

Colours of Home

About the use of colours during Finland's post-war reconstruction period

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The reconstruction period is widely considered to be one of the best periods in Finnish architecture. Finnish housing construction took nature into consideration and also received international fame. The essential qualities of construction were scale, which took into consideration both human and environmental elements, and a plain, controlled artistic approach.¹ Soft colours and skilled use of natural materials as a part of interior colouring were typical of the architecture of that period. *Arkkitehti* (Architect) magazine, which was founded in the beginning of the 1900s, is purely a professional magazine, representing the rational modern tradition that forms the basis of contemporary architecture in Finland. During the post-war reconstruction period, which lasted a little over ten years, *Arkkitehti* magazine published only a couple of colour pictures and a few textual remarks concerning colour under some black-and-white photographs. During the post-war time colour was used very skilfully, but talking about colour didn't seem to be part of architectural discourse.

At the same time *Kaunis koti* (Beautiful Home) magazine, which was founded in 1948, was first the Finnish interior decorating magazine, and its purpose was to influence public taste.² In spite of its role, it is also possible to picture interior decorating of everyday life in *Kaunis koti* magazine. Colour had a central position both in influencing public taste and the public's own way of decorating interiors. This can be seen very clearly through many, at that time still rare, colour pictures and numerous articles concerning interior colour in this popular journal. Especially in the late 1940's, *Kaunis Koti* magazine reflected the shortage of resources of the post-war period. The hard wartime was over and people needed cheering up and colour in their lives. The word colour was given a positive meaning and almost without exception the articles connected it to happiness. Interior decoration at home was quite modest. The smallest coloured object was worthy of consideration and its position in the interior was pondered very carefully. Textiles also brought colour to homes. Right after the war it was almost impossible to obtain traditional cotton or wool textile fabrics. There-

fore, fabrics were woven out of paper string, which wasn't a very easy material to dye at that time. It was difficult to get the desired colour into homes. This may be the reason why, especially in the late 1940's, Kaunis Koti magazine pronouncedly seized upon the colour theme.

A positive attitude and warmth were still part of the colour image of the 1950's, but as the times got better colour was brought to homes on a wider scale and emphasis was no longer placed only on the smallest details. One gets the impression that since natural materials were not available during the war, they were luxuriated on after the war. In addition to hard materials such as wood, stone and brick, home textiles and indoor plants also had an important role in creating the overall colouring of homes. Painting or wall-papering were inexpensive and easy ways to bring badly needed warmth through colours into the rooms of home. A certain matt-finished roughness united all the coloured surfaces.

At the end of the 1940's and into the 1950's Arkkitehti magazine concentrated on presenting reconstruction projects, where priority was given to numeric quantities and texts describing the buildings' structures. Black-and-white photographs and their captions rarely mentioned colour or gave tips about the use of colour in interior decoration. Kaunis koti and Arkkitehti magazine quite often published the same projects, but Kaunis koti magazine viewed them more softly than the professional journal, also with regard to colour. This confusing difference in attitudes toward colour between professionals and the public leads me to further search the background of these matters.

The position of colour in the development of modern architecture

Colour is accompanied by a dichotomous basic arrangement: on one hand colour is thought of as an object of scientific observation, and on the other hand it is considered a tool of artistic interpretation. According to Pauline von Bonsdorff, from the beginning of modernism the position of architecture among other arts was argued. Because of its material nature, the philosopher Hegel in the 1820's gave architecture the lowest posi-

tion in the hierarchy of arts. The situation didn't raise a bigger conflict between architecture and art philosophy, but from the viewpoint of aesthetic discourse, architecture was set aside. When the possibilities of architecture were defined within the prevailing opinion of art, the only choice that was left inside modernism was modernisation and enlightenment.³ At that time in architecture a consolidation process began between romantic and rational modernism. The ideal of romantic modernism was to bring art and life closer together, to embellish everyday life. Rational modernism was more interested in rules and their cumulative rational development.⁴ During that time colour education in the Deutsche Werkbund and in the Bauhaus school was searching for its position between the objectivistic and subjectivistic attitudes towards colour in architecture. As John Gage has noticed,

At no time [...] during the short but tortuous history of the Bauhaus [...] was there a coherent view of the nature and functioning of colour among its teachers and most students must have come away with a very confused idea of its significance. [...] This lack of coherence and eclecticism was to have a profound effect after the Bauhaus.⁵

The dispute between rational and romantic modernism in a way ended in the 1920s, when the pioneers of architectural modernism paved the way for the beginning of a new architecture that united art and technology. The contrary positions of art and technology were abandoned and the aim was to unite the two voluntarily. In practice, fusing art with technology on the terms of technology made it possible to pass over the romantic movement, which had been awkward for rational modernism. One ideal of rational modernism was the belief in the possibility of objective methods.⁶ Because colour by its basic character is qualitative, flickering and continuously changing, a clearly objective study of colour in the context of built architecture is difficult. In rational modernism, colour was considered insignificant or meaningless. The relationship between colour and architecture remained undefined. In theoretical studies colour was transferred outside of architecture.⁷

As predecessors of Finnish architectural modernism,

the pioneers of continental architectural modernism also lead architecture to differentiated development, where architecture retired into itself and made inner criticism of modernisation difficult. The unification of art and technology eliminated all boundaries, but also a lot of possibilities.⁸The presence of this rational modernism has always been seen in a very strong way in Finnish modernism.

Different viewpoints: high and popular culture

When one looks at the colours of home by comparing the articles of *Arkkitehti* magazine, which represents the architectural viewpoint, and the articles of *Kaunis koti* magazine, which represent the popular viewpoint of everyday life, it inevitably leads to cultural comparisons. In parallel, the traditionally understood architecture and the less appreciated popular architecture of everyday life will then also be compared.⁹In another words, I will be looking at the legitimate viewpoint of architects and architecture in parallel with lived architecture or architectural practices, and the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity, which in the area of architecture refers to self-making and generally to traditional vernacular building.

High and low art or culture is more generally connected with institutional activity and functions. The professional core, mainly consisting of professional artists, actors of cultural life, leading researchers and critics, have adopted as their duty to maintain internal control of art and cultural institutions, to define and maintain the criterion of good and recommendable and at the same time to maintain the division between high and low.¹⁰According to Herbert J. Gans, architects were professional imperialists who expressed the contemporary culture and philosophy of their society through their buildings. Architecture's professional expertise involved aesthetics that lead to a debate over the merits of high culture and popular culture. Gans points out that the architectural elite were generally on the side of high culture, having disdain for popular culture and popular vernacular building.¹¹In the field of architecture the maintenance of internal control was very clear and purposeful. The power-holding core in Finland was solid and unanimous, being mostly on the

side of rational modernism.

The concept of taste is in a very central way connected to the debates about the differences and similarities in high and popular cultures. From the viewpoint of the Finnish post-war reconstruction period, the concept of taste is an interesting mechanism which divides or unites the different areas of culture. The definition of good taste is not in a central position, but a more interesting matter is the question of how the legitimate taste of popular culture differed from the legitimate taste of high culture, and how high culture tried to influence the popular taste. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has studied the concept of taste in an advanced way in his work, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. According to him, taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects are classified by their classifications. They distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make. The distinctions between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, express or betray their position in the objective classifications.¹² One of Bourdieu's main arguments is that cultural distinctions are used to support class distinctions. The story emphasises that taste is a deeply ideological category: it functions as a marker of class, meaning both the social-economic category and a particular level of quality.¹³

One crucial difference between popular and high cultural taste concerns presentation and things presented. According to Bourdieu, popular taste applies the schemes of the ethos, which pertain to the ordinary circumstances of life, to legitimate works of art, and so performs a systematic reduction of things of art to things of life. Intellectuals could be said to believe in the representation – literature, theatre, painting – more than in the things represented, whereas the people chiefly expect representations and the conventions which govern them to allow them to believe 'naively' in the things represented.¹⁴ Bourdieu's train of thought about the tendency of popular taste to reduce the things of art to the things of life is a strict, but interesting conclusion. In the field of interior colour it would mean that popular taste looks at colours only as such and intellectual taste, in this case architects, look at colours as representing something in architecture.

But because the position of colour was so undefined, it was difficult to talk about it. Tacit knowledge of how to use colour in an architectural way was quietly developed.

For Bourdieu, the science of taste and cultural consumption makes legitimate culture a separate universe, in order to discover the intelligible relations which unite apparently incommensurable 'choices', such as preferences in music and food, painting and sport, literature and hairstyle.¹⁵ According to Gronow, Bourdieu adopted one possible empiricist solution to the antinomy of taste by claiming that the taste of the ruling class is always the legitimate taste of society. But in his opinion this legitimate taste is not genuine good taste: in fact, there could not possibly be any genuine good taste. Legitimate taste pretends to be the universally valid and disinterested good taste, whereas in reality it is nothing more than the taste of one particular class, the ruling class.¹⁶

Richard Shusterman argues about high culture from the viewpoint of pragmatist aesthetics. According to Shusterman, the consolidating development of autonomous aesthetics, where 'aesthetic' and 'spiritual values' were lifted above the things of everyday life, is still present when defining high culture. Such autonomy need not be construed in terms of a sharp separation from the praxis of life, but merely in terms of art's having a distinctive productive and distributive framework for its works and its own characteristic modes for their reception, which can nonetheless overlap and intersect with non-artistic institutions and discourse.¹⁷ Because of its nature, architecture has never been utterly disengaged from practical and material interests of life, nor has it ever reached the tightest autonomous aesthetic mode of art's ideology. In the architectural field, challenge may be seen in Shusterman's spirit as a process where the tight, self-defining core of architecture voluntarily opens and starts to discuss on equal level using non-architectural language together with the surrounding world.

In addition to the narrow aesthetic limits imposed by the established ideology of autonomous art, Shusterman refers to high art as an oppressive social evil, because it provides a devastating strategy by which

the socio-cultural elite asserts its proud claim to intrinsic superiority. For our high art, tradition (which includes not only its canonised works but also its canonised modes of appreciation) is unfamiliar and insufficiently accessible to the culturally underprivileged. The incapacity to appreciate high art is projected as a sign of more intrinsic inferiority, a lack of taste or sensitivity, terms which suggest natural and not socio-economic disability.¹⁸ According to Bourdieu, the logic of what is sometimes called in typical 'pedantic' language the 'reading' of a work of art offers an objective basis for this opposition. Consumption is in this case a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a code. Bourdieu argues that one can say that the capacity to see is a function of the knowledge, or the concepts, meaning the words that are available to name the visible things are programmers for perception. A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code into which it is encoded. Bourdieu says that a beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines without rhyme or reason.¹⁹ The intellectualistic theory of artistic perception, which requires decoding, directly contradicts the experience of the art-lovers closest to the legitimate definition: acquisition of legitimate culture by insensible familiarisation within the family circle tends to favour an enchanted experience of culture which implies forgetting the acquisition.²⁰ Without a doubt the language of architecture belongs to this high art tradition that is difficult to unfold. It is very common that among architects and the enlightened elite, opinions about the quality of a certain building were in conflict with the liking of the public. With the cultural elite and architects there were also draught about architectural propositions, although architects as a professional group are outwardly quite loyal. Despite these contradictions between high and popular culture, one presupposition of my forthcoming thesis is that especially during the post-war reconstruction period, architects' and the public's liking were quite close to each other.

Shusterman names the third and last argument

against high culture, which is its escapist nature. Enchantment with art's glorious products gives the lie to the miserable and sinful material conditions in which they are generated and admired. We are seductively lulled by art's satisfying beauty and perfection into assuming that its creators – humankind and society – have likewise approached perfection and satisfaction, at the very least in the spiritual world of art, which is deemed superior to harsh, prosaic material existence.²¹ It is not possible to turn all these accusations against architecture, because the ideas aiming towards social good have from time to time tried to carry this out by architectural means. For example, especially the housing architecture of the Finnish post-war reconstruction period has produced many successful and lasting solutions and realisations. The escapist nature that Shusterman above described can easily be found in the relationship between heroic architecture and the housing architecture of many architectural periods. Prominent public buildings and their architects are usually raised more easily than buildings that are smaller and more modest, but often important in everyday life.

Typical use of colour during the Finnish post-war reconstruction period

At the time of the post-war reconstruction period there was a romantic phase in Finnish architecture, which was quite strong but very short in length. During this period popular taste and the intellectual taste of architecture did meet each other. Here are some examples of the typical use of colour during the Finnish post-war reconstruction period.

Asymmetrical colouring was typical in post-war reconstruction period interiors. The idea of overall furnishing started to give in during the period between the wars, but the actual breakthrough of standardised pieces of furniture took place in the 1950's, when industrial furniture production grew rapidly. Planners and designers began to speak about the aesthetics of utility, which was considered to be a carrying idea, for example, by *Kaunis Koti* magazine, which advocated aesthetics and concepts of beauty during that period.²² The uniform furnishing of the living-room and the dining-room were replaced by combinations of

pieces of furniture representing different styles and collected from various places. Mixing the old and the new was permissible.²³

It was typical to have asymmetrical colouring in the living-room. A light-looking, fairly hard and often grey-coloured sofa and two different kinds of small-scale armchairs upholstered with different single coloured fabrics. Even if the armchairs were of the same model they both had their unique colourings. The asymmetric theme also continued in the curtain and wall colourings. Very often one of the living-room walls was more strongly coloured than the others, and colourful curtains were hung only on one side of a window or doorway. Even the kitchen dining table's four chairs were often painted with different colours.

Colour is often perceived as a synonym with paint or a painted surface. I extend the examination to also include the use of the colours of natural materials, such as wooden and stone materials, and the use of red brick, which was very typical at that time. During the post-war reconstruction period the skilful use of natural materials as part of the fixed interiors was very typical. For this reason the colourings of natural materials are in a central position, especially when picturing the entire colour scheme of the post-war time.

In giving colouring instructions in *Kaunis koti* magazine, interior architect Yki Nummi reminds the readers about the power of natural wood material and the bad colour trap connected to it. According to him, natural wooden colours have an aggressive and heavy-coloured nature: birch, oak and elm wood have different tones of orange, while beech and mahogany wood are reddish in colour.²⁴ More common red-orange wooden timber species, such as pine and spruce, were used both in summer cottages²⁵ and in single-family houses as building material and in interior surface coverings. A fine example of using cut red-hearted pine as a surface material on a cabinet wall can be found in the master bedroom of architect Aarne Ervi's private residence²⁶. Veneers cut from very old almost thoroughly heartwood red-hearted pine as vertical thickly-striped columns create an image of a glowing trunk forest. Wallpaper with a pattern of large leaves on the wall next to the cabinet supports the strong analogy with nature in the room.

In the interior natural stone material was often situated in the fireplace or the wall surrounding the fireplace. A common material was grey slate stone, which was used to cover the whole fireplace or it was combined with white roughcast plastering.²⁷ This theme often continued outside, where the chimney, terrace and foundation were also covered with grey slate stone. Cleanly laid red brick on fireplaces and the surrounding walls was even more common than slate stone coverings.²⁸ In these cases red brick was used almost without exception in cleanly laid chimneys, too. In some cases even without a fireplace the red brick facade was extended into the interior²⁹ as a roughly warm colour theme.

During the post-war reconstruction period, in addition to using natural materials' own colouring, it was very typical to use authentic natural green tones in interior colourings. It was almost a rule to have a "flower window" in one's apartment and especially in one's living room. The flower window usually was rich in indoor plant species, of which at least one was a climbing plant. Architect Kyllikki Halme guided the readers of *Kaunis koti* magazine to form a flower window. According to her, climbing plants should be situated to frame the window, where they smoothen the outlines of the window opening against the darker wall and in many cases also replace the curtains³⁰.

The generality of flower windows in *Arkkitehti* magazine could only be read from the pictures because they were not written about. They were not only the property of homes, they were also used to frame the windows of public spaces. Architects wrote articles in *Kaunis koti* magazine about the meaning of flower windows in interior design. The reason to use indoor plants as part of the interior was the need to unite the living spirit with the dead surroundings: walls, ceilings, furniture and textiles.³¹ Indoor plants were felt to convey outdoor nature inside.³² This nature's greenness brought inside formed a reference point for defining interior colour schemes. Indoor plants were to be considered as one of the factors when designing colourings and choosing textiles. For example, the strong green colour of the plants determined the upholstery of chairs close to the flower window.³³ Both

magazines, *Kaunis koti* and *Arkkitehti*, show that the flower windows of living rooms were in a pervious way the property of the strata of population from the luxurious residence of top architect Aarne Ervi at *Kuusisaari*³⁴ to the modest working class city flat.

In addition to the flower window, climbing plants or groups of plants on one side of a doorway or as a partition in a room in the inner parts of the flat were also typical. The climbing plant was often supported by a rattan frame or a stretched string partition. Even a little tree trunk from the woods was suggested as a supporting structure.³⁵ In addition to indoor plants, strongly leaf-patterned green one-sided curtains on one side were used as pictorial motifs of a real plants. Nature's green presence was very concrete in homes during the post-war reconstruction period.

Some remarks in conclusions

The early consolidating process between rational and romantic modernism and the confusing situation regarding the position of colour in architecture especially in the Bauhaus school led to Finnish rational modernistic architecture being not very talkative about colour. The different viewpoint on the meaning of colour in architecture led architects and the public apart from each other. For the public, colour as such was easier to talk about than colour in architecture, which for architects did not exist as such, but had meaning in the presentation. The position of architecture among the arts led it easily apart from common people. The codes of architectural language and the presentations of architectural colour were difficult to for non-professionals to unfold. In spite of all these borders and obstacles during the post-war reconstruction period, there did exist a unique silent agreement among public and professional tastes concerning colour that makes this period especially interesting to study. The mostly black-and-white photographed architecture of the

post-war reconstruction period needs to be put back into colour, and the unbalanced situation of using but not talking about colour is worth further research in the direction of unfolding the tacit paths of architecture and everyday life.

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Pictures, see page 33.

Notes

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3. During the same period the discussion about the polychrome of exterior colourings was raised when C. J. Hittorff 1829 published the coloured reconstruction drawings of an ancient Greek temple in Selinus, which caused shocked reactions among architects. Although the knowledge about the polychrome of the ancient Greek temple had been published in written form already in the 1750's, seeing the brightly coloured temple facades divided architects into two: architects with a rational attitude preferred structural colourings and architects who had a romantic viewpoint preferred the artistic colourings better, which were quite independent of the architectural constructions. The leading philosopher of the romantic pole was John Ruskin, whose thoughts published in *The Stones of Venice* in 1851 were later appreciated by the rational branch, too. (Collins, Peter. *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture 1750–1950*. Faber and Faber, London 1965, pp. 113–114; Ruskin, John. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, (1880) George Allen, Sunnyside, Orpington, London, 1900, 250–251 and 262–263.)
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14. Bourdieu 2000, 5.
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18. Shusterman 2000, 144.
19. Bourdieu 2000, 2.
20. Bourdieu 2000, 3.
21. Shusterman 1993, 146.
22. Kirsi Saarikangas, "Arkipäivän arvokkuus" – 1950-luvun asuntoarkkitehtuuri. Sankaruus ja arki – Suomen 50-luvun miljö, toim., Suomen rakennustaiteen museo, 1994, 144–148.
23. Riitta Pesonen, "A Personal Work of Art", *Rooms for Everyone. Perspectives on Finnish Interior Design 1949–1999*, Minna Sarantola-Weiss, toim., Otava, 1999, 196.
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34. Aarne Ervi, "Yksityistalo Ervi, Kuusisaari, Helsinki", *Arkkitehti*, 11–12, 1952, 155.
35. Tarumaa 1948, 18.