

## **Chromatictownscape: a manifesto. Colour communication and cultural identity in urban planning and architecture**

**M. Cler,\* F. Cler,\* V. M. Schindler\***

*\* Atelier Cler Etudes Chromatiques Urbanisme Architecture Design, Paris  
64 rue Vergniaud FR-75013 PARIS  
E-mail: atmfccler@wanadoo.fr*

### **ABSTRACT**

CHROMATICTOWNSCAPE: A MANIFESTO. Methodologies that promote an understanding of the relevance and significance of chromatic expression are important to the development of contemporary urban culture and architecture. The central argument of this paper concerns a specific chromatic methodology primarily developed by the Atelier France & Michel Cler and called CHROMATICTOWNSCAPE. Using this method, the Atelier aims to rediscover and revitalise the sense of place and memory of a site and its community. An innovative methodological framework for orchestrating the appearance or *manifestation of light, texture and colour* for a maximum harmonious effect, CHROMATICTOWNSCAPE is expressed here as a *manifesto*, that is, the method is not only treated as a way of analysing and applying colour, but is also understood primarily as a *political* tool. Thereby, in addition to a description of the method, the main topics to be addressed in the following paper include: (1) general principles and terminology of the CHROMATICTOWNSCAPE Manifesto; and, (2) description of twenty-five year's experience of studying and applying colour in the context of the Industrial Park of the French Ain Area next to Lyon with details of how a *Chromatic Chart* is conceived to synthesize the appearance and perception of colour. The goal of this presentation is to encourage a wider understanding and application of CHROMATICTOWNSCAPE and its *Chromatic Chart*. Intended as a tool, the method can be used to develop colour as an expression of rhythms and tensions not only of physical properties of materials, but also of historical, cultural, social and economic tendencies including the richness and turnovers of the meanings attributed to colour. Thereby the sweeping homogenisation of globalisation, the colour exotism, and the mummified sense of traditionalism can be successfully countered by a richer and deeper approach to colour.

### **1. CHROMATICTOWNSCAPE : A MANIFESTO**

CHROMATICTOWNSCAPE is a position not a dogma.

CHROMATICTOWNSCAPE is, most importantly, not just an aesthetic issue.

CHROMATICTOWNSCAPE explores the contextually contingent quality of chromatic appearances as a constituent element in urban and architectural space.

CHROMATICTOWNSCAPE stands for a mode of research, the study of visible parameters and hidden forces of colour properties that influence mood, identity and sense of place.

CHROMATICTOWNSCAPE implies a proto- or preliminary process and new attitude towards the dynamic, non-linear and non-deterministic relationship between colour and concept; *a colour concept* is neither a purely theoretical ideal nor a literally exact concrete.

CHROMATICTOWNSCAPE includes a methodological framework whereby through chromatic studies, *light-texture-colour* can be coherently orchestrated in accordance with both the need for colour and the understanding of colour semantics.

CHROMATICTOWNSCAPE treats colour appearance as a significant life resource, a key element in the creation of a higher quality of environmental, urban and habitat space.

CHROMATICTOWNSCAPE takes the initiative to inform and activate local and regional councils and politicians, as well as planners, architects, industrialists, private clients and the general public.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

The *chromatic aspect* is above all a manifestation of the *political*. That is, colour not only *appears*, but is made *manifest*. Manmade applications of colour involve a complex diversity of material and discursive processes. However, this not only implies that colour should be considered as a major element of the *designed*, but it also refers to the fact that in order to appear colour has to be *perceived*. Architects and designers need to understand and conceive of their colour notions in relation to all these forces. How can this complexity be addressed?

This presentation concerns an innovative method called CHROMATIC TOWNSCAPE which has been extended and applied in a variety of urban, suburban and rural environments including projects in metropolitan centres, industrial areas, housing complexes, commercial tracts, and extensive regional development projects involving a number of different valleys and their respective villages, historic towns and new development areas.

On the one hand, as a *manifesto*, the aim of CHROMATIC TOWNSCAPE is to contribute towards a larger movement to free colour from its dormant role. Exploring and demonstrating the dialectical development and relationship of colour appearance in the past and present, of tradition and modernity, of lasting and incidental applications, CHROMATIC TOWNSCAPE helps to ensure a vivid and dynamic preservation of local *colour culture* while still bridging the differences of conflicting interests of identities brought about through industrialization and commercialisation. The result is a new system not only enabling a procedure with which to *identify and communicate colour*, but by which a *colour transfer* from one period of time to another can take place.

On the other hand, emphasizing process, CHROMATIC TOWNSCAPE combines a thorough analysis of the immediate visual experience with a methodological assessment of place and climate including an examination of historical, cultural, social and economic aspects. The aim is to identify chromatic qualities that could be said to belong to the place and to strengthen and enrich these by new external colours and aspects of texture of contemporary materials. The study results are synthesized in a *Chromatic Chart* that provides a solid foundation and serves as a design and communication tool for planners, architects, clients and other potential users. The *Chromatic Chart* is a suggestion constituting a basis for developing further sensibility and awareness of colour and the perception of colour in the surroundings. Thereby, it is intended to enable a richer and deeper creative response to colour in the future.

## 3. COLOUR CONCEPT

A *colour concept* is not an embodiment of an *a priori* idea.

*Chromatic explorations* address diverse aspects of a site especially its social, historical and cultural identity as a specific landscape, architectural and urban space. This is a complex and controversial challenge in the present age of telecommunication and globalisation where the local is being understood as a paradoxical *here-and-there*.

Through an important process combining empirical observation, a thorough analysis of place and climate, and a consideration of historical, cultural, social and economic factors, the identity of the site is allowed to emerge in a dynamic way through the interaction of a variety of different systems. At the same time, because the colour concept is always an *open system*, colour mood and colour identities of urban and architectural space are generated.

*Colour concepts* evolve into a *Chromatic Chart* that provide a synthesis of a whole range of information and serve as an important tool for planners, architects, clients and other prospective users.

*Colour culture* is becoming a *new tradition*, a *colour practice* part of urban planning and architectural design transmitted from generation to generation.

## 4. COLOUR PRACTICE

CHROMATIC TOWNSCAPE has been launched by the Atelier France & Michel Cler in diverse places, such as in the New Towns in France, in the Mediterranean city of Menton (France), in

Hong Kong, as well as in Hue (Vietnam) and the French West Indies.

As well, an outstanding example of CHROMATIC TOWNSCAPE in terms of landscape chromatic studies and under development since 1979 is the Industrial Park of the French Ain Area next to Lyon. Presently covering 410 hectares, an additional 360 hectares are available for future development. The Ain River to the west and the Rhone River to the east form natural borders. Beyond to the east, the South Revermont Mountains rise above the flat territory. A major north-south highway flanks the west side of the general site. The PIPA's corporate logo, created by the Atelier, is based on both its geographical situation as well as a symbolic colour concept. The green square background signifies the serenity of both the surrounding rural area and the environment in general. As the complementary colour of green, red was chosen as the colour for a pair of red lines which represent the Ain and Rhone Rivers and symbolize dynamism and energy.

In 1979, a special Concept Team – the architect/colour consultant team of the Atelier France & Michel Cler and the landscape architect Jean-François Treyve – was set up by the PIPA Management to be in charge of developing and maintaining the PIPA. The Concept Team's major goals include the following: making the industrial park secure, comfortable, and attractive for people working on-site and for visitors; creating and developing an integrated, coherent industrial area which is harmoniously related to qualities of the surrounding environment.

Since its launching more than twenty-five years ago, the PIPA has been recognized for its environmental protection practices. The overall chromatic coherence can be achieved either through sensitively introducing nonindigenous colours which are nonetheless harmonious within their new context, or, through developing a chromatic scheme which skilfully incorporates on-site colours.

As part of its general approach, the Atelier France & Michel Cler have developed the *Chromatic Chart* as an essential tool to work with colour appearances.

#### **4.1 The Chromatic Chart Concept**

*In the first stage* of developing the basic concept for the *Chromatic Chart* of the PIPA, the Atelier architect/colour consultant made an analysis of the minerals and plants found on-site and compiled a summary of existing colours and materials in various areas. A further survey of colour appearances under the changing conditions of the four seasons was then conducted.

*In a second stage*, the Atelier architect/colour consultant completed a diagnosis to generate the major *light-texture-colour-families*. These were then used to set up a colour guideline specific to the PIPA geographical site.

*In a third stage*, when the program of the PIPA was determined, the Atelier architect/colour consultant completed a synthesis of the colour appearances to develop a *Chromatic Chart* showing the intended general mood or ambiance of the site. The synthesis included a scheme of the various colour families for different zones and areas of the site. Besides the arrival and integration of new firms, major changes which require the updating of the *Chromatic Chart* and revision or new creation of colour schemes include the expansion of existing companies through facility extension or the addition of new buildings; the demolition and removal of facilities when firms go out of business; or, changes brought about through renovation necessary because of normal wear-and-tear or unexpected alternations due to poor facility maintenance or faulty materials. Finally, as PIPA Management personnel changes, new development policies are created which can greatly impact colour preferences as well as applications.

In considering the development of the PIPA, the *Chromatic Chart* and related colour schemes are not only important for the industrial buildings, but also for the signage system which greatly affect orientation and mood. Further, over the years, the security lighting system has been studied and it is planned that the night colour mood will become an integrated part of the PIPA *Chromatic Chart*.

As a key member in developing the successful PIPA *Chromatic Chart* over a twenty-five year period, the Atelier France & Michel Cler are concerned with preserving the memory of the site, establishing the identity of new buildings, strengthening and enhancing a sense of place and mood, using chromatic aspects to support the well-being of people and tracking chromatic development over time, an approach which the Atelier calls CHROMATIC TOWNSCAPE.

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