A perceptual approach to the urban colour reading

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ABSTRACT
The Colour Plans in Italy, since the end of Seventies, have represented an answer to the necessity of preserving and disciplining, but also enhancing, the colour of the historical centres. The methodological and instrumental approaches developed inside these plans reflect a substantially conservative and restoration purpose towards the urban colour and show all their limits, if we want to face a chromatic planning addressed to the city in its entirety. Such a purpose requires, indeed, a design approach that draws motivation not only from history and pre-existent, but also from colour’s ability to perceptually modify and influence the vision and the experience of a space. This contribution wants to bring attention to the necessity of an urban colour perceptual reading, able to relate the chromatic component to the cultural, temporal and spatial context, and then to the more complex system of variables (light, material, etc.) that determines our perceptual experience of places.

Keywords: Colour perception, Colour plan, Urban colour design

1. INTRODUCTION
Today, as in the past, colour represents an important element of recognition, belonging, readability and quality of the city. But whereas before the architectural and urban dimension was mostly related to local materials and pigments, in an almost inevitable solution of continuity, the advent of new building materials with new techniques of construction has marked the beginning of that process of internationalism of Architecture which, emptied of its social and ideological content, indeed has ended up in creating a substantial and general homologation of urban traits. Emblematic examples of this reality are the suburbs that, in every large city in the world, have come to resemble each other in terms of formal, material and even colour solutions. Synthetic colours and ready for use products have, in fact, generated a globalization of both colour supplies and colour charts.

In this context it is interesting to note that it is really the colour, with its evocative and emotional signic force, that plays a crucial role in the debate on the need to preserve the city’s identity, but also to initiate a process of urban and social requalification.

Colour in that sense, as already remarked by Bruno Taut, is revealed as the most effective, quick and cheap means to counter the inexpressive grey of much of the building production and to awake the consciousness and perceptual capacities of the citizens.
2. THE COLOURS OF THE CITY BETWEEN STORAGE AND PROCESSING INSTANCES

2.1 The Italian colour plans: a historical approach

The colour plans, which have subsisted in Italy since the late Seventies, have represented a first response regarding the need to develop tools able to regulate and plan, and also to enhance, colour on an urban scale, with special reference to historical centres.

The colour plan of Turin, by Giovanni Brino in 1978, is the first Italian plan to intervene on buildings in a historical centre with a logic of restoration of the originally designed colours on the basis of the found rich historical archives records.

Records that, in contrast with the practice of widespread and indiscriminate use of so-called yellow-Turin, brought to light a fanciful and very much refined colour design that took form in the requalification and regulation program of urban interventions developed and fine-tuned in the nineteenth century by the Conseil des Ediles [1]. A real and proper plan of colouring the city that, since 1808 and for almost fifty years, governed the chromatic aspect of the city.

Although consequently the colour plan of Turin takes the moves from a situation almost unique in the Italian panorama, namely the discovery of the nineteenth century plan with its rich documentation, the model developed by Brino for Turin gave the green light to numerous colour plans that since the Eighties have spread throughout the Italian territory and beyond.

In fact, the direct or indirect influence of the plan of Turin, above all rests on having stimulated and consolidated an approach to the conservation and restoration of historical colours, original or traditional, which, even though within a lively and structured debate, undoubtedly appears to contribute both to the demands of requalification of historical centres both to the needs to preserve the chromatic identity.

2.2 The chromatic complexity of contemporary city

Without wishing to enter the specifications that however characterize the various colour plans drawn up, the things I would like to focus attention on are inherent to some limitations implicit to this urban colour approach that is likely to confine the same colour planning to the role of a static control tool of the original or traditional colours of the city seen as historical centre, according to more or less rigid patterns of intervention, paying no attention to the several transformations that the city continues to assume [2].

And I don’t refer only to the new urban areas, but also to both the coexistence within the historical centre of buildings of different periods and the increasingly more complex aggregate of planned and spontaneous urban signs, which contribute to the definition of public and social spaces.

Actually, nowadays the colours of the city are no longer linked only to the colours of its buildings, but they are progressively more dictated by the movement of cars and public transport, by road signs and advertising information, by shop windows and signs, by the growing use of coloured light that animates and transforms the appearance of urban areas at night. History cannot possibly be the sole criterion to draw inspiration from in order to find answers to the design needs of this complex chromatic system.
Add to this that any intervention on the urban colour component must be understood as essentially a design process, whether it is the case of restoring an original state through a faithful historical reconstruction, whether it is the case of keeping the colour material on the historic built as part of material culture [3], or finally whether it is the case of operating in a continuance with the traditional local practices.

The problem of planning the colour, then, is essentially due to the real possibility of reading the colour complexity that characterizes the city, that is to say on how to acquire that information system – indispensable prerequisite – which can lead to project hypothesis.

Referring to the work of Lynch, the problem I want to put forward is on what would be the most appropriate method to read and return the chromatic image of the city, "a summary that can be a first step in preparing a 'visual plan'. (...) As a spot survey and analysis, it does not determine a plan, but it provides a basis on which creative decisions can be taken" [4].

### 2.3 The geography of colour by Lenclos: a visual-perceptual approach

During the same years wherein, in Italy, colour plans are being developed, in France Jean Philippe Lenclos introduces the concept of the “geography of colour” noting that the specificity of the French traditional colours of the built is closely related to regional environmental differences, and then, most of all, to the use of local building materials [5].

The method of analysis developed by Lenclos is summarized in palettes of colours that reveal the true chromatic character of each locality and contribute to the emergence of a local, regional and national identity. It is a sort of chromatic vocabulary that is offered as a knowledge basis to consciously guide every possible operational development in respect of the urban colour component.

Within this geographical chromatic mapping there are not only encompassed the so-called “permanent” colours, which have a relatively stable and objectively detectable visual character – for example the colours of construction materials – but also those variable “impermanent” colours, which is a trait of landscape – such as the light, the sky, the vegetation – that contribute to the ever-changing vitality of a place.

One approach, therefore, of perceptual kind that leads to attention, as the specific chromatic character of the built is the result of simultaneity of relations determined by different situations of observation [6-7].

The considerations made by Lenclos on the visual-perceptual characteristics of buildings, although being oriented toward the traditional historical fabric, offer nonetheless interesting perspectives on the possibility to read the colour complexity of the city, thus returning alongside to the historical facts also the colour’s ability to perceptually modify the vision of a space and affect the living.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The perceptual impression evoked by an urban environment, even if consisting of identifiable series of elements, lies in the quantitative and qualitative interactions among the various elements. In this sense, colour can help to determine the visual hierarchy of urban space, emphasizing, for example, the sense of unity and continuity, rather than allowing some distinctive features to surface. In analyzing the colour of an urban area, then, it is not sufficient to proceed in “punctual” terms, as if it were a summation of individual colour components, instead it should be preferable
to think in terms of chromatic spatial context leading to highlight, as noted by Lenclos, that system of variables – light, material, shape, size, close by and distant colours – that determines our perceptual experience of places.

Analysis of different spatial conditions is determined by a study of flows and preferential positions of observation that covers the distance, the direction and also the different perspective, which is offered to the observer in motion that is, for example, walking down the sidewalk or travelling on public transport than to the static observer.

The definition of this summation of those factors that contribute to colour perception of urban space, is intended to relate the space components with the temporal and cultural dimensions and, therefore, with the values, or meanings, susceptible to change over time, which can be attributed both to a building as to an urban design element.

The map shown in Fig. 1 represents the actual attempt to relate the three contexts: spatial, temporal and cultural, that are considered likely to return the complexity of colour perception and thereby to constitute the knowledge base – verifiable by the specificity of each site from time to time – on which design thought should be founded.

The choice of the term approach, within the definition of the proposed analysis, wants to highlight how the exposed intentions should undergo the necessary operational and practical checks, but also suggest the sense of moving closer to chromatic complexity that is not always coming across an answer in the determination of the method.

On the other hand, some teaching experiences have shown that perceptual exploration has provided interesting incentives to develop a design thought, which knows how to operate in a critical way with the component of urban colour: thus laying not a priori hold of both the need to preserve the identity of historical and traditional colours, both the need to bring new colour identities.
4. CONCLUSIONS

Each colour intervention on the city is a design intervention that must derive justification not only from history and pre-existent, but also from the ability of colour to resolve the contradictions dictated by the transformations of the city, which involve both the historical urban fabric and the so-called suburbs, where an approach to colour able to return identity and sense of belonging, but also lead to quality, appears even more necessary. The described perceptual approach appears to offer a reading key able to stimulate a design thought that can bring together the demands of preserving place memory with those of renewal, and therefore the need to develop a qualification and consistence process extended throughout all the city also and especially through colour.

REFERENCES


