

"Das farbige Zürich" : the regulation of facades and the facades of regulation

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«Das farbige Zürich»: the Regulation of Facades and the Facades of Regulation *Alla Vronskaya*



fig. a «Einzig der Mann ist noch farblos. Es ist höchste Zeit, sich anzupassen.» Caricature in: «Nebelspalter: das Humor- und Satire-Magazin», no. 56 (1930), p. 3

«Die farbige Stadt» («The Colorful City»), an illustration published by the Swiss satirical magazine «Nebelspalter», presents a stereotypical, if comically exaggerated, image of the old city of Zurich: mediaeval buildings with wooden shutters, a beer bar, and a drinking fountain topped with an armored knight statue in front of the entrance (fig. a). However, everything—the houses, the bar, and even the knight—is red, covered with a solid layer of paint. The last remaining white spot, the caption tells us, is the man whom we see near the fountain—now fervently trying on his new red clothes. Indeed, by 1930, when the illustration was published, «die farbige Stadt» (and its local version, «das farbige Zürich») became such an important phenomenon of European architectural culture that its ubiquitous presence led to accusations of being a mindless fashion.¹ Yet, street colors, I would argue, spoke of more than a transient craze: in the atmosphere of Interwar political radicalization, they silently but forcefully asserted a highly specific project for a social compromise.

The interest in architectural color originated in Germany as Weimar society was becoming progressively polarized between a strong and militant social democracy and burgeoning conservative nationalism. Mirroring the socio-political split, two conflicting approaches to color in architecture developed simultaneously and largely independently from each other.² Left, socialist and modernist, architects led first by Bruno Taut and, later, by the Bauhaus Wall-Painting Workshop (in 1925–1933 headed by Hinnerk Scheper), experimented with the use of color in new types of workers' settlement. Unlike them, the Hamburg-based Federation for the Promotion of Color in Urban Scene (Bund zur Förderung der Farbe im Stadtbild), founded by a group of architects, technologists, planners, and pedagogues in 1926, explored the traditional use of color, above all, in historic cores of German cities («Altstädte»). While the former found limited outspoken support in Switzerland, «das farbige Zürich» positioned itself as a branch of the latter. However, unlike its German counterpart, «das farbige Zürich» was more a bureaucratic than a purely artistic or technological enterprise. It was initiated not by an independent group, but by Zurich municipal construction office («Bauamt»), which saw its mission in achieving an artistically sound general result and preventing losses for the city picture («Stadtbild») and disagreements between neighbors.³ It was less nationalist, more cautious in artistic solutions, and more respectful of private owners' rights than the Bund zur Förderung der Farbe im Stadtbild. In other words, it was less concerned with a promotion of urban color than with a protection of the city from its uncontrollable spread, which was associated with low-class tastelessness and political extremism.

The Construction Office aspired «to exclude a chance that the coloring of facades would be progressing without a plan.» Instead, it claimed that «one has to strive for planned works that are based on artistic considerations.»⁴ Related to economic values of order, rationalization, and efficiency, the idea of subjecting the entirety of street facades to an overarching municipal control was an unprecedented product of modernist (in spirit, if not always in style) logic. Eloquently described by Manfredo Tafuri as the final stage in the drift of utopia from its eighteenth-century origins to the Interwar fascination with urban planning and finally to its dissolution in the reality of the economic plan, the first half of the twentieth century witnessed a belief in the ability of planning to solve economic, and furthermore, social, problems.⁵ The First Five-Year Economic Plan in the USSR (1928–1932), Keynesianism, and the American New Deal (1933–1938) were adaptations of the principle of planning addressing specific political and historic contexts.



fig. b Piero Bottoni, «Chromatismi architettonici», 1927. Public domain

Planning seemed to offer a way to stop capitalist circles of crises, to eliminate economic and social chaos that they generated, and to obtain control over the future. In the realm of architecture, these ideals led to a confluence of the roles of the architect and the municipal bureaucrat: while bureaucracy received an unprecedented role in making architectural, and particularly urban, decisions, architects attempted to obtain municipal bureaucratic positions in order to secure and control the implementation of their projects. Similarly, several attempts at planning and regulating the colors of urban facades were simultaneously made in different parts of Europe in the late 1920s. Originating in different political, artistic, and economic contexts, these projects demonstrated a local specificity that transcended their apparent formal similarity.

Piero Bottoni's «Chromatismi architettonici» (1927) reflected the Milano Rationalist's imperative of moving from coloring architecture to colorful architecture (fig. b). Color, according to Bottoni, had to possess a constructive function, expressing the physical condition of the building.⁶ Gradual changes in the intensity and shades of color could thus determine the psychological perception of form. In those cases when the color scale progressed from lighter shades at the bottom to more intense shades at the top of the building, its lower part was psychologically dematerialized, making the street seem wider; in contrast, more intense coloration of the lower part of building emphasized its mass, making the viewer experience gravity. Moreover, color, according to Bottoni, balanced effects of light and shade and added variety to the urban scene.

Along similar lines, a project for the coloring of Moscow prepared in 1930 by Leiba Antokol'sky (and influenced by Russian Rationalism), was organized as scales of intensity (fig. c). However, it asserted not a vertical, but a horizontal progression, whose colors intensified towards the center in order to arouse the excitement of the masses rallying there from the periphery of the city. In the first, belt, version of the project, rings of prismatic colors radiated from the center to the margins. In the

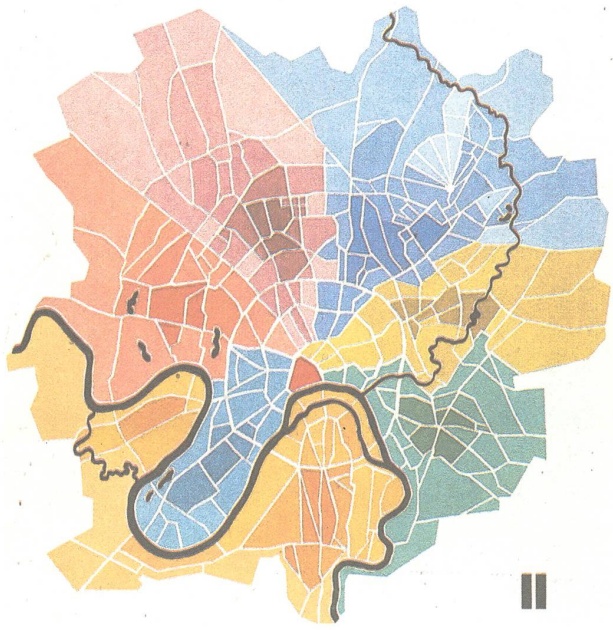


fig. c Leiba Antokol'skii, three schemes for the repainting of Moscow, Reconstruction by A. V. Efimov, 1978. Reproduced in: A. V. Efimov, 'Formirovanie tsvetovoi sredy goroda', 'Arkhitektura SSSR', 1978, no. 9, p. 7

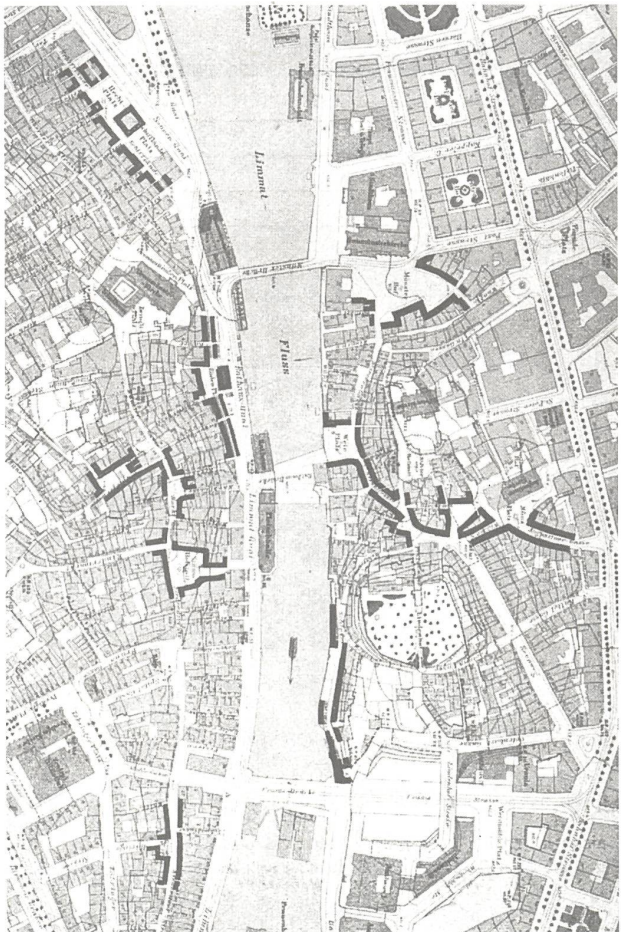


fig. f Plan of the old town of Zurich, emphasizing squares and streets selected for wall-painting, in 'Das Werk: Architektur und Kunst', no. 14 (1927), Heft 6, p. 186



fig. d Das Stadtbauamt, gez. Lehmann, General color plan for the city of Osnabrück (1927), in 'Die farbige Stadt', 1927, Heft 9, Tafel 2

second, zonal, version, each district received one of the seven colors of the spectrum. The third, arterial, version suggested painting all major thoroughfares of the city in shades of red, which intensified towards the center. In addition, all major squares received their own distinctive color. In all of the versions, the streets, from major boulevards to side lanes, were treated as corridors leading from a square of one color to a square of another, while the tone of houses was gradually modified to allow a seamless transition from one to the next.

Unlike these Rationalist projects, those created in German-speaking countries during the Weimar period were based on contrasts and combinations of colors rather than on scales of intensity, treating the street as an egalitarian and static composition rather than as a dynamic raw characterized by hierarchy and direction. Conceived as a prototype to be imitated in other German cities, the highly ambitious color plan for the city of Osnabrück, prepared by the municipal construction office in 1927, suggested an all-encompassing scheme, which united individual, independent houses into a harmonic whole, comparing the city to an 'organism', an artwork, and a piece of music⁷ (fig. d). The streets were unified through a single color or a characteristic combination of colors, while the carefully designed chromatic composition of the general plan guaranteed its overall picturesqueness. As the plan operated with streets rather than buildings, every house was incorporated into one or another colorful scheme.

With the participation of the Society of Swiss Painters, Sculptors and Architects, Zurich municipality solicited first projects of coloring city streets already in the early 1920s. The sole existing (due to its restoration in 1995) trace of 'das farbige Zürich'—the project for coloration of the facades of Augustinergasse—was prepared by artist Karl Hugin in 1925. (fig. e) Two years later, the chief city architect Hermann Herter commissioned color schemes for the squares of Zurich 'Altstadt' to Symbolist artist Augusto Giacometti (1877–1947), renowned for his interest in color⁸; the general color scheme for the 'Altstadt' was completed, in collaboration with Giacometti, by artist Giuseppe Scartezzini (fig. f). Similarly to the color plan for Osnabrück, the one for Zurich did not employ scales of intensity, treating the street as a static composition. Yet, in contrast to the Osnabrück project, it focused on selected areas, leaving most of the 'Altstadt' devoid of color. Das Haus zum Rügen, a mediaeval assembly hall, belonging to the municipality since the 1860s, was chosen as the colorful center of the scheme. At the same time, other prominent mediaeval buildings, such as the Rathaus and Helmhaus, had to be toned down, and in general the plan relied on calmer and paler tones than its German counterpart. Moreover, the plan prohibited coloring buildings in certain areas, such as the Bahnhofstrasse, where they could visually intervene in the modern ensemble of the Bahnhofplatz (the square of the central railway station).

In its fear of brightness, 'das farbige Zürich' seemed to be the opposite of German left-wing approaches, and indeed, its proponents often evoked Bruno Taut's Magdeburg as a counterexample that embodied tastelessness and political extremism.⁹ When in 1933 the 'Neues Winterthurer Tagblatt' lamented that the Swiss color movement had gone astray, it condemned 'the rowdiness of yellow, green, blue, pink girders, often all together at the same time in the same house,' juxtaposing the modest hues of Italian and Austrian cities to the presumed Swiss way of treating houses as 'individuals,' which expressed the owner's 'taste or the absence thereof'. 'Das Werk' echoed, adding that Swiss villages were overtaken by 'an especially bad fallacy'—'an addiction to violet houses,' which hit, 'sur-

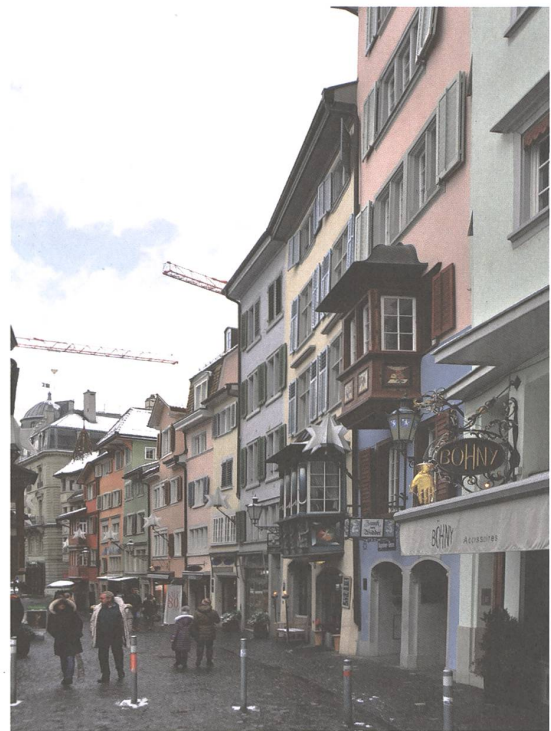


fig. e Zurich, Augustinergasse, Photographed by the author

prisingly, almost always bars and butcheries.» «This could become a true field for preservation ('Heimatschutz'), because this bad wall-painting is a worse enemy of local character than all the flat roofs and telegraph lines!»¹⁰

Although houses had to suppress individuality, subordinating their appearance to an overarching color scheme, 'das farbige Zürich' gave private house owners more independence than its German counterpart: if in Germany a new color of the building had to be approved by municipality, in Zurich the Construction Office offered no more than advice. As the Construction Office proudly reported, this advice was usually followed.¹¹ House-owners, indeed, seemed to be the most important addressees of the plan, which aspired to find a compromise between their conflicting interests and egos in order to maintain order and agreement in the community. Moreover, house owners had to be protected from 'bars and butcheries'—these icons of low-class kitsch, which threatened the accepted ideal of social integrity and even endangered Swiss historicity, allegedly maintained by the upper classes.

The bureaucratic nature of 'das farbige Zürich', which visibly differed from the technocratic character of its German counterparts, allowed the editor-in-chief of 'die farbige Stadt' (the organ of Bund zur Förderung der Farbe im Stadtbild) Edmund Meier-Oberist to classify the movement as 'aristocratic', in particular, concerning the prominently supportive role of museums.¹² An exhibition, indeed, played a crucial role in popularizing the movement in Switzerland: it was shown at the Crafts Museum (Gewerbemuseum) in Winterthur in the summer of 1926, and at the Crafts Museum in Zurich in the summer of 1927. The second installation expanded the scopes of the exhibition, demonstrating not only projects associated with the German and Swiss color movement, but also alternative, more radical, approaches to urban color, including Bottoni's watercolors, as well as watercolors of Swiss mediaeval frescoes (fig. g). However, both exhibitions were predominantly comprised of display items provided by municipal offices and institutions.¹³



fig. i Proposal for wall-painting of the old town of Zurich, Münsterhof. Design by H. Herter, drawing by Augusto Giacometti and Giuseppe Scartezzini, in: *Das Werk: Architektur und Kunst*, no. 14 (1927), Heft 6



fig. g «Die farbige Stadt», exhibition in «Kunstgewerbemuseum Zürich» (1927), Photograph courtesy Archive Zurich University of the Arts

This «aristocratism»—or rather, bourgeoisism—of «das farbige Zürich», noted by Meier-Oberist, was at the core of its aesthetics. Responsible for major design decisions, Augusto Giacometti was neither an academic nor a modernist artist, but was rather close to Symbolism and Impressionism in style and possessed strong ties with Zurich bureaucracy. His major project, the entrance hall of the police department (Amthaus I; 1923–1925) on the banks of the Limmat in the newly rebuilt area adjacent to the Altstadt, was commissioned by a city parliament member, socialist-democrat Emil Klöti. Both of Giacometti's projects for Zurich, the Amthaus and «das farbige Zürich», contributed to the gentrification of the Altstadt, creating visual clues of bourgeois respectability. The fact that Giacometti's work was supported by the head of the Swiss social-democratic movement, who soon (in 1928) was to become the «Stadtpräsident», marking the beginning of a decade-long control of the party over the city (the so-called «rotes Zürich») should not come as a surprise. Unlike their counterparts elsewhere, Swiss socialists preferred traditional forms, approaches, and materials in art and architecture. Realistically depicted worker-life scenes enjoyed popularity among Swiss muralists during the Interwar period, often placed on the outside walls of housing cooperatives (socialist self-help housing organizations).¹⁴ Furthermore, the numerous cooperatives of Zurich resisted flat roofs until the early 1930s.¹⁵ Unlike Germany and Austria, where cooperatives served as testing grounds of modernism, the architecture of their Swiss counterparts was far more conservative. Some notable exceptions such as Hannes Meyer and Hans Bernoulli notwithstanding, Swiss cooperatives and workers' housing were designed by traditionalist architects. They rejected the ideal of «Existenzminimum» with its small modern apartments, preferring, instead, large apartments without kitchens and bathrooms. Similarly, modern materials were avoided in favor of the more traditional—if more expensive—brick, which was assumed to be more sustainable and eventually more cost-effective with regard to maintenance and repairs.¹⁶

This aesthetic conservatism reflected the political profile of the Swiss social-democratic movement, which, in spite of its powerfulness, remained non-militant and moderate in methods and goals, avoiding the radicalism of German and Russian revolutionaries. On the one hand, during the 1910s and the 1920s, it experienced an unprecedented rise, which culminated with the General Strike of 1918, supported by a quarter of a million workers. In the field of wall-painting, social battles un-

folded as the strikes of 1912, 1924 and 1929, initiated by the social-democratic Union of Wall-painters and directed against the Society of Wall-painting Masters (Malermeisterverband)¹⁸ (fig. h). On the other hand, the demands of the General Strike were relatively moderate, reflecting Swiss social-democratic party eagerness for compromises, which only increased in the aftermath of the strike's failure. For instance, Ernst Nobs, the editor of the socialist-democratic newspaper «Volksrecht» and the future president of the Swiss Confederation, recalled that when in 1916 Vladimir Lenin argued for an immediate armed uprising in Switzerland, he strongly opposed the suggestion of the Russian revolutionary.¹⁹ As a result, the radicals split from the Social-Democratic Party as early as 1921, forming the Communist Party, which, however, could never attain electoral support.



fig. h «Wall-painters' strike in Zurich. Wall-painting masters are urgently requested not to employ participants of the strike. Those employed are to be fired immediately!» Headline of «Schweizerische Maler-u. Gipsmeister-Zeitung», 24 September 1929

While Swiss social democrats were rather moderate in their goals and methods, their radical international counterparts, many of whom resided in politically and military neutral Switzerland during and after the First World War, were perceived as a threat to social stability in the country. Political radicals were joined by radical artists from belligerent countries. Many of these newcomers resided in the Altstadt, a central but poor and affordable area among the working-class population. Among others, Lenin lived there in 1916–1917, renting an apartment in Spiegelgasse, within steps from the Dadaist meeting place Cabaret Voltaire. Focusing on the Altstadt, «das farbige Zürich» (differing in this respect from the color plan for Osnabrück, which encompassed both the old and the new parts of the city, unifying the two without prioritizing either) played its role in reining all kinds of extremisms, political and aesthetic alike. It was continued by the Altstadt gentrification program, which was initiated in the 1930s and continued throughout the 1970s.²⁰

Although the concerns of historic preservation were often evoked in support of the aesthetic conservatism of «das farbige Zürich», the program advocated not an archival restoration of the buildings' historic color schemes, but developing new, modern solutions. The movement was indeed far from banning modern approaches to architecture—instead of opposing it, it sought for ways of incorporating it into a tamed and controlled aesthetic environment. Thus, unlike the aesthetically conservative exhibition in Winterthur, the one in Zurich was open to modernism—and yet it warned against rather than encouraged the use of color in architecture. The programmatic article that opened its catalog started with a quote from J. J. P. Oud: «As the last important factor for the renewal of architecture, I [would] name color, to which a deplorable indifference was shown until now. [...] One should not turn it into a philosophy [Weltanschauung], a white house is better than color for the sake of color.»²¹

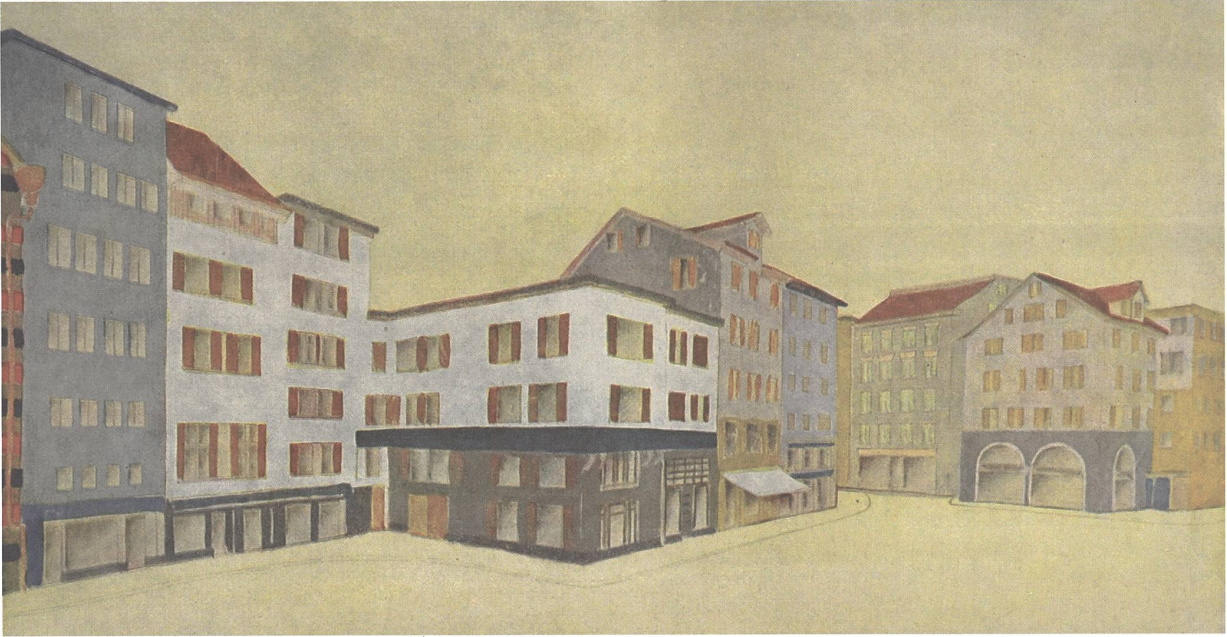


fig. j Berta Tappolet, Proposal for color design of Münsterhof, Zurich. in: Die farbige Stadt, 1929, Heft 1, Tafel 1

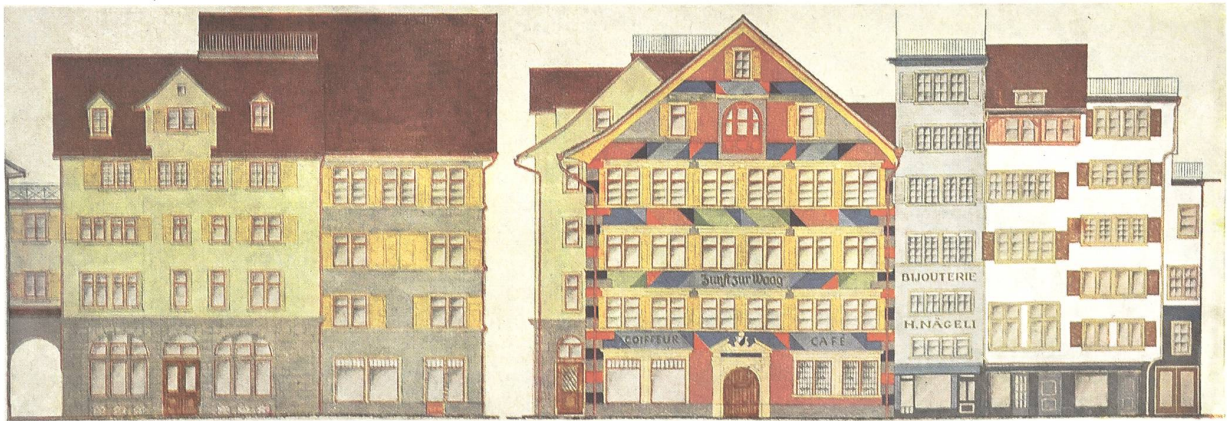


fig. k Berta Tappolet, Proposal for color design of Münsterhof, Zurich. in: Die farbige Stadt, 1929, Heft 1, Tafel 2

When in the spring of 1928 the city of Zurich announced a competition for the color design of Münsterhof, an old-town square adjacent to the Fraumünster, one of Zurich's major mediaeval churches, the first prize was awarded to a young female artist Berta Tappolet (1897–1947), a graduate of the Munich School of Applied Arts. Her simple and restrained design softened modernist representation techniques by linking it to Zurich protestant traditions. It differed visibly from Giacometti's design for the same square. Giacometti's symbolist pastel assigned every building a particular color, often a bright one (including even the notorious violet), creating a picturesque composition by carefully arranging their combinations and contrasts. Orange shutters, the only differently-colored element that disrupted the monochromy of the buildings, created a decorative pattern that united the scene (fig. i). By contrast, Tappolet's design saw Münsterhof as a space of rationalized, geometric forms painted in grayish, toned-down hues. Only the Haus zur Waag, a mediaeval guild house, stood apart, painted in a variety of bright colors arranged in modern and geometric, yet highly ornamental patterns (fig. j, k). As a critic explained, «Genius simplicity of form and color breathes something after New Moscow and of spirit of the beauty of Telephone building on the Füsslistrasse in Zürich.»²² Encouraged as a competition proposal, which confirmed that «das farbige Zürich» offered a vision of a vibrant modern metropolis, Tappolet's soft modernism, however, was unacceptable as a practical design solution. The critic's prediction—«it will disappear in drawers»—proved to be true:

The competition demonstrates a lot of blue; today, this is a fashionable color, [although] just recently we moaned: no blue houses! In ten years, street dust and fading will transform the colorful city into a grey one—it has always been so. Facades were painted bright colors around 1700, as well as in the early Middle Ages and especially during the Biedermeier period around 1820. At that time, aesthetic taste was at its noblest, it was delicate and cultivated even in philistines. Today, crude and unbalanced contrasts are barely less cultivated. A brutal Cubist architectural sensibility leaked from Lenin's grave in Moscow into both [drawings of the project that won] the first prize of this competition; on the other hand, [the project] artificially revives Biedermeier or the Babylonian style confusion of 1890. Miss Tappolet has her 2000 franks and this is most important; the project, like all Zurich competitions, will disappear in drawers.²³

In the heated political climate of the second decade of the twentieth century, the non-partisan bureaucracy of color employed aesthetic negativity as a strategy of social stabilization. «Das farbige Zürich» merged aesthetics and politics, using the color of urban facades as an instrument of social control, mitigating between past and future, historicism and modernism, reaction and revolution, the stability of Swiss democracy and the explosiveness of international revolutionaries residing in the city. Subjecting color to bureaucratic regulation, it aimed to avoid extremities and conflicts, to restrict rather than to encourage, be cautious rather than audacious. Initiated by a municipal office, it projected modern Swiss ideology, negotiating between social democratic and conservative forces in the interests of «Bürgerliche Gesellschaft».

I am thankful to Torsten Lange for commenting on a draft of this essay.

- 1 For an overview of the use of color in twentieth-century Swiss architecture, see: Arthur Rüegg, «Farbe im Neuen Bauen in der Schweiz: Hintergründe des Farbeinsatzes», in: vdf Hochschulverlag AG an der ETH Zürich, «Mineralfarben, Beiträge zur Geschichte und Restaurierung von Fassadenmalereien und Anstrichen», Zürich 1998, pp. 79–88.
- 2 Hans Jörg Rieger, «Die farbige Stadt: Beiträge zur Geschichte der farbigen Architektur in Deutschland und in der Schweiz 1910–1939: farbige Gartenstädte / farbige Architektur-Utopien / Das bunte Magdeburg / Farbe im genossenschaftlichen Wohnungsbau / farbige Altstadt-Erneuerung», (aku-Fotodruck Zürich, 1976). Dissertation, Univ. Zürich. pp. 145–147.
- 3 Auszug aus dem Protokoll des Stadtrates von Zürich vom 1. Dezember 1926, «Die Farbige Stadt», 1927, Heft 6 (Juni): pp. 89–91.
- 4 Ibid., p. 90.
- 5 Manfredo Tafuri, «Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development», Cambridge 1973.
- 6 Piero Bottoni, «Farbgebung in der Architektur (Chromatismi Architetonici)», in: «Die Farbige Stadt», 1928, Heft 3 (März): pp. 65–70 (67).
- 7 See: Der Stadtbaurat, gez. Lehmann, «Richtlinien zur Erläuterung und Ergänzung des Bemalungsplanes für die Alt- und Neustadt von Osnabrück», «Die farbige Stadt», 1927, Heft 6: pp. 164–167; and (Edmund) Meier-Oberist, «Der Bemalungsplan für die Stadt Osnabrück», ibid.: pp. 167–169.
- 8 Eventually, his grave stone commemorated him as the «Meister der Farbe».
- 9 «Auszug aus dem Protokoll des Stadtrates von Zürich vom 1. Dezember 1926», p. 90.
- 10 P.M., «Grenzen der farbigen Stadt», in: «Das Werk: Architektur und Kunst», Band 20 (1933), Heft 2: XVIII, XXI.
- 11 «Auszug aus dem Protokoll des Stadtrates von Zürich vom 1. Dezember 1926», p. 90.
- 12 (Edmund) Meier-Oberist, «Das farbige Zürich», «Die farbige Stadt», 1927, Heft 12: pp. 241–242.
- 13 The exhibitors of the Zurich exhibition included, in addition to the Bund zur Förderung der Farbe im Stadtbild, construction offices of the cities of Zurich, Basel, and Winterthur, Swiss museums, schools, and archives. Most of the artists represented at the exhibition were employed by municipal offices. The full list is provided in «Wegleitungen des Kunstgewerbemuseums der Stadt Zürich 73. Ausstellung: Die farbige Stadt. 31. Juli – 11. September 1927», S.p., 25.
- 14 See, for example: Albert Lutz, «Bilder für die Öffentlichkeit? Zur schweizerischen Wandmalerei der dreissiger Jahre», in: «Dreissiger Jahre Schweiz. Ein Jahrzehnt im Widerspruch: Kunsthaus Zürich, 30. Oktober 1981 bis 10. Januar 1982», Guido Magnagagno and Albert Lutz, Zürich 1981.
- 15 In 1932, a flat roof was used in Wohnkolonie Zurlinden, designed by Hans Hofmann and Adolf Kellermüller.
- 16 Rieger, «Die farbige Stadt», p. 189.
- 17 See: Christian Koller, «Labour, Labour Movements, Trade Unions and Strikes (Switzerland)», Berlin 2015.
- 18 See, for instance: «Zum Malerstreik in Zürich», in: «Schweizerische Maler-u. Gipsmeister-Zeitung», 24. September 1929, pp. 355–356; «Malerstreik in Zürich», ibid., 22. Oktober 1929, pp. 395–396; and «Ausklang des Zürcher Malerstreik», ibid., 29. Oktober 1929, pp. 415–416.
- 19 Mikhail Shishkin, «Die Russische Schweiz»
- 20 See: Andreas W. Putz, «Der Bestand der Stadt: Leitbilder und Praktiken der Erhaltung», Zürich 1930–1970, Dissertation, ETH Zürich, 2015.
- 21 F. T. G., «Farbige Baukunst», in: «Wegleitungen des Kunstgewerbemuseums der Stadt Zürich 73.», pp. 6–12 (6).
- 22 H., «Fassadenbemalungs-Wettbewerb in Zürich», in: «Schweizerische Maler-u. Gipsmeister-Zeitung», no. 11, 1929, pp. 197–198, no. 12, 1929, pp. 220–221 (197).
- 23 Ibid.: p. 221.

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