An experience to improve visual perception and information about urban colors

Emanuela LAURI
Municipality of Marino (Rome-IT) - Advisor
urbanistica.centrostorico@comune.marino.rm.it studio.lauri@tiscali.it

ABSTRACT
Since 1998 the Municipality of Marino has been carrying out a Colour Plan for the requalification of its historical centre. Obstacles come from the stakeholders (buildings owners, restoration enterprises, etc.) for they are often regardless or even mistrustful towards the plan’s efficacy. This issue shows the cultural nature of the problem and the need of a pedagogic action, in order to bridge this gap of information and to make people aware of their own heritage, since their early education. Thus a children-focused program has been set up to stimulate them about the existence of an urban color in their own city and to teach them the historical image of their city. This activity - led through different educational levels – sprung interesting ideas about new tools for information.

Keywords: Colour Perception, Colour Plan, Pedagogic Action

1. INTRODUCTION
The issue of the colour in historical city centres mainly concerns the restoration and maintenance of existing buildings, i.e. the “houses” architecture that has characterised the urban fabric over the centuries, following different logics in each period.
The recovery of the Historical City we now live in, is not limited to the debate on the restoration of emerging architectures (Churches, Lord Palaces, Monuments, etc.), but extends to the territory as a whole, including the countless local habits of those who personally maintain their own “home”.
Therefore, we are not dealing with a recovery activity that can be run by historians and experts of architecture in all the different applications needed by a urban fabric.
At this point it is unavoidable to involve every single user to make him aware of the potential of its home both from a historical and artistic point of view.

2. THE CITY OF MARINO
Situated 20 km South-West from Rome, the city of Marino looks like a partially fortified historical centre on the top of a volcanic rocky crag. Its centre is characterised by a Medieval residential fabric, “divided” by 3 road axes dating back to the 15th and 16th century.
The Historical Centre of Marino has two home typologies:
-**Medieval Districts**, characterised by buildings such as “case a profferlo” and “case in linea”, mainly finished in plaster and colours, if any, which reflect the local lands, and a urban fabric usually rich in alleys. (Fig.1)

-**Renaissance Districts** characterised by buildings such as “case in linea di refusione” or “Palazzetti”, finished in plaster and colours, if any, which reflect the 6th and 8th century Roman painting style, and a straight urban fabric rich in wide roads. (Fig.2)

As in many historical cities of the Province of Rome, the chaotic urban development and the economic and production changes (migration from the primary to the services sector) of the 60s and 70s led to the gradual degradation of the original façades in terms of superetation, illegal extensions, modernisation using inappropriate materials, visible wiring systems, inappropriate shop signs and surfaces, etc. Towards the end of the 80s, the difficulties of a degradation now affecting too much even the tourist and commercial sectors started to be noticed. The first restorations of the public historical monuments started (Palazzo Fumasoni Biondi, Gothic Church, Asilo Umberto I, etc.) but they did not extend to the façades of nearby and surrounding private buildings.

### 3. THE URBAN COLOUR PLAN

The Marino Town’s Urban Colour Plan, composed of extracts since 1998 and currently approved for the whole historical town, is part of a wider project concerning the urban furniture as well and is focused on the re-discovery of the original architectural language of the city.

The thematic framework of the Plan was fundamentally related to the regulation of the recovering interventions in the ancient town of which records have been analyzed. They are characterized by evident lacks at a project level and bad execution, often due to a reductive interpretation of the basic fabric elements which are considered to be mere “out of fashion methods” rather than elements of a hand-crafted, chromatic and cultural heritage, able to characterise a town.

The technical part of the Plan has been based on the study of the façade colour of typical living townhouses, to be reproduced according to a series of project choices depending on different strategies such as:

- Historical research (fig.3)
4. THE ACHIVEMENT OF THE URBAN COLOUR PLAN

Since the beginning of the activities, it was clear that the success of the Plan could not be based only on proper technical-chromatic interpretations or a clear administrative procedure. It was also necessary to speak to the users (house owners, property developers, maintenance and restoring companies, etc.) in order to involve them in the process according to an integrated approach methodology.

Thus, a series of meetings have been held with users and stakeholders in cooperation with financial operators to set up an awareness raising process in relation to the need to find work methodologies and operational – as well as financial - tools, more suitable to the chromatic and craft heritage of the city.

To assist the achievement of the Plan and the integrated approach to the thematic, an Urban Colour Office was created in 2009 with the specific aim to support users in the restoring activities (filling out and critical analysis of the technical forms, comparative
evaluations, free consultancy, etc.) but also to survey the Plan implementation on the territory. Confirming the need to strengthen the information action according to the original setting of the Plan and taking into account the time required for a full maturation of the contents of the Plan itself, the Urban Colour Office has launched another initiative for an even more integrated approach, which involved another sector of the city. Basically, a test was carried out moving the chromatic urban perception analysis from the context of house owners, companies and other operators to the context of children: the school.

5. THE CULTURAL PROBLEM OF THE URBAN COLOUR PERCEPTION

It often happens to meet people still having a well defined sensitiveness in terms of chromatic harmony of the urban façades and equipments, show this capacity only outside their own urban context.

The several urban realities with clear and beautiful chromatic harmonies catch the attention and the admiration of the people when being tourists. But the same people, once they come back home, pay no attention to their own urban history, close the eyes to their (residual) own heritage, mortifying it with a total disregard or even a will to delete it. Thus, it seems that the perception capacity can be stimulated only if transferred to another “space” while it is ready to be inhibited in its own urban habitat. An explanation of this phenomenon can be found in the “visual habits” which can reduce or delete the perception sensitiveness and lead to a passive acceptance of negative changes which hide even more the chromatic pre-existent clues.

6. A PILOT STUDY: “COLOUR YOUR TOWN” COMPETITION-INQUIRY

On the basis of the above mentioned considerations and seen the absence of a planned didactical context where to develop a more structured initiative, the Colour Plan Office elaborated an experimental approach with the intention to verify the general level of sensitiveness on this matter.

The method of the Competition-Inquiry has been chosen in order to stimulate the students’ curiosity and to give a greater visibility to the initiative, a prerequisite to grasp the attention of a wider audience.

The Competition addressed to the primary and secondary schools i.e. to a scholar age range between 6-12 years. The output was thought with the idea to stimulate the participants’ awareness towards colours and urban space, gradually checking the chromatic perception level in relation to the elements more familiar to the child: his own house, his own quarter, the main street of his own town.

The contents of the Competition were firstly introduced to and discussed with each of the 21 classes contacted (18 primary and 3 secondary schools) out of a total of about 500 students and 30 teachers. Then students in each class were requested to produce one or more works in collaboration with the teachers who followed the development of the activities.

The requested output were thought to raise the interest and the curiosity of the students by a sort of play consisting in taking pictures or making drawings with or without any fixed subject, or colouring prearranged black and white views of the main street of Marino.

Some of the tasks assigned were the following:

• Take a picture of your home (your grandparents’ home or your friend’s home)
Make a sketch of your house
Describe the colour transformations happened over time
Find the typology name of your house
Colour the façade of your house as it is today or as you would like it to be
Colour “Trieste” Avenue (with a black and white base differently detailed in relation to the class level)

That way, we tried to test - through several expressive tools differently suitable for each situation (colour, pictures, audiovisualls, written papers, etc.), - the students’ perception capacity of the town chromatism, spuring an internal debate within each class not only about the contents of the competition but also on the choice of the best communication tools to be employed, which is at the basis of the perception process awareness.

The Competition – Inquiriy had three separate phases:

1st Phase: Awareness of the Territory by interactive lessons on the historical and typological awareness of the places most known by the students with open-air inspections together with the teachers and the architect in charge of the initiative

2nd Phase: direct participation of the students by their work on the activities requested

3rd Phase: Exhibition of the works and award ceremony in the Great Hall of the Marino Municipality

A special attention was granted to the 1st phase of the initial approach which was the first occasion to meet the student; several interesting points for the awareness of façades came out:
• **Awareness of the quarter**: by the projection of the aerial picture of the town’s quarters, the comparison between the ancient buildings and their current aspect, the comparison between public buildings (Town Hall, Churches, Hospitals, etc.) and private residential buildings. In this part, every child found and acknowledged, often enthusiastically, his own places and daily paths (the palace near the amusement park, the front door where “the grandmother lives”, the “church of the Sunday”) assigning to these “objects” a new value in their self imagination, discovering the difference between old and modern style, between the “living houses” and public buildings, etc.. It is worthwhile to put in evidence that this selective process was developed by the children not on abstract things but on their own “town familiar objects”.

**Awareness of the Town History** – by a general review of the Marino’s history told throughout its buildings and streets, highlighting the differences between the Medieval and the Renaissance quarters. It is to be noticed that in order to explain to the youngest children the difference between the Middle-Ages and the Renaissance, lacking a full historical prospective, the presentation often needed to refer to the cartoons set designs.

• **Awareness of the house typologies**: by the pictures taken by the children of their own houses, compared with the house typology application forms arranged for the Urban Colour Plan. The students were able to identify and classify the houses pictured and designed by themselves. Their attention focused in particular on ancient and articulated shapes like façades with “profferlos”.

The Competition-Inquiry ended in June 2010, after 4 months of activities with the final award ceremony extended to all the participating classes.

7. CONCLUSIONS
There is an evident gap between the citizens’ capacity on urban colour perception and their capacity of reading their own urban realities.

This disequilibrium often leads to degrade the urban habitats for it is not possible to find enough “antibodies” against wrong or missing maintenances of the urban chromatic heritage, notwithstanding the existence of a specific planning.

The municipality of Marino, by the Colour Plan Office, launched an experimental initiative (Urban colour design Competition/Inquiry) to stimulate and analyze the perception capacity of the urban colour in about 20 classes among primary and secondary schools.

The initiative had a very singular success amongst both the students and the teachers.

The most significant conclusions which can be drawn from such an articulated experience rich in reflection points, are summarized as follows:

The interest recorded between the students for the colour of their own Town, proved the existence of a clear cultural space which can and must be satisfied with the hope of avoiding apathetic behaviours among grown-up citizens, first step for an urban degenerating process.

The successful initiative enable to design a more structured cultural operation to be developed during the whole school year and to be included in the global action of the Colour Plan for an approach truly integrated with the social network of the urban reality in which you have to operate.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
The author likes to thank the Municipality of Marino in the person of the Major Mr. Adriano Palozzi and of the Assessor for town planning Mr. Mario Moro. The author is very grateful for the cooperation and interest showed by the children and the professors of Marino’s Schools. This work was supported by: Provincia di Roma, Ordine degli Architetti di Roma e Provincia-Consulta dei Beni Culturali.

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