

The evolution of environmental colour design in the French period

Verena M. Schindler ^{1,3,*} and Yulia A. Griber ^{2,3}

¹ Art and Architectural Historian, Zollikon, Switzerland; ecd.studygroup@yahoo.com

² Smolensk State University, Smolensk, Russia; y.griber@gmail.com

³ Co-Chair of the AIC Study Group on Environmental Colour Design

* Corresponding author: ecd.studygroup@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper describes the third (and final) part of an analysis of the results of an on-going research project concerning the French period of environmental colour design. In May 2019, a qualitative oral history approach was used to conduct a series of semi-structured interviews in French with six colour consultants presently living in Paris: Michel Albert-Vanel, Yves Charnay, Victor Chérubin Grillo, Bernard Lassus, André Lemonnier, and Jean-Philippe Lenclos. Applying an inductive approach and implementing a thematic analysis for the interpretation and representation of the interview data revealed answers to the question “*Comment voyez-vous l'évolution de la couleur dans l'environnement?*” or, in English, “How do you see the evolution of colour in the environment?” The answers of the six colour designers carefully analyzed in the French context since the 1950s contribute to a better understanding of key aspects of the evolution of environmental colour design.

Keywords: *environmental colour design, colour design, semi-structured interviews, qualitative oral history approach, French context*

INTRODUCTION

Analyzing history, current developments, and the possible future of colour in architecture and environmental design, one cannot help but notice that the specificity of knowledge about colour in environmental design in the 1950s and 1960s sparked the birth of a new profession: the colour consultant (see, e.g., Prieto 1995; Caivano 2006). In collaboration with architects, designers, engineers, town planners, and industrialists, and other professionals, colour consultants have worked in France as colour theorists and researchers addressing in their influential projects several topics such as: colour for new buildings, historical city centres, industrial architecture, and local or regional urban landscapes. Their theoretical insights and practical approach to colour have not only shaped the city, but also significantly influenced colour research, colour education, and the approach to colour in the built environment.

We conducted a series of interviews with the representatives of the first generations of French colour designers presently living in Paris to study this important French period as a holistic artistic phenomenon to better understand the ideas of the French colour consultants and to trace their influence on the traditions of contemporary environmental colour design. The idea behind this project was that these renowned French colour consultants embody unique experience and knowledge, whose value will increase over time. If this heritage is not collected and analyzed now, much will be lost forever.

The first results of this ongoing research project concerning the French period of environmental colour design were presented in 2019 at the First Russian Congress on Colour (Griber et al. 2019) and the AIC 2019 Midterm Meeting (Schindler et al. 2019). In 2020, we continued the analysis and presented the philosophy of colour in the French period of environmental colour design at the International Conference of the Color Society of Russia (Schindler and Griber 2021). This paper describes the third (and final) part of our study.

METHOD

To explore subjective viewpoints (Flick 2009) and gather in-depth accounts of the experiences of persons who have contributed to the history of environmental colour design, a qualitative oral history approach was used in a series of semi-structured interviews.

Selected on the basis of the nature and design of the study, the aims and research questions, and the relevance to the theory of environmental colour design, six colour consultants were asked to participate in the study:

- Colour designer, inventor of the Planetary Colour System *Michel Albert-Vanel* (b. 1935);
- Visual artist, painter, creator of a patented colour-light device, and designer of light installations *Yves Charnay* (b. 1942);
- Visual artist, colour designer for architecture and industry *Victor Chérubin Grillo* (b. 1944);
- Landscape architect and visual artist *Bernard Lassus* (b. 1929);
- Painter, visual artist, colour researcher, inventor of patented colour tools and atlas, and colour designer for architecture and industry *André Lemonnier* (b. 1937);
- Colour designer, visual artist, colour researcher, and creator of the concept 'The Geography of Colour' *Jean-Philippe Lenclos* (b. 1938).

Our interviewees are Professors Emeritus at the *École nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs* (Michel Albert-Vanel, Jean-Philippe Lenclos, and Yves Charnay) and the *École nationale supérieure d'Arts de Paris-Cergy* (Victor Chérubin Grillo). Bernard Lassus taught at several different universities in Versailles, Paris, Pennsylvania, Cambridge UK, and Bologna.

All interviews took place in May 2019 in Paris at the homes or studios of the interviewees. They were conducted in French and videorecorded.

The topic guidelines for the interviews included five groups of exploratory, open-ended questions about spiritual, philosophical, and intellectual influences on their design projects and sources of their inspiration; people they considered their teachers and successors; and, their way of practicing colour.

This paper discusses findings related to one of our most important interview questions: "*Comment voyez-vous l'évolution de la couleur dans l'environnement?*" or, in English, "How do you see the evolution of colour in the environment?"

RESULTS

After the videotaped interviews were transcribed, edited, and translated from French into English, we applied an inductive approach and implemented a "thematic analysis" (see, e.g., Evans 2017) for the interpretation and representation of the data collected.

As expected, relatively unstructured interviews allowed the interviewees enough space to answer on their own terms.

Landscape architect and visual artist *Bernard Lassus* asserts that the role of colour has changed since the 1950s. In his opinion, in the fifties and in the following decades colour was very important in architecture and social housing, mainly for economic reasons. Compared to other building materials and construction elements colour was more accessible and often played a decisive role in the appearance of architecture. Basically, colour was something that transformed architecture enormously and attractively while costing less than other materials.

Bernard Lassus sees strengthening the holistic approach to colour as the main force driving the evolution of environmental colour design. The holistic approach implies treating colour not as an isolated element separated from the other senses but using colour in its relationship to light, material,

movement, and many other dimensions and qualities that make up the atmosphere. Understood in this way, colour has considerable power and often is underestimated.

Colour designer *Jean-Philippe Lenclos* thinks that in today's life colour has become an essential dimension of the environment. Through communication via the press, television and social media, colour enters all areas of our lives and becomes omnipresent. Without being fully aware of it, people, and society in general, are permanently infused with colour in the living environment and landscape. On a sociological level, it can be observed that people are unconsciously being trained and gradually understand that colours are part of their life, their choice, and their mental perception of things. As a consequence, the colour designer's tasks also change. Today colour consultants are obliged to carry out long-term research projects to contribute to producing objects for the living environment in which colour plays a very specific role and corresponds to very precise expectations of the users and consumers.

Colour researcher *Michel Albert-Vanel* also believes that colour is becoming more and more important at all levels, but at the same time he sees the explanation for the omnipresence of black in fashion and architecture as the fact that people are afraid of colour. He emphasizes that this kind of chromophobia is completely alien to traditional cultures: "When you travel abroad, (...) you are immersed in the country's colours (...). In India, in particular, you cannot help but be impressed by the beautiful colours of the saris that women wear. If you go to Mexico, there are a lot of colours too; it is quite astonishing especially in the villages. And if you travel to Peru to Lake Titicaca you are welcomed by women wearing clothes of multiple vibrant colours similar to the colours of butterflies. It is really wonderful."

Colour designer *Victor Chérubin Grillo* is convinced that environmental colour design is a reflection of the society we live in: multicultural and evolving. Some architectural projects express freedom with saturated colours and polychrome façades, which have a cultural significance. Nonetheless, a certain return to the neo-Haussmannian style is taking place for example in Parisian suburbs. The shades of limestone are still a secure choice in architecture and the "ton pierre" ("stone colour") has been specified among other shades of limestone in the manufacturers' colour charts for the built environment.

Victor Chérubin Grillo emphasizes the important role of "colourists" or colour designers in the process of environmental colour design development. Grillo believes that by fulfilling the duties in line with the local authority's regulations of space, the colourist composes new variants that force the regulatory framework to evolve.

Visual artist *Yves Charnay* has been following the evolution of antipathy towards advertising and street art. In his view, colour has taken an important place in the environment over the last twenty years; firstly, through advertising in urban areas. It is an "anarchic" colour, however, whose main function is not to make life easier or pleasant, but to sell. Here colours are always shocking, strong, and aggressive. Secondly, in his view, street art in general and large-scale graffiti in particular are often created by people who do not have a sense for relationships with other people and the environment, but rather wish to impose their own signature. Charnay dislikes the multiplication of colour when colour "denatures" a landscape, city, or environment. He is convinced that colour should be included in urban projects and spaces either as artwork or colour designs based on research: "Then it is magnificent."

Colour designer and artist *André Lemonnier* delivered a surprising verdict in response to our question about how he sees the evolution of environmental colour design. He thinks that the profession he practiced in past decades does not exist anymore and now belongs to art history.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, our interviewees were far from unequivocal about the direction of the evolution of colour design in the environment. Landscape architect and visual artist Bernard Lassus asserts that the role of colour has changed since the 1950s. So does colour designer Jean-Philippe Lenclos who thinks that colour has become an essential dimension in the environment for several reasons, and that colour plays a very specific role in daily life and corresponds to very precise expectations of users and consumers. Colour researcher Michel Albert-Vanel believes that the explanation for the omnipresence of black is that people are afraid of colour. Colour designer Victor Chérubin Grillo, however, observes that the shades of limestone are still a secure choice in architecture. Visual artist Yves Charnay has been following the evolution of advertising and street art which should be replaced by artwork and colour designs in urban space. André Lemonnier even thinks that the profession he practiced does not exist anymore and now belongs to (art) history.

The answers of the six colour designers presently living in Paris, carefully analyzed in the French context since the 1950s, contribute to a better understanding of key aspects of the evolution of environmental colour design. They all agree on one thing: They are convinced of the need of a conscious and thorough application of colour in architecture and urban space and consider colour as a powerful means to modify interior and exterior built environments.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The conducted interviews are part of a broader project that aims to examine the French period in the history of environmental colour design and has been funded by the Mechnikov Program of the Embassy of France in Moscow.

REFERENCES

- Caivano, J. L. 2006. The research on colour in architecture: Brief history, current developments, and possible future. *Color Research and Application* 31(4): 350-363.
- Evans, C. 2017. *Analysing semi-structured interviews using thematic analysis: exploring voluntary civic participation among adults*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Research Methods Datasets.
- Flick, U. 2009. *An introduction to qualitative research*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Griber, Y. A., V. M. Schindler, and M. Bouchier. 2019. Francuzskij period istorii cvetovogo dizajna sredy v vospominanijah sovremennikov [The French period in the history of environmental colour design]. *Social Transformations* 30: 48-52 (in Russian).
- Prieto, S. 1995. The colour consultant: a new professional serving architecture today in France. *Color Research and Application* 20: 4-17.
- Schindler, V. M., and Y. A. Griber. 2021. The philosophy of colour in the French period of environmental colour design. In: *The International Scientific Conference of the Color Society of Russia: Selected Papers*. Y. A. Griber, V. M. Schindler, eds. Smolensk: Smolensk State University Press, 310-318.
- Schindler, V. M., Y. A. Griber, and M. Bouchier. 2019. The French period in the history of environmental colour design. In: *Proceedings of the International Color Association (AIC) Conference 2019*. J. L. Caivano, ed. Newtown, NSW: AIC, 544-549.