Chapter 4
Notes on the Spatiality of Colour

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores colour phenomena through the lens of an architect. It proposes that colour experience is best understood as only partially a visual experience that has three interrelated components: the visual, how colours describe the spaces around us; environments, how colours change with their social, historical, and cultural contexts; and non-visible, what colours represent. What role does the chromatic imagination play in contemporary interiors space? The chapter proposes that spatial experience of any singular colour has a multiplicity of possible readings and dimensions, that there is no absolute value to colours. Our chromatic experience is mobile and fleeting, as the three components of colour experience shift and overlap.

INTRODUCTION

The use of colour in interior space is intricate (Murata, 2004). It’s a field that has been dominated by taste and fashion on the one hand and by colour science on the other. As a consequence, we overlook colour’s subtle interrelationships with its environments and its inhabitants, assuming that colour values are somehow fixed, absolute. The inescapable evidence is rather the opposite; the colours we see in space are like fleeting moments in networks of relationships that make up a spatial and social context. Hues shift in light and in time, and according to material contexts and the even language we use to describe them. Colours also depend on who sees them, how and where. To understand colours is to explore a situational understanding of space, and colour as a vital component in contemporary spatial practice.

Making-with-colour reaches back to earliest forms of spatial expression. Starting with mark making, drawing and later painting and craft, earths, pigments, red and yellow ochres the hues of crushed bones, whites of kaolin and shells, blacks of charred sticks, were among the ancient colours of drawing, painting and making. Early forms of making were making-with-colour, and these colours were the tones of the things of the natural world. Nowadays designers tend to use colour as standardised, chemical prod-

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Products. Colours are branded: super white, brilliant white, decorators white, simply white, marble white, snowfall white, white dove, paper white (to name but a few) are all shades of white, variously described as warm, cool, neutral, traditional or modern. The language of artificial colouring attempts to market shades of whites, but does not acknowledge that colour perception is both subjective and dependent on the scale the setting, colour context, orientation, material surface, lighting and time: it is as though a room of ‘snowfall white’ in say, Alaska will be experienced in the same way as the same colour in an interior of say, Sydney – and that it will not change differentially according to the time of the day, the seasons, and that it will not age. Even if the rooms were identical, we can assume that in a land of snow-covered landscapes, a ‘snowfall white’ wall will appear artificial compared to the experience of the same wall in a place where snow never falls. And in each case the experience of ‘snowfall white’ depends on a network of interdependencies that are as subtle as they are fundamental to the social and spatial understanding of colour. With the momentum of our dependency on screen-based colour, digital renders the commercialisation of interior products and the science of colour this craft has been levelled almost to the point of invisibility.

Colour science has a long tradition that emerges in the eighteenth century when colour starts to be ordered and aligned to geometric form. Some of the colour circles, colour triangles, globes and pyramids form these early theories reflect Newton’s seven colours, others add more, but all of them order colour according to the differentiated relationship between the three primaries, red, yellow and blue. The theories that followed Newton’s colour circle (Newton, 1704) such as Boutet (1708), Schiffermüller (1772), Müller (1803), Goethe (1810) and Chevreul (1839), through to Munsell’s Colour Atlas (1905) - later to be refined by Friedrich Wilhelm Ostwald’s Colour Primer (1916) – all use form to represent an encompassing colour system (Loske, 2019).

Others bring colour studies into the natural sciences and develop a formal classification of colour derived from a study of the natural world: Werner’s Nomenclature of Colours (1814) was Charles Darwin’s companion text on his voyage on the Beagle (1833) (Baty, 2017). A convergence of colour theory with science and art is supported by later colour theories of Hay and Field, among others, in the nineteenth century that culminated in the influential theories of Charles Henry (1889) among others, for whom the particle of colour became absolute, each colour understood independently of the other. Henry published a colour circle and aesthetic protractor in an attempt to systematically evaluate colour and influenced the development of post-impressionist technique. For artists such as Seurat and Signac the influence of Henry and the development of colour technique propelled their painterly experiments. It brought the traditions of painting, aesthetic theory and colour science together as the means of thinking of colour as an emotional or musical experience.

At the dawn of Modernism, the spatiality of colour was further reduced to the aesthetics of colour or subjective experience and subjugated to form and space-as-geometry:

The idea of form precedes that of colour. The form is preeminent, colour is but one of its accessories. Colour depends entirely of the material shape: the concept of a sphere, for instance, precedes the concept of colour; it is conceived as a colourless sphere, a colourless plane, colour is not conceived independently of some support. Colour is coordinated with form, but the reciprocal is not true. We believe, thus, that a theme should be selected for its forms and not for its colours. (Jeanneret and Ozenfant, 1918; Kane 2015)

There was another significant development: the industrialisation of colour. New kinds of paints, and techniques brought consistency into mass production of garment dyes and paints. New paint types
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