

The role of colour in Modern Movement Architecture. The case of Terragni's Casa del Fascio in Como

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Abstract

The belief that 20th-Century architecture can be recognized by the use it made of the colour white has been widely rebutted over the last few years. One of the most interesting results of the research studies on the buildings of the Modern Movement is the rediscovery of colours. Many factors contributed to the idea that Modern Architecture was mainly characterized by white, but black and white photography is for sure the most influential one. All those black & white pictures were instrumental in paving the way for a precise iconography associated to Modern Architecture, thus leading to a serious misconception. It is as if Modern Architecture lived a parallel life in vintage photographs. Even if it is perceived in the collective imagination as that perfect artistic shot suspended in time and space, Modern Architecture did develop and change over time, in particular with respect to details and finishes, such as colours. This article aims at highlighting those tiny changes that – even though insignificant when taken singularly – substantially contribute to changing the way a building is perceived when considered as a whole. Giuseppe Terragni's Casa del Fascio is so well suited to the purpose. One of the masterpieces of the Italian Modern Movement, inaugurated in 1936, it has been used as Guardia di Finanza police headquarter since 1957. Colour variations represent a key element in the architectural language of Casa del Fascio. The plasters, the wood and iron windows and shutters, the doors, the grout joints of the concrete-framed glass blocks, the stairway railings changed in colour many times, thus altering the appearance of the building. Walls, for example, have many different coats of paint: originally the lower part had a special colour obtained by mixing blue and light green, while the upper part had a lighter colour. When looking at black & white vintage photos we can spot the different colour shades, as if these were supposed to enhance some surfaces in contrast to others. Today this effect has been eliminated through the white paint coat applied to all the surfaces. The stairway railing met a similar fate: originally embellished by a two-tone effect it is now all black. Together with the white walls it seems to inaccurately translate the vintage pictures. Although it is of utmost importance to understand which colours characterized the building at the time of its construction, no less important is to comprehend how its surfaces were transformed over time and why a specific colour was chosen and eventually altered. Terragni's Casa del Fascio can now be returned to the inexorable passing of time, as it no more embodies the idea of an incorruptible monument.

Keywords: Modern Movement, Built Cultural Heritage, Casa del Fascio, Colour

Introduction

While waiting for a history of colour in 20th-Century architecture, it is possible to mention – as an introduction – the tasks colour has performed in many of the so-called Modern Movement works: the exaltation of the landscape, its ability to direct and distribute functions, its thermal properties to capture or block heat, its therapeutic power, its use to create a feeling of belonging to a group (neighbourhood), its political role in certain social contexts (Reichlin, 2013) and – particularly important in this work of Terragni we are dealing with – "colour as an organic part of architecture, that is, as an element of expression of space-time relationships [...] not on a plane, not in two dimensions, but in the new field: time-space in four dimensions" (Van Doesburg, 1979).

The use of colour in Terragni's architecture

The colour schemes developed by Terragni in his architecture are inextricably linked to the international Modern Movement. What is certain is that he knew the work of the European avant-garde and of its leading architects, as well as their colour composition systems: Le Corbusier's Purism, Taut's Expressionism and Rietveld's Neoplasticism. The problem of colour in architecture was also widespread in the Italian cultural debate of the time: Bottoni's studies on architectural chromaticism and Sartoris' graphic experimentations are some of the most famous and representative examples (Artioli and Belluschi, 1990). The critical inattention to colour also affected Terragni's works, even though he always used different materials and colours. *Villa Bianca* in Seveso had a facade painted in pink, *Villa del Floricoltore* in sky blue-grey, *Casa Rustici* was coated in red hue and white marble, while in *Casa del Fascio* in Lissone marbles of different types and colours were used (Artioli and Napoli, 2004). Even in the *Novocomum* the colour played an important role. While, at present, the building has a predominance of white-grey shades imposed by the restoration by Zuccoli in the 1950s, at the time of construction the building facades were coated in a light hazelnut colour. The parts underneath the balconies, the recesses and corner cylinders were painted in orange, the windows in red, the shutters in grey-green and the iron railings in blue (Artioli and Belluschi, 1990). The use of colour gradations was one of the key elements of the architectural language of the *Novocomum*, as it was for the *Casa del Fascio* in Como.

The case study: Casa del Fascio in Como

Terragni's *Casa del Fascio* in Como is one of the historic masterpieces of the Italian Modern Movement (Fig. 1). Inaugurated in 1936 it was used as a National Fascist Party branch for only nine years, until 1945 when the city of Como was liberated from the Fascist Regime. Since then it was used by the National Liberation Committee parties and in 1957 it became the headquarter of the VI Legion of the Italian Finance Police, which still occupies it (Poretti, 1998).

The building has four floors with a square plan and it is characterized by a large central double height hall called *Salone delle Adunate* (Gatherings Room), illuminated from above through a skylight made of concrete-frame glass block (Fig. 2). This huge space originally contained the panels designed by Mario Radice: a marble stele and a large image of the *Duce* on a glass support. These elements were not simply decorative, but also compositional. The gallery of the first floor which connects the offices overhangs the *Salone delle Adunate* (Fig. 3). The second floor follows the distribution system of the first: the only difference is that the gallery opens onto the roof of the *Salone delle Adunate*, characterized by a walkway that crosses it in the middle. On the top floor the building is divided in two parts by two open galleries (Artioli, 1989).

The lack of immediate recognition of the monumental value of *Casa del Fascio*, listed only in 1986, led to maintenance actions over the years that have altered the original design intents of Terragni, including the use of colour.



Fig. 1 – Outside view of the Casa del Fascio (Photo by Sara Mauri, 2016)



Fig. 2 – Salone delle Adunate (Photo by Sara Mauri, 2016)



Fig. 3 – Gallery at the first floor (Photo by Sara Mauri, 2016)

Research on colours and materials

The poor consideration by the critical literature to the problem of colours and the interpretative errors induced by the approximation of black & white vintage photos have led to the spread of an

incorrect chromatic simplification also for what regards the Casa del Fascio in Como. Colour variations actually play a leading role in its architectural language because, as we have seen in the previous chapter, they are a compositional feature typical of Terragni's architecture and not a simple technical and formal finish. The plasters, the grout joints of the concrete-framed glass blocks, the wood windows and shutters, the doors, the stairway railings have changed in colour many times, thus altering the appearance of the building. Another key aspect is the natural colour of the materials used in the Casa del Fascio, just think of the countless types of marbles that cover its interior spaces and that have also undergone more or less significant transformations. The result is a building rich in coloured surfaces and materials that now, deprived of some of its original colours, is equally fascinating but simplified and somewhat mortified in its expressive potential.

Plasters finishing

Years ago, during the repainting works of the *Salone delle Adunate*, some signs of colour came to light and, from a quick extemporaneous analysis; these were immediately identified as the original colours. These had in fact a gloss stucco finish, like *marmorino*, which could not be traced back to a later coating due to its refinement. Sky blue in the vertical walls and grey in the horizontal surfaces, the finishes colour recalled the same contrast chosen in the contemporary *Villa del Floricoltore* (Artioli and Napoli, 2004). In 1999, thanks to a new repainting work supported by the Italian Finance Police, the Superintendency of Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape in Milan commissioned a series of scientific investigations to research its original colours.

A first study carried out by the restorer Salvatore Napoli concerned the stratigraphy of finishing layers. A total of fourteen stratigraphic tests were executed in different points of the building, seven on the ground floor and seven on the first floor, in order to define all the paint sequences applied over the years, from the first finish to the last layer (Fig. 4). In general, the number of paints found on the surfaces is eight, but on the ground floor, in two samples, the number of layers found is lower. It is assumed that the colour binders of the first four layers are synthetic polymeric materials, while the deepest ones contain lime. The deepest layer of blue-green colour (that is three millimetres thick) is made up of a compact, smooth, glossy finish which is very similar to *marmorino*, confirming what was already hypothesized during the first observations (Artioli and Napoli, 2004). This precious finishing treatment was also documented in the special issue of the monthly magazine *Quadrante*, published in 1936 and completely dedicated to the Casa del Fascio: in the list of suppliers and executors of the works there is the *Giacomo Lingeri* company as responsible for the polishing of the Salone delle Adunate walls, which could be intended as a particular finish such as *marmorino* (Terragni, 1936).

In addition to the various stratigraphic analysis, the Superintendency engaged Dr. Antonietta Gallone from the Department of Physics of the Politecnico di Milano to analyse some walls colour samples on the ground and first floor, using chemical-physical methods in order to establish the nature of the materials used. A total of seven samples were analysed. The investigation methodologies used (optical microscope and scanning electron microscope investigation, microchemical tests, x-ray fluorescence and x-ray diffraction analysis, staining tests) highlighted original pigments of two different shades of blue: a light turquoise, obtained by mixing artificial ultramarine green particles with white stucco, and a light blue, obtained by using artificial ultramarine blue. From the examination of the stratigraphic sections, the layers containing the blue particles were overlapped on those with the green particles. Hence, the walls were originally coated with a stucco paint of a delicate blue-light green colour consisting of a compact and homogeneous layer of fine grain size material (Gallone, 1999). In the gallery wall on the first floor, it is now possible to observe a small portion of the surface repainted with the original colour, for illustrative purposes (Fig. 5).

Looking at black & white vintage pictures we can spot the different colour hues, as if these were supposed to enhance some surfaces in contrast to others or to establish an intimate connection with the decorative panels by Mario Radice and the glass panels of the pillars. The blue-green colour

identified probably distinguished the *Salone delle Adunate* surfaces up to the upper limit of the beams, above which there was a lighter colour, perhaps white (Fig. 6). Another hypothesis is suggested by Terragni himself in the monthly magazine *Quadrante*. At the height of 2.10 m he identifies a horizontal line, considered as fundamental in the building structural-architectural planning, corresponding to the line of the doors, as well as to the *Sala del Direttorio* (Board of Governors room) windows and the intermediate landings of the stairs (Terragni, 1936). It is therefore possible that originally there was a slightly different colour from the one applied below this height to underline this limit, maybe a blue-light green of a lighter shade. Unfortunately, the stratigraphic analyses were carried out at a height of less than 2.10 m, so it is not possible to demonstrate the previous two hypotheses. Today this effect no longer exists because the internal surfaces were repainted several times with white paint coat (Fig. 2-3) or white pigments combined with small amounts of black particles (grey paint coat), with a synthetic resin as a binder. We are not able to precisely date these repainting works. It is conceivable, however, that the application of grey paint layers dates back to the occupation of the Italian Finance Police, quite used to repainting everything in grey, being grey their official colour (see the doors and windows chapters).

It would therefore be desirable to carry out further analyses on the *Salone delle Adunate* beams and ceiling, which still retain their original colours, and maybe even in other parts of the building, such as the offices, of which nothing is known.



Fig. 4 – Stratigraphy of finishing layers on the ground floor (Photo by Sara Mauri, 2016)

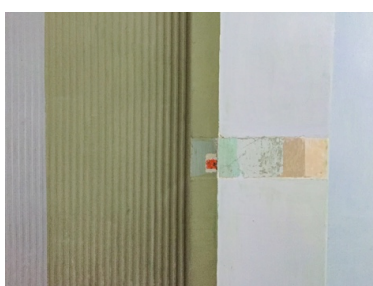


Fig. 5 – Reconstruction of the original colour of the plaster finish and of a door (Photo by Sara Mauri, 2016)



Fig. 6 – In this vintage photo it is possible to notice the difference between the colour of the skylight structural elements and of the underlying beams (Terragni's Archive, 1936)

Doors

The Casa del Fascio interior doors are made of wood clad with Bakelite and are painted with a grey hue (Fig. 3), a colour attributable to the period when the Italian Finance Police started occupying the building. In 2004, a stratigraphic test was carried out on the ground floor bathroom door to establish its original colour. From a conservative point of view, the paint was oxidized, but had no adhesion or cohesion defects or cracks. By making a stratification test with paint strippers and scalpels, four layers were found on the door front part, well adherent to each other. The deepest layer is the original black Bakelite material, the second one is a blue-grey paint, the third one is a pale-yellow paint (probably an oxidation of the previous layer), finally the last fourth level is the grey paint still visible today. There is also a stratification along the door thickness: after the sampling a dowel made of a different wood essence and two different layers of paint came back to light (Rampoldi, 2004). Other investigations on another door revealed a first layer of bright green colour, the same found on the wooden windows and shutters and in the grout joints of the concrete-framed glass blocks. At the moment, next to the colour reproduction of the plaster finish we have mentioned above, there is a small portion of door repainted in green (Fig. 5). There are doubts, however, that this green colouring was executed immediately at the end of the construction and on all the doors, because, from the photographic documentation of the time, some doors seem to be very dark, perhaps black, thus leaving in evidence the Bakelite clad. This theory confirms the results of the ground floor door sampling, which probably had the Bakelite as its original finish without any coating.

Windows and roller shutters

Windows play an important role in the articulation of the Casa del Fascio facades: Terragni paid particular attention to their design by using innovative systems. Two solutions were adopted: iron windows, inserted in the concrete-framed glass blocks panels of the facades and inner courtyard, and wooden windows, for the external facades of the office areas. The latter ones were specifically designed and patented by the company *Colombo & Clerici* for the Casa del Fascio. The wooden windows consist of two elements: a ribbon window, in the lower part, almost always having the same width as the span, aligned at the top with the height of 2.10 m, and a transom having the same width as the span in some rooms, half width in others and being completely missing in others again. They can be classified into ten typologies according to the different shapes, sizes and opening systems, but all have the same movement system based on a counterweight mechanism. Due to their high technical complexity and to the action of atmospheric agents and variations in temperature and humidity, the wooden windows are in a poor state of conservation. For this reason, in 2005, the Superintendency obtained specific funding for their restoration: in order to select the most suitable intervention methodology, some sampling operations were carried out on a window located on the ground floor in Via Pessina. The restoration work ended in 2006 and concerned the frames' structural stiffening through the insertion of steel tubulars and the replacement of the single glazing with a safety one (Artioli *et al.*, 2009). In parallel to these operations, a number of paint samples were taken from the window frame with the aim of identifying the stratigraphic sequences through chemical investigation. The spectrophotometric analysis measured the samples reflectance at various wavelengths (between 400 and 700 nm) to accurately reconstruct the frame's original colour, while infrared analysis established the characteristics of the pigments (Barium sulphate and/or Lithopone, Calcium carbonate and Zinc stearate) and of the binder (it is likely to be Urethane alkyd) (Ambrosini, 2005). These investigations showed that the original paint colour was green both inside and outside the window. The pigments have been modified over the years from green to grey in the 1950s, up to the current painting, which is grey internally and brown externally (Fig. 7). In order to obtain again a colour as close as possible to the original, the wooden frame of the sample window was treated with a green satin oil-based paint and a traditional gloss synthetic paint (Fig. 8-9) (Ambrosini, 2005). In 2016 two other windows were restored, both on the ground floor, one in Via dei Partigiani and one on the rear facade. The intervention methodology and the colour applied for the window frames were the same as those used for the restoration of the sample window.



Fig. 7 – Stratigraphic analysis of the window wooden frame (Photo by Luca Ambrosini, 2005)



Fig. 8 – Restored sample window (Photo by Luca Ambrosini, 2006)



Fig. 9 – Detail of the restored sample window (Photo by Luca Ambrosini, 2006)

Each wooden window has an external shading system consisting of wooden roller shutters, replaced in the 1990s with handmade reproductions. Before their replacement, however, some investigations were carried out to establish their original colour. When restoration works began, they were painted with a brown coat under which another slightly softer shade of brown was found that had been painted over the original light green layer. This latter paint was also found in the slats' hidden parts and in the vertical edges: this is due to the fact that the original paint was spread on each slat before they were assembled, while the following coats of paint were spread only on the external parts of the shutters (Artioli, 1993).

Being the wooden windows and shutters painted green, it can be inferred that the iron windows had the same colour, too. Unluckily, these were completely replaced, so there is no certain information other than that deduced from the vintage photos.

Marble and glass claddings

Marble, used outside as a cladding (Fig. 1), is also widely used inside, not only for decorative purposes, but also to create emotional effects through its colour combinations. If the only variety of marble used externally was *calcare di Botticino*, internally there are different types: *Pietra di Trani*, *Giallo Adriatico*, *Nero Col di Lana* and *Nero di Belgio*. Although Terragni described the various types of marble in the monthly magazine *Quadrante* in a dedicated section, no mention was made where they were used (Terragni, 1936). Hence, assumptions have been made about it.

Pietra di Trani is a compact limestone, with a colour that can vary from straw yellow to brown. In particular, the variety inside the Casa del Fascio is the *filetto rosso*, characterized by a light-yellow background with thin parallel stripes pink coloured. In the form of slabs, it probably covers the floor and pillars of the Atrium as well as the stairs. *Giallo Adriatico* marble has very similar features to *Pietra di Trani* and it is characterized by a uniform yellow background, devoid of veining and stains. Maybe it was used as floor covering for the *Salone delle Adunate* (Fig. 10), although, from direct observation, this is more similar to *calcare di Botticino*. The latter was used as a tile to cover the galleries of the first (Fig. 3), second and third floor in lieu of the original linoleum.

Nero Col di Lana marble has an intense and compact black colour. This feature, together with the very fine grain and the absence of white stains, makes it comparable to *Nero di Belgio* marble, also used in the building. Given the lack of information about its application, it is supposed that it was used in the cladding of the bathroom walls towards the galleries.

Nero di Belgio marble has a compact structure, a dark, intense and uniform black background and a homogeneous grain. In the Casa del Fascio, this type of marble was probably used to cover the Atrium's false ceiling. The original lucidity of the marble was damaged by the bonfires that were often lit inside the building in the years before the Italian Finance Police occupied it. The smoke opacified and blackened the marble slabs and, due to the lack of maintenance over the years, they are still in this condition. Polishing tests were carried out in February 2008, but these were not followed by any kind of project concerning the restoration of the material's characteristics (Mauri and Busnelli, 2016).

In the Casa del Fascio, glass was also used as cladding material, in particular in some pillars in the *Salone delle Adunate*, in the part below the steps of the main staircase and in the bathrooms' internal walls. With regard to the pillars, the glass panes framed them for a height of 2.10 m from the ground and were anchored to the structure. Currently the glass panes have been removed and replaced with *Pietra di Trani*. The parts below the steps of the main staircase were made of *Opalina nera*, a type of coloured glass. Finally, the interior walls of the bathrooms were covered with painted glass tiles (replaced with the same material in the 1990s) whereas different colours were used for each floor (Artioli, 1999): light blue in the bathroom on the ground floor, green on the first floor (Fig. 11) and yellow on the second floor. These tiles further confirm the importance given by Terragni to colour.

Stairway railing

The main staircase, which connects the ground floor to the first and second floor, is – as we have seen – cladded with slabs of *Pietra di Trani* and with *Opalina nera*. The railing is made up of ultra-strong glass panes, which accompany the passage from one ramp to another with a full and regular curvature. Here, the sheet of glass is inserted between two couples of iron profiles. Along the ramps the glass is supported by metal pillars and the handrail, also made of iron, follows the curve of the sheet of glass. Over the years the railing has undergone some chromatic alterations highlighted by comparing the current situation to black & white photos (Fig. 12). The handrail and the vertical pillars have been roughly painted in black, covering the original ebonised surface. The same type of

paint was used on the couple of iron profiles supporting the glass in the passage between the two ramps, probably originally coloured with a shade of green (traces of green were found on the secondary staircase railing). Hence, the original double chromaticity that characterized the railing is lost today due to the uniformity of the black colour (Pracchi *et al.*, 2017).



Fig. 10 – On the left *Pietra di Trani* marble floor in the Atrium, on the right *Giallo Adritico* floor in the *Salone delle Adunate* (Photo by Sara Mauri, 2016)

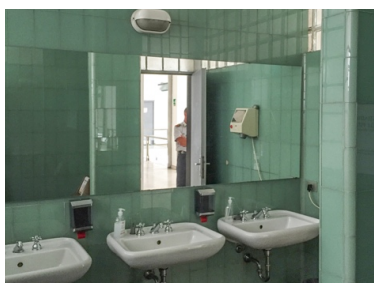


Fig. 11 – Bathroom on the first floor covered with green glass tiles (Photo by Sara Mauri, 2016)

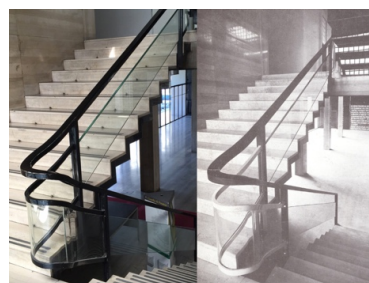


Fig. 12 – Comparison between a vintage photo and the current situation of the stairway railing (Photo by Sara Mauri, 2016)

Conclusion

In the last 15 or 20 years, restorers have carried out studies on many iconic cases showing that the “white cubes” were never white: Billiet House in Bruges (1927) (Verdonck, 2007), Sonneveld House in Rotterdam (1933) (Block *et al.*, 2001), Van Doesburg’s Studio House in Meudon (1929-30) (Polman, 2013), Peeters house in Deurne (1932), Ville Savoye in Poissy (1929-31), Ville La Roche in Paris (1923-25), Bauhaus in Dessau (1925-26), Villa Beer in Vienna (1930), Tugendhat House in Brno (1929-30) and so on.

Our purpose is to add information regarding the history of the life of Casa del Fascio and how it has changed during the years. This was possible thanks to in-depth research in the archives at a national and municipal level as well as a survey of the building, mixing direct and indirect sources. Furthermore, various hypotheses were assessed, when possible, by means of physical and stratigraphic analysis. The aim is not to provide the exact composition of original colours or to repaint them in a future conservation project, but rather to provide a solid basis in order to be able to understand what has changed and how, and to make decisions in full awareness and responsibility. If everything seemed to be white in the past, nonetheless it is not necessary that modern architecture must now be fully recoloured. For this type of architecture, we do not accept the passage of time, considered as a sign of premature decadence, a failure of modernity. This could end up in the “Dorian Gray syndrome”, which is perfectly represented in the title of a famous article written by W.J. Pajmans and J. Molenaar on the work done in Villa Sonneveld: “A modern Villa from 1933 to 2001. As if nothing has happened” (Canziani, 2004).

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