

# From the 'plan of color' to the 'plan of conservation'

## Theoretical issues and methodological approaches

A identidade cromática é um factor determinante nos projectos de intervenção para a conservação do património arquitectónico urbano. A necessidade de abordar a conservação com uma perspectiva dinâmica, de maneira a não tornar a cidade num conjunto estático, contraria a mutação histórica dos espaços urbanos. Os padrões cromáticos são, portanto, elementos que os esforços de reabilitação não podem menosprezar.

1972 is the year in which, a few months apart from each other, two conferences were held. Both took place in Rome and opened the debate on the colouring of architectural heritage. Forgotten for some years, this comparison was, at first, forcefully made (coinciding with the Jubilee interventions), only to fall once again into oblivion, before identifying broadly consensual solutions. Today, urban colour is an issue re-presented as solely concerning restorers, whose apparent indifference

towards it generates coarse outcomes, both technically and theoretically incorrect. Moreover, the indifference of restorers makes 'urban colour', as an issue, increasingly vulnerable to the arbitrary decisions of construction companies, increasingly distant from 'ancient wisdom'. In addition, diverse instances of speculation frequently arise from the widespread practice of 'Plans of Colour'.

Concerning the restoration of plastered surfaces, radically different

ideas and modes of operation oppose each other: in parallel with stances which regard highly what already exists, we find brief reflections in Brandian thought, and openly condescending attitudes that ascertain the desire for renewal. This is related to a largely diffuse taste for the 'ever new', which Riegl refers to as a 'novelty value'.

This multiformity of theoretical reflections is followed by everyday practice, which distinguishes itself by a substantial lack of specialised skills among the workforce involved in routine or special façade maintenance operations, activities often encouraged and supported by sponsors who are seldom concerned by conservation issues and care mostly for the freshness of the plaster evenly-spread on the walls.

Maybe the perplexity expressed by Giovanni Carbonara concerning the 'reductionism of the color theme', which was forcibly defined in relation to a more general 'restoration issue, should represent the point from which to depart with a renewed vigour, reviewing the 'façades' theme in the broader field of restoration at an urban scale. This does not mean, however, that we should extrapolate from architectural restoration while assessing solely the 'outer shell'; rather, we should aim to think of the façade as the enabler of an articulation between internal architecture and the urban dimension of a city. The need to link planning to conservation has been repeatedly brought up by Gaetano Miarelli Mariani because of "(...) our contemporary conceptualization of environment and consequent extension of the field of conservation (...)", in addition to what is mentioned in the Amsterdam Charter: "The



Fig. 1



Fig. 1a

### Color - Matter

*'The color becomes matter' within an architectural body. However, this evidence is a matter still unresolved, although many specialists have drawn the attention of traders on the need to process materials for "what they want to be not for what they are" while respecting the conceptual rather than physical identity of matter.*

*Fig. 1 - Rome, the church of S. Maria Porta Paradiso. The restoration does not include the architectural language of the façade*

*Fig. 1a - Rome, palace on Via Magnanapoli. The color respects only the physical identity of the subject*

conservation of architectural heritage must be thought of not as a marginal problem, but as the main objective of urban and territorial planning."

The 'Colour Plans' are not the solution to the problem of architectural conservation at an urban scale, since the issue is broad and complex, meaning that the theme of colours shouldn't be simplified. Moreover, such planmaking schemes are associated, even if they are diverse, because the outcomes will be one and the same in both instances. Indeed, notwithstanding the need to determine a 'palette' through extensive and thorough research, the outcome moves strongly towards the restatement of the 'original colouring'; a obstinate and dubiously legitimated research, since the word 'original' is nothing more than a "(...) blatant terminological inaccuracy, [because] 'original state' means, at most, an intermediate moment in the life of a building (...)" (Miarelli). The city is not an inert ensemble, reduced to the fixity of a historic moment. It is an organism in a slow and inexorable mutation: as a whole, it is a material testimony to the passage in time of a site's culture; it is a form of stratification and moves according to a process of change that must not be stopped.

The study of a façade's colour, both in its historical and scientific scopes, is a valuable aid for the study of its fabrication techniques and constitutive materials. From stratigraphic tests, one may read the complexity of the transformative process of a building, a continuous evolution which is connected to the events of city, the epochal taste, the ability of architecture to transform itself in accordance to changes and historic and perceptual contexts, within which it is located.

Therefore, this is about setting a planning tool that can carefully evaluate this multiplicity, in which colours represent an element of the whole. The issue of colours, therefore, must be framed within a broader vision linked to the conservation of the city's morphological structure and with it the 'architectural surfaces' that define façades in urban itineraries. In façades



Fig. 2



Fig. 2a

#### Unit - distinction

*While choosing colour, one should strive, on the one hand, for "the most complete relation between artefacts and the ensemble to which they belong; on the other, to respect its uniqueness that comes from its individual creation and its individual transformation over time" (Miarelli).*

*Fig. 2 - Rome, Piazza del Pantheon. The lack of respect for the chromatic*

*Fig. 2a - Rome, Via del Corso. The approval of color façades*

lie all the ambiguity and complexity of architecture, which finds, in its 'skin', its most glaring and contradictory element. Through the analysis of façades, it becomes possible to trace the history of a city, since they record 'change' (Bellini). On their surface, the practical response should focus on the internal dynamics of the building, but it should also focus on the need to subdue, through the ductile quality of walls and the composition of ornaments, the plastic invasion of the city. Therefore, one might think of a plan that, supported by correctly inter-related analyses and rules, should be able to allow for protection of existing architectural heritage, through programmed transformation, implemented on the basis of what presently represents a place, on what once represented it, and on what we would like it to become gradually.

This would be an instrument through which one could reach a correct assessment of the extension of interventions to be made on urban areas.

This would also necessitate the inclusion of 'architectural surfaces' which, in this outline (specifying all actions necessary to the restoration of the ensemble and specifically in mural façades, indicating the extension of patches, any replacements, consolidations needed as well as permanent additions, the choice of techniques and materials to be taken in intervention) would include considerations on road pavements, in particular those that contribute to clarify the persisting features of an urban area's identity.

Historic and scientific analytical devices should aid the understanding of the morphological evolution of an urban area, involving both formation issues and direct knowledge of artefacts, the wall substrate, the composition of mortars, the presence or absence of color or special surface finishes, degradation of materials that combine to qualify it architecturally (windows, bars, rain-covering, roofing, advertising, furniture). Based on these considerations, one may justify various operations of intervention, namely cleaning, consolidation, protection, reintegration and ultimately also the choice of color of a urban architectural surface.

Aged plaster has a charm that not everyone may appreciate, but it is undeniable that the 'malady' of time gives new textures to surfaces, new chromatic values generated by the multitude of hues' resurgence, which show themselves and blend with the original ones. Regardless, the evocative intensity of degraded matter should not "replace the operational responsibility of leaving the building's future to chance" (Della Torre). The issue shifts, in any case, to the possibility of 'exhibiting care', in order that "the signs of time" are not perceived as 'signs of neglect', rather as evidence of the 'antiquity' of a place. This, which is the fundamental aspect of the restoration of architectural surfaces in urban contexts, finds its solution in the chromatic definition of façades, both in issues relating to colour as matter and in specifically perceptual aspects related to colour.



#### Differentiation-brightness-saturation

Perceptual analysis can be articulated with optical principles in order to produce a chromatic reading of buildings, increasing the practical significance of evaluative propositions regarding dyes in urban context.

Fig. 3 - Proposal for a preservation of urban colors taken from thesis of Maria Teresa Sprovieri, developed in the laboratory restoration led by Maria Piera Sette, aa 2004-2005

Fig. 3a - The chromatic scale proposed by Guido Strazza and Gaetano Miarelli Mariani for the detection of the tonal field compatible with the de facto status. The dyes, taken from colours detected in the city, are arranged in concentric circles that differ, from the center outwards, according to the tonal scale for saturation, brightness and contrast

The choice of colour-as-matter is always linked to the *de facto* status of a place and the need for formal integrity, which is the aim of interventions. It is well known that the traditional colouring is bright, vibrant, transparent, qualities that stem from the nature of colour (pigment and lime), fortified by the substrate of traditional plaster, which is absorbent and grainy, as specifically noted by Gaetano Miarelli Mariani, who suggested that, in restorative interventions, the colour should be strengthened by adding grit "(...) so

as to give surfaces the level of roughness necessary to determine *chiaroscuro* vibrations, in order to obtain satisfactory results in terms of size and quality of materials". In order to obtain a more nuanced result, a semi-transparent finish, almost 'foglike', one may instead mix pigments with diluted lime milk (the addition of acrylic resins would endow the product with increased resistance to weather conditions). Our immediate present is the starting point from which considerations on the choice of colour as pigment,

as well as any intervention on existing architectural heritage, are made. However, the chromatic value of a façade cannot be measured in its singularity, as it is part of the language, material and chromatic systems of urban space. Therefore, the paint chosen to cover an artefact's surface should be picked in relation to these 'contextual' elements. In this sense, a perceptual analysis can be a valuable tool through which one may analyse the 'persistent structure' of an urban area, or that sum of elements characterized by a physical presence durable over time, namely: light components that interact on the assessment color (brightness, contrast, saturation), empty and built spaces, the material composition, the linguistic composition and the height of façades, the skyline and the morphology of the itinerary. These are joined, in addition, by different sets of superstructural elements, defined as all aspects of human temporary modifications of context, namely road paving, lighting, the presence of arborized spaces, street furniture, shop windows and various symbols.

It is clear, then, that the choice of colour is never a single and independent action. To the contrary, it descends from a careful selection and evaluation of a range of hues detectable in the present reality of an urban area, with the aim of "achieving chromatic harmony of the context within which one operates, while respecting the conceptual identity of the matter" (Miarelli).

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#### NOTA

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