Novelette*) in 1912. It is a little known text; the tale is rarely included in bibliographies of Scheerbart’s collected works,” [4]. The gist of this short tale is about a proposal by a patroness who wants to build a spa at the bottom of a mineshaft, not for bathing in water but for bathing in light! Many of his ideas related to glass from 1914 have been correctly forecast such as: “double walls of glass,” which we now know as double-glazing, and “glass fibres,” which became fibreglass. Maybe his “bathing in light” could be another? So lets have “more coloured light.”

Looking back at the history of coloured light, one obviously associates it with stained glass in windows of religious chapels, churches and cathedrals. On a visit to Saint-Chapelle in Paris, (14.09.1988), the author has stood back and watched peoples’ reactions to the blaze of coloured light that literally hits the visitor, as they came up the tight curving staircase, (from the Chapelle Basse below), into the Chapelle Haute. Their mouths dropped open in awe, their breath seemed taken away, at the experiencing of the affect of the Chapel’s coloured light. Often such stained glass is overlaid with religious iconography. However these literal images, (especially in cathedrals), are often too far away to be seen clearly by the naked eye to put the effect down to recognition of religious motifs. 

So, some sort of phenomena is at work. The direct “assault” on our sense of sight triggers a human reaction to such coloured light, independent of religious belief. The resulting “coloured light splashes” affects us in a primordial or fundamental way.

One person who experimented with coloured light was Mexican artist: Jesus “Chucho” Reyes Ferreira, (1880-1977); he built himself a “yellow” living room where “the glass was painted yellow so that the room is washed with yellow light, giving the effect of sunshine. [This] idea...resurfaced later in the houses of [Luis] Barragan,” [5]. An example being: the hallway of the Gilardi House, (1978), which has the frosted glass paned slots painted with yellow pointillist paint splodges, resulting in a “spacelight.” And, as Saito describes the experience, the light: “dyes the white wall and ceiling...so that passing through it becomes a surrealist dream-walk...the yellow corridor, the very air of which is tinged with particles of golden light, functions as a type of space converter. As you walk down this long tunnel through the shower of golden light, you can feel your mood change. No architect has explored the effect of colour on space and the human psyche to the extent that Barragan has,” [6].

A current explorer of using coloured light as pure form is the artist James Turrell, who says: “I make spaces that apprehend light for our perception, and in some way gather it, or seem to hold it. So in that way it’s a little like Plato’s
cave. We sit in the cave with our backs to reality, looking at the reflection of reality on the cave wall," [7]. In his so-called “Skyspaces,” Turrell builds a seat for the viewer, as though inviting the viewer to stop, to be seated for a while, and let the overhead phenomena wash over the viewer. (The author’s visit to the “Skyspace,” at the De Young Museum, San Francisco, (31.05.2010)). Further, in the Turrell’s: Live Oak Friends Meeting House in Houston, Texas, (2000, commissioned by local Quakers), there are bench like seats gathered around and under the “Skywindow,” proffering the same invitation to pause and reflect on the sky’s, (coloured), light.

Quakers are renowned for their “meeting[s] in which any words emerge from silence." [8]. Sara Maitland, in her book entitled: A Book of Silence, describes the phenomena associated with her various deliberate immersions into different “silent” environs, and she says: “I am convinced that as a whole society we are losing something precious in our increasingly silence-avoiding culture and that somehow, whatever this silence might be, it needs holding, nourishing and unpacking,” [9].

One of the few ecumenical “chapels” built is The Rothko Chapel, in Houston, Texas, (1971), which displays 14No. of Mark Rothko’s paintings mounted around the walls of an octagon. (NB. the author found himself willingly staying for a half day during a visit on 24.07.1986). Despite varying opinions of its success, the “Chapel” continues to draw people as a place of tranquility. A recent check of the YELP website, (which claims: “real people, real reviews”), shows 37 reviews, of which 18No. were 5-star rated.

One women, (Cara D. from Houston), commenting: “It is a place to mediate, to think, to pray, to use however you wish – so long as you are not disturbing other dwellers, of course…I visited here with a friend from Chicago…and once we were outside she exclaimed: ‘If only every city could have a place like this’”[10].

3. DISCUSSION

The above texts support the proposal: Why not use this deconsecrated chapel: Futuna, as a “coloured light-retreat?” A refuge of sorts that can be enjoyed for its peacefulness, within a busy suburb. A space open during sunlight hours, for all-comers. A space to take rest in silence and watch the coloured light fall within the “lightspace.” Compare this to what has happened to various Churches and chapels within New Zealand, some have been reused as houses or bingo halls. These reinventions may be practical but often show respect little of the original “being” of the building.

One of the stumbling blocks or complicating factors for the reuse of churches and chapels is the prominence of religious iconography and what to do about it. For the space to be welcoming to all-comers it is important that the religiousness is downplayed.

In this case the coloured light window, the squares are actually made of perspex, set into black painted aluminum “H” sections for support, (as opposed to stained glass with lead canes). The creator of this system, artist: Jim Allen was “interested in a floating atmosphere of colour…[and he was looking for a way that] the hue of the colour could be intensified…he learned that if he isolated colour by embedding it in black, the colour became far more intense. He also learned the value of having small panes of clear [perspex] which could focus light and make it flash, like sun
Fig. 1
Coloured Light: Futuna

Fig. 2
Stations of the Cross: Futuna

Fig. 3
Bench seating, (2010): Futuna

Fig. 4
Coloured Light: Futuna

Fig. 5
Coloured Light: Futuna

Fig. 6
Coloured Light: Futuna
reflecting off a car window," [11]. This gives the amazing coloured light splashes that rain down within the “retreat.” These perspex squares are also devoid of religious iconographic images, they are made up of abstract groupings of primary colours: red, blue and yellow squares, which sometimes combine to create secondary colours of purples, greens, and oranges. These colours can be savoured in their own right, with no religious overtones, just colour, (refer also to Fig.1).

The Stations of the Cross, which were also done by Jim Allen were carved out of cast plaster and backlit by perspex covered electric lights. These could be downplayed by switching the lights off, (refer Fig.2).

The original bench seating, has been recently reinstated without the kneelers, thus removing the cue to worship and further freeing the space’s use, (refer Fig.3).

Currently, Jim Allen’s original carved timber Crucifix, (depicting Christ nailed to the Cross), is missing from the chapel. Whilst its return is the rallying call around which the current Futuna Trust is gathering restoration funds, it not being there allows for a freer space for reflection and would function well without. Its non-presence in the space would reinforce it use as a neutral retreat welcoming all.

To give some idea of the powerful affect the coloured light had: “Jim Allen described this event vividly: ‘You can imagine the very first time we saw it – I think it was John that saw it first. He came running in – as we were in another building – come on, come on, and have a look at this. We all ran across to the chapel – the yellow and blood-red light was on the wall – the most amazing thing, because for the next hour there were people standing there in silence – just watching the light… And it was the first time it had been seen’," [12].

And still more recently: the author attended a Futuna fundraising lecture, (11.08.2010, at 8 Railway Street, Newmarket, Auckland, New Zealand), presented by Architect: Nick Bevin, (current chair of the “The Friends of Futuna Charitable Trust”). Before getting to the digital slides of the coloured light, (Gavin Woodward’s beautiful images, that are part of Russell Walden’s book), Nick rather poignantly told the audience, “he was going to stop talking, while he showed the next images,” The silence was palpable, as about 50 design professionals stood stock still, (no sipping of wine or chatter), while the coloured light images, (similar to figures 4 to 6, below), worked their magic.

4. CONCLUSION
Quoting Henry Plummer: “The contemporary artist James Turrell has said: ‘Light is not so much something that reveals, as it is itself the revelation.’ Attention to light itself, and not to the object it illuminates, is the point. In a similar way, by providing the time to live with light to watch its movement and feel its presence, to think about it and see into it, the twentieth-century work of “phenomenal architecture” as never before to evoke moods and feelings we feel inside ourselves – helping modern man escape the loneliness of his social system, and fill the void left by a ‘disappearance’ of God," [13].
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