

Walls without History

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ABSTRACT

After having investigated the features of frescoed façades of the historic Palaces of Genova - a proper 'environmental color design' of the past -, my current research focuses on the more contemporary issue of 'walls without history', a typical features of city suburbs. In Genova, these hilly areas are often characterized by imposing gray concrete walls used to prop up the hill sides.

Once again, it has meant to resort to an environmental approach, namely to get out of the constraints of built construct and expand it to concepts linked to sensitivity, ethics, aesthetics, for a better involvement of all our senses.

Therefore, concrete walls that become color may also become landscape and provide a link between bare, rational, and 'isolated' buildings.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past I have investigated and presented research works on painted façades of the old city of Genova, which set it apart from other cities. For this cultural heritage, Genova was also called '*Genua Picta*'. The development of this art reached its peak around mid 16th century, when many of the noble palaces were built. However, as early as in the 12th century, the colors of the buildings facing the waterfront were already a feature which also had some practical reasons: these colors would help sailors of the then still small seaside village recognize their houses from the sea.

Conversely, my aesthetic research has now moved to its modern suburbs. Differently from the colorful old city center, its modern suburbs are gray, anonymous, and uniform, with large concrete walls that are used to buttress the hill sides. The hilly landscape is indeed another typical feature of Genova's surroundings. These areas have been intensely built since the '60s and are characterized by buildings of simple design mainly inhabited by working class people.

2. METHOD

To deal with this issue as part of a color and architectural topic means once again to resort to an environmental approach, namely to get out of the constraints of built construct and expand it to concepts linked to sensitivity, ethics, aesthetics, for a better involvement of all our senses.

Concrete walls that become color may also become landscape and provide a link between bare, rational buildings that are 'isolated' by their closed shape. Therefore, the color of a concrete wall becomes a semantic, 'live' feature: from the gray color of cement, which exclusively identifies its strength, the wall becomes something different, and strange.

Color becomes an environmental and characteristic mark, a sign of revamping.

Colors are selected in a creative and yet non-random way: just like in a painting, colors are the expression of surfaces and spaces, and a way to communicate emotions.

The various interventions are very close to the idea of 'imaginative city', of 'serendipity', the surprise expressed at a fortunate discovery, and the mental images brought about by either a built or natural space in the relationship between people and the environment.

This project suggests a new dialogue with our habitat, in which perceptive communication is explored by playing with the association between the bi-dimensional nature of color and the 3-D nature of architectural or environmental spaces to which they refer. It offers a meeting-confrontation opportunity between color/painting and architecture, with due attention to the various types of constructions and different settings.



Figure 1 - Color project for the Wall of the Santa Maria e San Giustino Church in Genoa.

The role of these 'decorations' is also to harmonically balance the surrounding space, to provide a better balance between light and shadow, more color where there is none, and a better visibility to a site that needs to be properly identified.

3. RESULTS

The 'wall without history' acquires an active morphological role even in the desolation of city suburbs.

In the historic tradition of Genoa, the colors on the façades of its palaces were part of an 'environmental design' proper, while providing aesthetic value and being an expression of privilege. Similarly, the features of the contemporary city have motivated me to transfer some feasible aesthetic values to our suburban areas.

In designing these works, a full awareness of color rules is obviously essential: indeed, color brilliance and intensity do change depending on the light and the other colors in the environment. The brightness of color tones may increase also by contrast; the spatial direction of color and other dynamic-perceptive qualities also matter.

All in all, the color surfaces used by the project are essential, without any specific more complex identity of traditional compositions, which would otherwise limit its meaning.

This particular project refers to Valbisagno - the Bisagno river valley - along which there are several concrete walls used to prop up the hills on both sides: the itinerary itself has suggested the composition criteria and the colors required to establish a creative dialogue among the various points. Wherever there is a lack of color and of natural elements, chromatically saturated colors have been used as well as composition lines linking the various buildings, thus creating new dynamic connections.

The project will follow a chromatic pathway to be best enjoyed by travelling by bus along the Bisagno River valley. Industrial colors will be employed, because they are more suitable from a technical point of view, they are also more brilliant and last longer. The work will however be intended as a personal aesthetic intervention by means of industrial production.

Color references may be resumed at subsequent sites, however with the use of new formal solutions. Conversely, those walls that maintain a dynamic relation with neighboring areas may play a significant color composition role by becoming 3-D plastic elements. Direction lines - as if they were extensions of buildings - may intersect and change the chromatic surfaces in a dynamic way.

Sometimes, even one single color may acquire a vital meaning (as with the recent invasion of yellow canvases by artist Christo in New York).

To make an example, I will be presenting the projects developed for the wall without history of Santa Maria e San Giustino Church. This little Church, with a valuable modern contemporary architecture, is also located in Valbisagno.

In this case, symbolic elements and the specific connotation of this place require an accurate choice of colors in keeping with its main features.

Therefore, formal contemporary concepts must be kept into account. The smooth profile of the building forms a curvilinear shape, which is resumed by the underlying wall with chromatic areas that are bordered by the church projection lines. The result is a non-descriptive mirror reflection which is created by the imagination. Colors are mainly included in the pink/orange palette with some turquoise areas and some bright yellow projection lines. All this provides an overall sense of welcoming harmony. However, some areas of concrete will be left without color, in order to prevent color from becoming another barrier (see photo above).

4. CONCLUSIONS

In the relation between different buildings in a diversified and disordered context like the one we have in a city suburbs, the 'painted wall' becomes a catalyst, as well as creative and innovative energy. The 'painted wall' provides a composite perception, ranging between the bi-dimensional nature of color and a 3-D unconventional perception of the environment, which may become even multi-dimensional.

Hence, a new history is created, namely a new role for contemporary walls, that are no longer just separating elements or symbols of strength, but elements of dialogue and aesthetic attention for more valuable suburbs.

Therefore, color become a tool, and technical material to revamp spaces and generate new ideas.

Perhaps, our 'walls without history' may become symbolic 'windows' through color.

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