

Color, Time, Layering and Preservation

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Abstract: The preservation of polychromy in 20th century architecture is here considered from both theoretical and operational perspectives. A further theme is that of polymatericity, which addresses issues related to the experimental context with reference to the materials and technologies employed. The passage of time and the lack of durability of innovative materials, the transformations and the presence of forms of alteration and degradation, pose problems related to the will and the possibility of preserving layering, without falling into the restoration of the presumed original document, in relation to the authorial project documentation and the underlying theories.

Key words: Polychromy, polymatericity, 20th century architecture, innovative materials, layering, preservation.

1. Introduction

The recognition of the role of color in the architecture of the past was first expressed in 1832 by Quatremère de Quincy in the *Dictionary of Architecture* [1]. The theme of color, beginning with archaeological findings, became part of the theoretical debate in architecture and, therefore, was also faced by the many architectural movements that animated the Modern Movement.

Giulio Carlo Argan (1909-1992) wrote that color should not be a mere decorative component, but rather a fundamental element of formal structure. Argan stated that architecture and color must be conceived and designed simultaneously. This clarification highlights an extraordinarily complex issue for the preservation of polychromy architectures nowadays. Indeed, we cannot neglect to consider the role of time, whose action shapes the architecture, transforms the surfaces and sometimes modifies or deletes the original colors.

Argan, referring to movements and actors that characterize the early 20th century, identified “De Stijl” as a key episode in the history of contemporary art [2].

2. The Color Issue and the 20th Century Architecture

Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931) is known as the

founder and leader of “De Stijl”. In 1924 he published the essay “Toward a Plastic Architecture” in which he outlined 16 points on the neo-plastic vision of modern architecture. The 14th and 15th points faced the color issues. In particular, the 15th point explains: “The new architecture is anti-decorative. Color (and this is something the color-shy must try to grasp) is not a decorative part of architecture, but its organic medium of expression” [3]. Van Doesburg also wrote: “We have given color its rightful place in architecture and we affirm that painting separated from architectural construction has no right to exist” [4].

Van Doesburg exemplifies this concept in the study of the *Maison Particulière* where volumes are emphasized with the use of the primary colors: blue, yellow and red (Fig. 1).

In 20th architecture, color becomes a very important theme expressed in the poetics of the masters [5].

Le Corbusier constitutes the best-known example to emphasize the fundamental importance of color in architecture. He proposed the concept of *Polychromie Architecturale*, introducing the *claviers de couleurs* (keyboards of colors). The first *palette* of 1931, which would be used by the company *Salubra* for a wallpaper collection, included 43 hues in 14 sets of solid colors and calibrated tones. Le Corbusier, based on previous



Fig. 1 Theo Van Doesburg, Cornelis van Eesteren, *Maison Particulière* 1923.

experience, including Maison La Roche (1924), created color combinations that recalled studies on optical sensations and moods [6].

In 1959 a second collection completed the first *Polychromie Architecturale* and consisted of 20 additional bright colors and 63 shades, used in the *Unité d'Habitation* and at the *Maison De L'Homme* in Zurich. The harmonization of the various colors in the palette was compared to the role of a piano master. As a further supplement to the previous comment Le Corbusier writes "It was necessary to prevent colors from reducing the aesthetic value of the walls [...]. Therefore, an authoritative assumption: eliminate colors that can be considered non-architectural. Better yet: identify, choose colors that can be called exclusively architectural, and limit yourself to them. These are more than enough!" [7] (Fig. 2).

These synthetically reported examples are followed by later experiences in which color also finds a relationship with the surrounding landscape. The Italian case of Edoardo Gellner provides an important topic. In the former ENI village of Borca di Cadore, Gellner indeed introduces a selection of colors that accompany the changing of nature in the different seasons [8] (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2 Le Corbusier's apartment in Paris after renovations (Scaramuzza, 2018).



Fig. 3 E. Gellner, former ENI village in Borca di Cadore (Faccio, 2018).

3. Conclusions

The examples given, though fragmentary, are nonetheless significant in highlighting conservation issues. The possibility of reading layers over time, and the role of time shaping and transforming architecture (and surfaces), seems to be contradictory to theories of color in architecture, which would seem to suggest the need to innovate/restore polychromy in its full and total legibility.

It is necessary to mention the conservation of materials, in relation to the experimental techniques employed in the twentieth century, where technological innovation also assumes an important role related to both color and polymatericity.

In this context, therefore, fundamental issues arise with which the preservation of twentieth-century architecture

has to deal. The question is whether to pursue the approach of preserving the layering over time or to prioritize the memory of theoretical assumptions and design outcomes that constitute a fundamental part of the Modern Movement.

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