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Colours of a Neighbourhood: Methodological Questions and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses methodological questions that arise from large-scale architectural colour research. The paper will discuss some preliminary findings of my on-going PhD. The PhD project represents a practice-led study concerning the colour planning six residential areas built during the last twenty years in the greater Helsinki metropolitan area in Finland.

The paper will focus on one of these sites, Aurinkolahti, which is situated in the eastern part of Helsinki and was built between 2000–2016. In this pilot study, I tested two research methods, for enabling architects, artists and colour designers to conceptualise their experience of architectural colours, particularly in terms of the design process. The first method referred to as *colour walk*, is an ethnographic walking method. Colour walk allows the designer to provide words for non-verbal experience of colours in architecture and to create concepts for the artistic colour design process. The second method, visual ethnographic photography is both a method for documentation and an approach for conducting artistic research concerning the atmosphere of architecture focusing on colours. Designer-photographers act with their own perceptions and knowledge, documents and photographs the area in order to visualise their thoughts.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Finland, the colours of a new neighbourhood are specified by the building description stipulated in a city plan. The architects Hannunkari and Mäkipaja designed a specific, detailed colour plan for the east side of Aurinkolahti in 2002–2003.

The paper will present and discuss the methodology used in my practice-led PhD on large-scale colour design. In this pilot study, I use two new methods for studying, conceptualising and visualising an actual architectural colour experience.



Figure 1. A view of Aurinkolahti. The facades of the buildings near the canal in Aurinkolahti are yellow and white. The left side of the canal forms the border of the neighbourhood, with the right side being covered by a park grows behind which lies a pine forest.

2. METHOD

The methods presented in this paper are visual ethnographic photography and the colour walk method. The photography method is based on Pink's visual ethnographic method (2013), where the photographers' own knowledge and perception are involved in the photographic process.

2.1 The Colour walk

The colour walk is an ethnographic walking method that can involve 3-6 colour or architectural professionals in a documented, open discussion and guided through ten open questions while walking along a pre-determined route on the site. The conversation is recorded by a video camera and digital voice recorder. The participants consisted of a selected group of architects, colour researchers, colour planners and artists, who have existing professional knowledge about colour and architecture. Four professionals participated in this pilot study.

The methodology used in this study is based on Kusenbach's (2003) street phenomenology, a "go-along" ethnographic research tool. A similar method has also been used in cultural anthropology by Suopajärvi (2014), who used a "walk-along" ethnographic method to understand how senior citizens experience their daily surroundings in a city.

This paper focuses on colour design as a design process, not only on the experience of an inhabitant. For this reason, it is essential that the colour walkers be professionals in order to conceptualise these perceptions, experiences and the design process in professional terms. The atmosphere during the walk and discussion is important. It is not a critique about the architecture or compositions, but rather aims to understand the built environment through their role as a colour designer or architect. For example, some solutions may not have resulted from the colour decisions of designers. Instead, it could simply be a question of money or a narrow palette of colours imposed by the building materials.

2.2 The photography method

In light of my background as a landscape architect, it is not surprising that the second method involves taking photographs of buildings during all four seasons within a landscape of different colours. This method gives equal emphasis to both the buildings and the environment into which the buildings have been placed.

This photographic method is based on the work of colour designers and researchers, such as the colour analysis of Lenclos and Lenclos (1990) as well as the results of a study by Fridell Anter (2000: 40), who explored the factors involved in our perception of colour. Another study influencing my work is the well-documented colour design process developed by Smedal (2001), which showed the impact of only two colours, only white (snow) and black (darkness) backgrounds, on the potential colours for buildings in Spritsbergen, Norway. A similar climate and landscape as that found in Aurinkolahti was studied by Fridell Anter (2000: 198). Her research focused on a single building in the Uppsala region of Sweden, whose backdrop changed with the seasons from winter brown to spring green, summer green, autumn green and winter white.

Figures 2 – 6 show examples of my photographic method used in Aurinkolahti, Finland. The effect of seasonal changes in the background are shown in Figures 2 and 3, while the series of photographs in Figure 4 highlight the importance of the colours of other buildings in the background. The influence of the atmosphere created by entrances and a sequence of space are demonstrated in Figures 5 and 6.



Figure 2 and 3. The relationship between the colours of the landscape, buildings and the older surrounding architecture: Winter white and summer green.



Figure 4. The colours of the facades influenced by neighbouring buildings



Figure 5. The atmosphere created by the colours of entrances.



Figure 6. The impact of the sequence of spaces on the atmosphere of Aurinkolahti (Finland).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This pilot case study of Aurinkolahti demonstrate not final results, only preliminary findings. During the colour walk, the four professional participants in colour and architecture discussed their perceptions and formed numerous concepts concerning the connection between colour and architecture, including the colour and volume of buildings, the atmosphere, colour of the materials, aging of the building materials, landmarks, colour in the four seasons, homogeneity or variety of colour, and sequence of spaces.

Although colour design is typically a non-verbal artistic process, walking around allows designers the opportunity to open and decode actual concepts. After coding the colour walks of six neighbourhoods, it will become possible to expose the hidden, non-verbalised concepts common to

the four professions represented by the participants. The following observations demonstrate discussion of colour walk:

“The facades have a two-dimensional composition, what continues perhaps around the corner.”

“All the buildings have the same volume. Colour has a role as a decoration, and colour have used to break up the volume of the building.”

“I have visited this area during the winter and leafless time. The colours worked well, though yellow and grey were too dominant in the white wintertime.”

“The landmark is one floor higher and the only building with brick facades, the others are plastered. The colour solution should be stronger to make the landmark stand out.”

“It’s difficult when different materials have the same colour, since all the materials will age differently. After a few years those will look ill-conceived.”

Photography visualises the colours of a neighbourhood, its architecture, landscape and relationship to older architecture. It is more than documentation. The photographer’s own experience and knowledge becomes one part of the photographic process. Lenclos and Lenclos (1990) photographed buildings and simplified the colours of façades, windows, doors and roofs. However, architecture has increasingly become more interested in other elements than windows or doors. (Figure 4.). For example, the entrance to buildings is more than just a door (Figure 5.).

4. CONCLUSIONS

This pilot study provides a new research method to understand a highly complex relationship between the colour, architecture, space, landscape, materials, seasons and distances in urban environments. The two methods proposed in this study give designers tools to verbalise concepts and visual elements. The colour walk provides a method to conceptualise the non-verbal experience of architectural colours on a broader scale of an entire neighbourhood. Walking around the site offers researchers vistas as well as sequences of the spaces and atmosphere of an area. The colour walk is enhanced by photography, which visualises the relationship between colours, landscape, buildings and older architecture in different seasons.

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