



## LISTEN

# Antoni Malinowski

There is still much to be learned about the role of colour in architecture — and more schools should focus on it

## BLUEPRINT SENSORY

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We live in a world of the senses, and our sense of colour is part of our experience of life. A confluence of perceptual experiences allows us to be in the world, and colour is an essential component of this sensual interplay. Often regarded as a secondary quality, it is in fact as important as haptic 'seeing' of an object. And, of course, colour is physically embedded in the micro-structure of the materials that make art, and that comprise architecture.

Fifteen years ago at the **AA School of Architecture** I set up a course called **Materiality of Colour** and began teaching the basis of colour interactions. I still teach this course, which follows **Josef Albers'** seminal work in 2D, but also expands it into 3D. I also want the students to understand the principles of the subtractive colour phenomenon.

The micro-structure of colour is pigment. It is the reflecting and refracting factor of the crystalline particles that makes a particular quality of colour.

Some basic understanding of the physics of colour helps to articulate volumetric interactions. When a design is chromatically informed it gains fuller perceptual qualities, and achieves more depth visually and also intellectually. As **Goethe** said: 'Thinking is more interesting than knowing, but not than looking.'

I have just returned from **Milan**, where I made a large painting installation in the vast spaces of **Assab One**, a former print works situated near the city's main ring road. Buildings on **Via Assab** mostly comprise 1960s social housing. Some are six storeys, some smaller, intersected with the lower industrial structures from the same period. There is a burnt umber ceramic-tile-clad building, dark and reflecting light — simultaneously shining and warm. Another has a variegated greyish/pinkish mosaic elevation. The ground-floor glass doors reveal a lobby clad with textured small ceramic tiles in a deep Bordeaux colour. The walls are a cooler shade of pink and this connects them visually to the elevation.

Opposite, a light-grey, rendered industrial building has a vivid green gate; striking but warmly soft green — a metal oxide-based paint. On the other side, a long warehouse wall is covered with Venetian red render. Inside **Assab One**, the subtle pinkish light reflected off the adjoining red terracotta-clad building is bouncing off the dusty green linoleum floor and is absorbed by the dark, oil-stained concrete.

My installation is part of the institution's annual 1+1+1 project by **Elena Quarestani**, which brings an artist, an architect and a designer together in one exhibition. Curated for the second time by **Marco Sammiceli**, and in collaboration with architect **Johanna Grawunder** and designer **Christoph Hefti**, the result is

a feast of colour. For my wall paintings I used some matte, light-absorbing paint, a range of mineral greys. This made a perfect background for the highly reflective shapes painted with mica and even more reflective interference pigments. These nano technology particles bend wave lengths and scatter them in three directions, so it is a 3D colour par excellence. As the daylight changes and as the spectator moves in the large spaces of the gallery, the colours of the painted shapes change, their interactions shift.

My **Almost Seen** installation is made of nuanced, almost imperceptible spatial resonances. It represents the most recent point in my research into interdependence of the material and immaterial nature of colour within architectural space.

In an adjoining, darkened space, **Johanna Grawunder** has made her colour/light installation, **Alone Together**, which consists of two 3D constructs suspended at the opposite ends of the large darkness. The first, which must be walked through, is a simple construction, asymmetrical and made with humble plywood painted fluorescent pink. On the rectangular panels are glowing black light tubes. Some 30m across, the second piece is symmetrical and translucent, made with bright planes of **Perspex**. Each plane is lit by invisible LED strips — a high-tech interaction of luminous pale blue, dusky orange, deep yellow, magenta. Both the painted plywood and the luxurious, custom-made **Perspex** planes are different ways of exploring chromatic contrasts and affinities. The dark void is saturated with spectral tension.

In my AA colour course, apart from talking about the characteristics of colour — such as dark/light, warm/cool, reflective/absorbent — I also emphasise the need to understand the light of place. When working with colour we have to comprehend the characteristics of light. In **Milan** the light is luminous, yet somehow placid, the shadows a warm earth shade. In **London**, we are often dealing with very low-level light that oscillates with a brilliant sunshine. This light is Turner yellow, the shadows are almost black.

A couple of years ago, a colleague's research revealed that I run the only structured practical colour course in an architectural school in the UK. While it is exciting to be unique I feel that an opportunity is being missed to spread this knowledge in a systematic way to other institutions and to enable the architecture students of the future to understand the crucial role of light and colour in their work.

**Antoni Malinowski** is an artist and co-director of Saturated Space at the AA