

Preserving Color in Modernist Architecture (1900-1975)

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Abstract:

Color has been important and integral to the social issues and the holistic environmental design approach of modernist architectural design since the 1920s. This importance, however, has often been completely missed by architects, historians, and preservationists. This widespread misconception and, therefore, the unwitting disregard for color in modern design can be attributed to a significant degree to the abundance of high quality black and white photographs of the period. Many of the early designers and architects were intensely interested in color (Le Corbusier, Aalto, Albers, Oud, etc.) but the discussion about the significance of color in their designs and thus the subsequent understanding of the role of color in the design and spatial development is limited.

Moreover, the profusion and quality of the black and white photography has in many ways defined early and mid-twentieth century Modern architecture. Ezra Stoller, Julius Shulman or Hedrich Blessing with their own artistry have memorialized the icons of the Modern Movement. These well-known images highlight the spatial relationships in modern design by simplifying the appearance of the buildings and their spaces enhancing shadows and light, closeness, transparency, lines, and volumes.

Subsequent changes to the existing buildings have made the appreciation of the original color difficult, while the iconic black and white images are continued in use illustrating an almost idealized appearance perceptually freezing these buildings in time and effectively limiting the discussion of color and color restoration.

Research and sampling techniques have revealed original color schemes of historic buildings from all periods of history with, in many instances, surprising results: colors and color schemes that are creative, sophisticated, environmentally supportive and stimulating. This type and depth of conservation undertaken in modernist buildings will help to remove the black and white mask and reveal their 'true' colors.

Case studies, like the ones shown (figures 1-3), will be explored to illustrate the relationships between Modern design, color and holistic design, black and white imagery, and perception.

Figure 1. H55 Pavilion – Helsingborg, Sweden



Figure 2. E 1027 House – Roquebrune Cap Martin, France



Eileen Gray – Le Destin, 1910

Le Corbusier Mural – E1027

Figure 3. Zonnestraal – Hilversum, The Netherlands

