COLOUR IN THE CITY: A FACTOR FOR SIGNAGE, ORIENTATION AND IDENTIFICATION

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Abstract (500 words maximum)

This paper aims to present the research project that is being carried out by Margarida Gamito, under the supervision of Fernando Moreira da Silva, MPhil in Colour and interior Design (University of Salford), PhD in Colour and Architecture (University of Salford). Post-Doctorate in Inclusive Design (University of Salford). Associate Professor in Design Project/Architect. Design PhD course coordinator (FA/UTL). Design Area coordinator at CIAUD (Research Centre in Architecture, Urban Planning and Design – FAUTL), within the Design PhD Course at the Faculty of Architecture — The Technical University of Lisbon.

It is focused on the main steps concerning the research process that has been carried out in the City of Lisbon, establishing a colour plan that should be applied to urban furniture at the different quarters of this city. The research aims to establish that colour, applied to urban furniture, should contribute for the improvement of the visibility of these elements, becoming a factor of inclusivity, ameliorates the orientation in the city; as well as it can be a way for identification of its different zones, and acts as signage.

Key words: City Colour, Signage, Urban Furniture, Orientation, Identification

Colour, inseparable from light, is an integral part of our total sensory and perceptual experience. It not only conveys information about our surroundings, but also has great impact on our psychological reactions and physiological well-being. (Durão 2002, p162)

In natural environment, colour appears frequently as a way for defence and conservation: a camouflage system, a warning for danger, or as an attractive element that allows the reproduction of animals and plants.

On their evolution, human being have inherited psycho-physiologic reactions which, even if they cannot be controlled or objectively explained, makes colour act has a necessary
mean of information, communication and comprehension of the environment, as it was written by Michael Lancaster:

(...) The functions of colour are to attract attention, to impart information, to aid deception and to stimulate the emotions. (Lancaster, p8)

(...) for the human eye there is no space without its colour; and no colour that does not create its own space. When you open your eyes the texture of the entire visual field consists of one thing: and that is colour. (p60)

Modern cities, in their development, had been invaded by a profusion of multicoloured publicity which, added to the colour of the architecture, make them chromatically confuse, as it is mentioned by Professor Moreira da Silva (1999) in his PhD thesis:

The reality of a city (the urban reality), particularly at the street level, lives from the continuous changes, the graffiti, the advertisements, and the colour of the cars. The city colour forms itself from factors, which are beyond the architectural space components although they alter their meaning. (p211)

This evolution and the consequent growing of population and traffic, originate the need for the installation of a wide urban furniture ensemble, as well as signage systems that could give support and orientation to the inhabitants, and identify the different zones of the city.

Otherwise, old cities and, particularly, old quarters of the European cities presents a tendency to be monochromatic, even achromatic, in its architecture and, therefore, colour elimination in urban furniture and signage systems contributes to a lack of visibility that is an impeachment to the fulfilment of their functions, as well as it is a factor of social exclusion for people with deficient vision.

Recently, there has been a growing concern about colour psycho-physiologic connotations and its application to the environment. However, colour urban plans scarcely refer to colour application in urban furniture and signage.

In order to be used, urban furniture must be seen and, therefore, it must stand out from the environment. Despite of the fact that colour is the easiest and more appropriate tool to this achievement; it is rarely applied with that intention. Adding to the uniformity prone by the furnishers of urban furniture, colour elimination in these elements can be a reaction to the excessive colour multiplicity present in the city, being this solution an impeachment to the satisfactory fulfilment of its functions.

Signage also manifests shyness on colour application. It presents a dominant concern about environment integration, when it should stand out, and, as a result, it becomes frequently less visible and unable to accomplish its function completely.

Signage chromatism, usually restrains itself to the form and ground contrast, or the black and white achromatic contrast, and applies the chromatic road norms. Although, those norms were planned to long distance vision and to be seen at the speed of road car driving, and, within the city they lose visibility and confound themselves with build environment colours. Therefore they become illegible for a population that has different degrees of visual acuity.
Orientation within the city, the problem of wayfinding, is not always easy to solve, independently from the individual way of locomotion. Colour utilization as a mean to show the way, as been punctually employed successful in interior and exterior spaces, therefore we could assume that the sensible and general application may be a way to the successful resolution of the orientation problem within the city.

Colour is the easiest way to achieve the identification of the different city zones, and to promote the orientation of the population, permanent or temporary, because colour is the objects characteristic which the eye first perceives, even before form or texture.

Therefore this research pretends to define and underline the importance of colour application on signage and urban furniture, taking in consideration that a pertinent application of colour may contribute for a better visualisation and, consequently, ameliorate its utilisation. The city population is constituted from a wide variety of people, with more or less visual limitations and, therefore, to have better visibility conditions, and in order that urban furniture and signage could be part of inclusive design, they must present a good chromatic and luminosity contrast.

The research focuses on the City of Lisbon, and a comparison has been established with other cities, where this problem has been addressed and might be successfully resolved, in order to make suggestions for adequate solutions. The research development, besides a constant literature review, included a methodology of observation by photographic record of both urban furniture and signage, in order to evaluate their visibility and legibility, as well as their colour applications.

The case study includes three different quarters with their own specificities. The first one, Baixa, is the heart of Lisbon and was a candidate to the world patrimony (2004), the second one, Campo de Ourique, is a traditional quarter, both commercial and residential, and the last, Parque das Nações, is a recent one which is still in construction.

On these quarters, an active research has been carried out, in order to record the urban furniture present, the problems of visibility and legibility that may exist, and the colour of the environment.

With these elements, there has been drawn a colour-plan for their urban furniture, that is different for each quarter, may respect the local history and symbolism, and makes a good contrast with the environment.

Three focus groups, with six to ten elements, have been chosen, in order to validate the chromatic options for each quarter. One of the focus group included people of different age and sex, the other one was formed by older people which age was comprised between sixty five and eighty five years, and the last one was a group of specialists from inclusive design, urban design and municipality equipment.

All three focus groups will make two different approaches to the problem of visibility and colour application to urban furniture. The first approach will be a visit to the three quarters, included on the case study, to evaluate the visibility conditions of the urban furniture present on the locals. After that they will be presented to the proposals of colour applications,
in order to appreciate and discuss the changes and ameliorations that colour could have caused.

A cross information of all the data information, and literature revue will be made, in order to analyse the research results. If it proves the necessity, there will be a new round of research that will lead to the research conclusions, which pretends to be a contribution to knowledge.

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