URBAN IDENTITY AND COLOUR: THE CASE OF TIRANA - ALBANIA

When an artist is put in charge of a city, he will use the town as his canvas. Edi Rama became Mayor of Tirana in 2000 and since then has undertaken an unusual and colourful renewal program for the Albania capital.

Tirana dates back to 1614 and in 1920 was chosen as seat for the government of the newly independent Albania. The city centre and all the main public buildings have been built in Italian Renaissance style, further Italian architecture has been then developed during the Fascist occupation. After the Second World War, the country become a stronghold of the Communist block, new suburbs and apartment buildings were erected with simple lines, white façades and no decorations as the canon of the Modern Movement in its real socialist version.

The identity of Tirana has always been fragile due to its architecture is more a sort of cultural colonialism than a genuine expression of the Albanian society. In the 1990s this Balkan country has undertaken one of the hardest transitions to a free market status, passing through a harsh economic crisis with has resulted in mass emigration and widespread crime. After his election, Edi Rama had to face a city with not only high social problem, but also a lack of identity and a dissatisfaction of the citizens for their environment, which at the time was neglected and dilapidated. Rama, son of an accomplished Albanian sculptor, trained as a painter; was able to spend some time in Paris where he also exhibited some of his works. As sometime happens, he was dragged into politics when clean new faces were needed; after spending a couple of years as Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports, he won the top office in Tirana. His idea, since then, has been renewing the town with a greening and painting program. If restoring parks and boulevards are quite a common action in city

The dull and monotonous urban landscape has been reinvented as a colourful and variegated canvas. Since the first façade has been completed in 2000, entire sections of the city have been repainted in bright, cheerful hues; in some cases the architectural frame has just been revamped, more often new geometrical, abstract and even pop pattern have been superimposed on otherwise anonymous buildings. As part of the program, streets and squares have also been lit and an ambitious project developed for the main public space of Tirana, Skanderbeg Square. As usually happens, there are those who support the new urban landscapes and those that criticises it, arguing that the program is just a makeup operation that in time the colour will fade and sooner or later disappear. Rama’s project has not to be underestimated, its first outcome has been to bring people together discussing their city and their environment. The citizens went back to care about their town and, eventually, are
management, its idea about building renovation and public environment is pretty revolutionary. I am proud to talk about it. Some of the façades have been published on arts magazines around the world, local and international artist have also been invited in designing new layouts and colour schemes for some buildings and this approach is intended to be brought further ahead transforming entire blocks in artworks.

After a long time the public space of Tirana started assuming a proper individuality, strong and unique connotations with which citizens can identify themself. Nowadays the cheerful painted buildings are one of the main features of the towns, something which makes this place unique. People have started using the public spaces amazed by the new environment and supported by the new illumination program. Tirana is no more a place to leave, but a place to live; the social life of the Albanian capital has reborn to new life and community attitudes now are much more confident in a bright and colourful future.

Reference: Edi Rama, “Tirana: Greening and Painting, Re-inventing the Wheel. When colours become politics”
http://www.tirana.gov.al/?cid=2,10
http://www.pbase.com/blphotography/edirama

This article was sourced and provided by Mirko Guaralda, Senior Landscape Architect for the Pine Rivers Shire Council and valued member of the Colour Society of Queensland.

Ramblings from Europe of a Past President (about birds and buildings!)

With the end of my term as President of the Society coinciding with the AIC Congress in Sydney, I knew in advance that afterwards I would welcome a holiday to both reflect on the event and come down after all of the effort of being part of the organising committee. The joy and pleasure I got from being involved in AIC 2009 was magnified many times over by how successful the event was and from meeting so many interesting people working in the field of colour from all over the world.

I chose to swap the developing colours of an Australian Spring for the anticipated late autumn greyness of England in the hope that I would be there just in time for the last vestiges of the colour change. Leaves on many trees were still changing from green through to shades of yellow, orange and red but with a backdrop of mostly leaden grey skies the colours could not be seen at their vibrant best. Of course when the sun was out I either did not have my camera or the photo composition was just not there!

I can though recommend spending time in the Dales and villages of Peak District of Derbyshire any time of the year and my time in Lathkill Dale and Ashford in the Water, both of which can be searched on the internet, was very colourful and rewarding. Another icon for me of the natural beauty of Derbyshire is the song and striking yellow colouration of the Yellowhammer. Sadly on this trip I have not been blessed with either sight or sound.

To escape the wind, rain and grey skies of England I went to Spain to enjoy the colours of a Mediterranean people and their art and architecture, get some sun and experience the natural beauty of the Sierras. The