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Prefabricated Housing and Colours

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Summary

The necessary rehabilitation and modernization of a great number of prefabricated buildings in Eastern Germany offers the possibility and the need to improve them not only technically but also aesthetically. Colouring is an important instrument to reach this goal. To avoid mistakes, as sometimes made in the past, it is indispensable to become acquainted with the principles of chromatics and the effect of colours.

Repair Works on Prefabricated Housing

Approximately 2.4 million appartments located in Eastern Germany were industrially produced. The need of their rehabilitation presents the challenge and the chance to improve the houses not only from the technical point of view, but also aesthetically.

About half of the flats were subject to repair work until now. Architects found many positive solutions, but also many unsatisfactory examples of facade design appeared. Therefore some concrete hints to be considered by colour designers will be introduced.

The Effect of Colours

Colouring is an important issue and the right choice of colours influences our sense of harmony and even our psychological state. Evidently everybody is touched and formed by the colours of his/her surroundings.

The primary function of us architects and colour designers should be to harmonically integrate our buildings in the "world of nature".

Colour is one of the best and fastest natural means of communication. A possibility to recognize its meaning offers the so called "semantic reference system", which means the connection between the terminology and the different colours or coloured ensembles. It is important to state that the meaning of a colour (presumed there is one) cannot be determined to only one interpretation. It is though totally insufficient to quote an established signification for an isolated colour, as the isolated colour, detached from its surroundings, has no entire meaning. Only if that colour is considered in its relation to other colours and to the context of its exact application, its meaning becomes perceivable and can be defined.

We react intuitively to colours. Colours produce a certain atmosphere, they are able to disturb our emotional balance in the long run and can even lead us to lose our bearings.

What exactly are the capacities of colour?

Colour can make a great difference, optically as well as psychologically.

Colour can add structure, providing depth and weight.

Colour can bring things closer or relegate them to the background.

Colour can have stimulating or calming effects.

Colour can produce feelings of warmth or cold.

Aim of Design

Applied to the aesthetic design of panel buildings the psychological effect of colours can impress on living and working conditions of its residents decisively. Colour influences volumetric structures, particularly the impression of their size and height.

Most panel buildings create "dark" feelings as chill, heaviness, solitude, loss of orientation. The harmonic unity, where warmth, safety and joy dominate, is missing completely in many cases. Once the importance and the effect of colour has become obvious, it should and must be the goal of every architect and colour designer to impart a harmonic, "holistic" style on the prefabricated housing developments.

The residential environment has to be considered too, the height, shape and colour of adjacent buildings. And - depending on whether a particular street should be visually opened or closed - colour accents should range from light to dark or vice versa.

Colour design is also an excellent orientation tool. Entrance areas are ideally suited to being differentiated by colour.

Additional care has to be taken to retain the look typical of a prefabricated building - the goal is to upgrade only the structural properties and appearances of the building, base structures, knee walls and entrance areas should be accented by colour and, if possible, through different building materials. The simple elegance of a building is due to e.g. the use of soft-hued colours and wellplaced colour accents around balconies and loggias, as well as the entrance areas.

Nevertheless we should always regard to avoid an excessive use of colour, which leads to stress, shrillness, even to a chaotic impression. This is one area where more often than not, less is more.

In the case of large housing estates it would be expedient to prepare a specific design concept for each residential area to be introduced to the tenants. After all, any building, any ensemble, any architectonic space serves the respective residents and has to answer their requirements. Architectonic order principles and colour design solutions have the declared aim to maintain or to advance the mental comfort of the inhabitants and the acceptance of their environs.

With the general state of economy and of construction technology, each colour accent will be perceived as a symbol of change and, if done well, can serve to instill a positive feeling about life.

In closing a brief reminder that prefabricated buildings represent a part of architectural history; they may not be examples of the most striking body of architecture, but they are certainly habitable. Furthermore, they have been widely accepted by the respective residents. It is our job to improve their general atmosphere which can also be measured by how their inhabitants feel about their lives. It really is quite simple to incorporate the concepts of aesthetics into prefabricated buildings; after all, aesthetics is nothing more than the science of the general laws of the possible aesthetics relationships between humans and reality and the general laws of artistic development.