A Wall of Books: Natural and Applied Colors in Architecture

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> ". . . in this separate art of colouring, as referred to architecture, it is very notable that the best tints are always those of natural stones. These can hardly be wrong; I think I never yet saw an offensive introduction of the natural colours of marble and precious stones, . . . On the other hand, I have most assuredly never yet seen a painted building, ancient of modern, which seemed to me quite right.[1]

In a recent article, a popular shelter magazine interviewed an interior designer about the acquisition of books-by-the-yard to decorate the apartments of non-readers, and the magazine wondered at the ethics of the deception.[2] Their question turns on the issue of identity and the accurate representation of occupants by their dwellings. The complex interaction between inhabitants and their habitats is made doubly intricate by the intrusion of a professional, who must first interpret the client's identity and then deploy elements to make that identity legible. The fact that those elements are presented according to cultural conventions and stereotypes is further exacerbated by the degree to which identity is itself negotiated through such acts of display. My question is the inverse of the magazine's, inquiring about the decorative use of books themselves. This shifts the emphasis away from identities, to the architectural elements and practices with which they are negotiated. How do the actual procedures of coloring condition those manifestations; how are they discussed or conveyed in practice; and by what reasoning are they applied?

Inquiring about the decorative nature of books directs us to a material palette that attained its mature form, in *The International Style* of 1932. Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson succinctly describe it in the section of their book on "The Avoidance of Applied Decoration."

> At present applied color is used less. The color of natural surfacing materials and the natural metal color of detail is definitely preferred. Where the metal is painted, a dark neutral tone minimizes the apparent weight of the window frame. In surfaces of stucco, white or off-white, even where it is obtained with paint, is felt to constitute the natural color. The earlier use of bright color had value in attracting attention to the new style, but it could not long remain pleasing. It ceased to startle and began to bore; its mechanical sharpness and freshness became rapidly tawdry. If architecture is not to resemble billboards, color should be both technically and psychologically permanent.[3]

The logic of that palette is still visible in contemporary "high tech" buildings, expensive consumer products, and shelter magazines. While the errors, exaggerations, and omissions of the exhibition have been examined and debated since its inception, the fact remains that it produced a startlingly successful manual of style, similar in many respects to the guidebooks and manuals of interior design.[4] *The International Style* promoted a highly refined and selective taste that relies directly on the distinction between natural and applied colors, deploring the artifice and impermanence of paint. Indeed, it too extends that ethic to the decorative use of books, invoking the logic of function to explain their use and an apartment interior by Mies van der Rohe to illustrate them. "The use of natural materials and of such contrasts between different walls as structure and function easily provide is more satisfactory [than colored paint]. There is no better decoration than a wall of book-filled shelves."[5]

Books introduce colored elements into a room without the artifice of painting the walls or draping fabric. Moreover, their colors endure and derive from the materials and craftsmanship of the bindery. They convey both the discipline of their production and the authority of their use, implying precisely the literary activities that the shelter magazine felt should not be deceptively advertised. These conventions of decoration have a precise history and can be traced to two historical circumstances: the discussion of architectural authenticity in the nineteenth-century and the development of interior design as a distinct and separate practice.[6] The two are deeply intertwined; when decorative elements are deemed artificial, they and their advocates are excised from mainstream architectural practice, displaced in many instances to interior design. Interior design constitutes one of the modern

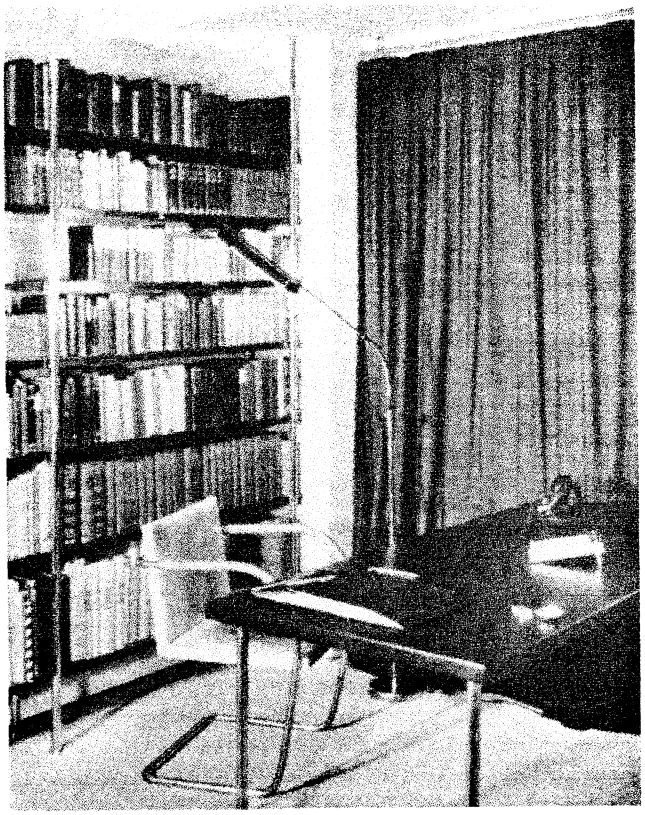

Fig. 1. "Mies van der Rohe, Apartment Study, New York, 1930," *The International Style*, 191.

divisions of labor within the building trades, and it is a highly gendered division in which the activities and the individuals engaged in them are assumed to be somehow feminine. That assignment derives, in part, from the domestic situation of women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a situation noted by the first professional interior designer, Elsie de Wolfe (1865-1950), in her arguments for the invention of the discipline:

> We take it for granted that every woman is interested in houses-that she either has a house in course of construction, or dreams of having one, or has had a house long enough wrong to wish it right. And we take it for granted that this American home is always the woman's home: a man may build and decorate a beautiful house, but it remains for a woman to make a home of it for him. It is the personality of the mistress that the home expresses. Men are forever guests in our homes, no matter how much happiness they may find there.[7]

Like Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman's *Decoration of Houses* (1897),[8] de *Wolfe's House in Good Taste* (1913) was a room-by-room analysis of the house, which refers to the great houses and palaces of Europe for authority. Her work was among the first in a deluge of books explaining the principles and practices of interior design for homeowners and professionals, and feeding directly into the developing field of home economics.[9] In her introduction, de Wolfe outlines a prehistory for the feminine nature of sensible domestic design: "the virtues of simplicity and reticence in form first came into being, as nearly as we can tell, in the Grotta, the little studio-like apartment of Isabella d'Este, the Marchioness of Mantua, away back in 1496."[10] However, her reference to simplicity has a much more complex history which is bound to the discussion of authenticity and utility and which finds its moment of crystallization in the English reform movement of the mid-century. William Morris, John Ruskin, and their circle profoundly altered the discussion of domestic design, and their ideas were broadcast across America through Charles Locke Eastlake's *Hints on Household Taste* (1868)[11] and Oscar Wilde's 10 month lecure tour on the "English Renaissance" in 1882. In the many variations of Wilde's lecture, eventually titled "The House Beautiful," he too followed the room-by-room format, describing suitable materials and finishes for each element of the house.[12] He illustrated the unity of beauty and craftsmanship, which is the hallmark of the movement, in his own discussion of books: "an old library is one of the most beautifully colored things imaginable; the old colors are toned down and they are so well bound, for whatever is beautiful is well made."[13]

Neither Morris nor Wilde argued against all use of applied colors, both discussed the selection and use of paint colors at length. But with respect to the exterior, Wilde followed Ruskin's distrust of painted buildings, indicating one of the operational principles by which natural and applied colors are distinguished.

> The true colours of architecture are those of natural stone, and I would fain see them taken advantage of to the full. . . let the painter's work be reserved for the shadowed loggia and inner chamber.
>
> This is the true and faithful way of building. Where this cannot be, the device of external colouring may indeed be employed without dishonour—but it must be with the warning reflection that a time will come when such aids will pass away and when the building will be judged in its lifelessness, dying the death of the dolphin. Better the less bright, more enduring fabric. The transparent alabasters of San Miniato and the mosaics of Saint Mark's are more warmly filled and more brightly touched by every return of morning and evening rays, while the hues of the Gothic cathedrals have died like the iris out of the cloud, and the temples, whose azure and purple once gleamed above the Grecian promontory, stand in their faded whiteness like snows which the sunset has left cold.[14]

This is a real distinction of craft: the demands on exterior finishes differ substantially from those of the interior; the facts of endurance and wear draw a line precisely between natural and applied colors. Fifty years of experimentation with modern polychromy had taught nineteenth-century architects the importance of "structural" color, not only by

experience, but in recognition that the applied coloring of ancient and medieval buildings had been lost to time.[15] Nevertheless, the force of the twentieth-century's misgivings about applied color are not sufficiently explained by either the demands of craft or the consciousness of future generations. On the one hand, the authority of the natural over the artificial reaches back to the 18th century, while the mistrust of color's artifice extends at least to the painter's argument about *disegno e colore* of the Renaissance and sixteenth centuries.[16] The further affiliation of applied coloring with the tendency of matter to change form aligns it with the strongly gendered hylomorphic (matter-form) tradition traced by David Summers back to the Pythagorean contraries.[17] But on the other hand, questions about the preference for natural color and the decorative use of books are not wholly answered by a linear histories of influence; the situation is full of contradictions. From Wilde's tour of 1882 to the International Style Exhibition of 1932, those preferences are shaped in the complex interaction between the rapidly consolidated practices of interior design, the changing roles of women and characterizations of femininity, and the formation of modern homosexual identity, itself given focus by Wilde's trial and conviction in 1895.[18]

Expressions of taste like *The International Style* or the manuals of interior design are also highly class based. As Hitchcock and Johnson explained about their work, "the current style sets a high, but not impossible standard for decoration: better none at all unless it be good. The principle is aristocratic rather than puritanical."[19] Wilde would agree with the standard if not the specifics of the style. The proliferation of mass-produced decorative goods and the successive movements of reform and education are bound together, while the development of kitsch, camp, and low art attest to their interaction and complicity.[20] Between 1882 and 1932, the positive discussion of applied color and decoration shifts into interior design and the room-by-room format of its guidebooks. There the discourse is conducted at two levels: one organized by the declaration of formal principles and exemplary works, while the second is implicit in the topics, examples, and commentary, which are better suited to the formation of a canon of taste.

The ethic of natural color described by Hitchcock and Johnson is highlighted by Emily Post's interior architecture guidebook of 1930, *The Personality of a House*, published just before the *International Style Exhibition* was mounted.[21] Post is better known for her immensely successful guide, *The Etiquette*, which has been in print since 1922.[22] She was the daughter of Bruce Price, the architect of Tuxedo Park, and after a divorce supported herself by writing articles and designing interiors. In a different time, she would surely have been an architect and despite her success as an arbiter of manners, her son has said that the book on interior design was her favorite work.[23] The *Etiquette* and *The Personality of a House* mirror one another remarkably, both advancing strong standards of taste founded on the principles of charm, comfort, and accommodation, explained through example. Like its interior design predecessors, *The Personality of a House* outlines a series of principles and then proceeds room-by-room, referring to the English Georgian as an exemplar and also to local examples, including Post's own work, for the specifics of American usage and construction. Her general ethic, "emptiness is always an essential of classic beauty and dignity," is virtually identical to de Wolfes "simplicity and reticence," and the "better none at all" of the International Style. Her fundamental principles of design-utility, strength, and beauty-are plainly drawn from architectural treatises. Implicit rules for natural color occur in her chapter on the design of "A Room for a Man," in which she articulates the gendered assumptions about of colors, finishes, and books.

> All plain wood-lined rooms are good, as are also walls painted or papered in neutral tones of putty, or sand, or olive-gray, or wrapping-paper brown, made colorful by many books (red ones!). . . . For a man's study-unless he never reads-the most furnishing de corations are well-filled book-shelves, not too closely matched. Odd lots of books, reference books in calf or leather, or at most, sets of favorite authors in cloth bindings, are far more suggestive of the man who reads than are even rows of splendidly-tooled bindings—unless bindings are his hobby.[24]

In a subsequent section, she discusses the production of "Faked Bindings for Decoration," prefiguring exactly the convention reviewed in the shelter magazine discussed at the beginning of this paper. This practice, and the decorative deployment of books in general, operate not according to the logic of utility and authenticity by which the formal principles are explained at the beginning of her book, but according to the negotiation of identity and its representations. As Heidegger noted, the correlation of this kind of opposition with the form and matter pairing produces a "conceptual mechanism that nothing is capable of withstanding."[25] Decorative practices like the faking of books are

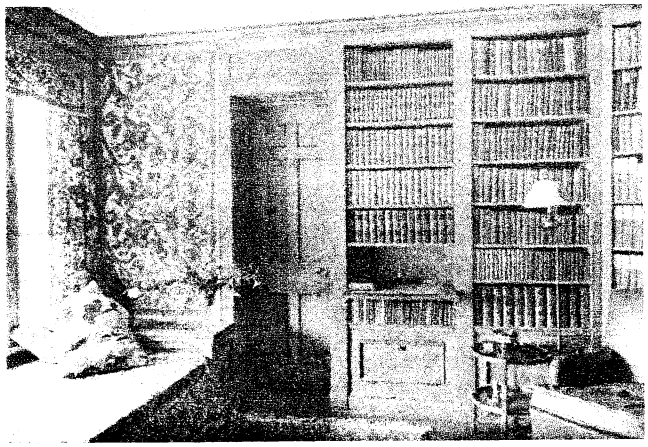

Fig. 2. "An inviting man's room, in which color is supplied in gay print and the mellow quality of old books," *The Personality of a House*, Plate 45.

excluded from the formal discourse, leaving them largely unexamined and disciplined only through the room-by-room narrative format that is consequently their trademark.

The similarities between the "Room for a Man" and the room of *The International Style* exemplify the fully formed concept of modern color and finish by which simple, achromatic rooms or devices are deemed masculine. That identity is remarkably independent of style, and it continues to characterize designers, occupants, and finishes, warping and restricting architectural practice by its definition. The distinction of natural finishes from applied colors derives its energy from the resistance to the subjectivity of "taste," which is further affiliated with intuition, irrationality, and the feminine. The repeated efforts to develop a definitive science of color effects, either functionally or linguistically, are efforts to excise that subjectivity and its connotations from architecture. The fear of taste also exacerbates the gap between the practical applications of color and the discourse which seeks to explain them. The logic of color practices cannot be grasped by positivist theories without an equivalent consideration of change, occasion, and taste. It requires the kind of attention to variable elements proposed by Claude Perrault.

> In architecture there is positive beauty and beauty that is only arbitrary, even though it appears to be positive due to prejudice, against which one guards oneself with great difficulty. It is also true that even though good taste is founded on a knowledge of both kinds of beauty, a knowledge of arbitrary beauty is usually more apt to form what we call taste and is that which distinguishes true architects from the rest.[26]

The selection of colors and finishes is an exercise of taste, and any such acknowledgment makes evident the deep affiliation of architecture with the arts of convention-dressing, dining, dancing, etc. That perhaps is the deepest fear expressed by the privileging of natural over applied color: that acknowledgment of the arts of convention and the necessity of timeliness would undermine a profession dedicated defensively to timelessness. Ultimately, it is through taste, shaped according to class and gender, that we discriminate among the qualities of materials and their finishing, but despite the arbitrariness of its specific, historical elements, the composition of a palettes is among the most demanding forms of discrimination required of architects and designers. Its method involves the close attention to material details *and* identities, for which the best guide would be Emily Post and Hitchcock *and* Johnson.

NOTES

[1] John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1960), 102.

[2] I have been unable to locate this article which I read in the late 1980's, but as I hope this article will show, it is the expression of both a common practice and a commonplace. *Si non e vero e bene trovata.*

[3] Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style* (1932), (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1966), 75.

[4] For a history of the exhibition: Terence Riley, *The International Style: Exhibition 1 and the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Rizzoli/cba, 1992).

[5] *The International Style*, 76.

[6] C. Ray Smith, *Interior Design in 20th Century America: A History* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987). Margaret Milam Sharon, *Historical Perspectives on Interior Architecture/Design as a Developing Profession* (Unpublished Dissertation: University of Kentucky, 1992).

[7] Elsie de Wolfe, *The House in Good Taste* (New York: The Century Co., 1913), 5.

[8] Edith Wharton, and Codman, Ogden, Jr. *The Decoration of Houses* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1897). Metcalf, Pauline C. Ed. *Odgen Codman and the Decoration of Houses* (The Boston Athenaeum, 1988).

[9] The prototype for these room-by-room prescriptive works, though not literally referenced, has to be: Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières, *The Genius of Architecture; of, the Analogy of the Art with our Sensations* (Santa Monica: The Getty Center for the history of Art and Humanities, 1992).

[10] *House in Good Taste*, 9.

[11] Charles L Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste: The Classic Handbook of Victorian Interior Decoration*, 4th Ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1986).

[12] Kevin H.F O'Brien,. "'The House Beautiful': A Reconstruction of Oscar Wilde's American Lecture." *Victorian Studies*, XVII (June, 1974), 395-418. For the form of this talk, as well as many of its specifics: William Morris, "Making the Best of It (1879)," *The Collected Works of William Morris*, XXII (London: Longmans Green and Company, 1914), 81-118.

[13] *The House Beautiful*, paragraph 38.

[14] This quotation is from a slightly different version of the lecture. Oscar Wilde, "Art and the Handicrafstman," *The First Collected Edition of the works of Oscar Wilde*, Vol. 14 (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969), 292-308.

[15] David Van Zanten, *The Architectural Polychromy of the 1830's* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977). Robin Middleton, "Colour and Cladding in the Nineteenth Century," *Daidalos*, 51 (March, 1994), 7889.

[16] John Gage, *Color and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 117-38.

[17] David Summers, "Form and Gender." *New Literary History*, 24 (Spring, 1993), 243-271. "Form and Gender." "'Form,' NineteenthCentury Metaphysics and the Problem of Art historical Description," *Critical Inquiry*, 15 (Winter, 1989), 372-406.

[18] I owe my understanding of this process to the dissertation research by Durham Crout on E.W. Godwin, C.R. Ashbee, and Oscar Wilde (unpublished, University of Pennsylvania). For a discussion of Wilde and the trial: Hyde, H. Montgomery, *Oscar Wilde: A Biography* (New York: A Da Capo Paperback, 1975). As to the precise effects of homophobia on the subject of this paper, I can only note the degree to which Hitchcock and Johnson both operated according to the stereotype of homosexual connoisseur-ship and applied the homophobic exclusion of artifice and changeable finishes. The contradictions of the process affects not only the logic of the practices, but the public discourse and identities of the critics and architects themselves.

[19] *The International Style*, 75.

[20] Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987).

[21] Emily Post, *The Personality of a House: The Blue Book of Home Design and Decoration* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1930)

[22] Emily Post, *Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics, and at Home* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1922). It quickly became known as The Blue Book of Social Usage and is now in its 15th revision.

[23] Edwin Post, *Truly Emily Post* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1961).

[24] The Personality of a House, 406. The reference to red books comes from an anecdote that she relates earlier in the book. "This reminds me of a story that is true: The wife of an eminent author who had enlarged their library living-room was annoyed at the distressing emptiness of so many of the new book-shelves. So she went to a store that had advertised cheap editions and asked for 'lots of books.' Said the clerk: 'Which books may I get you?' To the horror of the clerk, she answered, 'Red ones!' She giggled afterwards at the clerks's obvious estimate of her literary taste." 188.

[25] Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art, (1935-6)" *Basic Writings* (Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977), 158.

[26] Claude Perrault, *Ordonnance for the Five Kinds of Columns after the Method of the Ancients* (1683) (Santa Monica: Getty Center, 1993).