

Dammi i Colori

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ABSTRACT

In his capacity as city architect in the German town Magdeburg in 1921, Bruno Taut introduced strong colours in facades. In a project named *Das bunte Magdeburg* (*The Colourful Magdeburg*), Taut invited artists and private house owners to *repaint* the city. Not only the buildings, but also kiosks, clocks, and advertisements were designed in expressionist colours. Bruno Taut's intention was to build a society open to people's view, to give the citizens the opportunity to obtain a clear insight into their own community. Taut was a forerunner of using colour in architecture.

A hundred years later, we find a similar approach in Tirana. Using colour, the artist and Mayor of Tirana, and now the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama, transformed the rather neglected city environment. Rama's intention of the painting on the concrete buildings, was to give the population a contribution to a brighter democratic future. In 2003, the Albanian contemporary artist Anri Sala documented the ongoing project in his video *Dammi i Colori* (*Pass me the Colours*).

This paper will investigate and discuss the expressions of the new colours on the buildings in Magdeburg and Tirana. What intentions lie behind the two projects? Are there relations and correlations between the cities? Did Edi Rama have knowledge about Taut's project?

KEYWORDS: colour, repainting, Bruno Taut, Magdeburg and Tirana, colour to get a better community, Edi Rama/Anri Sala



Figure 1: Das bunte Magdeburg

1 INTRODUCTION

With focus on colour, the German architect Bruno Taut (1880–1938) worked for a better society. His aim was to create the best possible quality of housing at a minimal cost, often with colour as an aesthetic component, and with gardens as outdoor rooms.

In the German town Magdeburg the population was doubled within 30 years due to the

industrialisation. After a competition in 1913, Taut was engaged as architect in the *Gartenstadt-Kolonie Reform* (1911–39), and from 1919 responsible for Magdeburg's urban development. He designed houses with large gardens and facades in strong colours, with ornaments, tiles and ceramic. He used, to give an example, 21 different types of entrance doors.

Taut pursued the Siedlung Reform, a municipal housing area, in a style so pure and plain that it offended the inhabitants. Not only the buildings, but also the windows and entrance doors were designed in strong colour schedules. The colour of the facades were painted in a vertical and horizontal organization with the result that every estate and every street had its own unique colour combination and approach. Actually, the colouring was considered by his opponents to be so undisciplined that it distracted the eye. Taut's intention was to build a society open to people's view, to give the citizens the opportunity to obtain a clear insight into their own community. – Taut was a forerunner *talking* of colour in architecture. And he was a forerunner *using* colour in architecture.

2 DAS BUNTE MAGDEBURG

In his capacity as city architect and councillor in Magdeburg, 1921–24, Bruno Taut continued to use strong colours in facades. In his mission, Taut focused on (three pillars): "the reorganisation of the municipal building department, the set up of a master plan in terms of estates and the transformation of Magdeburg into a colourful town" (Heise, 2002). Taut criticised the overall grey colour on the contemporary building facades and emphasized that "the colour should give some character back to the buildings" (ibid.). Taut urged the private house owners to send proposals of colour designs to an urban development committee. He invited artists to *repaint* the city. Not only buildings, but also kiosks, clocks, and advertisements were designed in expressionist colours. The project, *Das bunte Magdeburg* (The Colorful Magdeburg), was from now on discussed everywhere from the newspapers to the city council. And the facades were painted over in new colour dresses.

Otto Richter Strasse (1904–16) was part of the project in Magdeburg's western area. In 1921 around 150 meters of the street were painted in strong colours. This part consisted of six apartment buildings of 24 meters each, positioned parallel to one another on both sides of the street. The backs of the four-story buildings faced onto gardens. Each building was painted in four to six colors with a main colour to each facade – chromium-oxide green, strong yellow, two different nuances of red, blue-black ultramarine and cobalt blue.

The colours chosen by Taut were strong and clear and composed in contrasts. Both colours and patterns stood out clearly. Silicate colour as a material produces a brilliance through its crystalline structure. At a distance of, say, 450 meters from the facades, the colors are still clear and distinct. They maintain their intensity and independence. Colours and patterns do not melt together in the eye of the observer. Nor are they discoloured into gray in an optical mixture. Instead, due to the size of the colour surfaces in the facade pattern, the contrast phenomenon increases hue.

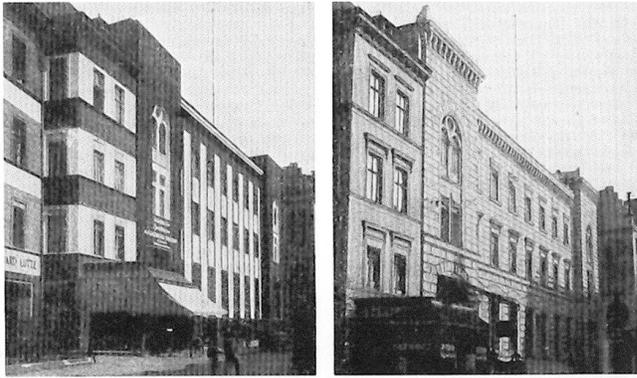


Figure 2: After and before the repainting



Figure 3: Otto Richter Strasse (1921/2005)

3 THE COLOR THEORY OF BRUNO TAUT

Taut's colour expression was not limited to the two-dimensional composition of the facade. He was interested in contemporary painting, and pointed out artists like Léger, Kandinsky, Archipenko and Robert Delaunay as models who the architects should follow. "The architect must also recognize that architecture embraces from the outset the preconditions which the new painting has created: freedom from perspective and from the narrowness of a single viewpoint", Taut wrote in 1914 in *Der Sturm* (Boyd Whyte, 1982). One can find aesthetic and psychological impulses of Expressionism in Taut's colour compositions, but at the same time they own a natural simplicity in lines and structure. Taut had an overall view for his projects. In addition, he always used real colour material – such as linseed-oil paint or silicate paint. These materials are accepted by the eye, although they are applied in strong hues, because of their authenticity.

According to Taut, the choice of colour can not be overlooked. Colour treatment is critical for the expression of the architecture. It is regarded as a structural component, and colour becomes a building material on equal footing with brick, wood, and sheet metal. The beauty of colour cannot be strictly separated from its practical value. Taut writes in *Gehag-Nachrichten* in 1930 about the possibilities of colour (Konstakademien, 1982):

Since color has the ability to increase or decrease the distance between the houses, to influence the dimensions of the buildings this way or that, that is, to make them seem larger or smaller, to bring the houses in harmony with nature, or to make them contrast with nature, and so on – because, that is to say, color can no more be eliminated from the building process, than can bricks from masonry, or iron and concrete from a building's framework, and concrete can be eliminated from the construction process, one must work with color just as logically and consistently as with every other material.

4 TAUT IN BERLIN

Besides Magdeburg, Taut worked with eye-catching colour schemes both in interiors and exteriors in Berlin. In *Gartenstadt Falkenberg*, erected between 1913–16, Taut worked with strong, often complementary colours in his colour schemes. He chose strong and pure colours without any mixing of grey or white. Often, Taut applies several strong colours next to one another in the window recesses and on the doors in order to achieve the desired play among colour, form, and light. Taut saw his use of colour, and the play of colour-harmonies on the facades, as means to achieve the desired harmony-in-

diversity. In *Drei Siedlungen* (1919/20, p. 183) he writes: “The coloured appearance initially provoked a lot of surprise, for the earlier and ubiquitous tradition of coloured architecture had been totally lost. Especially the Berliners, coming from the grey tenement quarters, were beside themselves with genuine indignation and repeatedly declared that the architect deserved to be locked up.” (Boyd Whyte ,1982). In *Gartenstadt Falkenberg*, Taut built a social mix between family houses and single-room flats. He also pointed out this social mix as one major success of the project.



Figure 4: Gartenstadt Falkenberg (1913–16)

Another Gartenstadt, *Onkel Toms Hütte*, built in the south-west parts of Berlin about 10 years later than Falkenberg, between 1926–31, we can find more monochrome facades, but the doors and the frames around the windows, are always painted in unexpected colours. Taut also used many different colours on the facades of the buildings, but always in genuine pigments.

In his projects, Taut exploited variations in light and different properties of the various points of the compass in his choice of colours. In *Waldsiedlung Zehlendorf* (1926–31), in keeping with his theory, he uses warm colours towards the south and cold towards the north. The opposite colour scheme, i.e. cold colours towards the south and warm towards the north, yields grey colours without luster according to Taut’s theory.

5 TAUT’S UTOPIAN VISION

Bruno Taut’s belief in the future takes along a social thought involving “a decent home for everyone”, symbolically to find one’s way home. His ambition was a new society socially organized. “Architecture will thus become the creator of new social forms”, he wrote. Taut was inspired by Gothic architecture. The cathedral, in the capacity of a module of great and spiritual value, incarnates the building up, in spirit of community, of the new society. A culture for the future was conjured up in which architecture – *die Urkunst*, the Primary Art – manifests the idea in common, the social thought. In Taut’s utopia Architecture replaces the Christianity of the Gothic era. Taut draws and describes small starshaped communities spread out over the country. In these communities the cathedrals of the new era glitter in shape of modern crystal palaces.

In his utopian drawings of the crystalline alpine peaks sprinkled with glass, Taut used watercolors. For Taut, building over the alps was a triad of snow, glaciers and glass. Its realization would have been “extremely difficult and full of sacrifices, but not impossible”, with Taut’s words. In *Die Stadtkrone* (p. 69), he expresses: “The glowing light of purity and transcendence shimmers over the carnival of unrefracted, radiant colours. The city spreads out like a sea of colour, as proof of the happiness in the new life.” (translation from Boyd Whyte 1982, p. 81).



Figure 5: Alpine Architectur (1913)

6 EDI RAMA IN TIRANA

Eighty years later, with the beginning in 2000, a similar project started in Tirana. The artist and Mayor of Tirana, and since September 2013 the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama, transformed with colour the rather neglected city environment. In similarity with Taut's project, the older facades were painted over with bright colours and ornamented in expressive patterns. Since the decline and fall of communism in 1990, there was an increase in population in Tirana from 200 000 to 700 000. Besides the colour project, Rama in his role as Mayor, also developed a so called *Clean and Green* project (2010), resulting in large areas of green lands and parks in the city. He opened movie theatres in Tirana, showing popular foreign films, an entirely new phenomenon for the Albanian people. In addition, he restored damaged buildings and made the city's water system function – contributions to Tirana's regained faith and confidence.

The mentioned colour project is called *Edi Rama colours* and is often described as using the colours green, violet, yellow and pink. The aim for Rama was that he wanted to raise the city from grey and decayed buildings, and give Tirana a modern decoration. He looked forward to a democratic future and wished for a collective response for a better life, intentions in resemblance to Bruno Taut's. "The city [of Tirana] was dead. It looked like a transit station where one could stay only if waiting for something", says Rama in the video *Dammi i Colori*. Thus, in 2003, the Albanian contemporary artist Anri Sala documented the ongoing project in his video *Dammi i Colori (Pass me the Colours)*. Sala filmed Rama and interviewed him during a tour in a car around the city. "I love the joy that color can give to our lives and to our communities", Edi Rama comments. Through the car's windscreen, we travel street by street and follow the newpainted buildings in the city. The painting is still ongoing. The contrast is striking between the bright colours and the grey concrete. The streets are dusty and gravelly. The sounds from the streets follow us in the film. During the trip Rama discusses the effects of the city's transformation from communism to democracy: "When colors came out everywhere, a mood of change started transforming the spirit of the people." As a result of the coloured facades, people stopped to drop litter in the streets, Rama states in the video, they started to pay taxes, and crimes were reduced.



Figure 6: Before and after the repainting

7 CONCLUSION

In the 1920s the city of Magdeburg was a forerunner towards a new social-oriented town planning, highlighting an interaction between architecture, art, design and social responsibility. In Tirana, a similar project took place 80 years later. With the same intention, both Mayors used colour to repaint the cities and create better communities to live in. Indeed, the colour did not pass unnoticed.

The ornamentation in the cities is comparable. Both in Magdeburg and Tirana we can find expressive pattern designs and facades in monochrome colours. The colour schemes are created in a rhythm between colour, ornament and building. One can consider, to whom belongs the colours: to the house owners, the residents or the beholders in the street? Also, are the towns transformed to artworks or still the same after the repaintings?

In contemporary architecture strong colours are used again, not least in ceramic materials on facades. Consequently, Magdeburg and Tirana are a step before the new colouring mood, and also, as we have seen, with strong thoughts behind the projects – hopes for a better society.



Figure 7: Magdeburg (1921) vs Tirana (2003)

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Figure 8: The repainted Tirana

