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Color loci placemaking: The urban color between needs of continuity and renewal

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Abstract

The article presents the theoretical framework and the operational concepts of a research, finalized to explore and verify the prerequisites of an approach to urban color that, while recognizing to color the flexible as well as transient capacity to respond to the successive and multiple demands that characterize the urban space, sees a possible way of coexisting between the needs of continuity and renewal. Searching to understand the modalities and possibilities through which colour can intervene in the processes of transformation of the city to support both the needs of resignification and reappropriation and those of conservation and enhancement of the vital identity of each single place, the research looked on one side to the experiences gained within the colour plans and Lenclos' geography of colour and on the other side to the different and diversified experiences developed within the idea and practice of placemaking, aimed at the recognition and enhancement of the collective and plural creative dimension that colour seems effectively able to interpret. The term "color loci placemaking" was introduced to summarize this mode/possibility of understanding and approaching urban color, characterized especially by the attention for the specificity of each single place and the human factor underpinning place-experience.

KEYWORDS
color design, color plans, design, placemaking, urban color

1 | INTRODUCTION

The color plans in Europe, since the Seventies, have represented a response to the necessity of providing conceptual and instrumental apparatuses able to regulate and plan, as well as to enhance color on the urban scale, with particular regard to the historical tissue. Turin's color plan by Giovanni Brino, started at the end of the Seventies,[1,2] and Lenclos' geography of color developed since the late Sixties[3–5] represent the ancestors of an approach to the urban color especially addressed to the recover and conservation of the historical chromatic image, original or traditional, of the city. This is an approach that although not being without critical

issues, finds a strong, understandable, and sharable reason of intervention in a historical motivation. The color plans have therefore been consolidating especially in the methodological and technical aspects aimed at recognizing and preserving the original and traditional chromatic identities of places, with particular reference to the models developed by Brino[1,2] and Lenclos.[3–5]

More problematic appears the framework of those interventions that look at color as a privileged communicative and emotional means to launch aesthetical, cultural, and social revitalization processes and also to affirm new identities. The advantage, as Bruno Taut observed in his invitation to colored architecture, is that color is at the same time the

FIGURE 1 An example of chromatic actions conducted in Tirana, Albania, beginning in 2001 prompted by Mayor-artist Edi Rama (Photograph Mariacristina Giambruno)

FIGURE 2 Haas &Hahn, Praça Cantão, Favela of Santa Marta, Rio De Janeiro, 2010. In 2005, artists Jeroen Koolhaas and Dre Urhahn, Haas &Hahn, began developing the *Favela Painting* project: a series of artistic interventions involving the local communities in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. (Photograph http://www.favelapainting.com/page/favelapainting)

most economic and effective means to transform the urban environment and launch a social strategy aimed at instilling visual pleasure and joy of living urban spaces.[6]

A prime example is the experience carried out in Tirana since 2000 by Mayor and artist Edi Rama, who relied on color as the most rapid and economic means to oppose the physical and cultural disrepair affecting the city and to raise a collective awareness about public goods[7,8] (Figure 1). In this case, color was meant—and actually worked—as a driving force for a longer and more radical process of urban renewal through actions both on the cultural level and on the architectural and city planning level.[8]

The case of Tirana, although unique for its context and programmatic vision, is part of a larger scale phenomenon of urban transformation through spontaneous chromatic restyling interventions that, since the 1990's, have affected numerous residential areas built in the communist era, where the polychromatic component symbolically took on the social meaning of a rupture with a diffusely achromatic past.[9,10]

A desire of color and differentiation without rules that after years have brought to a general fragmentation and reading confusion of the urban environment.[9,10] As reported by Andrea Urland about the Slovakia case, compared with the enthusiasm of the first phase of the process, nowadays the situation appears characterized by a general dissatisfaction and the search of more coherent chromatic solutions.[9] As Tarajko-Kowalska observed, in Poland the campaigns born to oppose the spontaneous and improvised chromatic interventions searching for new, planned and established, solutions show as the problem induced a strong social involvement.[10]

Similarly to the case of Tirana, these interventions, evaluated not only for the visual results, appear to prove how color is able to activate, at least in the short period, the seeds of a cultural, and social renewal.

Aspects that find, in the last few years, new elements of reflection looking at those projects that move within the concept of creative placemaking, that is the physical and social regeneration of urban spaces through participative creative and artistic initiatives.[11] See in this sense the Favela Painting and the Philly Painting projects, by artists Haas&Hahn[12,13] (Figures 2–4), and the work of Boa Mistura, a group of urban artists established in 2001 in Madrid, Luz nas vielas and Proyecto las Americas[14] (Figures 5 and 6). As well as the projects of the Let's Color program launched in 2009 by the multinational AkzoNobel.[15] Projects characterized especially for the active involvement of the local communities, both in the conceptual and realization phase.

Waiting to evaluate their long-term impact, what is interesting to notice is how in these interventions the color is intended as the product, the visual result, of a collective creative process that, actually, is the most important instrument

FIGURE 3 Philadelphia Mural Arts Program and Haas &Hahn, Philly Painting, Philadelphia, 2010–2012. The chromatic regeneration and enhancement project of one of the oldest commercial corridors in Philadelphia involved several economic and institutional stakeholders and the local community (Photograph Haas & Hahn)

FIGURE 4 Philadelphia Mural Arts Program and Haas &Hahn, Philly Painting, Philadelphia, 2010–2012. The chromatic regeneration and enhancement project of one of the oldest commercial corridors in Philadelphia involved several economic and institutional stakeholders and the local community (Photographs Steve Weinik for the Mural Arts Program)

of legitimateness of the interventions themselves and the true promoter of a social and cultural renewal.

The research explored and verified the theoretical and operational prerequisites of an approach to urban color that, while recognizing to color the flexible as well as transient capacity to respond to the successive and multiple demands that characterize the urban space, discovered a possible way of coexisting between the needs of continuity and renewal. Looking on one side especially to the experiences gained within the colour plans and Lenclos' geography of colour and on the other side to the different and diversified experiences developed within the idea and practice of placemaking, aimed at the recognition and enhancement of the collective and plural creative dimension that colour seems so effectively able to interpret.

FIGURE 5 Boa Mistura, Luz nas vielas, Vila Brasilandia, São Paulo, Brazil, 2012. This project is part of the Crossroads series: participative urban art interventions aimed at modifying severely blighted urban areas using art as an instrument for transformation and inspiration (Photograph http://www.boamistura.com)
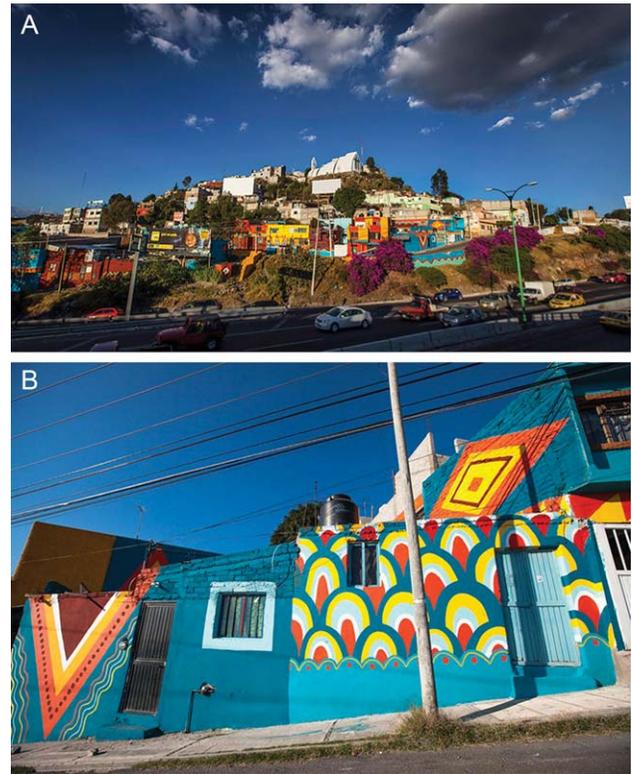
FIGURE 6 (A,B) Boa Mistura, Proyecto las Américas, Santiago de Querétaro, Mexico, 2014. The outcome of an action focused on approximately thirty buildings and an example of the decorations used, inspired by the fabrics produced by native civilizations that inhabitants were able to choose for their homes (Photograph http://www.boamistura.com)

The article presents the theoretical framework of the research and the concepts supporting its operational translation. Such concepts are based on a literature review and case study research; on the identification of specific case studies, which read in the light of the research purposes can offer operational exemplifying hypothesis; and on the experiences carried out in didactic workshops that considering as case studies contexts of historical interest have offered the opportunity to a more precise verification of the research prerequisites.

2 | COLOR LOCI PLACEMAKING AND ITS APPLICABILITY TO URBAN COLOR PLANNING

The chromatic identity of a city is a complex system of material and immaterial components. A complexity that offers different modalities and possibilities of intervention, and that requires a constant openness to redefine the terms within which to operate in a continuous and/or conservative manner with regard to the chromatic component and chromatic material and where to intervene with actions focused to support the transformations and the new meanings of the urban space.

Aspects that the color plans have contributed to arise, recognizing the dynamic and creative function through which color has participated in support of the transformational, social, and cultural processes that accompany the city history.[16–19] In the transience or impermanence of color in the constructed landscape, in the provisional image of its paintings, as noted by Tagliasacchi, we can recognize that renewal potential the city still continues to need.[18]

Aspects that assume new significances compared to the changes affecting the city and the contemporary society.[20] In the extraordinary mobility that characterize the contemporaneity, both in terms of people fluxes and meanings and images, the idea of stability and univocity leaves the place to new forms of fragmentation, plurality, and complexity.[21] As suggested by Decandia, this requires a new logic of make planning open to a plural and becoming construction, where the collective, creative, and temporal dimension prevails on the centrality of experts.[22]

The question therefore is how the urban color planning can interpret this continuous process of change and adaptation imposed by the living needs.[23] A question the research has meant to explore in the light of the two equally fundamental and complementary requirements: conservation and transformation, continuity and renewal. Two requirements, as observed by Decandia, that far from being doomed to contraposition, contribute to the true sense of uniqueness of places, and therefore to its actual conservation that can only be guaranteed through the exploration and openness to new meanings and new dynamics of appropriation.[22]

Searching to understand the modalities and possibilities through which color can intervene in the processes of transformation of the city in order to support the need of resignification and reappropriation as well as those of conservation and enhancement of the vital identity of each place, the research have looked on one side to the experiences gained within the color plans and Lenclos' geography of color and on the other side to the different and diversified experiences developed within the idea and practice of placemaking. Experiences that appear complementary in answering to the need of a structured temporal vision in the search of a solution of continuity among past, present and future; as well as of a dynamic and open vision focused to recognize and support the successive and multiple needs of the present. Experiences, finally, that appear complementary to avoid the risk of nourishing, even involuntarily, yet another form of homogenization of urban traits, ascribable both to an aestheticization of the locality where the image prevails on the use value and the significance[22] and to generation of fragmented images and meanings, which are not only potentially disconnected one from the other, but also unrelated to the specific character of each place.

The term "color loci placemaking" was chosen to summarize this mode/possibility of understanding and approaching urban color, characterized especially by the attention for the distinctive character and the specificity of each single place, and the human factor underpinning the experience of place. In fact, if the term "color loci" (the term "color loci" was already introduced by Raimondo and by Swirnoff),[24,25] on the wake of the "genius loci" concept developed by Christian Norberg-Schulz, refers to the chromatic spirit or distinctive features of a specific place that must be preserved in a new key of interpretation, without interfering with the inevitable and necessary transformations of a city,[26] the term "placemaking" refers to the way in which the human factor transforms the spaces into living places.[27] This action of construction, transformation, and renovation is innate in human expression and, as underlined by Schneekloth and Shibley, is generated independently of the assistance of professionals or "professional placemakers."[27]

A way of conceiving the project that not only implies that physical space, activity and meanings are inextricably involved,[28] but also that the processes have a fundamental and indispensable role.[29]

The concepts of "soft projects" and "surface transformations" were introduced for the purpose of an operational translation of the research premises. Both these concepts refer to the possibility of intervening through actions that preferring flexibility, reversibility and temporariness, see color as a material and immaterial resource, able to answer to the successive and multiple needs of significance and appropriation that characterized the urban space and, to the end of the research, also and above all to extend such processes at urban areas of historical value.

3 | SOFT PROJECTS

The term "soft projects" refers to a new way of approaching design where priority is given to minimal actions targeting on the effectiveness and efficacy of urban sign rather than its invasiveness, on processes and meanings rather than their evidence, on perceptive aspects rather than structural elements (despite being scarcely used in the field of urban planning, the term "soft regeneration" appears to be employed to describe a model of urban planning actions that take into account the reconditioning and developing of the existing assets with the involvement of local community.[30,31] The term soft projects, in a sense in many ways similar, was instead used in the framework of the *Soft projects for fragile territories* workshop held within the Master in Urban Vision and Architectural Design at the Domus Academy and the Major in Construction Engineering - Architecture at the University of Genoa focused on redesigning the seafront in Bogliasco, Genoa, with minimal and at the same time effective interventions).[32] These projects foresee flexible, reversible, transient actions that leave open new and plural possibilities of interpretation and expression,

looking more toward the possibility to requalify and give coherence to the existing, working mostly on filling in project gaps and urban furniture.

A new way of approaching urban design, which finds various connections with Mark A. Wyckoff's definition of "Tactical Placemaking" when referring to the experience of "Tactical Urbanism," from the "Street Plans Collaborative" and "Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper" from the PPS Project for Public Spaces.[33] In particular, with the slogan "Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper" (LQC), borrowed from Eric Reynolds, the Project for Public Spaces summarise the possibility of launching simple, short-term and low-cost design solutions,[34] which cannot but bring to mind the already mentioned Taut's vision of colour as the most economic and effective means to transform the urban environment and begin a social strategy aimed at arousing visual pleasure and joy of living urban spaces.[6]

Inside these records of projects, color, primarily in the form of mural art, is seen as a means to advance both a solution to the contradictions of the urban spaces and a collective operational stance to be renewed over time. In this regard, it is worthwhile mentioning the Intersection Repair project in Portland, where local communities and volunteers worked together on large murals that, in the transformation of the intersections into unique places that the district is proud of, contributed to the slowing down of automobile traffic and to increase road safety (Figure 7).

An interesting implementation of these concepts appears in the possibility of using color to bring significance leading to a more effective use of public spaces.[35] These aspects have been investigated in the framework of a research project carried out by the Department of Architectural Sciences at the University of Genoa in 2011. Specific design scenarios were laid down where priority was given to a coherent implementation and enhancement of urban signs through color[36] (Figure 7).

In the research context these interventions are open to the possibility to act through minimal, soft actions of requalification of the existing that do not necessary concern the building macroscale, but rather tend to enhance those urban elements and signs, such as the urban furniture, that offer a better answer to the needs of supporting the vitality of places also through the promotion of participatory processes.

A few experiments were carried out in this regard in the framework of design workshops to develop ideas and proposals for the enhancement and resignification of urban areas endowed with historical value also through potentially noninvasive and/or impermanent chromatic actions (Color and the city workshop, Architects Registration Board of Lugo, Spain, 2011, Leading professors: Mario Bisson, Cristina Boeri, Valentina Vezzani; Color and City: Conservation and design for contemporary city workshop, Laboratorio da Cor, Universidade Lusiada de Lisboa, Faculty of Arts and Architecture, 2012, Leading professors: Cristina Boeri, Mariacristina

Giambruno, Maria Isabel Braz de Oliveira.). The most interesting proposals emerged focused on the possibilities to use color to give new significance to those functional elements that were added over time to the urban tissue and buildings and that are to be construed as sometimes anaesthetic signs of the vital, continuous and inevitable transformation imposed by living requirements. It is a form of "conceptual rewriting," as Bulleri puts forward in relation to the 2005 project of Julia Bolles and Peter Wilson for a residential building in Tirana, where "reality is not denied but comes back into play through a recomposition of its components."[8] And its purpose might also be to create a collective community awareness, even temporary, whose results are to be sought beyond the visual outcome.

4 | SURFACE TRANSFORMATIONS

Closely linked to the concept of "soft projects" is the concept of "surface transformations", which focuses on the opportunities offered by surface transformations, primarily on a chromatic scale, in order to support new social and urban qualifications and significations and at the same time preserving as unaltered as possible the substance of urban artifacts for new possibilities of interpretation and expression that can lead to even more radical solutions obviously in longer times (this concept is taken from a text by Eugenio Battisti written in 1978, where the author longs for an aesthetics addressed to a primarily chromatic regeneration of old industrial buildings, thus advancing a surface transformation as an alternative to a substantial modification).[37]

Compared with increasingly numerous phenomena of urban transformation and revitalization through chromatic restyling, the issue at stake here is not only to carry out economically and operationally sustainable actions, but also socially viable interventions on urban space that are flexible and reversible and that leave room for future interpretations.

It is a new way of understanding and interpreting the color intervention aimed at establishing a form of conscious mediation between the need to support and/or promote new meanings given to urban space through minimal actions, or rather surface actions, and the need of preserving nearly unaltered the substance of urban artifacts for any future considerations. When analyzed under this light, new factors arise that take into account, for instance, the aspects related to the compatibility of the materials used with the pre-existing supports.

A meaningful case with respect to such an approach to color concerns the industrial landscape, where chromatic-perceptive requalification interventions are increasingly frequent. These actions are aimed both at reconciling a purely functional, out-of-scale language of the industrial building with its urban, rural, and natural context, and at revitalizing the industrial heritage of the past.[38] Color, as it emerges in this type

PROJECT		MAIN ELEMENTS INVOLVED IN THE REVITALISATION PROCESS/PROJECT	LEVEL OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION *
	Research project *I colori di Cornigliano. Design per lo scenario urbano*, Italy, 2011	pavement urban furniture urban service elements	
	Superkilen, Nørrebro, Copenhagen, Denmark, 2012	pavement urban furniture	
	San Sperate, Cagliari, Sardinia, Italy, 2007-2010	pavement	
	Intersection Repair project, Portland, Oregon, 2011	pavement	
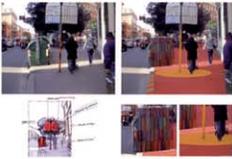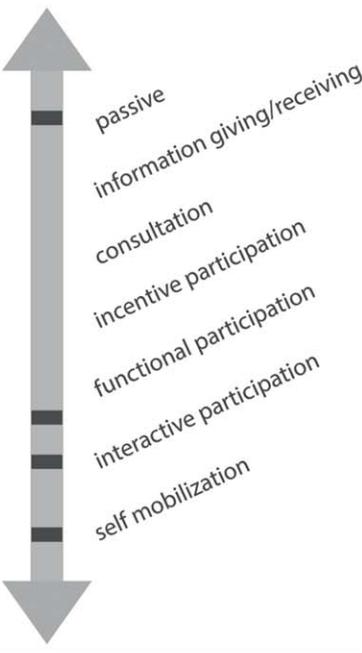
passive
information giving/receiving
consultation
incentive participation
functional participation
interactive participation
self mobilization

* Taken and adapted from Rodney Jackson (2000), Community Participation: Tools and Example (who adapted from Worah et al. 1999)

FIGURE 7 A summary of the most relevant case studies analyzed within the concept of soft projects

of intervention, appears to be an effective means for resolving the visual and social impact of industrial sites through actions of mitigation and resignification thus leading to a new integration and interaction with the surrounding environment.

It is worthwhile mentioning in this regard the 2011 Couleurs Carolo project in Charleroi (Belgium), where color was viewed as an opportunity to trigger a transformation and regeneration process aimed at affirming the need to build and enhance new forms of identity in the light of a strongly industrial past (this project falls within the framework of the program Let's Color, launched in 2009 by the multinational AkzoNobel, which saw the implementation of approximately 250 projects in 25 countries).[39] Moreover, this project touched upon many of the aspects that characterized the recent projects, already cited, that move within the concept of creative placemaking. First of all, the participation of an important multinational contributed to the implementation of the project. Secondly, a massive media campaign accompanied the entire operation. Thirdly, chromatic actions were carried out very rapidly, in the summer of 2011, in six strategic spots in the city as the apex of an awareness-raising and collective mobilization process. Finally, the project foresaw explicitly that the actions were to be carried out by the local communities. This active participation was deemed crucial to encourage new forms of accountability and affection towards the city, as well as new forms of relational dynamics within the communities themselves (Figure 8).

In the context of the research, although the concept of surface transformation was not concerned or at least expressed in the project, it is interesting to note that the actions carried out were consistent with the community's need to transform the image and vision of the city. Despite the limitation to the "skin" of the buildings, this transformation was nonetheless effective in the short term and did not hinder the possibility to begin more complex and intensive reflections on past industrial heritage, which was left substantially unaltered.

Particularly interesting within the concept of surface transformations is the possibility of working with colored light, rather than chromatic material, via a method that is even less invasive, leaving even the surface unaltered, overwritten by the colored light intervention. This is a way of implementing interventions on an urban space that has been widely explored in the framework of events such as Luci d'Artista in Turin and Fête des lumières in Lyon and in other luminous public art projects implemented both as temporary and permanent solutions.[40,41]

According to Tosca, the possibility of switching from pigmentary-color-design to lighting-color-design brings to "the insertion of a new order of relatedness into the existing course of events."[23]

An experiment in this regard was carried out in a workshop with students from the Faculty of Arts and Architecture of the Universidade Lusiada de Lisboa and from the School of Design of the Politecnico di Milano (Color Landscape 2. Designing the industrial landscape between perception and

FIGURE 8 Couleurs Carolo, Charleroi, 2011. Frames from the video presented at a conference in London produced by Sancta.

conservation workshop, Laboratorio da Cor, Universidade Lusiada de Lisboa, Faculty of Arts and Architecture, 2014, Leading professors: Cristina Boeri, Mariacristina Giambruno, Maria Isabel Braz de Oliveira, with the contribution of Samuel Roda Fernandes; Laboratorio Colore, School of Design, Politecnico di Milano, 2014, Professor: Cristina Boeri). This workshop was organized in the framework of a research activity at the Laboratorio da Cor, Universidade Lusiada de Lisboa, on the theme of industrial landscape perceptual requalification, which identified the southern edge of the river Tejo as the case study for the project.

The experiment explored the possibility of acting on the façades of buildings in severe disrepair through light projections that underpinned the concepts of reversible urban actions, of regeneration and re-signification of an industrial urban landscape, which are connected with the concept of identity and the safeguarding of identity.[42] In particular, the hypothesis of intervention was devised according to three modes/possibilities that see the projection used to "recreate a lost scenario," to "tell the tale of a lost scenario," and to "reinvent or reanimate a lost scenario" (Figure 9). The first instance refers to virtual archaeology and
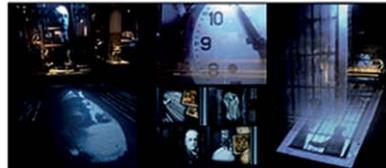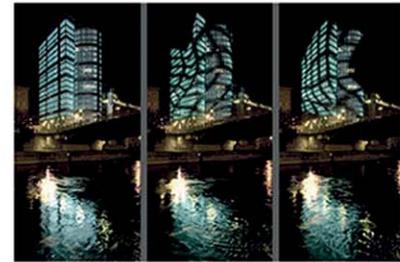
FIGURE 9 Concept table developed within the Color Landscape 2. Designing the industrial landscape between perception and conservation workshop, Laboratorio da Cor, Universidade Lusiada de Lisboa, Faculty of Arts and Architecture, and Laboratorio Colore, School of Design, Politecnico di Milano, 2012. Professors: Cristina Boeri, Mariacristina Giambruno, Maria Isabel Braz de Oliveira

advances the possibility of acting on the façades in severe disrepair and/or strongly transformed by overlapping the images of their original aspect. The second instance relates most of all to the visual narrations that animate the various museums where StudioAzzurro[43] has operated and offers the opportunity to elaborate on ancient functions, anecdotes, and stories pertaining to the past. The third instance relates to the projections that, stemming from the traces of façade elements, create a distortion, giving the impression that the building has a life of its own and prompting the viewer to identify with the luminous structures as real architectural structures.

Although further investigations and feasibility verifications are required, the results of the experiment demonstrated true potential for such interventions, still unexplored and linked to the concepts of visual narration, to the role of memory as the central theme connecting past and present and allowing to plan the future.[42] Far from preventing further actions, this concept of intervention actually paves the way for future measures, encouraging a shared reflection thereon.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

Color loci placemaking is offered as a new way/possibility of understanding and approaching urban color that tries to reconcile the demands of conservation and continuity of the vital and specific identity of each place with the equally inevitable and necessary needs of transformations and reappropriation. The approach stems both from the necessity of reflecting on and highlighting the meanings and potentials that emerge within an increasingly widespread phenomenon of collective revitalization of urban spaces through color, and from the need to connect these experiences within a shared and articulated thinking about the chromatic features specific to a given place, and finally to experiences gained within color plans and Lenclos' geography of color.

The main aspects emerged in the research can be summarized in the following considerations:

- The attention toward the processes can already provide an interesting premise to the possibility of intervening through resignification and reappropriation actions, oriented to feed the immaterial dimension of such actions rather than the material one related to the visual results, and thus enhancing the coexistence of continuity and renewal values.

- Rather than to the building macro scale, such actions can be oriented to those urban elements and signs, such as the urban furniture, that are more available to be read in a dynamic and widespread way, aimed at supporting the successive and multiple needs of the urban space.

- If such actions are oriented to support collective creative processes of revitalization at the building scale, they can be intended as a transitional step to the end of answering the demands of the present and at the same time contributing to leave open or to generate future reflections aimed at offering more well-pondered and articulated answer.

In this regard, the need to act on the city within a wider plan is ever more felt. Such a plan should contribute to defining and following an informed and shared vision of a city's specific features and chromatic identity. It is exactly this vision that should drive actions that are consistent with the urban space, in an attempt to reach a necessary balance between the need for renewal and conservation, between creative and historical-environmental dimension, between renovation drives and territorial values to be preserved, and between the aspirations and commitments of inhabitants and specialists.

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