

TITLE: Enough Beige
SUBTITLE: A Glimpse of Hundertwasser
WRITER: Tuvia Poliskin

Driving north on I-5 in the dim light of a cold northwest winter morning, I was suddenly struck by the vast blight of beige casting its colorless shadow over the majestic Puget Sound landscape. As I entered the Downtown, Seattle area I noticed the nondescript sterile buildings lining the roadway to the west, while to the east a clump of beige stalagmites rose from Pill Hill. What struck me at that moment was the magnitude of buildings lacking the courage to express emotion through color. I felt Hundertwasser's spirit beckoning to speak out, his call to awaken us from this haze.

Color is not new in architecture. Throughout history, from ancient Greece to Babylonia to a small Ndebelle tribe in Africa, color has been harnessed by diverse cultures to enrich their built environments and establish an identity of place. Scores of architecture books are filled with illustrations of these magnificent feats, which stare back at us, questioning—why have you not acted similarly?

We feel safe expressing color in our personal spaces, but it seems we don't feel as safe doing the same with the exterior skin of our buildings. So we fall back to the safety of beige and pale imitations of what once was color.

Countless psychological and physiological studies have investigated our primal need and responses to color. Clinical studies have shown that humans left in environments devoid of color experience excessive negative emotional responses: irritation, restlessness, anxiety, distress and fear, which we know are detrimental to our wellbeing (1). Studies have also revealed the positive benefits of color—to aid in the healing process, contribute to unthreatening environments, support social interaction and improve learning abilities (2). Color has such power.

In the Seattle metropolitan area, many of our daily sensory experiences may be perceived under an overcast sky. This significant amount of decreased exposure to sunlight can have a negative impact on our emotional state. Think of color as “vitamin D” for our eyes and spirit. Many health professionals recommend that inhabitants of the Northwest take a vitamin D daily supplement to offset the lack of exposure to sunlight, which can affect our psychological and physical health.

The ancient study of phototherapy (chromotherapy) dates as far back as the Egyptians who used light and color's electromagnetic radiation as a treatment for health ailments (3). By adding more color to the exterior surfaces of our buildings, we can activate them to act as reflectors that transmit the full range of nourishing wavelengths. We can amplify what light we have by harnessing this energy. Color has the capability to rejuvenate and sustain our spirit through the lengthy seasons of grey.

Wassily Kandinsky writes about the sound of color in his book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. He states, "Generally speaking, color is a power, which directly influences the soul. Color is a keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, and the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand, which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul."

Imagine walking into an impressionist painting with the artist's colors cascading over you, their spectacular pigments illuminating the surrounding canvas. Remember in *The Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy's house lands after the tornado and the film changes from a sepia tinted black and white into Technicolor? That was where her transformation began.

Now, picture the Seattle cityscape with an infusion of color. Can you envision the transformation? We have inherited a breathtaking texture of greens and browns that permeate our environment. If you are fortunate to be in proximity of one of our luscious bodies of water, add a splash of indigo with a pinch of violet along with a wash of lavender. What other colors can we add to the palette to enhance our collective painting?

Among the beige, I've glimpsed inspired buildings that express some emotion through color. I'm sure you've witnessed your own. You may live, work, pass by, or have created one. They leave an enduring imprint on our memories. My eyes and heart are always grateful for that exceptional moment when I see a building that says, "Yes, I'm here." These colored offerings please their inhabitants and in so doing, remind all of what can be if we are willing to make the effort and take a risk.

Buildings and structures imbued with color spark our imaginations and touch our emotions. They hold us to a higher standard of aliveness. Some may induce a smile, some a scream, but they won't elicit indifference or numbness.

BIO

Tuvia Poliskin is a practicing architect and college design educator in Seattle. He is the founder of T2 Design + Architecture, and PPA, a pre-design assessment service. Currently he is writing the 'to-design' Awareness Guide, a navigation tool for emerging architects.

To share your sightings of built color in the Seattle metropolitan area, please go to http://www.flickr.com/groups/enough_beige-seattle/ and upload your photographs for all to see.

References

1. Functional Color and Design in Education, Architectural Record, June 2013
2. Manke F. Color, Environment, & Human Response. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.; 1996
3. Azeemi S, Raza Mohsin, A critical Analysis of Chromotherapy and Its Scientific Evolution, Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine, Volume 2 (2005), Issue 4, Pages 481-488, Hindawi Publishing Corp.