

I want this room to be yellow

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I want this room to be yellow

*In conversation with
Joseph Halligan of Assemble*



fig. a Granby Street, Liverpool, photographed by Gary Calton

Joseph Halligan joined us on a Monday evening in the trans office for a discussion about his work with the collective Assemble, around a red table.

Joseph Halligan (jh): So this issue is about colour, right? Why colour?

TransMagazin (tm): We liked the multi-layered complexity of the subject matter, and the challenge of talking about it. It was also triggered by the fact that we don't know how to deal with colour in our projects.

jh: I've just started teaching here in Zurich and one thing I've noticed is how desaturated it is. Everything in Zurich seems desaturated, right? I've always thought it was something done by photographers in photoshop but it's not. It makes it quite severe and cold I think, but also quiet and peaceful. It must be because of how the light falls on the fog; It gives it kind of a grey wash. I guess it's different in the summer...

tm: 80% of Zurich is beige. In reality it's quite different thanks to the city landscape, which is very developed with this messy greenery between the streets and the houses. One of the articles talks about the fact that people see Zurich as being very blue, probably because of the water, the lake, the rivers. We are actually curious about the Granby Four Streets project, also because of the fact that you were confronted with an already on-going process with different actors, different colours.

jh: When I think about colour in the Granby project I think about paint. Colour was something we used in the houses, to highlight certain moments. It was a low-budget project, so there is not always so much you can do. What is interesting about colour in paint is that it's very economical. It could be blue, be grey or it could be orange and it's all the same price. For us it was something we could use very freely. So when we were working on the houses, this was something we were aware of.

tm: Local residents also used paint on the houses, right? By painting the unoccupied houses, with a thin layer of paint, they managed to reanimate their neighbourhood.

jh: Yes that's right. The one side of the street was renovated first and the other side was completely unoccupied so the people living there, sick of looking at those empty houses, painted curtains onto the boarded windows and it made a huge difference. What I think is so cool about that is how domestic the act of painting is. The local residents of Granby, who were there trying to transform the area, were using domestic actions; actions that they knew. They were cleaning the streets like you would clean your house, they were planting the streets like you would plant your garden and they were painting the buildings like you would your house. It's quite a powerful thing. That you don't require specialist training to alter the built environment. But I guess that's not so much about colour, it's more about the act of painting.

tm: It shows how colour can make something more valuable. How did you decide which colour to choose?

jh: We wanted to use a variety of colours, and made sure no single colour was used more than once, so all the houses were individual. The front doors and bay windows on the 10 houses we renovated are different colours, which creates this lively streetscape. The people on the street talk about it.

The colours we used were slightly unconventional, I guess. The houses renovated by the housing associations all use this same colour red. Historically it was the colour used by the local council; it's this standard, almost brick red. They would paint the house this colour, and they would also paint the door this colour and it has this very negative association with local people. It's a political colour. It reminds people of the failed top down regeneration attempts that happened in the area. So we were aware of that. We chose strong, bright, hopeful colours. A lot of the people in the Community Land Trust we were working for have very colourful houses themselves, some that were really quite garish. We chose colours that they might like, that we didn't necessarily like so much. The colours we were choosing weren't very tasteful. Bright orange and yellow doors. I guess almost inviting the new owners or tenants to paint the door because it's that bad, ha ha. In the process, making the houses feel more like their own. Three houses have been sold, and two of the people that are moving in like the colours and one really hates them.

I think it's great that the houses don't feel too precious and that people can paint and repaint the interiors. I mean it's crazy what some people do. I went back to visit some of the houses recently and one of the tenants living there had painted

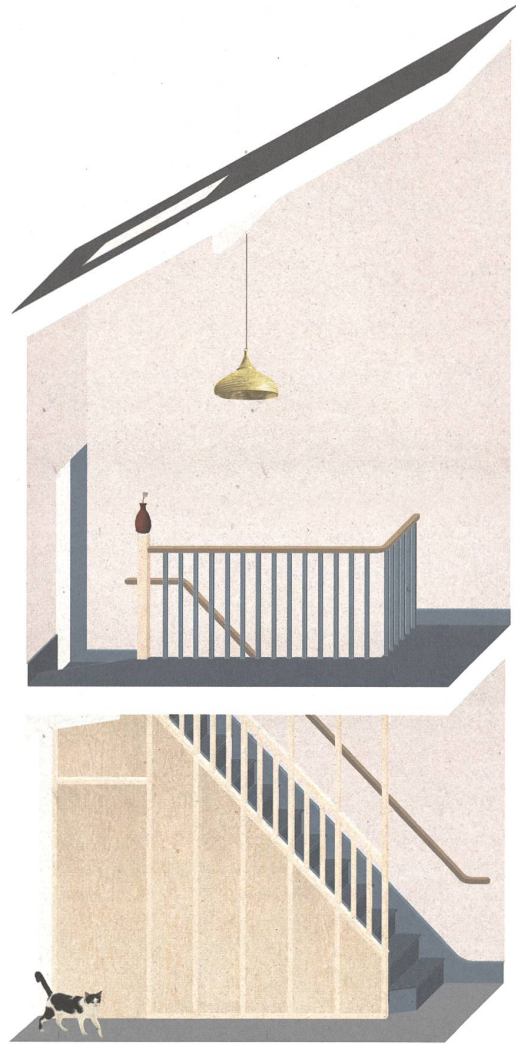


fig. b,c One of the refurbished houses on Cairns Street

everything black. This beautiful Douglas Fir storage wall, with wonderfully expressive grain and hidden fixings etc, painted black, all black. Crazy stuff we never would have thought would happen. It's a very personal thing, colour, I guess. A child always wants to paint his room. I remember asking my mom to paint my room when I was a teenager, it's about ownership. «I want this room to be yellow.» There is an amazing series of pictures of teenager rooms in the 90's by Adrienne Salinger, which shows this.



fig. d Adrienne Salinger, 'In My Room: Teenagers in Their Bedrooms'

tm: Granby is also a place where you experimented a lot with materials, with colours. Were the inhabitants involved in this work?

jh: Not to start with but eventually yes. We would work in the backyard of one of the houses, behind a local cafe, making mantelpieces from rubble we found in skips on the street. People would come in everyday and slowly offer advice. We set up a stall at the local market one weekend and tried to sell our wares. You always get lots of feedback then. Now we've set up a social enterprise on the street, Granby Workshop, which employs two local people full time, producing these products for the home. Colour is always so personal though, some people like it, some don't.

tm: Trying to discuss it, that's quite a challenge. In the end it's maybe not so much about whether you like it or not. In a sense, you get involved because you change it.

jh: I always think, if we had more money, would the houses have been colourful? I don't know. For us, if they were just all white it would have been so boring. We were renovating the houses as economically as possible. We weren't doing so much, so we had to do something with the colours and the colour of paint is free as I described earlier, so...

tm: Looking at the Yardhouse or the Goldsmiths Art Gallery for instance, it seems like colours are something you like to explore.

jh: For the Yardhouse, all the tiles are made exactly the same. They were actually all made by the same person, using the same mold. This is economically how it has to be. You can't have 1500

different molds, so the colour is what gives the variety. We did some tests using different pigments and then made batches of concrete, each one a different colour. Every batch could produce maybe 20 tiles. Whatever that colour came out as, that's what it is. The next batch would be another and the batch after another again. It wasn't so controlled. The tiles were then placed on the facade of the building with the instruction to group similar colours together. They were hung say 50 at the time and then the builders would take a break and change the colour. You can see this in the facade. There are some bits where the builders were super rigorous and then other bits where the builders didn't care so much. It's funny. We also had this problem again, or not this problem but when you want something to appear arbitrary, it can be very difficult to tell someone this. We made these special tiles for the houses in Liverpool, each one different. We wanted them spread throughout the bathroom randomly, between the plain tiles but trying to tell someone how to do something like this is tough... The builders would make patterns with the tiles, borders etc. How you scatter them and how you choose the colour is very difficult. In the end we had a rule that every tenth tile had to be a special tile.

tm: You were telling us how you were using the pigments for the tiles. Could we link this to the fireplaces in Granby, where the pigments become the gravels and stones you were finding on-site?

jh: They were cast in the backyard of one of the houses. There is lots of building work in the area so there are lots of skips for this stuff. We walked around and went to those skips and picked up bricks and slates; the different bits of rubble that usually come from the demolition sites. We made simple and geometric molds for the fireplaces and then we threw in some bricks, slates, tiles etc and made up a kind of cement mix like a concrete with more sand and less gravel. We made three batches and then mixed in some pigments. One fireplace might be a mix of white concrete, a kind of pink and then a deeper red.

tm: So you were using pigments...

jh: I shouldn't have told you that. But that's the kind of ambiguity, which I think is really fun. People always assume that you are getting the colour from the bricks themselves. We were very aware of people interpreting it like that. So all the ones that have brick aggregates tend to be red and use a red pigment, which tries to match the brick. The slate ones are more black and kind of navy. So there is this thing where you think it might be...

tm: You were actually trying to remake this kind of marble or stones in order to give value to a very cheap material.

jh: That was completely it. It's quite poignant because the stuff we were making for the houses like tiles, mantelpieces, door handles... If you ever visited these houses before they were renovated, the front doors would have these stickers on them that said: «Anything of value has been removed from this property.» It's a way of deterring people from breaking into the properties. So when we were refurbishing the houses we wanted to reintroduce these things of value. It was about making things, which



fig. e,f Interiors of a house on Cairns Street

looked valuable, like handmade tiles, very decorative fireplaces and these handles, which have this smoked finish, which kind of look like they could be ivory or bone. But of course all of this had to be done for super cheap.

tm: Was there a difference between those colours? How do people like those kind of brutal fireplaces?

jh: I think some people don't notice them or they're not fussed about them. But most people tend to like the fireplaces; they have a story. The painted stuff though people just paint over if they don't like it. As most people would. If I bought a house I would paint it. I always think this. If I was buying a house, I would want to redo the bathroom, kitchen etc even if it was really nice. It's about creating a sense of ownership, where you are like: «I want it to be my house.» I always feel that.

tm: In a sense, you already get this feeling when you can choose something. You get a feeling that this is yours because it's specific.

Looking at the tiles or the fireplaces, the pigments allow you to give a materiality to the object whereas the adding of colour in the Brutalist Playground does the contrary in the sense that the colour makes it abstract.

jh: The foam looks a bit like concrete, right, but it's colourful and soft, that was the one liner or joke, but the exhibition was really about the state of playgrounds today. We are fascinated by these images of the concrete playgrounds you find on brutalist estates. They are so abstract. At Assemble we talk about how playgrounds today belittle children. They are made up of primary coloured swings, and seesaws that scream, «Kids, you can play here. This is a swing, you can use it like this». But I don't think kids read them like this. It's more for the adults. You don't have to belittle children, everything doesn't have to be brightly coloured and made of foam. Things can be abstract and there can be some risk. If a child grazes their knee perhaps they learn something from this experience. That was the point of the exhibition and why we liked these brutalist structures so much. They are grey, rough and super abstract. So you have to ask: «How do I play on this?» Even: «What is this?»

The idea about recreating them at 1:1 comes from this tradition of making copies of items of value. In London there is the Victoria and Albert Museum that has this room called the Cast Court, where 1:1 scale replicas from around the world are displayed. You'll find a pulpit from a church in Florence or a column from a temple in Athens, all replicated in plaster at 1:1. Through making a facsimilie you give importance and value. So with these playgrounds, a lot of which don't exist anymore, it was about replicating them at 1:1 and putting them in a gallery thus giving them some worth... and the foam was a commentary on play today and the fact that if they were made today they would probably have to be brightly coloured and super soft so no child can hurt themselves... I guess it also makes it quite fun.

tm: Maybe in the Brutalist Playground the colour is used to unify, whereas in Granby Four Streets it was to diversify.

jh: Yes maybe. In the production of foam the colour is completely pragmatic. Within the exhibition I think there are three

different colours, but they just represent different densities of foam. If you are making a seat, you might use a small amount of quite dense foam and underneath you'll use a less dense foam because it's cheaper and also gives a more comfortable seat. We were using reconstituted foam, which is made of recycled foam from car seats etc. To make it, the factories chop up the various bits of recycled foam and then chuck it into a big cauldron. A glue is used to bond it all together and then a pigment is added. They compress the mixture to different depths. Each pigment or colour indicates the depth in which the foam was compressed to.

What we found out is that the pigments they use are not colour-fast. I knew it but I didn't think it would be as bad as it was. Usually this doesn't matter as the foam is covered, but over the three months of the exhibition where it is in daylight, eventually it all faded to yellow. When the exhibition opened it was pinging, it was super bright, but by the end all the foam had deteriorated from kids scratching on it, there was rubbish everywhere and everything was yellow and gross. There is something familiar and equivalent about this and the state the surviving playgrounds are in now.

I guess colour and bright colour in particular generally represents something that is new. Maybe that's interesting about colour: this freshness that is associated with it.

Do you know Tom Sawyer? It's a funny children's book. As punishment Tom is made to whitewash the garden fence, a thankless never-ending task. Cleverly Tom convinces all his friends that painting is actually a wonderful thing to do and ends up getting all of them to do it for him. It's very good... but I guess like cleaning, painting is something that you have to do regularly, just in order to maintain something. I guess when you see bright colours it represents someone who has just repainted the garden fence. It shows work, which as Tom Sawyer's friend's would tell you, is a good thing.

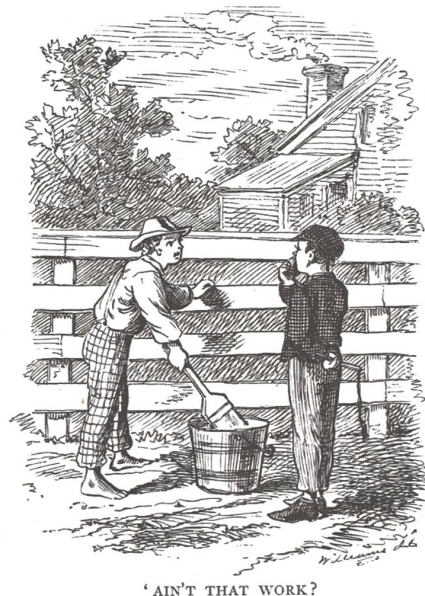


fig. g Mark Twain, Tom Sawyer, chapter two, 1876

tm: You've been working a lot with the small scale. How do you face a bigger project like the Goldsmiths Art Gallery?

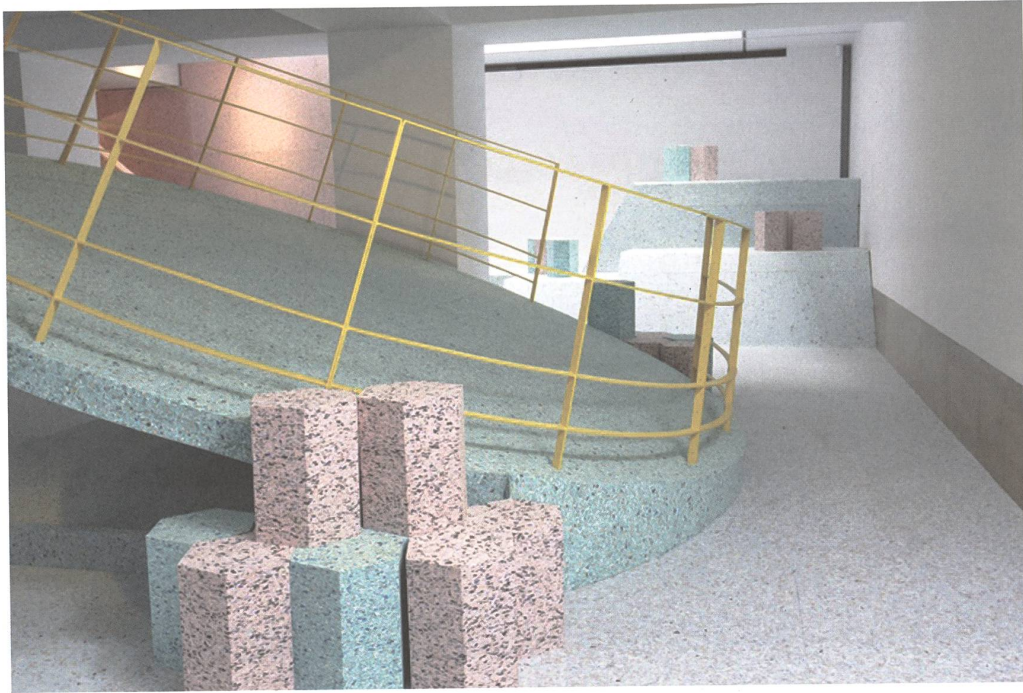


fig. h The Brutalist Playground at the Royal Institute of British Architects

jh: We are doing bits of it ourselves. We are going to make the facades of the tanks. There are two existing tanks and we are adding a third, which I guess isn't a tank but it looks a bit like a tank. We are using cement board panels, but staining them green. By adding a colour, I guess we are trying to add some extra value. Elevating something that is cheap. If it was just grey and you saw it you'd think: «I know what that is.» ... and it's the cheapest cladding you can buy. Originally in the scheme, we wanted it to be metal, because the other tanks are cast iron. We wanted to make this one thing that would have been very luxurious and bright, but then there is never the budget for that in the end. It's now more interesting that it is something cheap dressing up as something more expensive. It's less obvious and that is something we are making ourselves. That will be a package of work that we will deliver.

These days we set up a workshop in Liverpool, which makes these products for the home, which has continued to make the fireplaces, tiles and handles, so we'll probably specify a lot of those products as well. It's a social enterprise and the profit they make is used for the community. So it will set up more employment for the local people and there will be youth courses that are run in the local area. That's another thing we are doing. (pause)

I guess the problem with colour is that it's very hard to accurately represent it in student projects. Do you think that's true? Because it's never the finished thing, it's never something you can totally realise, it's either a colour on a paper or on a model. It also depends on what printer you've got, or what paper you've got or what coloured card you used to make the model. Or in Zurich it seems to be what powder people rub onto their model.

tm: In the studio of Adam Caruso, we are choosing most of the colours according to the papers that are available in the store.

jh: I wonder what else you are meant to do. It's kind of true in reality as well. You chose the paints that are available in a way. You can get them mixed up but I think it's always slightly dangerous. If you mix up a specific colour and paint something with it and then, in five years' time, they have to repaint it and you can never match it. Then they just change it. So you are almost better just painting it a more standard colour.

tm: It's also a theme that often arrives quite at the end of the design process and that's something we wanted to question and discuss. It's a bit this topic that no one dares talking about and that many of us push to the end.

jh: And then at 4am people choose...

tm: With no time left to reflect on it. That's maybe why the Granby Four Streets project is so strong with its colours: it has a meaning. You had to be aware of it but in a sense those colours aren't really your project. They were already there, with a history you had to understand. The project in a way started with colours but it actually isn't so much about the tint of the colour. It's more about the colour itself. We just add the colour and it could be red or blue but in the end it's not so important. Anyway it will change, so what are we talking about? (Everybody laughs)

Joseph Halligan studied architecture at the University of Cambridge and the London Metropolitan University. He was a founder member of Assemble, realising The Cineroleum in 2009 and the Folly in 2010 during two years experience in architecture practice. Since then he has worked on a variety of projects including the Granby Four Streets project. Joseph has also worked on a touring exhibition about the architect Lina Bo Bardi and the Brutalist Playground installation with artist Simon Terril. He has taught undergraduate architecture at the University of Nottingham for two years and was visiting professor at the University of Thessaly, Greece. He is currently teaching at the ETH in Zurich with the Chair of Adam Caruso.