

# New Colour ‘Editions’ of Urban Space in Post-Socialist Societies

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**Abstract**—The main goal of this paper is to present the comparison of Slovak and Russian colour “editions” of urban space. The research includes the necessary theoretical discussion, as well as the indispensable experimental investigation involving observation and documentation of urban colour, computer simulations and a combination of sociological and psychological methods of urban colour analysis. The comparative analysis of Slovak and Russian colour “editions” of urban space reveals two completely different approaches to urban colour design that can be designated as a “bottom-up” approach and a “top-down” one.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since people have been living in cities colour has been used to emphasise the social structure of urban space and social differences of townspeople. Colour in urban space is popular, easy of access and highly informative, and that is why it is successfully employed by citizens in their “self-presentation” and “manipulation of the impression” [1] that they wish to convey to others. However, much more essential is the influence of collective actors on colour characteristics of the city. Having a great amount of recourses, they “edit the city” [2] by use of colour. They can create colour illusions and impressions causing urban spaces to obtain particular qualities that in reality are actually not present.

The mass construction of reinforced concrete panel buildings in Socialist societies has significantly affected urban colour. The colour schemes of the ensembles from that time were originally a result of a mechanical distribution of colours on the façade surfaces. Achromatic colours prevailed – whitish and greyish. Throughout the cities and countries, the same colours were used and there was no consideration of the environment, specificity of the cities or sites. Only exceptionally a conceptual colour design was applied. Such approach to urban colour design resulted in visual monotony and uniformity, weakening of the sense of place, *genius loci*, and creating “inhuman” environments [3, 4].

The fall of state socialism changed the political system and the ideology of people. It brought new conditions for colour planning and colour design of urban space, for ways of production and distribution of colour images in urban culture. Local authorities could not get rid of the existing architecture (Fig. 1); however, they were able to use this accumulated architectural material as the base for expression of new ideas by means of colour.

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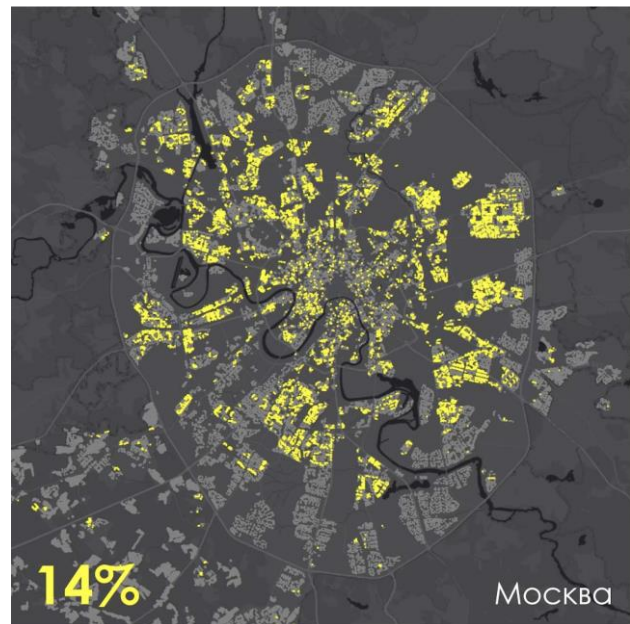


Figure 1. Location of the Soviet architecture (yellow) in the structure of contemporary Moscow

Source: Smartloc.ru

## II. METHOD

The research included the necessary theoretical discussion, as well as the indispensable empirical investigation involving visual surveys and documentation of urban colour, computer simulations and a combination of sociological and psychological methods of urban colour analysis.

A complex integrated approach involving the appropriate methodological arsenal was used as the basic method.

Empirical research was carried out using the case study method. The essence of the case-method used in various fields of science lies in the fact that this type of empirical research is aimed at the deep study of features and complexity of the particular case related to a certain phenomena class. It gives an idea about the decision or set of decisions, describes why those decisions were taken, how they were implemented and to what result they led. Cases provided information about the local community, the street space, and daily activities / practices. Complete observation was used to capture the real situation regarding the different urban structures and people's everyday actions/habits.

An important means of this study was a comparative analysis and its methodology.

### III. RESULTS

#### A. The Slovak Model

The process of colour changes in Slovak cities was spontaneous and faster than any relevant planning or coordination (Fig. 2). The results had an impact on the authenticity of the appearance of the buildings, identity as well as visual character of whole environments. The key word and impact of the process was differentiation. It started at the level of individual apartments within the residential buildings (first colour changes mainly affected the exterior parts of balconies, terraces, etc.). Individual subjective colour taste broke the former visual unity of the façades – this can be understood as a demonstration of individual identity, “moving out of the mass”.

The spontaneous creative process continued on a broadening scale and most often the following approaches have emerged:

- The whole façade is covered by a certain pattern - regardless of its articulation or with only a slight respect to the articulation of the façade - as a big “mosaic” or illusion of a different facade structure;



- Emphasis on vertical structuring of the façade;



- Emphasis on the horizontal dimension by horizontal lining of the façade;



- „Accidental“ distribution of variously sized colour areas – probably the most frequently used approach;



- “Overwriting” the facade by an artistic motif



- Choice of unusual hues, which have not traditionally been used as façade colours.

The opportunities for some conceptual colour designs occurred only exceptionally – both for individual buildings as for colour plans for ensembles.

On the whole, the dynamics of colours on façades of buildings in Slovakia over the past 50 years confirms W. Spillmann's [5, p. 41] concept of alternating chromatic and achromatic periods in human history. However, the duration of the individual periods is gradually getting shorter – the research in Slovakia since 1990 identifies relevant periods 1990–2000, 2000–2010 and after 2010. As this process has not been managed or coordinated in any way, it has been a spontaneous development, and as such it offers invaluable study material. Studies of preferences conducted since 1990 put in evidence a clear rejection of grey colours on façades in the two following decades. Naturally in practice this was demonstrated by the use of predominantly highly chromatic colours, an “explosion”, which had as a consequence (more or less since 2010) a return to the use of mainly achromatic colours on façades combined with a chromatic colour [3, 4]. This development falls into a “spiral” turning from the use of prevailing achromatic colour schemes through a super colourful period back to the prevailing achromatic phase of a higher level. It is a new quality of grey enriched by chromatic colours of higher chromaticness in limited surface extend.



Figure 2. The „Spiral” of colour preferences in architectural environments in Slovakia

**B. The Russian Model**

The Russian model was built on the unified programme focused on multi-flat blocks with a standard design. The procedure in this model included a number of consecutive steps.

*Step 1* Determination of the most widespread types of systems (“series”) of model buildings.

*Step 2* Analysis and generalisation of domestic and foreign experiences in colour design of mass housing.

*Step 3* Development of a theoretical framework for urban colour planning based on an international colour notation systems and computer-aided drawing (Fig. 3).

*Step 4* Establishment of a methodology for the selection process of the most appropriate colour design option for a particular building (Fig. 4).

Currently standard colour design is in more and more Russian cities and towns formed on the basis of the Album of model projects [6, p. 326–336]. The Architecture Committee of a city or town approves both the structure and the content of the Album. The Album contains projects of façade colouration for the most widespread standardized buildings of a city. There are a number of colour projects for every standardized building. There are also rules for choosing the most suitable colour design for a certain city object. The rules recommend taking into account the following factors:

- Location of the building in the city structure (centre, inter-mediate zone or periphery);
- Location of the building in the environment (city road or square, sea-front, pedestrian street, residential area);
- Role of the building in the city image (dominant, accent or a background element of urban environment);
- Architectural and natural colour environment;
- Function and use of the object (residential house, school, hospital, etc.).

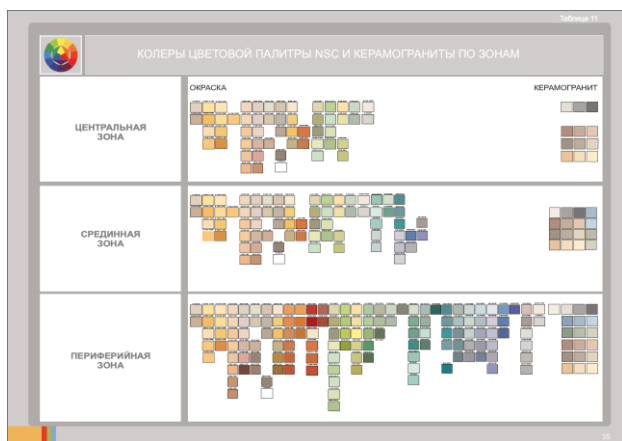


Figure 3. Colour palette of Moscow

Source: mos.ru



Figure 4. Different variants of colour design for the particular building

Source: mos.ru

The developed model projects, in general, recommend using achromatic colours in combination with chromatic details, limit the application of bright shades, reduce the size of implemented colour palette in each project to a maximum of two or three, and determine the main colour in the composition that guides the selection of the colour scheme and subordinates all the other colours in hue, saturation, and lightness.

**IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The comparative analysis of Slovak and Russian colour “editions” of urban space reveals two completely different approaches to urban colour design that can be called a “bottom-up” approach on one hand and a “top-down” approach on the other.

The “bottom-up” approach that has gradually been practiced in Bratislava and other Slovak cities has been driven by a thirst for change of appearance, differentiation, and making use of the new possibilities.

The “top-down” approach designed and implemented in Moscow and some other cities of the Russian Federation, requires the development of a unified refurbishment programme focused on buildings with a standard design.

To effectively implement urban colour planning, both approaches, i.e. “top down” and “bottom-up” are necessary. It is needed to rely on an appropriate mix of upstream and downstream approaches and to gather and

disseminate best practices. This may bring about a better balance in the process of policy-making.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The research was supported by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research, Project No 15-03-00733 and the Laboratory of Colour, STU in Bratislava – Faculty of Architecture.

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