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WHAT COLOUR CONSIDERATIONS COULD BE USED FOR ARCHITECTURAL RESTORATION?

QUE CRITÉRIOS CROMÁTICOS UTILIZAR PARA A RESTAURAÇÃO ARQUITETÔNICA?

¿QUÉ CRITERIOS CROMÁTICOS SE PUEDEN UTILIZAR PARA LA RESTAURACIÓN ARQUITECTÓNICA?



Figure 0. Rehabilitation of Chamboirat House, COVE Architects office. Source: available at ArchDaily (2024), accessed 18 June 24.

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RESUMO

Este artigo trata da escolha de cor nas superfícies do patrimônio edificado colocando-a como problema de imagem no âmbito da teoria e da crítica arquitetônica. Aborda-se a imagem como um mecanismo para percepção e memória humana e são apresentados os argumentos defendidos quanto ao uso da cor pelos principais expoentes da teoria da restauração, comparando essa produção teórica frente à realidade cromática de três núcleos urbanos tombados no Brasil. Tais locais refletem a imagem do patrimônio edificado fixada na memória da população brasileira, o que possibilita entendê-los como exemplos paradigmáticos. O trabalho observa as incoerências entre o discurso e a prática nas intervenções cromáticas e traz à luz a importância da teoria da restauração na criação de soluções alternativas. Demonstrando cenários possíveis e possibilidades de intervenções diferentes nas cores das superfícies arquitetônicas, o resultado traz para o debate a importância do conhecimento teórico para uma produção prática coerente com a noção de patrimônio cultural.

Palavras-chave: patrimônio cultural, superfície, cor, teoria, crítica.

ABSTRACT

This article looks at the choice of color on the surfaces of the built heritage as an image problem in the context of architectural theory and criticism. The image is approached as a mechanism for human perception and memory. The arguments defended regarding the use of color by the leading exponents of restoration theory are presented, comparing this theoretical production against the chromatic reality of three urban centers in Brazil. These sites reflect the image of the built heritage fixed in the memory of the Brazilian population, making it possible to understand them as paradigmatic examples. The work observes the inconsistencies between discourse and practice in chromatic interventions and brings to light the importance of restoration theory in creating alternative solutions. Demonstrating possible scenarios and possibilities of different interventions in the colors of architectural surfaces, the result brings to the debate the importance of theoretical knowledge for a practical production coherent with the notion of cultural heritage.

Keywords: cultural heritage, surfaces, color; theory, criticism.

RESUMO

Este artículo aborda la elección del color en las superficies del patrimonio edificado, situándolo como un problema de imagen en el contexto de la teoría y la crítica arquitectónicas. Aborda la imagen como mecanismo de percepción y memoria humanas y presenta los argumentos defendidos por los principales exponentes de la teoría de la restauración en relación con el uso del color; comparando esta producción teórica con la realidad cromática de tres centros urbanos catalogados de Brasil. Estos lugares reflejan la imagen del patrimonio construido fijada en la memoria de la población brasileña, lo que permite considerarlos ejemplos paradigmáticos. La obra observa las incoherencias entre el discurso y la práctica en las intervenciones cromáticas y saca a la luz la importancia de la teoría de la restauración para crear soluciones alternativas. Al mostrar posibles escenarios y posibilidades de diferentes intervenciones en los colores de las superficies arquitectónicas, el resultado trae al debate la importancia del conocimiento teórico para una producción práctica coherente con la noción de patrimonio cultural.

Palabras clave: patrimonio cultural, superficie, color; teoría, crítica.

INTRODUCTION

Architectural theory encompasses not only the built space but also the social aspects surrounding it, such as the notion of cultural heritage. Heritage, by representing significant moments in human history, serves as a reference to understand collective identity, allowing reflection on who we are, who we were, and how we evolved, both for housing and social organization. Understood as a fundamental element for forming group consciousness, heritage is not restricted to the work of art but encompasses a broader sense of identity and collective memory. Its preservation becomes essential in the face of the need for symbolic references, meanings, and cultural patterns that guide human beings in their life. From an anthropological perspective, the absence of these patterns – understood as systems of symbols and meanings – would result in chaotic human behavior. Culture, as the accumulated totality of these patterns, and heritage, in its material and immaterial dimensions, constitute essential conditions for human existence. In this context, the image plays a central role, acting as a means of communication and transmission of these meanings over time.

The image is an experience comprising memory and imagination; images appear in your brain when you think about something (Barry, 2008). This thought is also explored by Pallasmaa (2013), who links the image to human emotions, arguing that image and imagination make up the mechanism of human perception, thought, language, and memory. However, in architecture, the word “image” has been used to designate the production of an “architecture of the image,” which seduces and introduces representations in physical spaces. Hal Foster (2021) contributes to this discussion by contextualizing this phenomenon within a crisis of authenticity in contemporary culture, in which truth is often manipulated and transformed into a spectacle. Foster (2021) addresses the idea of farce as a gimmick to hide complex realities and replace them with simplified, manipulated versions for mass tourism. Faced with this, the idea of the architecture of the image dialogues with Foster’s concept of farce (2021) and, in the context of historical cities, reflects a scenographic architecture where buildings operate as mere stages.

Here, the problem of facade colors in architectural restorations is inserted because, to seek an image that dialogues with the meanings and historical meanings of color, it is necessary to understand that the foremost critical challenge today lies in the choice of colors. This decision involves analyzing archaeological remains and considering the possibilities of restoring a particular heritage image, as Aguiar highlighted (2002).

Understanding the relationship between theory and reality contributes to the judicious choice of color in architectural restorations, as the city is changeable in its liveliness. However, chromaticism expresses each historical period’s architectural languages, time, and technological capabilities. For this reason, coatings, especially color in architecture, reveal both architectural, anthropological, and political meanings. When analyzing the theory of

restoration and some Brazilian cases, it is questioned whether the colors reflect theoretical principles of restoration or if they act as an element of maintenance of an image architecture. In the following topics, this issue will be explored. First, however, it is necessary to discuss some theoretical foundations.

Why theory?

When talking about theory, it is common to highlight its role in the area regarding the concepts of history and criticism. However, here, it is not intended to repeat a commonplace concept but to provide the necessary technical concepts. In this sense, in architecture, it should be noted that history studies the past, criticism interprets existing works, and theory is constituted as a discourse on the practice and production of the discipline (Nesbitt, 2008). Colors, although widely studied in architecture, have often been analyzed from formal compositions or interior decoration, while little attention has been paid to the impacts of color on the image of cultural heritage.

Publications in the area of built heritage reveal a common point in the research on color carried out in the West from the mid-20th century: the need for an analysis that goes beyond its technical aspects. This positioning follows the theoretical principles of critical restoration, having in Cesare Brandi its foremost exponent, as stated in his book *The Theory of Restoration*, published in 1963. In this work, although Brandi (2008) does not deal specifically with architectural color, he addresses the concept of patina, a term that refers to the effect of time on the surfaces of buildings. For the author, patina is a natural phenomenon that results from the passage of time, and its conservation preserves the historical testimonies of architecture. He argues that it is wrong to contradict the very antiquity of the work by modifying its subject matter to simulate a freshness of novelty.

Another publication by Brandi (2009) recommends that the restoration should respect the history of the building, and a return to the original color should be taken with caution. It is a work of critical judgment, where the pictorial prospections must be evaluated to make the decision, which will depend on the historical investigation and the analysis of the value of the original layer, also considering the later stratifications and examining if these also have value.

Every building has color. This was not a relevant issue for centuries, since the buildings were colored with the pigments available in each territory. However, contemporaneity has altered this relationship, either by technological advances that have expanded the chromatic possibilities or by new perceptions influenced by screens and digital media. Given this scenario, we will analyze three Brazilian urban centers to verify whether the colors

METHODOLOGY

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Color in restoration theory

In the field of restoration, there is a consensus that color is not only a technical issue, but also a critical and interpretive one. However, it is important to emphasize that no single contemporary theoretical strand guides all interventions. This means that, in the West, chromatic decisions, when based on theoretical arguments, can be supported by at least three strands that distance themselves from the notion of pragmatic or strictly functional restoration, and they incorporate cultural, historical, and aesthetic aspects. In this context, we will approach the theory of critical restoration, which achieved international recognition through Brandi's writings and consolidated itself as a reference in the debate on color in restoration.

Brandi (2009) points out that, in architecture, chromatic interventions should be analyzed with caution, as they can compromise the balance of an entire urban complex. Adopting an even more conservative stance, he advocates the possibility of consolidating old layers, but never to return to the visual aspect of the original colors – an intention that he considers “historically absurd”. For the author, the search for supposed originality would alter the established and consolidated balance between the building and its urban context, in addition to ignoring the passage of time in the work. He further argues that it is impossible to accurately recreate the chromatic aspect of surfaces in their original period.

Muratore (2010) corroborates this issue and highlights the recognition of coloring the surfaces of buildings as an action of a simultaneously aesthetic and historical character, since the patina represents the passage of time. The researcher reinforces her argument by highlighting the thought of Renato Bonelli, an Italian architect of great relevance in the theoretical and practical field of critical restoration, who shared the same perspective when affirming the irreversibility of time. Similar arguments can be found in Paolo and Laura Mora (1984), for whom the chromatic intervention is not complex due to technical problems but because it involves critical, historical, and aesthetic challenges. Like Brandi, Bonelli, and Muratore, Mora and Mora (1984) emphasize that any chromatic intervention should be as moderate as possible. The authors suggest solutions such as respecting and preserving the layer in its current state, filling in gaps only after extensive documentation, maintaining the patina, or even reproducing it to give the new painting an aspect of natural aging.

¹ Although there are several strands within restoration theory, such as “critical-conservative and creative”, based on Brandian theory; “pure conservation”, which adopts a stance where the historical dimension predominates; and “maintenance-repristination”, which emphasizes an analog approach, all converge in respect of the historical value of the cultural property (Kuhl, 2004).

In line with this thought, Paul Philippot (1966), one of the founders of ICCROM², also stated that patina is a natural process, irreversible and inherent in the passage of time on matter. According to him, it is essential to recognize this modification as part of the work's cycle, since its original state can never be fully restored. In the same vein, Giovanni Carbonara (1997), the foremost contemporary exponent of the theoretical aspect of critical-conservative and creative restoration, argues in his book *Avvicinamento al restauro* that the colors of architectural surfaces take on a positive value because they suggest the passage of time. Like Bonelli (1988), he reinforces that the city is lived and enjoyed as an image, color being an essential element in the perceptual experience of the individual with space.

For Carbonara (1997), not only is it impossible to return to the original appearance of the surfaces of an old building, but interventions that introduce a new color depart from the principles of restoration and can lead to the loss of interest in the work as heritage to be preserved. The author emphasizes that the building, together with its context, transforms over time and that the search for an original appearance can, in some instances, take on an even criminal nature insofar as it erases part of history. In a more recent article, Carbonara (2020) also takes a stand against architectural restorations that seek to recover "primitive" colors, arguing that these interventions, although based on historical-philological research³, often translate into overly simplified solutions at the operational level.

Other authors argue that interventions that remove the signs of time distance themselves from the theoretical and practical field of restoration, as defended by Maria Grazia Turco of the Sapienza University in Rome. Turco (2018) notes that total renovations erase traces of the past, compromising the connection between the building (text) and the city (context). This intrinsic relationship between the well-built and urban environments is also analyzed by Nicola Santopuoli (2015), who has developed color plans and criticized what he calls "prepackaged recipes" – overly simplified solutions that disregard the relationships between surfaces and the identity of the place. Such arguments reinforce that the idea of color as an image should not be reduced to mere representation or form. It is essential to approach it as a critical problem, as Montaner (2022) points out, interpreting the work in its complexity and avoiding reducing it to purely formal aspects.

Still, within this theoretical framework, it is essential to highlight the Heritage Charters and ICOMOS documents⁴ that establish guidelines and reflect consensus among cultural field theorists. Among them, the Venice Charter of 1964 is considered the institution's fundamental document. Although it briefly deals with the topic of colors⁵, this charter is aligned with the critical restoration and reinforces the arguments about the importance of the historical value and image of the listed property.

Given this, there is a consensus among theorists regarding the irreversibility of time and the present moment as the guiding thread of the restoration

² International Study Center for the Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Property; intergovernmental organization for the preservation of cultural heritage worldwide that operates through research and training programs.

³ Historical research based only on surveys to verify ancient layers of color and philological research based only on analyzing documentary material are insufficient, as colors must be analyzed on a case-by-case basis against the urban context.

⁴ Icomos is the International Council on Monuments and Sites, a global non-governmental organization associated with UNESCO.

⁵ Article 6 refers to the idea of conservation of the environment, prohibiting interventions that modify the relationships of volume and color.

process. This means that it is not enough to carry out historical surveys if, at the same time, the traces of time are erased, forging a past by trying to recreate an image based on previous layers of paint from the idea that they contain historical contributions. It is essential to recognize that the treatment of surfaces must be approached in the restoration intervention from a critical perspective, understanding it, as defended by Aguiar (2002), as a design problem.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Current and possible scenarios

Parallel to this theoretical context, since the end of the 1930s, in the first years of the federal preservation agency in Brazil, the Institute of National Historical and Artistic Heritage (Iphan) chose national heritage buildings representative of the Brazilian colonial period. Lia Motta, architect, and officer of the Iphan for many years, notes that, between 1937 and 1967, the entity chose six hundred and forty-five (645) buildings, of which most were located in Minas Gerais (MG), followed by Rio de Janeiro (RJ) and, in third place, by Bahia (BA). Although, since 1967, there has been an expansion of the notion of heritage, the criteria initially adopted by Iphan are still present, as Motta (2008, p.55) points out when stating that this practice established “a powerful social framework of memory that fixed an image of heritage, associated with an architecture with colonial or exceptional features, in the memory of Brazilians.” It is precisely because of the strength of this image of heritage, rooted in the social memory of Brazilians, that it becomes possible, when talking about Ouro Preto (MG), Paraty (RJ), and Salvador (BA), to refer, in some way, to several other historical centers recognized as heritage.

The proximity of these three listed nuclei is no coincidence, as it reflects both the process of territorial occupation of Brazil and the first thirty years of Iphan, a period in which the agency's performance was aligned with the political project of modernist intellectuals. In this context, an aesthetic appreciation guided by modernist architects' vision prevailed, highlighting the Baroque style and colonial architecture. This aspect is especially relevant, as it directly influenced the desired chromatic image for these urban centers.

In the colonial period, the architecture of the *cinquecentrist* nuclei was predominantly whitewashed, although there were exceptions throughout the Brazilian territory, using clays and other pigments to add color. Over time, the remaining buildings began to incorporate contemporary chromatic practices, and by the 1940s, many buildings that bore witness to the colonial period had undergone significant changes in their colors. This process intensified between the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, a moment that reflects both the technological advancement of the pigment industry, which made it possible to distribute mineral paints and the social desires

of the population with some purchasing power for an aesthetic renewal. The three historical centers analyzed in this article do not escape this dynamic and have gone through all these moments, in addition to others that emerged later: the formation of their urban centers still in the colonial period, the transition from the 19th to the 20th century, marked by the rise of eclecticism and the popularization of mineral pigments in the coloring of buildings; the strengthening of architectural preservation in the first half of the 20th century, with the institutionalization of these practices in Brazil; the period between the 1960s and 1970s, when the rescue of the history of a place began to be explored as attractive to tourists, and finally, the current context, which, although it is a continuity of this process, presents new issues of the transition from the 20th to the 21st century, where the technology of virtual images and social networks has become an extension of our bodies, influencing our color perception and aesthetic preferences.

These changes in the social context directly impact the colors of architectural surfaces, traditionally treated in Brazil as "layers of sacrifice" – ephemeral and renewable whenever necessary. Even in the cases of institutionally protected cities, architectural and historical particularities make it challenging to adopt a standardized approach to a historic center. This makes it essential to carry out broad studies, which involve not only historical and typological analysis, but also phenomenological approaches. These factors may explain why the Iphan's legal tools do not yet include specific guidelines on chromatic interventions. In Paraty (RJ), Ouro Preto (MG), and Salvador (BA), regulatory documents have been published, but these do not establish clear criteria for the treatment of colors in buildings. Still, recommendations on the subject are found in the local Superintendencies of Iphan or inserted in municipal regulations, to which the Institute's units usually resort.

Motta (1987) points out that, in Ouro Preto, from the middle of the 20th century, all the attention of the Iphan turned entirely to the buildings' facades. The architect explains that this decision aimed to promote a traditional image for the city, but also reflected the Institute's understanding that this would be the best way to maintain a conservative, aesthetic, and stylistic criterion in the listed buildings. Thus, white became indispensable for the masonry, which until then could be painted in shades described as "light," while the wooden elements had to be painted in colors classified as "dark" (Motta, 1987, p. 115).

In Paraty, Pessôa (2011), in one of his articles on the city, points out that, from the 19th century, many architectural surfaces of the historic center began to be colored, reflecting the predominant styles during the First and Second Empire in Brazil. Brazilian eclecticism was on the rise, and technological advances made it possible to manufacture paints in a greater variety of colors. At the beginning of the 20th century, Brazilian architecture underwent significant transformations, and buildings that have maintained their original typologies often adopted colors beyond the white of lime



Figura 1. a, b – Historic center of Ouro Preto. Photographs of facades recorded during a visit in 2015, evidencing the predominance of white in the masonry and the diversity of colored tones in the architectural elements. Source: Author’s Collection, 2015.

Figura 2. a, b – Historic center of Paraty. Photographs that highlight the predominant use of white in masonry, in contrast to the colorful tones applied to the architectural elements of the houses’ facades. Source: Author’s collection, 2019.

and the shades of ochres, reds, and greens, traditionally used on doors and windows from organic pigments. However, it is important to emphasize that the tones and saturation of colors introduced in Brazilian architecture in the transition from the 19th to the 20th century were softer and distinct from the appearance of contemporary paints, which tend to be brighter and smoother in texture.

In Salvador, the situation was different because, especially in the 1990s, the Iphan sought to consolidate a more colorful image for the city, consistent with its predominantly eclectic architecture. As a result, a chromatic pattern is observed in the historic center where white elements contrast with colored backgrounds, which vary between more saturated tones and paler tones, maintaining a significant chromatic diversity, especially in the townhouses.

In all three cases, the colors of the buildings have been completely renewed over the past decades by the Iphan, as shown by the opinions issued by the agency in the last five years (Florenzano, 2023). These



documents show a more permissive approach to changes in the facades' substrate and pictorial layer, which contrasts with the principles defended by critical restoration theorists. Given this scenario, the three urban centers reach contemporaneity with the following chromatic configuration in their architectural surfaces (Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3).

Despite this scenario, there is room for pioneering initiatives that advocate another look at architectural surfaces, such as The Cassina Innovation House project, carried out by Laurent Troos in Manaus (AM). In this intervention, the treatment given to the architectural surface follows a historical-critical approach in which the heterogeneous materiality of the mortar and the marks of time prevail. The project shows the coherence between the architectural typology, the passage of time, and the constructed image. In addition, it proposes a new reflection on the past,

Figura 3. a, b – Salvador historic center. Photographs that highlight the colorful tones of the masonry, in contrast to the white architectural elements on the facades. Source: Author's collection, 2024.



Figura 4. a, b – Cassina Innovation House, Laurent Troost Architectures. Source: available at: <https://www.archdaily.com.br/br/958210/casarao-da-inovacao-cassina-laurent-troost-architectures>, accessed 18-Aug 2023, 11 am.



presenting an architecture that establishes a distinct relationship with the natural aging of buildings and highlights the connections between historical values and the visual identity of the built heritage. Although it was conceived on the scale of a single building, this model offers favorable conditions for developing similar proposals in listed urban centers. The recognition of the prize-winning⁶ and widely accepted project demonstrates that, although this practice is not yet common in the country, both the civil community and experts in the field agree with the image it represents (Figure 4).

However, it is relevant to highlight interventions carried out in other countries, where the treatment of architectural surfaces also follows a historical-critical approach. Figure 5 shows the rehabilitation of a historic building in Ébreuil, France, designed by COVE Architects. Built in the 19th century as an agricultural building, the structure preserves its architectural remnants in the restoration. The masonry of the facades was kept with a patina of time, presenting overlapping layers and gaps in the areas where material was lost.

Figura 5. Rehabilitation of Chamboirat House, COVE Architects office. Source: available at: https://www.archdaily.com.br/1023190/casa-chamboirat-cove-architectes?ad_source=search&ad_medium=projects_tab, accessed 18 June 24.

⁶ Oscar Niemeyer Award for Latin American Architecture, 2022.

Figure 6 a, b – Colonia do Sacramento. Source: Author's collection, 2019.



Another example (Figure 6), although not resulting from a specific intervention project, shows individual treatments applied to buildings located in Colonia del Sacramento, Uruguay. With a historic center protected by legislation and intensely explored by tourism, local buildings have coatings that preserve the signs of the passage of time, reflecting a distinct approach to polychrome – where it is not sought to rejuvenate the built heritage through colors. It is worth mentioning that this practice does not imply neglecting pathological manifestations, as the coatings appear to be intact, and the buildings are still in use.

Given the above, there is a distance between the recommendations of critical restoration theorists and the practices adopted in Brazil regarding the choice of colors for the facades of historical buildings. In the theoretical path, there is a consensus about the irreversibility of time and the need for coherence between image and architectural typology. However, chromatic interventions that try to forge a past prevail in Brazil, creating an artificial image of historical architecture without considering the passage of time. This process, by itself, is already problematic. However, it becomes even more serious as it is conducted by the National Preservation Agency, supported by a discourse that claims coherence with the theory – a reality we demonstrate here – is not confirmed.

In this context, the design of the Nova Cassina House reveals a complex approach that differs substantially from historicist postmodernism, as it does not use the past in an allegorical or nostalgic way. Notably, it is not a question of fixing a rigid model in the sense of the architectural archetype, but of understanding that, although subject to the action of time, materialities can also seek the maintenance of visual and cognitive elements that dialogue with history and the space in which they are inserted.

The other projects analyzed in this article also refuse the aestheticization of forced rejuvenation by choosing to preserve the marks of time on their facades. This choice can be interpreted as an analogy to what Foster (2021) identifies as an art that combats farce. Together, these examples configure good practices that can inspire and stimulate more judicious interventions in Brazilian architectural heritage.

The required reflection is that the answer lies in the image when practice distances itself from theory. Whether in the architecture of the image, which seeks to represent heritage allegorically, or in the solution itself: remember that the image of the listed good, as emphasized by Brandi (2008), is the aspect that culminates in the recognition of the work of art. Thus, this image must remain in dialogue with the historical instance, and color, as a fundamental element of this composition, must accompany it. For this possible scenario to become a reality, continuing debating and building theory is essential.

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CONCLUSIONS

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