

# The Colour and the City at the Beginning of the 21st Century

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The rapid economic, technological and cultural changes pose a problem which affects man's habitat, in which some fundamental bases such as space, identity, means of communication and consumption are some of its constitutive aspects.

Colour, present in every activity of life, is a tool of expression and communication which requires, on the part of designers, an updated knowledge of its scope of action. It is necessary, therefore, to understand the problems involved in the city of the end of the century, which will enable us to fully exploit its communicative and expressive potential. Nowadays, the action of colour seems to be dominated by inner and external forces of this end of the century society with the complacency of its operators.

In the perceptual plane as well as in the level of icons colour is a basic element of a progressive structuring of the suggestion of the physical surroundings, by means of which the inhabitant realises the environment around him.

(Sanz 1993: 31).

This double interpretation of the role of colour and the responsibility of its action as a tool of design in the construction of the city leads to think about certain considerations as regards the changing panorama of the present city.

The urban phenomenon of the last decades has suffered changes due to the development of technologies of communication and information. In the contemporary city, technological innovations exert an important influence on social transformations, and therefore on spatial ones; however, they do not trigger changes by themselves. These innovations form part of a system of relationships among a group of social, territorial, political and economic factors such as social structure, power relations in different social classes, promotion and management models, consumption rules, organisation of local government, social-spatial division, etc. On the other hand, the link between the social-spatial transformations and the innovations in communication and information technologies, according to Finkelievich (1998:67), arise not only from the changes in the models of production but also from the

collective and individual consumption habits.

There is a process of emergence of a new space of communication and flow of information that goes beyond the boundaries and frontiers of territorial space. The informational city is defined by Castells (1998: 37) "as a new way of social organization made up by technology, cultural and social information and their relationship". This can be seen not only in the domestic field, which is linked with the rest of the city, the country and the world for productive and reproductive reasons, but also in business, where companies are organised on the basis of information and can control, decide and execute plans in different territorial fragments connected at a global level.

While facilitating this virtual elimination of territorial frontiers, communication and information technologies also leave a transforming imprint on the urban landscape: the new urban fragmentation overlaps with the fragments of the pre-computer age. This transformation of the urban space – physical space and weave of social practices – in everyday activities as well in the use of collective space takes place not only because of the transformations in the model of production fostered by these new technologies but also as a consequence of their consumption.

The city immersed in this activity becomes a huge producer of consumption of objects, information and images. Simultaneously, its spatial and symbolic configuration is involved in the growth of multi-cultural crossings and the invisible nets of communication technologies which blur any possible local identity and tend to turn the physical space into a metaphoric concept. More and more contrasts seem to characterise different settings: contrasts between historic centres and obscure agglomerations, between luxury and poverty, between the rashness of street violence and the quietness of preserved enclaves, being public spaces the places where the paradox between the local and the global, the phenomenon of globalization and the impact of computer networks take place in full measure. There are transformations which are contradictory or divergent: in a society in which we are more and more involved with notions of the global, in a world that is closer and more integrated in terms of the imaginary,

the biggest fragmentation and gap are taking place. If there once was a slum next to a residential neighbourhood, the slum is today next to a closed, fenced neighbourhood, self-sufficient and self-protected. The technologies in computing which promise that bond and integration at all levels, also allow the total isolation of individuals.

Evidently, these changes influence the way man perceives, relates to and communicates with his urban scenario, in which the action of colour is involved in the concrete perception of all its components.

### **The performance of colour**

The chromatic aspect helps to express this city of contrasts, in which everything is unlimited exposed and seen, in which the over-action of colour and cesias<sup>1</sup> (Caivano 1991: 24) are present everywhere, shown in the graphic character of architecture, its geometry, the constitutive planes outlined in the distant sky, the unusual perspectives at street crossings or the reflections in glassed or mirrored walls, in the environment design that works on the relationship between the notices and their surroundings, in the typical effects of urban signals, in the organising flow of traffic in the highways or the net of advertising notices. The proliferation of showy logos which give even the smallest shop a certain corporate flair; the important bulk of books, magazines, newspapers, television screens, the cinema or Internet pages and the slightest object show that hardly anything has been able to escape from the compulsion of design-show.

When we speak of globalization, of incomprehensible simultaneity, of antipodal cities which offer the same images, attributes, customs and icons it seems as if the utopian idea of universal design were taking place. That utopia embodied in the Bauhaus in Germany during the first two decades of the century did not only mean achieving the articulation of art, design and everyday life but it also wanted to achieve harmony in the world of objects and equal an distribution of these objects among men.

But this new end of the century, which lacks vanguard, does not appear to be visionary; the impact of design suggests a much more varied and unbridled

general trend which, supported by software, tries to re-formulate every graphic sign and attempts at invading the urban spaces from graphics and notices to architecture itself. This phenomenon cannot be explained just by the advances of multinational corporations and the need for a constant growth in the market; it really leads the changes in the imaginary which makes the visual a competitive arena for a ferocious fight for distinctness. Indeed, in this capitalist post-modernism, the market has put emphasis on its symbolic condition placing circulation before production, whereas the traditional notions of value and necessity have become obscure. In this way, paradoxically, even products are not seen as an inherent quality but as unclear objects, a reference whose value is confused with the publicity image that supports it, and very often is absent from the image itself. What is sold is not the product but a model of life, styles, images; the market, essential value in these days, reaches a cultural dimension linked to the configuration of identity.

### **The city**

Neither the city nor the public spaces can elude this tendency. The cities adopt competitive strategies that allow them to position themselves economically and symbolically at regional, national and international levels. The phenomenon of urban media affects every city, in a direct or indirect way, and shares the reform of the public space. The city, like commercial products, is being advertised by means of trade mark images that make up the frame of strategies of distinctness. The city is being made visible so that it regains its meaning. In the seventies, the transformations in urbanism partly destroyed the meaning of the city whereas nowadays, visibility operations of mediatic type are being used and these would help us find again a meaning by insisting on the competitive appearance of urban scenarios. In this way, the structuring of the urban image is related with the contemporary iconic creation which has been progressively affected and conquered, in multiple and simultaneous ways, by means of communication and the development of technologies of information; there is a change in the perception of time and space as well as a progressive sophistication of iconosyntactic

and symbolic resources, according to Sanz (1996: 12), which is seen, among others, in an icon verbality and a convergence between connotation and denotation.

The supremacy of the visible in the urban life policies is convincing though it damages what remains invisible, the untouchable in the city such as the density of its memory. Many supports are used but the urban imagery is undoubtedly the most invasive. An iconographic continent has emerged where multiple fixed or animated images present cities according to figurative standards. The visible is the occasional memory that originates in communicating the development of immediate history with a valuation of the instantaneous, established as a value. The urban interventions are managed by the media coverage which projects them as an imaginary dimension, the fiction of an organised, impressive social life and its scope.

Because of all this, the action of colour must be studied in these icon-linguistic forms, the chromatism of which carries subliminal messages and is a means of the construction of image, since sight is a psychophysical phenomenon, the iconic communication a social phenomenon and colour is a psychic one. It is necessary to study the role of colour in these strategies of the visible, since this action of the city with trade mark images is becoming metaphors, associative operations and symbolic images with the commitment of an observer who is building a different territoriality based on this imagology.

What is considered by means of this mediatic-festive territoriality is the imagibility or legibility of the city that Kevin Lynch (1960 [1970:11]) put forward, that is to say, that by affecting the external form of the city, its legibility is developed; the quality of the object set in the space provokes a more or less strong mental image. A city with strong legibility is distinguished from others by the increasing attention of urban receptors. This imagibility meets the need of identity and structure of modern cities through the constitutive elements of its language, of urban order and, more broadly speaking, of the idea of city that is supported.

How can we integrate the simultaneity, the speed, the overlapping of images and the immediacy with Lynch's three categories of identification of an object,

of spatial relation between the object and the observer and of meaning to provide the inhabitant with legible surroundings? The streets and squares, once the places for recurrent and orderly social events, have been changed through the media into ephemeral, mobile events with no historic value.

How can we match the basic human needs of orientation and sense of place when these places are under the mediatic manipulation of images, considering types and formats that do not belong to urban design? There have always been imagologists; they worship the image and neglect the essence of objects, they are promoters of appearance. The present omnipresence of publicity, political and artistic images in the public field provoke the restatement of the meaning, construction and appearance of public places. It can be said that the public image replaces, somehow, the public places where social communication used to take place; nowadays, this communication develops according to the availability of images that erode any other possibility. Publicity in places such as underground stations has the clear objective of decentralising individuals and of creating a metaphoric space; besides, the urban publicity is a way of introducing the private in the public field. That is why the public space, the symbolic role of the square, lacks its collective substance. There is also an ambiguous relation between architecture and public image since the former is not only a publicity support but it also becomes publicity itself.

### **Possible ways**

The research on the action of colour and its use as a tool of design in an environment saturated with technologies of information and communication with characteristics of virtuality and features of globality leads to the fact, today more than ever, that we have to admit that the science of colour is a science of information with a psychological focus which has gained ground and has given back to colour its principal function, a referential function in its surroundings.



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The above mentioned encourages the consideration of the problem of colour in the city and establishes its action in the construction of its image taking into account some questions: Should colour be for man's living space in the city or should it be a vehicle of subliminal images that substitute a real urban physiognomy? Must colour identify a city? or Should it increase its potential for orientation and perception? Is colour to achieve a global mimesis? or Does it confirm an identity based on patrimonial testimony?

What has been stated before suggests that, in a commitment with the social, the aesthetic and the ideological it is necessary to act by thinking critically about colour from the open perspective of the science of colour avoiding the immediate complacency and resorting to memory, essential to build the future.

## Notes

1. The name *cesia* has been proposed for that aspect of appearance which deals with the sensations aroused by differences in the spatial distribution of light.

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