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Applications of colorimetry in industry and design

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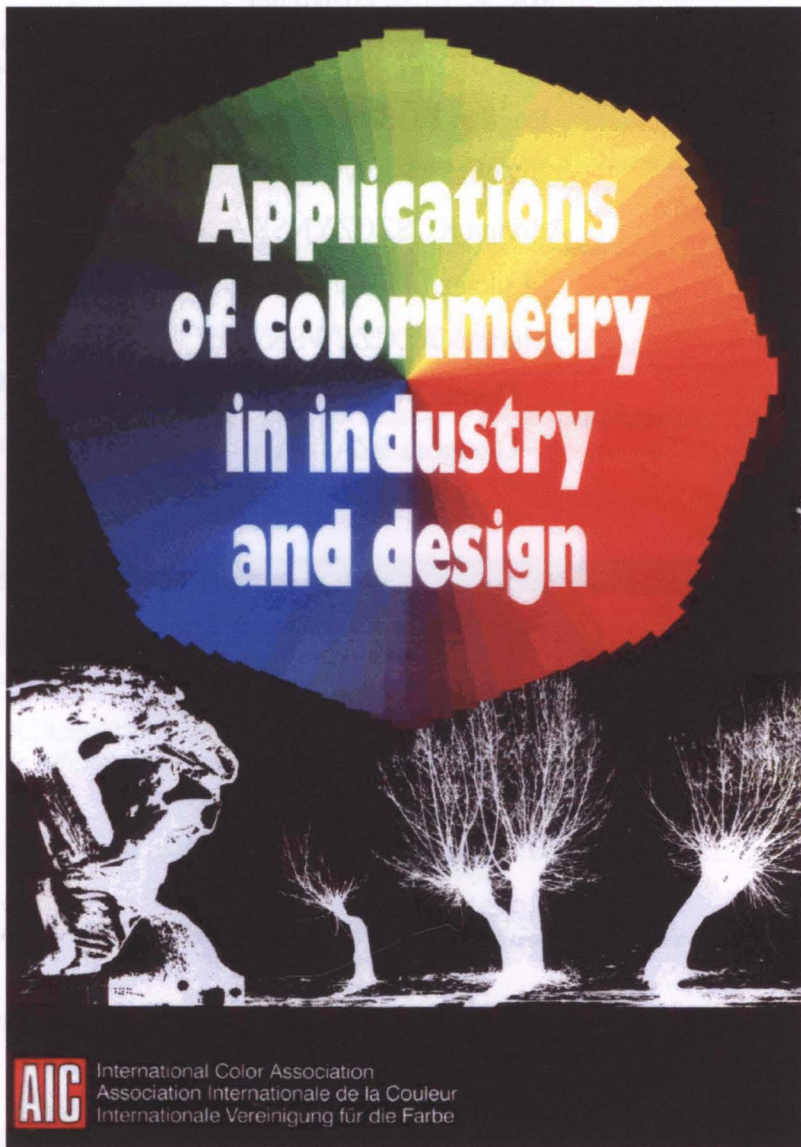
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COLOUR AND URBAN ENVIRONMENT

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The urban environment

The city, as the physical realisation of the urban environment, constitutes the materialisation of the human habitat which has been created by man through his social practice and consolidated by the historical context; what's more, it is basically his shelter, his unavoidable reference in the process of social communication. The urban phenomenon of the last decades has shown a change in the city's image. This image has not always been successfully controlled by an urbanism expressed by codes and rules that consider neither the human aspects of urban form nor the technological advances in information and communications that influence the quality of the environment.

The city witnesses the emergence of a new space of communication and flow of information that goes beyond the boundaries and frontiers of territorial space. This can be seen in the domestic as well as in the business domains. The information and communication technologies not only facilitate this virtual elimination of territorial frontiers but also leave a transforming imprint on the urban landscape being the 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.

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, the same ideal embodied in the Bauhaus in the first decades of the century. At present, and without utopias, the supremacy of design suggests a much more varied and unbridled general trend. This tendency, which is supported by software, tries to re-formulate every graphic sign and attempts at invading the urban spaces including publicity graphics and notices as well as architecture itself.

On the other hand, the urban-mediatic phenomenon 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.* We are trying to make the city "visible" so that it regains its meaning. In the seventies, the transformations in town planning partly destroyed the meaning of the city. Nowadays, however, visibility operations of mediatic type are being used and these would allow us to find again our *own consciousness by* insisting on the qualitative aspect of urban life.

The "visible" is understood as the occasional memory that originates when communicating the development of an ephemeral event. 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.

This attitude legitimises the search for a new utopia capable of providing answers to that virtuality, to the global mimesis. This new ideal should be able to deal with public spaces so as to regain the control of the substitution of the public image for public spaces considering all the aspects involved in its construction.

The role of colour

The above mentioned encourages the consideration of the problem of colour in the definition of urban environment and the role it plays in the creation of the image of the city. We need to focus on the concept of the urban space in relation to the man that inhabits it, that is to say, a conception of the city as a system of places.

From this perspective it is possible to pose the following questions: Should colour be for the urban physiognomy or colour for the urban living space? Must colour identify a city and increase its potential for orientation and perception?

The research into the use of light and the chromatic effects on the city and its inhabitants is based on the belief that the fundamental and inherent needs of man of total comprehension, orientation and sense of place are satisfied in urban places with the substantial contribution of chromatic expression.

Colour inevitably acts in those environments as form and sign, influencing human behaviour. This allows those who make deliberate use of it to turn it into a fundamental tool of design. The expression of colour operates through its organisation, grouping or composition laws which can display a chromatic system depending on the juxtaposition of hues, the extension, the textures and the feelings of cesias: transparency, matteness, brightness, specular reflectiveness and translucency. (Caivano 1994: 351-354). The colour constitutes a real morphogenetic agent and can highlight, change or destroy the syntax

by computer; therefore, it was possible to study each of them in detail to decide, together with the owners, on colours and design.

The professional team set down the general criteria as regards the chromatic intervention and, together with the neighbours, agreed on the chromatic palette for their property. The Municipality undertook the cost of this enterprise: restoration of plaster, mouldings and ornaments and the painting of façades, joinery, fences and balconies.

By using a polychromatic system of harmonious colours in contrast it was possible to obtain an environmental colour that improved some buildings from the late last century, some testimony of religious architecture and some minor expressions of the modern age. These were incorporated to the urban context, not only by structuring their own territory with colour, but with colour highlighting some architectural elements which had certain patrimonial value but without history; they were a modest patrimony which lacked that institutional artistic prestige that is found in great monuments. The colour revived and re-valued these buildings giving sense to the present time and at the same time, not only did it change the urban image or landscape but it also structured an urban place. There were changes in shops, new functions and alterations in behaviour patterns and social actions; these changes were later analysed according to a method of environmental evaluation which was developed in the Institute of Colour.

If we consider the crisis of the public space at the end of the century, which involves, at a global level, the destruction of singularity and the roots of territory, the lack of identity and sense of place, we may say that this chromatic intervention has proved effective in facing the problem. It is a joint enterprise, involving official organisms as well as citizens, where colour, as a tool of design, is capable of conveying not only a contemporary aesthetic but also the search for alternative ways; new paths to dignify identity and reinforce the idea that architecture has to be related to the environment with ideas different from universal homogeneity.

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