

# Competitions for colour schemes for streets and squares in Germany in the years 1925-31

Karolina Białobłocka

*Visiting Researcher, Faculty of Architecture, Technical University Berlin, Germany*

*Email: karolina.bialoblocka@gmail.com*

Research on historical examples of colour planning in the built environment has been undertaken in order to deepen the knowledge of colour in German architecture and urban planning. The methodology used includes analyses of written sources and archival designs. As a result, numerous examples of colour planning from the 1920s and 1930s have been detected and eight examples of competitions for colour schemes for streets and squares are presented in this article.

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## Introduction

The selection and use of colour in the built environment was widely discussed in Germany in the 1920s when the movement described as ‘the call for colour’ took place. The movement, which was characterised by the bold application of highly saturated colours, aimed to promote a welcoming built environment that lacked monotony. In particular, the Association *Die Farbige Stadt* was engaged in various activities that aimed to encourage the well-informed use of colour in German cities and towns. Apart from the promotion of theoretical knowledge, the association attempted to introduce much more colourful designs on newly erected structures and devoted great care for colour harmony on existing buildings. The latter task included cooperation with local councils, architects and painters’ associations in order to create guidelines on colour and to organise competitions for colour schemes. Competitions proved especially integral to this movement as these often enabled designs of high quality, promoted the widespread use of colour in the city, provoked discussions among professionals, and helped to increase the understanding of colour among inhabitants.

The correlation between the early 20th-century German architecture and colour has been explored previously in literature [e.g. 1-3]. However, still too little is known about historical methods of colour planning and competitions for colour schemes have never been analysed. To date, only selected examples of colour regulations in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s have been discussed by scientists. Rieger [4] investigated the colourful period of the 1920s in Germany and Switzerland and provided a brief overview on the activities undertaken by the *Die Farbige Stadt* Association. Bollerey and Hartmann [5] included the phenomenon of colour in the architecture of the 1920s in their discussion on historical colours. K. J. Krause [6] presented the colour proposal for the city centre of Osnabrück. Markowska [7] discussed two methods of colour planning regulations considered in Breslau (Wrocław) in the 1920s. The author of the present paper wrote about colours listed by the *Die Farbige Stadt* Association in the early 1930s as standard colours for Silesia [8], and compared those with the colour proposals for Lübeck and Zerbst [9]. A. Vronskaya [10] discussed colour regulations of the 1920s Zurich in relation to social and political background in Europe, including Germany.

The present research aims to expand and deepen the knowledge of colour planning in architecture and urbanism, especially (i) the knowledge of the methods with which colour used to be coordinated and regulated, (ii) the colour schemes that took place in the past, and (iii) the impact that reorganised colour can have on the built environment. In regard to the methodology, archival research has been utilised as a source of data on historical competitions. Both visual and written sources, such as designs and articles published in architectural magazines, have been analysed<sup>1</sup>.

As a result, eight competitions for colour schemes for small-scale locations have been detected. The competitions discussed in the following paper were launched for either a single street or a square in cities and towns throughout the whole of Germany between the years 1925-31. The comparative analysis of eight cases provides information on the way colour was introduced and coordinated in the built environment in Germany at that time<sup>2</sup>.

## Case studies

### ***Competition for a street in Hamburg, 1925***

The competition for a colour scheme for Grosse Burstach Street was launched in Hamburg in 1925. It was a busy street, filled with buildings of different heights, erected in various architectural styles and faced with different finishing materials in different colours; namely, plaster, stone, brick and glazed tiles. The expected outcome of the competition was a colour scheme that would unify the whole street and prevent further discord of that busy area caused by, among other things, too many colours and shades applied.

In order to achieve that goal, four commercial key buildings faced with brick and stone were pinpointed to serve as an inspiration: Certighaus (faced with glazed red bricks); the Geber Alsberg Department Store, the headquarters of the Büsing & Zeyn Company (both faced with grey-yellow sandstone) and the Schurig Department Store (covered with green glazed tiles).

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<sup>1</sup> Analysis of archival sources revealed that issues on colour were usually discussed in the Periodical *Die Farbige Stadt*. Comments on colour in architecture appeared much rarer in the other architectural magazines. The archive of the *Die Farbige Stadt* Association was not detected.

<sup>2</sup> Little is known whether the award-winning entries were executed on site. Comments in the press only indicate that the first prize entry was executed on site in Altona.

The three colours of the key buildings - green, red and yellow - were suggested to be applied to all the remaining plastered buildings in the following order: (i) the east part of the street, where the red Certighaus was located, was to be painted shades of red, (ii) yellow was suggested for the middle section between the Geber Alsberg and Büsing & Zeyn' buildings, and (iii) the west part of the street, dominated by the green Schurig Department Store, was to be painted shades of green (see Figure 1, street plan).

As a result, the huge number of hues that previously contributed to spatial chaos was reduced. The design, inspired by colours of natural materials already used within the area, was based on tonal contrast of red, yellow and green. Painted three different colours, the street was divided into three parts, but the unity of the area was strengthened by applying gold to lettering and the same hue (typically white) to all the window frames (see Figure 1) [11].



Figure 1: A colour scheme proposed for Grosser Burstah, Hamburg. The street views present the middle, 'yellow' section from both sides. Looking at the street plan, one gets the impression that the curve of the street prevents from seeing three colour sections at the same time. Reproduced from *Die Farbige Stadt*, 1927, Heft 5, Tafel 1, p79.

### Competition for a square in Breslau, 1926

The competition for a colour scheme for a square in front of the main railway station in Breslau (present day Wrocław) was launched in 1926. The site was a vast area surrounded by 19th-century architecture. A monumental neo-Gothic railway station building dominated the area on the south side and tenement houses enclosed the square on the north side (see Figure 2).

A multi-coloured approach ("Multi-colouredness") characterised the winning entry by the painter A. Walter, who designed combinations rich in colour and tonal contrasts. Most of the elevations were comprised of two or three colours, and a vast range of colours – from blue, brown, green, purple, red, yellow to white - were used. Only a few elevations were monochromatic, painted brown or yellow.

Strong tonal and light contrasts were achieved by colour arrangements - shades of red were juxtaposed with white or off-white, blue with yellow or beige, and purple with yellow and turquoise.

Different geometric arrangements were used. Generally, colours were applied in rectangular compositions (in two cases, one of which being the railway station, colours were designed alternately in horizontal red and white stripes). Although these did not create an easily perceived rhythm within the whole square, some amount of repetition would have been noticeable. Blue and yellow elevations were arranged alternately with brown and yellow buildings and with red and white buildings.

Multi-colouredness, the main feature of the entry, was instrumental in creating the atmosphere of gaiety, but it did not intend to provide strict unity of the area (see Figure 2) [12].



Figure 2: The winning entry for a colour scheme for the area in front of the main railway station in Breslau (Wrocław). The top picture depicts the railway station. Reproduced from *Schlesischer Malerbund, 1927, Heft 15, Tafel 9*.

### **Competition for Market Square in Brandenburg an der Havel, 1928**

The competition for a colour scheme for the Market Square in Brandenburg an der Havel was launched in 1928 in order to unify the old and new buildings of different architectural styles, heights and exterior finishes.

To achieve this goal, a matt slate blue was chosen as a principal hue of the colour scheme. A reduced palette also included shades of red and achromatic hues (white, off-white, grey). The shades of red were introduced with a view to improving proportions of irregular walls and enlivening the square. The whole colour scheme was based on the composition of two colours (blue and red) in various shades, which were applied to each building in a different way and quantity (to the walls, architectural details or timber elements such as entrance doors and shutters). Achromatic hues, which were applied to some walls on the highest floor level, window frames, some window bays and architectural details, enriched the whole colour scheme and provided additional contrast of dark and light surfaces.

The desired unity of the market square was achieved by the use of a limited colour palette. However, the colours were applied irregularly in order to not evoke the unwelcome sense of monotony. The use of multiple contrasts was another means of preventing monotony. Thus, there appeared contrasts of cool and warm colours (blue versus red), contrasts of lightness (blue/red versus white/grey) and contrasts of saturation (maroon versus pale pink) (see Figure 3) [13].



Figure 3: The winning entry in the competition for a colour scheme for Market Square in Brandenburg an der Havel. Reproduced from *Die Farbige Stadt*, 1928, Heft 8, Tafel 1 and 2.

### **Competition for a street in Kiel, 1928**

The Town Council of Kiel chose Am Wall Street to experiment with colour. The street, located along the harbour, was filled with 19th-century plastered houses and flanked on both sides with brick buildings.

In order to gain a high quality design, a competition was launched in 1928. The work by the painter H. Lundstedt, the winner of the competition, was praised for the following features: the way the inconsistent architecture was united by a uniform colour scheme, the non-identical treatment of individual façades, and the respect for individual features of each building achieved by a clever modification of the fundamental tone.

The proposed colour palette was limited to warm hues (shades of orange, red and yellow) and the design was based on contrasts of lightness and saturation. The spatial order was introduced by the regular sequence of colours applied to the wall surfaces, ranging from the darkest tones (applied to the corner buildings and the building in the middle) to the lightest tones in between the aforementioned buildings (Figure 4, street plan). The buildings were bi-coloured. All the architectural details were suggested to be painted the same light hue, probably white or off-white. Similarly, the window frames were consistently white and the entrance doors were either dark (black or brown) or red or white. A surviving illustration suggests that the walls of the ground floor level were painted darker shades of the same colour as the upper floors.

The unification of Am Wall Street was achieved by a repetition of the warm hues on the wall surfaces in regular rhythm and by a single hue used on the architectural details across the whole street, whereas the multitude of contrasts helped to dispel any feeling of sameness or dullness (see Figure 4) [14].



Figure 4: The winning entry in the competition for a colour scheme Am Wall Street in Kiel (the left side of the street). The black and white street plan indicates the strong contrast of colour lightness. Reproduced from *Die Farbige Stadt*, 1928, Heft 4, Tafel 2, p88.

### **Competition for a square in Breslau, 1928**

The competition for a colour scheme for Blücherplatz (Plac Solny) in Breslau (Wrocław) was launched in 1928. Blücherplatz, a medieval square in the city centre, was surrounded mostly by medieval buildings of different sizes and with façades rebuilt in different architectural styles. The approach of the authors of the two winning entries differed, especially in regard to the number of colours suggested.

The first design, based on a combination of two colours, the saturation of those colours, and light contrasts. The painter, A. Scheu, reduced a colour palette to yellow and brown. Shades of those two hues were applied to the walls and architectural details in various arrangements. The darkest shades were used on the upper floors and lightened towards the ground floor level. The architectural details, such as window surrounds, were usually painted a lighter shade than the wall surfaces. The window frames were white or blue, the entrance doors were black, and the bases were dark, in either brown or black (Figure 5, upper picture).

The other design, by the painter A. Walter, was much more colourful, with hue, light and saturation contrasts being used. Judging by the only available drawing of the proposal for the north frontage of the square, there was no limitation in regard to the amount of colours – the façades were painted brown, green, grey, red and yellow. Some of the façades were monochromatic and some bi-coloured. Hues were arranged in various ways. Architectural details were differentiated from the wall surfaces, and the upper floors were painted darker shades than the lower floors (Figure 5, lower picture).

The design by A. Scheu was chosen for execution. That entry was prized as it intensified the power of colour and increased the unity of the much differentiated square [15].



Figure 5: The winning entries in the competition for a colour scheme for a square in Breslau (Wrocław). The design of the north side of the square by the painter Alfred Scheu (upper picture), the design by the painter Alfred Walter (lower picture). Reproduced from *Die Farbige Stadt*, 1928, Heft 4, Tafel 1.

### **Competition for a square in Altona, 1929**

The competition for a colour scheme for the square at Hauptkirche in Altona was launched in 1929. The elongated triangular “square” was bounded by a red brick Baroque church, a busy street and a long row of buildings (erected in different architectural styles but uniform in terms of exterior finishes). Special attention had to be paid to the colour scheme for the row of buildings as it dominated the square.

Four entries that unified the area were award-winning. All of them are discussed below as they provide information on different approaches to colour planning.

The painter, J. Werdo, who was awarded the first prize, designed colour schemes that were based on a combination of three colours, namely: brown, green and red; these were to be applied to the walls above the ground floor level<sup>3</sup>. That vivid and colourful arrangement of the upper floors was balanced by the two colours applied to the ground floor level across the whole row of buildings. Dark grey-brown was used on the walls and red on the entrance doors, metal fittings and window frames. The unity was also increased by the use of white on the window frames and window surrounds above the ground floor level. Additionally, the irregular height of the buildings was balanced by the application of brown on the upper floors of the highest buildings, making them similar in colour to the colour of the roofs. As a result, the colourful and differentiated row of buildings made an impression of being consistent and unified (see Figure 6, top picture).

The colour scheme by the painter G. Ramcke, which was based on a strong light contrast, was awarded the second prize. The characteristic feature of the scheme was a domination of achromatic hues (light grey, off-white) which, as a result of being applied to the walls, created big light surfaces juxtaposed with smaller surfaces of dark, chromatic window frames, entrance doors and other architectural details painted grey-blue, brown, grey-green and light brown. Consequently, the designed colour scheme enlivened the buildings and provided variety to the square. However, the

<sup>3</sup> When finally executed in oil paints, those colours were acknowledged as moderate, rather bright then dull, but not obtrusive.

unity of the row was broken by vivid coloration of three buildings in the row (yellow, red) (see Figure 6).

The entry by the painter W. Ohnesorge (the second prize ex aqua) was based on a combination of warm hues, in which temperature and lightness played the key roles. Shades of red, orange and yellow were arranged along the row in a regular sequence, with darker colours of the longest waves being located on the edges of the row. The façades were to be painted monochromatically, but in some cases architectural details were to be slightly differentiated with grey, beige or light brown. Warm hues were planned for the entrance doors and lettering (see Figure 6).

A similar idea presented by the painter H. Lüdders in his entry was awarded the third prize. That colour scheme was also based on combination of warm hues arranged in accordance with hues and lightness. The only difference concerned temperature and lightness. The former increased and the latter lowered from left to the right side of the row of buildings. The unity of that colour scheme was strengthened by a red hue which was applied to the architectural details, bases, entrance doors and to most of the window frames (see Figure 6) [16].



Figure 6: The four entries rewarded in the competition for a colour scheme for a square in Altona. From top: the first prize entry by J. Werdo, the second prize entries by G. Ramcke and by W. Ohnesorge, the third prize entry by H. Lüdders. Reproduced from *Die Farbige Stadt*, 1929, Heft 6, Tafel 1-4.

### ***Competition for a square in Osnabrück, 1929***

A colour scheme was proposed for the area that was formed by three streets that ended near the Hegertor Gate in Osnabrück. The square was hardly defined by buildings and lacked clear regular boundaries typical of a square - it was rather a curvature of roads leading to Hegertor. This was the reason that the regular rhythm of colours that would typically be found in a regular square was not considered for the area. Additionally, the colour proposal that already had been implemented for the entire old town of Osnabrück provided rules that had to be taken into consideration. First, shades of dull blue were named in the guidelines as the basic tones for the square. Second, white was proposed for window frames.

The winning entry by H. Markmeyer followed the guidelines, and the whole area was unified by blue. The walls were to be painted various shades of blue, grey-blue or green-blue, with deeper blue applied to the façades located closer to the gate, and grey and green-blue to the façades located further from the gate. The suggested shades were delicate but neither obtrusive nor sweet. The whiteness of the window frames also unified the whole area. Other hues – green, red and yellow – were applied to the smaller surfaces, such as timbered window surrounds, selected ground floor walls, bases, lettering, and entrance doors.

As a result, the mixture of blue shades provided a feeling of order and unity, and colourful details helped to avoid the unwelcome feeling of monotony and boredom (see Figure 7) [17].



*Figure 7: The winning entry by H. Markmeyer in the competition for a colour scheme for the square near Hagertor in Osnabrück. Reproduced from Die Farbige Stadt, 1929/30, Heft 12, Tafel 1.*

### ***Competition for a row of houses in Tübingen, 1931***

A competition for a colour scheme for a row of buildings in Tübingen was organised in 1931. It was a representative area of the city, located along the river Neckar, between the bridge Neckarbrücke and the tower Hölderlinturm.

The organisers formulated preliminary conditions. First, the colour scheme should emphasise the character of the area defined as ‘a city wall’ and, for this reason, pure colours should be excluded<sup>4</sup>. Second, the buildings were richly ornamented so it was advised to avoid both strong colours and light contrasts. The window frames were expected to be painted white and stone was to be left exposed and unpainted – those hues were indicated as binding elements for the colourful row of houses. The green colour of a corner house was to be maintained, too.

Two entries, a design by E. Schmidt rewarded with the first prize and an out-of-competition design by G. Lepple, were considered for implementation. Both designs followed the conditions of the competition and both were based on combinations of a vast range of hues with no strong tonal and light contrasts.

The award-winning design consisted of a vast range of colours, consisting of blue, green, grey, maroon, orange, and yellow. Warm and cool hues were painted alternately. The buildings were painted monochromatically with stronger shades of the same or different colour being applied to the shutters. The richness of that scheme was gained by several tonal contrasts, but the area was uniform due to a lack of strong light and saturation contrasts.

The other design proposed a similar combination of colours, yet the palette was narrower and limited to dull and mellow, mostly warm colours. As a result, the whole colour composition was much more uniform in comparison to the successful design (see Figure 8) [18].



Figure 8: The colour schemes for the row of buildings along the Neckar River in Tübingen. The design rewarded the first prize by E. Schmid (above) and purchased design by G. Lepple (below). Reproduced from *Die Farbige Stadt, 1931, Heft 9, Tafel 1-2, Heft 10, Tafel 1-2*.

## Summary

The competitions discussed above were organised in Germany in the years 1925-31, during the colourful period in architecture known as the call for colour. By seeking high quality designs for areas

<sup>4</sup> The organisers perceived earth paints mixed with black or white as the best hues for the periphery of the city centre, especially as they were in line with stone hues of a church and a castle.

that suffered from spatial chaos, the organisers aimed to increase the awareness of colour and to promote the bolder use of it in architecture.

The eight competitions discussed above were launched for small-scale locations: five focused on squares and three on single streets. All the sites had similarities – the buildings represented various architectural styles, were of different heights, and usually faced with different finishing materials. In recognition of these differences, colour mainly aimed to unify those inconsistent spaces instead of differentiating them even more.

In most of the awarded entries, the atmosphere of spatial harmony and unity was achieved by the use of a limited colour palette, with the exception of two colourful designs for a row of houses in Tübingen and for two squares in Breslau (Wrocław). The number of colours that were to be applied to the bigger surfaces, usually to the walls, was very limited. It differed from one hue (Osnabrück) to three or four (if to distinguish off-white and grey in Brandenburg an der Havel). The application of two ‘main’ colours was suggested in Breslau (Wrocław) and of three ‘main’ colours in Hamburg, Kiel and Altona.

In terms of hues, different colours were suggested for walls. However, warm hues were more often suggested or were mixed with a cool hue<sup>5</sup>. In case of the use of one dominating colour, blue was chosen (Osnabrück); in case of bi-coloured composition - yellow and brown were suggested (Breslau); in case of tri-coloured compositions - the following hues were suggested: green, red, yellow or brown (Hamburg, Altona). In Brandenburg an der Havel two chromatic hues were composed with two achromatic hues – blue and red which were juxtaposed with grey and white. It was also characteristic to limit the number of colours applied to window frames – they were generally painted white or off-white.

In one case, the suggested colours were inspired by colours of existing buildings, namely by the colour of glazed slates of commercial buildings (Hamburg). Possibly, reds that were suggested in three winning entries in Altona were inspired by red bricks of the local Baroque church.

Smaller surfaces, like architectural details, were either painted different shades of colours of the walls (e.g. Breslau) or were painted different colours (e.g. Kiel, Osnabrück). It seems that architectural details were painted achromatic colours where the walls themselves were colourful, whereas in locations where walls were painted only one colour, architectural details were much more colourful.

In regard to compositions of the façades, colours were arranged in different ways. Compositions were either very regular (Kiel) or more accidental (Brandenburg an der Havel, Breslau). In the first case, rhythms were achieved by application of colours on façades in regular order (Kiel, Altona) or by differentiating floors by means of application of shades of the same colour (Breslau). Irregular compositions varied from horizontal stripes to mixtures of rectangular colourful surfaces.

In terms of the function of colour in architecture, colour usually served as a tool to create an atmosphere of harmony that increased the sense of security and comfort. Furthermore, colour helped to create spatial illusion. The latter visual device is especially noticeable in details designed to optically lower the height of buildings. One’s perception of the different sizes of buildings was adjusted by applying the colours of roofs (or less noticeable, achromatic hues) to the walls of the highest floor levels, thus visually blending these sections of the building together.

The discussed colour schemes unified spaces that varied in style, size and ornamentation. Unity was achieved by colour and shade limitation as well as by application of a single hue to the same parts of

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<sup>5</sup> Little is known about saturation and lightness of the suggested hues. They could have been muted and executed in lime technique, but also intense, painted with synthetic paints. The only indications took place in Tübingen where pure colours were forbidden.

the buildings throughout the whole area. On the other hand, the feeling of monotony usually was avoided by means of colourfully painted smaller surfaces. Generally, it seems that these carefully chosen unified schemes were achieved in either of two ways: (i) the larger, more colourful surfaces were unified by a single hue of smaller surfaces (e.g. Kiel), or (in contrast) (ii) walls of a single hue were enlivened by colourful details (e.g. Osnabrück). In that way, by providing coherent colour designs, these competitions focused on colour schemes helped to create a sense of order and harmony in small-scale locations throughout Germany in the years 1925-31.

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