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It is now time to have a more
relaxed relation to colour again
*In conversation with camponovo
baumgartner architekten*

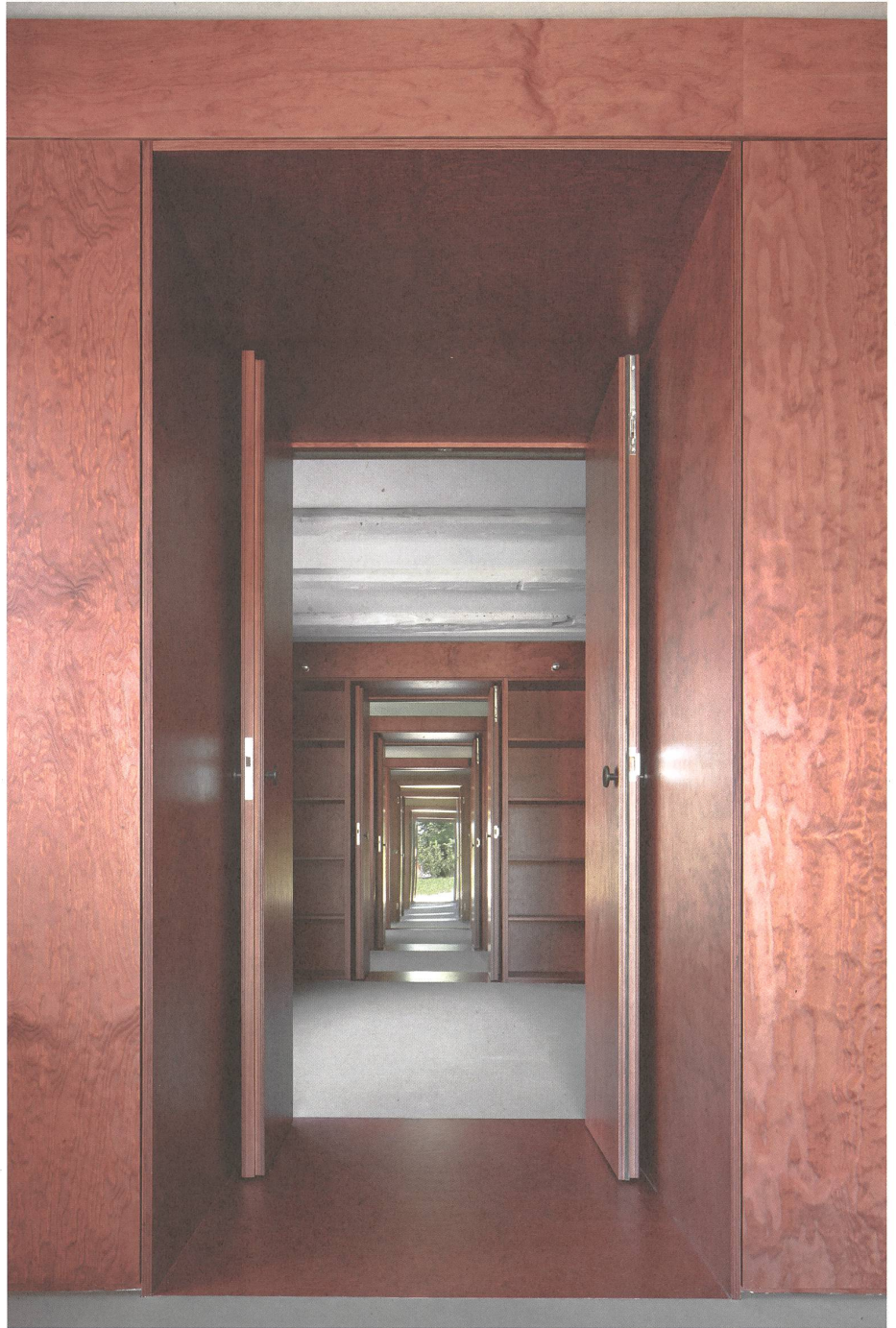


fig. a Haus des Kupferschmieds ©José Hevia

The office of camponovo baumgartner lies in the quiet centre of an urban block close to the main station. One has to pass through the ground floor of a housing estate building to reach a small courtyard, which is used as the office entrance lobby. The discussion is taking place in a room that serves both as a meeting room and samples library. Scattered on the large table is set of a series of material tests, ready to be presented to clients.

Marianne Baumgartner (mb): We are working a lot with samples. Big samples are necessary.

Luca Camponovo (lc): What we also do is to make models that we paint. We try to match the colours. This is the only chance to simulate the brightness, the daylight. We can have a look at the models afterwards, they are upstairs.

mb: For the «Haus des Kupferschmieds», for example, the carpenter first proposed to use cheap laminated panels. We were not interested in these because we wanted a wooden texture. So he proposed a laminated panel with the visual appearance of wood. To convince him, we decided to make our own samples, to show him what kind of structure we had in mind. We painted wooden panels and started to understand this material. It is a design process, taking place in the office to get an image of the project, followed by discussions and negotiations with the craftsmen. You need to find somebody who is able to do the practical job, and it can be really difficult. The client is not the only one to convince: there are also the people on the construction site. And not all of them like to do things that are different to what they usually do.

transMagazin (tm): In this project, the colours are clearly emphasizing the organization of the apartment.

lc: Here the theme was that the red wood could be perceived from one side, and from the other side you always see the clay. Then there is one other room which is separated from this enfilade. There we tried to use a very different colour. It is a room without windows, requiring a strong bright colour.

mb: In this project the view was also very important, because you have the windows only on one facade. It was actually the cellar before we transformed it into an apartment. And the couple living there was saying: «we are not going to live in a cellar». We had to argue that it was not the cellar,

but the garden apartment. So the view towards the garden was really important. If you look outside, you perceive a strong contrast to the green. If everything was white inside it wouldn't work so well, but as it is darker, all of a sudden the green in the garden becomes much more intense.

lc: We were convinced that in an apartment with not so much light we had to use dark colours—or strong colours maybe—and not bright surfaces, even if this is what actually everyone would do in the first place. Maybe if you measure it scientifically, in lumen, it is more efficient to have white walls, but I think that for the atmosphere, how you live in there and how you perceive the walls, warmer or stronger colours are better. You don't think that it is dark in the room. We also discovered that white is per definition a light-hungry colour. It needs the light. White without light is really sad. The shadows in the angles of a room intensify and become important. This is perhaps a reason why it is used in these warm countries, as in the Mediterranean area, where the villages are white. Of course it is to prevent the houses from overheating, but there is also this image in our head: the sun, the sea, the intense blue sky and the white houses. Maybe we have this need for warm colours in the north. All these conceptions are culturally embedded. It has to do with the climate and the standards of our society.

mb: Looking at movies you hardly see white rooms. Or imagine Almodovar's early movies, shot in white chambers. So if you want to create an atmosphere, you don't put people and things in a white room. Or you do it on purpose.

tm: White is very artificial. You hardly find it in nature.

mb: Snow, for example. White needs to be really pure. It is a powerful indicator of time. You can see every little stain and crack on a white wall. It is a problem if you want to repaint it partially. Recently there was a time when using a specific colour other than white was really daring and architects wanted to accentuate novelty when they were using colour. So they would use orange and other strong colours. We think it is now time to have a more relaxed relation to colour again.

lc: Using white is interesting but it is just one option out of ten thousands. The combination should be interesting. The choice should not be between white or coloured. We work with three—sometimes even four—different colours and we try to match them.



fig. b Haus an der Pestalozzistrasse ©José Hevia



tm: You have those quite clear wishes for atmospheres. What about the choice of the colour? How do you find the right colour among these endless options?

lc: It is really interesting. We have these samples and we put them together. Three, maybe two, and it is always quite clear which ones work, which ones don't. It is not only the two of us discussing the options (it could be, because we often agree) but we also ask our team and it often happens that they choose the same combination of colours.

tm: Is it that you start by choosing the red, you decide that the furniture needs to be red, and then you try to find the other colours which could fit to this red, or does it happen that during the process, the colour of the furniture is changed to green or blue, for instance?

mb: Yes. In this case it actually was green or blue. [laughing] It was really about these samples. We knew we wanted to have the wood and the client also liked the idea. After many attempts we realized that the green and the blue can't be controlled on the wood. We had a similar experience with the pavilion we made in Wildermettpark, with this bluish colour. It is extremely difficult to control because the wood is quite yellow/reddish. So at one moment we realized that if we continued in this way it would not work out the way we want. Going into red hues makes it easier. And then we got started with this and continued to look for what fits together.

tm: You were explaining how the colour is used to emphasize the concept of the enfilade, and also of this room which is standing apart, painted in a brighter colour. Could you explain the project in Pestalozzistrasse?

lc: The house was built in 1910 by Albert Emil Brändli in the romantic 'Heimatsstil'. We started with the research on the colours of the 'Heimatsstil', kind of a 'Jugendstil' in Switzerland. We also found some original colours in the attic rooms, which were these green, blue colours. Not bright green or pure green but a mixed green which is typical for this time. So this was the starting point. On the other hand, we also had to renew the sun protections on the building, which is listed as historic monument, at least the facade. We developed the colours on the facade together with the monuments protection office, which helped us to find the appropriate colours, especially for the wooden parts, the shutters for example, or the outside frames of the win-

dows. Regarding the inside we had more freedom, but we had in mind this particular kind of colour scheme. In the end we decided that all the main rooms were going to be in different colours and the corridors and staircases were to be painted in a contrasting colour, in order to show this idea that passing from one room to another changes the atmosphere.

mb: I think it is exactly about this. The house in Pestalozzistrasse was built in 1910, it was before Le Corbusier started his work, before the modernity, and Burgdorf was probably not part of a modern avantgarde. It is about these rooms distributed like chambers with a logic in themselves, so we treated them like chambers. The moment the floor plan opens up, you need other concepts.

lc: Maybe you have noticed that the doors have two colours? They don't have their own colour. It is the inside of the whole room which is covered by one coloured surface. So the element conforms to the logic of the room. We found it very interesting to have it opened, and to see the green entering the blue room.

tm: This is something you interpreted from the history of the house. What about the material of the wallpaper?

lc: Yes, there were a lot of wallpapers used in this house since it was built. Some were nice and we thought of preserving them first, but it was impossible. It was clear for us that this wallpaper could be a theme in the house so we tried to convince the client. The wallpaper we have chosen is painted wallpaper. The surface is not plain. It is more than a print, the surface of the wallpaper gets haptic and that creates an atmosphere. You can touch the wall and feel the texture.

mb: Colour in architecture is more than a visual perception. Colour is a material with its own characteristics.

tm: Those two projects are private. What is the difference to the school, which is a public project? How are you dealing with the fact that you are not directly faced with the taste of a client? Do you miss this external opinion or do you feel freer in your choices?

lc: We don't feel more free. It is more that there are a lot of people talking, saying what is feasible, or not. And there are many technical regulations. For example, the label Minergie Eco asks for bright colours because of light reflection. Bright

colours are reflecting more light than the dark colours. We are more interested in how a colour influences the atmosphere of a room and how people perceive it. Light values are not the only goal to reach. A warm earthy colour can create a much more comfortable atmosphere in a room with little light. A contrast of colours can help to read different architectural elements.

mb: It's more like an architectural critic. We don't talk so much about each colour. What is quite surprising is that if you talk about colours with a group of people, you talk about associations of colours. You never hear «I don't like the green» or «I would prefer it with a little bit of yellow». One says «It reminds me of my time in the army», the other says «It reminds me of the linoleum in my grandmother's kitchen». So you are talking all the time about associations and in the end you need a colour, that is somehow free of all these images. Do you know the colour scheme for the Olympic Games by Otl Aicher 1972? It was one of the main design aspects, to find colours which were free of any associations to Olympic Games of 1936, or any colours related to the history. He needed other colours to communicate another image of Germany. So he developed the rainbow-like colour scheme, which was adapted for all the posters, dresses and even the mascot Waldi. So in the end, even if you build for the public, you are always related to different persons, and you talk about associations.

tm: We could compare it to the «Olympisches Dorf» by Werner Wirsing, which was built for the same occasion. It is used today as student housing and they are allowed to paint their houses anyway they like. How do you conceive of colours in your projects? It would be so easy to put two hands in a bucket of paint and to change all of the colours of the apartment.

lc: This is always a problem, but I would not limit it to colours. Concrete walls could also be painted, and wooden floors could easily be covered with a synthetic surface. I mean that it depends on the task. If you build an Olympic village it's obvious that it will be used differently because it is a temporary programme. An interior of a private house is maybe lasting longer so I think the point is to know what you build. We always build atmospheres. We are doing it with materiality, colour or the haptic of the colours and if a client wants to change it after thirty years, which happens, it's always like this. This is a general problem with architects. You can also design a floor

plan which is very special, and someone maybe takes out the wall and it's gone.

mb: It's always the question of what you would like to protect. Is it the atmosphere with the real colours? Or maybe a spatial concept, independent from the colour? Or is it even a concept stating that everybody paints their house as they want it? The issue is always to be clear about the main theme you wish to protect: is it the building as it is or is it more the idea behind it?

lc: One thing which is interesting, is that a colour is not just a screen that can be programmed to show sometimes green, sometimes blue. It also has a history. For example in those old houses, if you make a hole in the wall, then you see the different layers of the colours used before. It is just like those student housings in Munich, where the different layers of colour tell a story about the house.

tm: We had this curiosity of the scale. The way you apprehend colour on the small scale is clear, by developing a project with owners and professionals. Could you transfer this conception and way of working to a large housing project?

lc: We are actually talking a lot about this question. We are trying to do something with it, with our clients. It's somehow kind of a fact in our culture, at least in our country, that white is the standard colour, known as the so-called neutral colour. But actually when you think about it, it's not neutral, it's just another colour. If you build for private developers, they normally don't want colours, they want just white. Maybe you could have some colours in the staircase. The apartments are white. That's the cultural standard. I think it is the heritage of modernity or of its descendants. Even if modernity wasn't only white at all. Architects established this attitude through the last fifty years, maybe it's also easier, you don't have to think anymore about how a surface is producing an atmosphere. The focus is more on the space or on the geometry of an architecture and less on the atmosphere of the room. «Keep it white.»

mb: For us it is a strange convention that everything should be white. It is about being sure to let them. As you said before, some colours are so personal that you are never sure that your client doesn't have a specific association with them. Doing a hundred apartments in the same colour isn't clever, for sure, but painting a hundred apartments in white isn't a solution either. It is a convention we are not convinced by.

I grew up in a building of the eighties with these visible stonewalls, with a concrete ceiling. But I was not aware of these plaster walls. During my studies I realized that it is somehow fake. Why would you build a wall and a second one in front of it, which is painted white? It never really made sense to me. Of course it is practical because you can hide all the electricity cables and tubes ...

tm: White is certainly coming from modernity or from our reading of modernity. Modernity also brought standardisation of housing. Do you think that architecture is slowly taking another direction, in the sense that we would be looking for individualization?

mb: The thoughts of modernity are really old by now. All of this happened a hundred years ago. But still, the real, pure modernity has almost never been achieved and is still modern today. Most of the people today are living in very conservative apartments compared to what was modern hundred years ago. What is somehow missing today is the pretention of what modernity could be. An open kitchen, a large open living room and huge windows everywhere, that's about what is left of the idea of modernity. It has nothing to do with modernity.

tm: To come back to the large housing project, do you think colour is perceived differently in the different social classes?

mb: It is interesting because our clients argue that maybe they could use colour for luxury apartments. Somehow colour expresses value. But also really bad architecture along the highways and train lines is coloured. Often these rather cheap houses are painted in colour to appear more familiar. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it is worse. Once we proposed green ceramics for a housing project. Green ceramics are the same price as white ceramics. But still, people think it will get really expensive.

lc: Colours were luxury, and expensive. Dark colours in particular.

mb: It is like this special purple, the actually very surprising colours of the emperors' and cardinals' robes. Historically it was coming from the animal («purpurschnecke»). They did not choose the colour just because they liked it, but because it was exclusive.

tm: When you talk about colours do you see them the same way?

lc: Probably not.



fig. c Model for the School Aemtler



fig. d Proposal for the competition Baugenossenschaft Waidmatt



fig. e Haus des Kupferschmieds ©José Hevia



fig. f Haus an der Pestalozzistrasse ©José Hevia

*Marianne Baumgartner, born 1984,
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