Architectural Polychromy in the 1970’s – from community grey to personal pink

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ABSTRACT
The Austrian Rudolf Steiner, founder of anthroposophy in the 1910’s, studied Goethe and theosophical notions on colour and developed thoughts on how the colouring of architectural space can have a direct impact on the human senses: give support, heal, relax or make way for dynamic reactions. Anthroposophy was transferred to Sweden and formed a stronghold in Järna, south of Stockholm. The polychrome wooden architecture in Järna was in the architectural debate of the 1970’s seen as an alternative to the general use of grey concrete, which characterized the state-driven, post-war building-complex.
The paper investigates the chain of connections from thoughts on colour, deriving from Steiner and inspired by Goethe and theosophy, which were transformed and applied during the 1970’s in the anthroposophical site in Järna, Sweden. The role and meaning of the pink colour in architecture, increasingly and commonly used in the 1980’s, is discussed as an alternative in opposition to the use of grey (concrete) and strong, primary colours.

Keywords: Colour in architecture, anthroposophy, pink architecture, 1970’s, Järna, Sweden

1. INTRODUCTION
Colours in architecture vary according to time and place. A certain expression in the choices of colours may be in fashion during a period, later to be replaced with others colours. What lies behind the use of specific colours at a given time? Can ideological ideas or other circumstances of socio-political character have an impact on which colours coming into fashion? Can interplay between societal changes and the use of certain colours in architecture be traced?

The purpose of the paper is to show how ideas on the symbolic meanings of colours can be traced in the use of colours in architecture. The overall aim is also the reversed: to reveal how the choices of specific colours in architecture can communicate significant symbolic contents. This means an investigation of both an ideology and practice of colour in architecture, and to a certain extent the interplay between them (1). The search for symbolic meanings of preferred colours in a given time and place includes a historical context. The choices of colours are at the same time illustrating and affecting a contemporary situation, in this case the architectural discourse in 1970's Sweden. As a basis for the analysis of an architectural discourse in the 1970's an examination has been made of the editions 1967-1983 of the Swedish architectural magazine Arkitektur as well as editions of a number of other relevant journals (Antropos,
Bygd och Natur, Form etc) and articles in newspapers (2). In addition built-up environments have been studied in situ and in different kinds of presentations, whereof a main example has been the well-known site in Järna. The specific aim has been to investigate and discuss a post-war notion of architecture and colour where a general and professional choice of unpainted, grey concrete combined with contrasting saturated primary colours were replaced in the late 1970’s by a preference for more harmonious and pinkish colour-combinations. The question is why the attitude to colour in architecture changed so strikingly during the 1970’s. How can these completely different preferences of colours be interpreted?

2. ARCHITECTURAL DEBATE IN THE 1970’s

A strong critique was in the 1970’s established against the architecture of the so-called inhuman post-war suburbs. The political goal in Sweden, to build one million homes in ten years, had to a large extent been real- ized. In the process a large socio-technological system had been put in motion, including the implementation of a society mostly adapted to daily use of the car. The core part of many Swedish towns, including the capital Stockholm, had at the same time been cleared of many valuable historical buildings. Protests were growing against the course of events and a wide range of fac- tors including recession and oil-crisis forced the Social-democrats, after 44 years of uninterrupted government position, to hand over power to right-wing parties in 1976. The political scene was however very scattered, but an overwhelming and unifying element from the left to the right was the opposition against the strong governmental superstructure and its expressions. The harsh and grey concrete was in this sense a dominating element in building on a big scale. In the architectural discourse grey concrete was generally considered to represent an authoritarian establishment. Many alter-
natives saw the light of day and the debate on housing and building resulted in wishes for architecture of greater variation, spirituality, tradition, integration and sensuality, including a desire for colour.

One of the first residential areas to satisfy professional needs for a new orientation in architecture was Kista north of Stockholm. The key elements of Kista were designed by Höjer & Ljungqvist 1975-1977, and the artist Elvy Engelbrektson was responsible for the colour-planning (Fig 1). Kista was in the eyes of many the answer to a residential area characterized by sensuality. It was presented under the heading “A playful pastorale”:

“The playfulness of the shapes and colours are striking, as well as a sensuality and a pleasurable expression”. Kista was said to resemble “a child’s drawing”, “sweet, pretty and beguiling” but also consciously aesthetic. In Kista Engelbrektson worked with plaster painted in different pastel colors against a pale blue shopping-center. The planning of the whole district included row-houses of wood with pronounced pink colours. Presumably, the sober pastel-like colours as an innovative treatment contributed to the perception of Kista as a new direction in 1970’s Swedish architecture.

The anthroposophical architecture in Järna was also pointed out as an outstanding alternative. The site of Järna, situated 50 kilometres south of Stockholm, expanded in the 1970’s and consists mainly of small-scaled wooden buildings with anthropomorphic forms painted in many different colours (Fig 3, 3). The life lived here could be tempting to the 1970’s discourse because of the way the inhabitants was understood to live closer to nature, spiritual issues and each other. These elements could challenge the image of the society as a rational factory – or at least offer a complement. As for the architecture there was an appreciation of the balance between expressive, modern shapes and colours and the traditional envelope, for example in the artisanal workmanship of the wooden panel-architecture. Järna was seen as a synthesis of modernism, nature and history and at the same time forward-looking. The architecture of the site has later been carefully described in the extensive book on the Danish-Swedish architect Erik Asmussen (3).

3. THE COLOURS OF ANTHROPOSOPHY
The buildings in Järna and their colours were inspired by the thoughts and works of Rudolf Steiner, founder of anthroposophy in Germany 1913. Steiner found the colouring of the environment to be of great importance, assigning colours the power to activate spiritual beings. He based his view on colour on Goethe but also on the thoughts deriving from theosophy. In the 1970’s several of his lectures and books were translated into Swedish (4). Goethe’s colour theory was also published in a new and second Swedish edition in 1976.

Steiner’s colour theory is based on the two opposites white and black. The third colour found to be fundamental is green. These three were complemented with the colour of the pink human skin, that is, the colour of Das Inkarnat, and Steiner described it more specifically as “the colour of the peach-blossom”: “In nature we find that the most similar to the healthy human skin-colour, the incarnadine, is the peach-blossom in spring. No other colour is similar to man’s color”. This would mean that “man” is synonymous with the pink and white man – no other skin-type is mentioned. When Steiner founded anthroposophy he had left his presidency in the German section of the Theosophical Society. According to the meaning of colours within theosophy the colour pink is a sign of “love for humanity”, “high spirituality” or “high unselfish
affection” (5).
Pink transparent colour is evident in Järna, for example in the large hall upstairs in the House of Eurythmy (1974-75, Fig 3).

Asmussen was indicating what might provide the right atmosphere for the function eurythmy with the words “an airy colour-scheme of pink, neither cold nor hot.” A transluscent “lazoring” of paint was to act like a skin or a membrane when letting a cold blue tone shine through the red-hot.

The positive way the antroposophical notion on colour in Järna was received and appropriated in the general architectural discussion can be illustrated with some words by the influential journalist and arthistorian Eva Eriksson, reporting in the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* from a visit in Järna in 1976:

"The layers of paint act as a transparent film over the wall surface, celebrating the surface structure. The wall feels alive just like skin. It is a sensual pleasure to walk around the rooms, touching wood surfaces, opening doors so that the light falls over them”.

4. GREY MACHINE. PINK MAN
Grey is the most important colour for postwar architecture in terms of prevalence of surfaces. It was used to communicate the authenticity of the raw and crude, but it also came to represent the rational and economic (6). Grey was the colour of the concrete in bridges, roads, traffic-ramps, housing and institutions, and grey were the wallpapers covering the walls in the new suburban apartments. Grey was seen as a neutral and rational colour, a colour that signified a belief in the functioning of the (community) machine. The home as a machine was a metaphor originally launched by Le Corbusier. Grey participated in a beauty of efficiency which was turned inside out where nothing seemed to be hidden, but rather revealed. Grey was there NOT to be there – it was not seen as a colour, that is, in the sense of a clothing (7). Grey could on the contrary act to unveil and demonstrate the design work – which would be the machine and the technology in itself - in other words, what could be seen as the ideal architecture of a functionalist rhetoric.

The bright primary colors, typically used for orientation, can be viewed as “machine-buttons” or part of the manual. The grey concrete, but also materials as glass or hard-anodized aluminum, can be interpreted to have meanings with links to order, rationality and theoretical thoughts on an aesthetic preference for the machine.

The grey color could at the same time be viewed as democratic in the sense of its equality; it worked as a single principle which could be subordinated to and highlight other expressions of collective, human activity in space. However, the opposite effect appeared because of the prevalence, especially where the grey concrete acted as an all too dominant background with a constant, still “faceless”, presence.

Pink, which became a more common colour in architecture in the 1980’s, showed a very different symbolic value referring back in history. The soul of man, visible in the facial pink skin, was an important design task for Romantic
artists. Hegel, with references to Goethe, was underlining how the painting of pink skin colour with a transparent effect, where the blue of the veins, the yellow of the skin and the red blood could achieve a perfect balance, was the most important ability of a portrait artist (8). Through the representation of the perfect colour, man revealed his inner soul and the expression could be transposed into art. Steiner, inspired by Goethe; Hegel and theosophy, talked of the colour pink of das Inkarnat as one of the absolutely fundamental. The expression of the colours in anthroposophical architecture was reached through developed technical knowledge on how to achieve transparence with lazoring paint. The architecture in Järna, which formed such an important option in the 1970’s architecture debate, was materializing the idea of pink, for example in the Eurythmy-hall.

Another part of the context, which is not a subject treated in this paper, was the relation to the rediscovery in the 1970’s of traditional pigments which historically had been used in lin-seed oil and lime. With this relation the choice of a traditional pink colour could be able to connotate a much-wanted historical expression in new and restored buildings. Pink could also be said to communicate a political statement and a resistance against a functionalistic building doctrine. Pink had until then a bad reputation as a colour for makeup and ladies’ underwear; something feminine and personal and nothing for serious building-projects. Pink was in the 1970’s said to be a human and friendly colour. The architect Carl Nyrén referred to these intentions of creating human surroundings in an inspiring example of pink architecture when the church of Gottsunda was built in 1980 (Fig 4).

Nyréns hallmark of the time was also the grey- and brownrosy interiors and the mild yellow wooden surfaces. One of the most popular cladding materials among Swedish architects during the same time was the pink brick-facade. Pink could even be said to illustrate a new definition of the concept architecture. Instead of architecture as a machine, the meaning of architecture was closer tightened to the individual human body and skin. Or, if the
very body earlier was perceived as a modernist machine: It was time to return to human nature (9). The meaning of the colour pink is multilayered though. The subtle know-how connected to architecture as consumption meant that the communication through the colour pink can be interpreted on another level. Because of the market’s understanding of the acute wish for individualism the symbol pink could be used in order to capitalize on that need.

5. CONCLUSION
Pink in different hues painted on plaster and wood or in brick became a characteristic colour of Swedish architecture of the 1980’s. The symbolic value of pink in the Swedish architectural discourse was during the 1970’s in part loaded by the import of meaning and use in the anthroposophical discourse. Thus, we do see an interplay between ideological and socio-political factors and the usage of certain colours, where the symbolic meaning of pink was to illustrate a new social and political context which among other things was characterized by a search for expressions of individuality.

1. The interplay between ideology and artefacts is for example described by Sewell, W H. “The Concept(s) of Culture” in Bonnell, V E and Hunt, L (ed), Beyond the cultural turn. New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1999 p 35-61 (p 51).