

LESZEK MALUGA*

MEXICAN PLAYS WITH ARCHITECTURE AND COLOUR

MEKSYKAŃSKIE ZABAWY ARCHITEKTURĄ I KOLOREM

Abstract

Colour plays a significant role in Mexican culture. Our study deals with four areas of using colour in a spatial composition on an architectural and urban scale. These are murals, i.e. monumental painting in the structure of architectural objects, colourful traditional and modern architecture, ornamental forms and structures, and current trends in the revalorisation of historical cities.

Keywords: Mexican architecture, spatial composition, colour in architecture

Streszczenie

W kulturze Meksyku dużą rolę odgrywa kolor. W opracowaniu ukazano cztery obszary zastosowania koloru w kompozycji przestrzennej w skali architektonicznej i urbanistycznej. Są to murale, czyli monumentalne malarstwo w strukturze obiektów architektonicznych, barwna architektura tradycyjna i nowoczesna, formy i struktury dekoracyjne oraz aktualne tendencje w rewaloryzacji miast zabytkowych.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura meksykańska, kompozycja przestrzenna, kolor w architekturze

* Assoc. Prof. Ph.D. D.Sc. Arch. Leszek Maluga, Department of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture, Faculty of Architecture, Wrocław University of Technology.

1. Games with space

Constructing is a necessity for some people, for others it is a pleasure – a play with space, material, colour, an intellectual, artistic, aesthetic game. This play, however, should first of all bring pleasure to all those for whom – in the author's intention – it is created. This ought to involve much greater engagement on the part of the author than a merely dispassionate discharge of professional duties.

Reversing the order, we must state that if architecture may give pleasure, apart from satisfying basic functional needs, then it should be a sort of a game or play with space. This category comprises, *inter alia*, the creative activity of Hundertwasser [3], who transfers painting experiences onto architectural forms. Works of authors from *art brut* trend can also be perceived in this way [11].

Such a wide spectrum of games with space is present in the architecture of Mexico. Mexicans are people who know how to play. This feature can also be found in their attitude to space, where one of the forms of expression of this feature is the colour that is present in everyday life and in the works of the most remarkable creators of architecture and art.

2. Colour in Mexican culture

Colour in Mexican culture has always played a significant role, both decorative and symbolic. Since pre-Hispanic times the walls of temples, ceramics and utility appliances have been painted. The importance of colour was great when manufacturing fabrics and ornaments. The palette of colours depended on the possibilities of obtaining mineral or organic dyes. The modern possibilities of production of paints on the basis of synthetic dyes has facilitated the use of a much richer palette of colours. The products which are offered at folk art fairs nowadays are more intensive in colour when compared to those from the past. A sign of our times in the contemporary public space are street vendors of brightly coloured ornaments and toys coming from China. Hence the Mexican people's love of being surrounded by colours is manifested in various forms, i.e. from popular art and cheap decorations to sophisticated works by the most prominent artists.

The modern architecture of Mexico has become famous all over the world also due to colour, which was elevated to the role of a decisive factor in a spatial composition. Mexicans the global architectural trends by including games of colour with space in design solutions.

Further parts of this study shall deal with four areas of a spatial game based on the use of colour: from painting in architectural space to new trends in the revalorisation of historical cities.

3. Murals – painting in the structure of architectural objects

Mural painting developed as early as in pre-Hispanic times, mainly as a pictorial documentation of history, beliefs and rituals. Paintings were made on the external walls of palaces and temples as well as in architectural interiors. Spaniards also used mural painting when propagating a new religion as paintings on walls of churches and monasteries were a form of narration that was understandable to the Indians.

A new chapter in the use of painting in public spaces was the mural movement after the revolution, which changed political and social relations in the country. Murals as such were not a game in connection with the performed function of propaganda messages. However, from the formal point of view they constituted a game, with architecture becoming a part of the spatial context of the existing, often historical development. The most famous works are murals of the greatest author of the three remarkable Mexican muralists – D. Rivera (the others are D.A. Siqueiros and J.C. Orozco) in the staircase and cloisters of the Presidential Palace in Mexico City (1929–35), depicting the history of the pre-Hispanic culture of Mexico, its conquest, and contemporary revolutionary ideas (including references to European revolutionary thought).

Such placement of murals in the staircases of elegant historical buildings are also to be seen in other towns. J. C. Orozco painted murals, inter alia, on the vaults, e.g. in Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso in Mexico City (1922) and in the chapel Hospicio Cabañas in Guadalajara (1937–39), including a spectacular mural entitled ‘Man in flames’ on the internal surface of the dome.

Starting from the mid-1950s, some paintings were also made on new structures, in this way conducting a compositional and artistic game with modernistic forms. A good example here are the murals by D.A. Siqueiros on the buildings of UNAM Rector’s Office – a newly built University Town in the south of the capital (1948–1954).

As a consequence of recognizing the significant role of murals in the spatial culture of Mexico, as well as the high status of their artists, some structures entirely covered by murals were also put up. Two spectacular architectural objects belong to this group, namely the UNAM Central Library (1950) and the cultural centre *Polyforum Cultural Siqueiros* (1971).

In the first case the artist J. O’Gorman covered the whole rectangular body, stylized as the head of Tlaloc – the ancient god of rain, with a stone mosaic illustrating the history of mankind, Mexico and the University’s cultural mission [5] (photo 1).

In a similar way, the nearby University Olympic Stadium was to be wholly covered by a stone mosaic. D. River – the author of this idea – completed only fragments of the composition above the main entrance. His death in 1957 put an end to the further realization of the work.

On the other hand, the series of murals by Siqueiros on *Polyforum* was completed in its entirety. This twelve-sided building on its circumference was wholly covered by the artist’s painting (photo 2). Moreover, in the main hall of the centre – *Foro Universal* – Siqueiros painted the biggest mural in the world – *March of Humanity* – covering all the walls and the ceiling of the hall [8].

The latest scene in the game with murals is the recently opened museum in Cuernavaca – the former Siqueiros’ studio *La Tallera* in Cuernavaca (designed by F. Escobedo, 2010). The designer used monumental paintings by the artist as a frame for the entrance zone of the building.

4. From popular architecture to Barragan and Legorreta

As previously mentioned, starting from pre-Hispanic times, architecture was painted with colours that could be obtained in the given conditions. Many facades of colonial houses were covered in strong colours. The resolute use of colours on facades of houses is particularly



- III. 1. J. O’Gorman, mosaic on UNAM Central Library, Mexico City, photo by L. Maluga
- III. 2. D.A. Siqueiros, murals on Polyforum by Siqueiros, Mexico City, photo by L. Maluga
- III. 3. J. O’Gorman, D. Rivera’s and F. Kahlo’s houses-studios, Mexico City, photo by L. Maluga
- III. 4. Church in San Francisco Acatepec, photo by L. Maluga
- III. 5. J. Senosiain, *Conjunto Satélite*, source: <http://www.arquitecturaorganica.com> (access: 2015.06.08)
- III. 6. Street in Izamal, photo by L. Maluga

visible in independently erected developments. In housing estates and districts populated by out-of-town people we can observe to this day the dominant use of vivid colours of walls and whole buildings, i.e. red, blue, violet, orange etc. in various scales and shades.

In the modern architecture of Mexico authored by remarkable designers, the first examples of references to traditional strong folk colours were the houses-studios of Diego Rivera

and Frida Kahlo designed by J. O’Gorman in 1931 modelled on Le Corbusier’s functionalist designs. Rivera’s house was painted white and red while Frida Kahlo’s studio was painted blue [5, p. 19] (photo 3).

Another type of game with modernism was initiated by L. Barragán. He used colour as an element deciding on the structure of space, e.g. his own house or *Casa Gilardi* [7]. In his designs he conducted a subtle game with colour and light inspired by the folk tradition of Mexico and by his experiences from travels to Spain and North Africa. His few realisations are characterised by combinations of colourful planes and sophisticated details in interior design.

R. Legorreta was the first ideological heir of Barragán, as he was the creator of many realisations in Mexico and all over the world. These architectural objects, often monumental in scale, are characterised by the use of big planes of strong colours, sometimes of a narrowed palette of colours, as a game of two dominant colours, at times almost monochromatic compositions [6]. Both architects made Mexican architecture famous worldwide thanks to exhibiting a game of colourful planes and solids.

The trend started by Barragán is continued by many contemporary Mexican architects. Colourful architectural compositions are featured in hotels and tourist centres under construction, for example, the *Westin Regina* hotel complex in Los Cabos (Baja California, architect J. S. Madaleno) and in residential architecture (e.g. private villas in Puebla, designed by E. Acuña [2]). This sort of play with colour has also become a feature of architectural objects and interiors all over the world referring to Mexican culture (e.g. Mexican restaurants).

5. From *tequitqui* art to Senosiaina

Two important elements of Mexican culture originated during the colonial period. On the one hand, arts and crafts connected with ceramics developed in Puebla (*talavera*, *azulejos*). On the other hand, a type of art was developed called *tequitqui*, inter alia, folk baroque (*barroco popular*), which was a combination of pre-Hispanic (Indian) aesthetics and Christianity [1]. In Puebla itself and in the surrounding area ceramics started to be used to face construction surfaces (facades, domes, floors). First of all, numerous churches were adorned by colourful ceramics, painted with vivid colours and complemented by sculptured details with folk art aesthetics. This almost fairy-tale character can be seen in a church that was particularly richly adorned with ceramics, namely in San Francisco Acatepec (photo 4).

This folk and ludic character of architecture can be found in modern secular architecture too, at least as a game with new aesthetic messages.

J. O’Gorman, who made the mosaics on the building of UNAM Library, at the same time started building his own house (completed in 1956, now non-existent). In the wall composition and the residential and garden space the architect-artist introduced soft shapes and numerous narration elements referring to pre-Hispanic culture and forces of nature (snakes, birds, mysterious figures), which were made as a mosaic with colourful stones. In this particular case, the new form and aesthetics were connected with O’Gorman’s fascination with organic architecture (F.L. Wright) and the aesthetics of artistic creativity of A. Gaudi [5, p. 64].

Similarly in our times, J. Senosiain designs architectural objects which he places in the trends of organicity and regionalism. His houses of biomorphic and zoomorphic shapes [9] are richly adorned with plastic structures (painted surfaces, mosaics, stained glass) and they suggest fairytale like play with architecture (photo 5) [4]. The artistic form in this case seems to definitely dominate over the ideological premises of Senosiain's creativity [10].

6. "Magic towns"

Yet another peculiar case of play with colour is connected with the program 'Magic towns' (*Pueblos Mágicos*), which has been implemented for several years and whose aim is to activate local economies by developing tourism, for instance. Within the activities aimed at creating a town's image, a uniform colour scheme of house facades in historical town centres is prepared. These are usually small towns in the colonial tradition [9].

This group does not comprise cities which are entered in the UNESCO World Heritage List such as Guanajuato, San Miguel de Allende, Tlacotalpán or Campeche. They constitute, however, a conceptual reference to actions carried out in other towns.

A special case is Campeche, where in the 1990s new rules for the revalorization of historical towns were proclaimed. In the 1980s it was still a white town. Today it abounds with a rich palette of pastel colours. Tlacotalpán, on the other hand, is mottled with different colours. In turn, San Miguel de Allende, which belonged to the *Pueblos Mágicos* group until it was entered in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2008, is characterized by the requirement to maintain a palette of a few shades of brown on the facades of the historical centre: from ochre to chocolate brown.

In the particular cities from the list of 'Magic towns' individual colour concepts have been realized. In Patzcuaro white walls are required above the brown panelling. In Izamal in Yucatan there is a requirement of yellow-ochre walls with white elements of cornices, pilasters, portals or window bands (photo 6). Also in Yucatan in Valladolid there is no restriction as to using colours as long as a uniform pastel shade for a given façade is maintained.

This colour scheme order ensures spatial coherence, but at the same time it introduces a sense of artificiality. However, this artificiality may be perceived as a positive play with space and architecture and is certainly an attractive way of packaging a 'tourist product'.

7. Summary

The examples presented in this study by no means give a full picture of the scale and rank of colour in shaping architectural and urban spaces, because the full perception of this environment is conditioned by a total of factors which also include, among other things, the ubiquitous folk art, lush nature and the special light of the tropical zone. In the landscape of the Mexican province, culture is manifested by colourful church domes as well as by single simple architectural forms, sometimes white, more often covered by a strong colour. This colourful architecture has its background in the Mexican landscape which stretches between the lush tropical greenery and sun-burned dry plateaus.

This game of architecture with colour constitutes the specificity of the unique cultural landscape of Mexico. It expresses the unusual and optimistic nature of Mexican people. And for visitors to Mexico it is an environment that inspires, emanates energy, and evokes a positive attitude to the spatial environment.

References

- [1] Alfaro M., M.S. Alévalo, *Barroco popular (o tequitqui) en los espacios monásticos de la Sierra Alta y Altiplano: ¿Un producto mestizo?*, <http://www.iiifilologicas.unam.mx/pnovohispano> (access: 2013.10.13).
- [2] *Arquitectura poblana*, Puebla 2010.
- [3] *Hundertwasser. Architektur*, Koln 1997.
- [4] Javier Senosiain. *Arquitectura Orgánica*, <http://www.arquitecturaorganica.com> (access: 2015.06.04).
- [5] Jimenez V., Juan O’Gorman. *Vida y obra*, México 2004.
- [6] Legorreta + Legorreta, Barcelona 2002.
- [7] Molina y Vedia J., Luis Barragán. *Paraisos-Paradises*, Madrid 2001.
- [8] *Polyforum Siqueiros*, <http://polyforumsiqueiros.com.mx> (dostep: 2015.06.04).
- [9] *Pueblos Mágicos*, <http://www.sectur.gob.mx/pueblos-magicos> (access: 2015.06.04).
- [10] Senosiain J., *Bio-Architecture*, Oxford 2003.
- [11] Taschen A. (red.), D. von Schaewen, J. Maizels, *Fantasy Worlds*, Köln 2007.