

# **GLASGOW COLOUR STUDIES GROUP**

## **Notes following the Twenty-Second Meeting, 5th February 2014**

The twenty-second meeting of the GCSG took place in Room 1, English Language, University of Glasgow. Thanks are due to Carole Biggam who organized the meeting, Carole Hough who acted as master of ceremonies, and to Christian Kay and Carole Hough who organized the refreshments.

Our speaker was Prof. Fiona McLachlan, Professor of Architectural Practice, Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture (ESALA), Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh.

### **Fiona McLachlan spoke on ‘Immersive, Transformational, Instrumental: Strategic Colour in Architectural Design’**

Her abstract is as follows:

The lecture will explore the transformative capabilities of colour in architecture through the work of selected architectural practices. It will discuss the outcomes of current research by Professor McLachlan, in collaboration with art historians at the Haus der Farbe in Zurich and Berlin, which considers the strategic use of colour within architectural design. The research process which was adopted reflects a phenomenological, empirical consideration of colour. Colour is rarely static, shifting in its appearance with light conditions, dependant on material surface, occasionally fugitive, ephemeral and frequently complex to define, in terms of its role. Architecture is experienced in a haptic sense, by a combination of visual, psychological and physiological signals. Rather than take a scientific approach to documenting colour, the research has adopted an experiential methodology. Colour, whether inherent in material or applied, has the capability to be used as an instrument to tune and transform architectural space. It affects the character, atmosphere, meaning, spatial understanding and hierarchy of architecture, and of place.

Commentary (by Carole Biggam; checked by Fiona McLachlan)

Prof. McLachlan believes architects lack confidence in the use of colour, and it should be considered more closely. Several buildings were presented with their various uses of colour. St Ignatius’ Chapel in Seattle, designed by the architect Steven Holl, uses coloured light to transform the perception of particular spaces. In his original drawing, he shows several cone shapes of different colours, representing different areas of the chapel, but he also uses white light for the foyer. Also by Steven Holl is the extension to the Cranbrook Institute of Science in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, again with much use of light but also large interior areas of red. The interior of the Reid Concert Hall, University of Edinburgh was re-designed by E. and F. McLachlan Architects, to create a sense of drama.

‘Families’ of colours, i.e. those which can be used in the same space to create particular effects, were described by D. R. Hay in his book ‘The Laws of Harmonious Colouring Adapted to House Painting’, published in Edinburgh in 1828. He often used one vivid colour from the ‘family’ for dramatic effect. Fiona McLachlan’s research into colour began with collecting the

colours the practice had used on various commissions and then creating a triptych, showing the colours in the chronological order in which they had been used. It was interesting to see that the 1980s colours had never appeared again, and that with social housing projects, a softer palette was used, mainly because the architects did not know the occupants. Fiona McLachlan then read colour theory in depth, as presented by authors such as Goethe and Runge, but she particularly liked the work of Michel Eugène Chevreul, in 'The Laws of Contrast and Colour' (English edition, 1861). Chevreul was a chemist who became the director of the famous Gobelins dye works in Paris. People often find colours confusing because they can be perceived differently according to their neighbouring colours, and in different lighting conditions. There is a certain anxiety about colour among architects, many of whom avoid it. Consider the book 'Chromophobia' by David Batchelor. Le Corbusier restricted his colours to forty-three so "one could act with security". Some modern buildings, however, are more adventurous.

The architectural practice of Sauerbruch Hutton, based in Berlin, designed a building for the Fire and Police services of the city, with green panels on the exterior of one side for the Police, and with red panels on the other for the Fire Services, although a few panels appear on the 'wrong' side so as not to completely isolate the two services from each other. The German artist, Gerhard Richter, produced a work entitled '1024 Farben' in 1974, consisting of small squares of 1,024 colours, which has similarities to the Sauerbruch Hutton panels. The panels appear to undermine form. Also by Sauerbruch Hutton is the Brandhorst Museum in Munich which has coloured ceramic rods on the exterior. As one moves further away from the buildings, the many colours merge into an overall beige impression.

A particularly bold use of colour can be seen on the Agora Theatre in Lelystad, The Netherlands, designed by UN Studio. The exterior is bright orange, and the interior is red. However, the walls of the interior are 'crumpled' not flat, and painted in about nine different reds increasing the sense of three-dimensionality. The foyer and stairs are partly in pink which gives the impression of a ribbon wrapping around the interior. There is in fact only one shade of pink but the changing lights make it seem that there are several. Also by UN Studio is the La Defense office complex in Almere, The Netherlands, in yellows, oranges and reds, but the colours change as the viewer walks around the buildings.

Fiona McLachlan is involved in the Colour Capture Project, set up in 2012, with colleagues in Berlin and the Haus der Farbe in Zurich. Their focus is on the strategic use of colour, studying a range of buildings from the 1920s to the present, and producing accurate colour portraits of each building. The project members have learnt to make and use colours by hand to create sample cards. A methodology was developed to allow the process to be repeated across the three cities involved. The colour samples had to be matched to each building rather than to a single brick or other sample, since that is how people see buildings.

Next, some of the buildings involved were presented, such as the award-winning Forth Valley College in Stirling (2012) by Reiach and Hall. The stairs are built from larch-wood, partly whitewashed to quieten the effect, referred to as "hushed tonalities". Also by this practice is the new Bannockburn Heritage Centre (2013) which 'invites the light in' as it is a rather gentle northern light. The exterior has a 'charred' dark grey appearance. The work of Sir Basil Spence is also studied, such as his Claremont Court housing (1959–62) and Canongate housing (1959–61), both in Edinburgh. Spence was flamboyant but many of his colours have since been changed. For example, his strong blue-black at Claremont Court would not have formed such a strong contrast at the period, because of the surrounding blackened buildings, but it does not now survive. The original colours used are researched through documentary sources and

scrapes from the buildings. His colour sense seems to come from his early career, such as his work for the Festival of Britain (1951), and his drawings use the same colours.

Fiona McLachlan has published a book 'Architectural Colour in the Professional Palette' (Routledge, 2012).

### **News**

If you have suggestions for, or offers of GCSG talks (any format), please contact Carole Biggam at [c.p.biggam@btinternet.com](mailto:c.p.biggam@btinternet.com) Please note that we attempt to produce a balanced programme (i.e. different disciplines) and do not necessarily accept talks in the order in which they are offered. Nonetheless, all offers are most welcome and will be acknowledged.

Please report any new publications (books or articles) or other colour-related news on our discussion list at [ColourStudies@jiscmail.ac.uk](mailto:ColourStudies@jiscmail.ac.uk)