

## Colour design and industrial landscape

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**ABSTRACT:** The aim of this paper is to highlight some matters and problematic issues related to the industrial landscape and present some chromatic-perceptual interventions of qualification and requalification, which open interesting reflections and perspectives of action within a more general, and necessary, rethinking process of industrial areas and plants. Interventions that, leaving unaltered the material and immaterial substance, entrust mainly to the surface changes the task to offer a new current reading of the past as well as to promote a new perceptual quality that attempts to reconcile the purely functional, extraneous, out of scale, language of the industrial apparatus with the urban, rural, natural landscape.

Com este trabalho queremos destacar algumas questões problemáticas relacionadas com a paisagem industrial e apresentar algumas intervenções de requalificação e qualificação cromático-perceptiva que nos conduzem a interessantes reflexões e perspectivas de intervenção num processo mais geral e necessário no sentido de repensar as áreas de uso industrial. Intervenções que deixam inalterada a essência material e imaterial para deixar sobretudo às transformações da superfície dos edifícios a tarefa de oferecer uma nova e reatualizada leitura do passado, e, de como criar e promover uma nova qualidade perceptiva, que tente reconciliar a linguagem puramente funcional, diferente, estranha, fora da escala do conjunto industrial com a paisagem urbana, rural e natural.

**KEYWORDS:** colour design, industrial landscape, industrial archaeology, conservation

### Introduction

Among the problematic aspects that characterize the contemporary society and territory there is one related to industrial areas and plants and their apparent incompatibility or irreconcilability with the urban, rural, natural landscape.

Areas and plants that, as a result of the accelerate changes that characterize the industrial and productive logics, present two kinds of problems: one related to the transformation, requalification and revitalization of the abandoned or underused

heritage, the other related to the qualification and signification of what works and is new today.

If on one hand the definition of the concept of industrial archaeology has promoted a cultural vision and a different consciousness toward the disused testimonies of the industrial past, on the other difficult cruxes of conciliation continue to coexist between functional aspects and aesthetic values, production requirements and perception of environmental quality and livability.

Within this complexity, not only environmental but also social, cultural and economic one, it is interesting to note how a new conception of “cosmetics”, mainly entrusted to colour, has made its way in order to leave as much as possible unchanged the substance, giving especially to the surface transformations the task to offer a new current reading of the past, in a meaning of conservation<sup>1</sup>, and promote a new perceptual quality that attempts to reconcile the purely functional, harsh, extraneous, out of scale, language of the industrial apparatus with the urban, rural, natural landscape.

This paper highlights some questions and problematic issues related to the industrial landscape, and presents some chromatic-perceptual interventions of qualification and requalification, which open interesting reflections and perspectives of action within a more general, and necessary, rethinking process of industrial areas and plants. Interventions that, while generating real conditions of environmental, urban and social improvement, leave the material and immaterial substance, historical, cultural and architectural, unaltered and open to new and meaningful interpretations in the future.

### **Industrial landscape: values and problematic issues**

The definition of industrial landscape can be referred to those areas «affected by the industry both in terms of its characteristics and especially from a functional point of view, which can be integrated into urban space, suburban or rural areas»<sup>2</sup>.

Then the industrial landscape is configured as a complex set of buildings and plants, infrastructures and facilities created for production. An apparatus that has radically transformed the urban, rural and natural areas, equipped with necessary resources for its sustenance, to set up a new settlement, and social, reality, unique and peculiar.

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<sup>1</sup> BATTISTI, 2001: 39.

<sup>2</sup> MIREA, 2011: 298.

Moreover an apparatus that today is often located in strategic areas for cities and in landscape contexts of great interest, assuming a strong relevance not only from an environmental point of view, but also from a social, cultural, economic one.

Production evidences of different ages that if on one hand the industrial archaeology has been able to rehabilitate promoting a new cultural vision toward the industrial past testimonies, on the other continue to represent difficult instances of conciliation between functional aspects and aesthetic values, production requirements and perception of environmental quality and livability.

In Italy known is the case of the Veneto region, where in the last fifty years the territory has been literally consumed by factories of all sizes and without any architectural quality or urban design, to the point that the region has been pushed to prepare plans and regulations to return dignity to these places.

The discovery of the concept of industrial archaeology has promoted a conservative attitude toward the oldest evidences of the industrial heritage, starting processes of revitalization and reuse. The historic architectures of production, whose value of testimony, the rich and fascinating typology, and the settlement differentiations compared to the territory have begun to be rediscovered<sup>3</sup>, have gained importance as material and immaterial evidences of the history of a community read and interpreted through its work. In many European cities large industrial complexes of the past have been restored assuming new functions and meanings in the contemporary city.

Now it is time to take charge of the industrial heritage and the landscape that has shaped as a whole, including the question of the most recent plants, abandoned or still in function, which anyway constitute an evidence, although not yet recognized, of material and immaterial culture.

The problem is complex considering that many are the traces, even negative, that these plants have left on the territory. To deal with their demolition and replacement, if they are abandoned, means preparing complex disposal and reclamation actions; not to act means forsaking not only themselves, but also those areas which house them to an accelerated physical, functional and social degradation. On the contrary, if still working they need to be reformulated into a new urban and local design able to make them consistent with the spatial, temporal and cultural context they refer to.

So it is a question of how to redesign the role of industrial areas and plants, both old and recent ones, within the contemporary territory.

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<sup>3</sup> BATTISTI, 2001: 37.

How to deal with the problem taking into account both the economic aspects and the rapid industrial changes that have characterized the last few decades, not only leaving an extended obsolete heritage but also creating a new one?

Can colour, understood as an epidermal modification, even reversible, contribute in giving an answer in this sense?

It is not just a matter of cosmetics, understood as its common negative sense, but to entrust mainly to surface transformations, and therefore also and especially to colour, the task of providing a new current reading of the past, preserving as much as possible unchanged the substance<sup>4</sup>, and promoting a new perceptual quality that attempts both to give a new image and imagination of the industrial apparatus, and reconcile it with its own context, urban, rural, natural.

As proven by some interventions of colour design on industrial buildings of the past and present time, surface transformations have been revealed effective, quick and affordable means to try to solve both the problem of visual pollution through mitigation, or camouflage solutions, and that of re-appropriation and re-signification of industrial sites.

Interventions that, while providing real conditions of environmental, urban and social improvement, leave unaltered and open to new and meaningful interpretations in the future the material and immaterial substance, historical, cultural and architectural.

Finally interventions that, even if certainly do not resolve the complex issues presented by the industrial landscape, can be a starting point for a deeper and overall process of environmental, architectural, social and economic requalification of these areas.

### **Toward a chromatic-perceptual requalification**

Since the nineties, under the pressure of a new concept of pollution also of visual nature<sup>5</sup>, some interesting solutions primarily entrusted to colour to mitigate the visual impact of industrial buildings already operating or newly designed have been launched. Solutions, often carried out by colour specialists, which draw from the colour palette existing in the environment to put it into perceptual patterns that can camouflage, resize, deconstruct, lighten the large volumes of the industrial and infrastructure apparatus turning them into new landmarks integrated in the landscape.

The colour project for the Brescia waste to energy plant of Jorrit Tornquist, 1996, is the first successful example of colour design applied to these plants in Italy (fig.1).

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<sup>4</sup> BATTISTI, 2001: 39.

<sup>5</sup> ROGNINI, 2008.

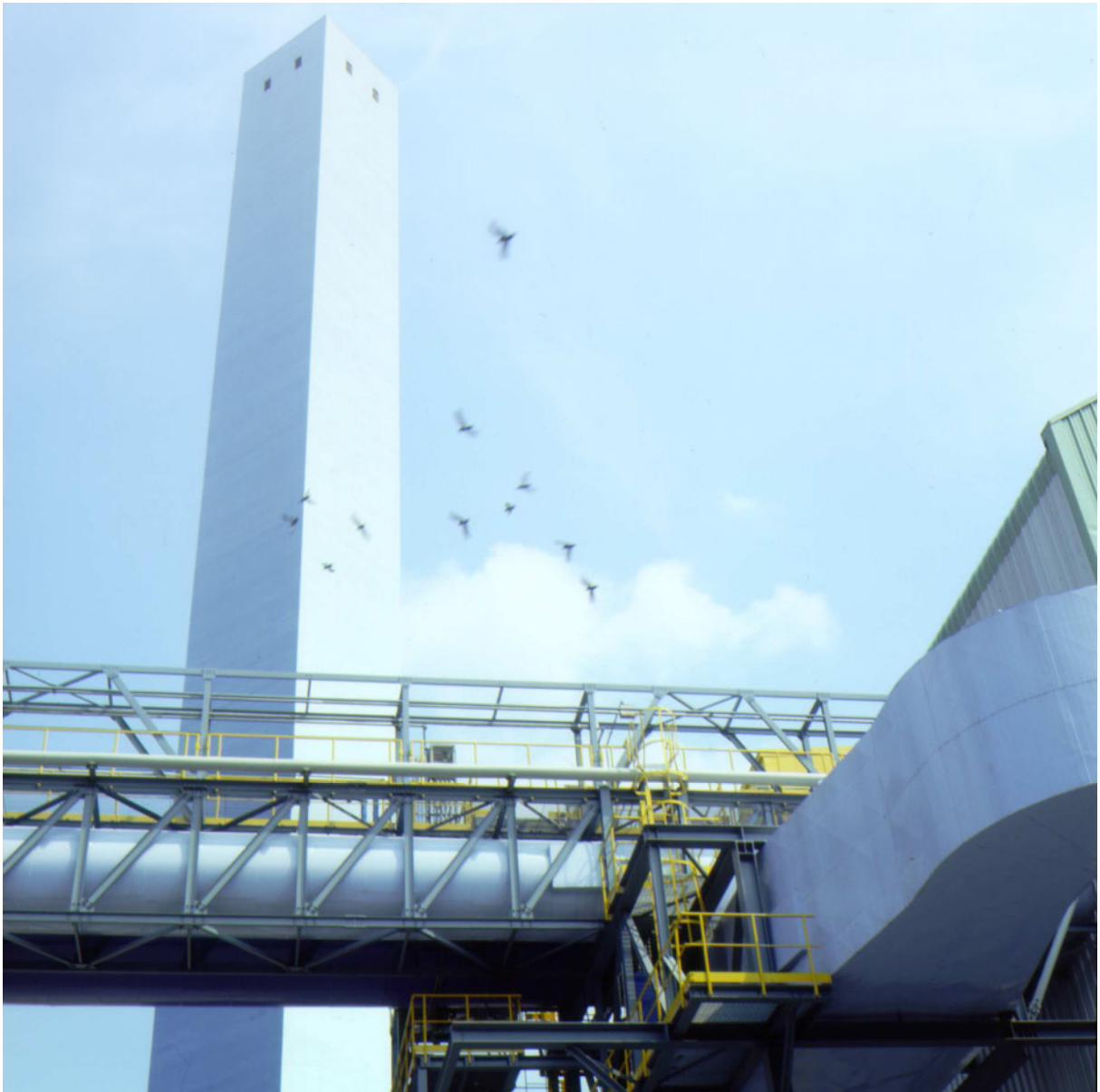


Figure 1. Jorrit Tornquist, Brescia waste to energy plant, Italy.

For the first time the Aeronautics' bodies in charge have agreed to replace the red and white stripes that, for security reasons, characterize the appearance of chimneys with more visible short time flash, already adopted in Japan, as a prerequisite to start a colour project whose primary goal is to enhance the chimney as a symbol of a new production model, and then a new way of conceiving and communicating the industrial plant.

The light grey-blue of the typical Brescia's sky has been applied to the chimney according to a scale of different shades that create a continuous mutability of perception with the changing light and weather conditions.

«The tower creates, through its own shade, a virtual torsion, *soft* and camouflage one, but at the same time, arouses curiosity, it is therefore a strong signal that does not

hide, thanks to the shade that blends with the colour of the sky, and mutes with the variation of lighting situations, an element that integrates and interacts with the landscape»<sup>6</sup>.

In fact, the tower has become a new recognizable landmark integrated into the landscape, a clear and strong signal that arouses interest on those who travel along the highway that runs next to it.

Other projects more and more targeted to the redevelopment of industrial buildings by the only use of colour component followed this work. It is the case of the Tavernola Bergamasca cement factory, on Iseo lake, commissioned to Tornquist by the company Lafarge in 1999 with the aim to mitigate the enormous visual impact of the plant on the landscape (fig. 2).



Figure 2. Jorrit Tornquist, Tavernola Bergamasca cement factory, Italy.

In this case the colour project specifically aims to cancel or dissolve the plants' shapes and volumes in the background of its environmental context<sup>7</sup>. The colour palette that refers to the surrounding landscape is applied on the volumes according to a

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<sup>6</sup>TORNQUIST, 2006: 31.

<sup>7</sup>TORNQUIST, 2006: 31.

square module that deconstructs them in smaller view fields, as if the image was decomposed into pixels or, given the size, megapixels. In the distance perception the large volumes look like they thin and blend into the landscape background, deformed by the water reflection.

A dematerialization effect in some ways similar to that used for the colour project of the shipyards hangar at Stralsund in Germany by Friedrich Ernst von Garnier<sup>8</sup> who tries to visually connect the large building with the background made of sky and sea, through a breakdown into horizontal and vertical plans of different shades of blue (fig. 3). The new chromatic skin overlies on the banality of the volume building new perceptual articulations, at the same time, searching and recreating an integration with the landscape and a new aesthetic.

Common to these projects is the search for new forms of dialogue with the urban, rural, natural landscape, through a new perceptual quality, entrusted to colour, that attempts to reconcile the purely functional, and out of scale language of the industrial apparatus with its context.



Figure 3. Friedrich Ernst von Garnier, shipyards hangar at Stralsund, Germany.

A colour, however, that assumes a dimension mostly immaterial, inconsistent, and therefore new and unusual in its architectural implications, but, because of this, bearer of a new perceptual aesthetic of integration and interaction with the landscape.

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<sup>8</sup> SPAGNOLI, 2010: 50-60.

«The building, then understood as an object that through its “skin”, its shell, interacts with its surrounding, integrates with it and modifies it by tracing a new sign that does not break the natural balance, but bring new harmonies»<sup>9</sup>.

According to a different meaning of perceptual requalification we can place those projects that instead look to a new expressive quality, mainly entrusted to colour, which transforms and contextualizes the image of the industrial production.

In this sense we can see Friedensreich Hundertwasser’s projects for the requalification of the Spittelau district heating plant, in a central area of Vienna, 1988-1992, and the new Maishima incineration plant of Osaka, 1997-2001 (fig. 4). Projects that play, once again, on the “skin” of the plants stratifying new matter chromatic shapes that evoke a fantastic architecture and transform the industrial “object” into a tourist attraction.



Figure 4. Friedensreich Hundertwasser, Spittelau district heating plant, Vienna. (Photo Lukas Riebling <http://commons.wikimedia.org>)

Other more recent projects refer to a new image of the industrial production as promoter of an urban regeneration, such as Let's color in the Belgian industrial city of Charleroi, and in the English one of Ashington. Here colour becomes a symbol of a

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<sup>9</sup> FRANCO, 2005: 166.



creative and participated process of aesthetic and social revitalization<sup>10</sup>. Even this, though so different in the results from an usual project of “restoration” on the past heritage, is a form of existing preservation. The productive places of the past are transformed by colour in new landmarks that continue to tell and witness a piece of urban history, and become “monuments” of a new city.

A form of revitalization of the past industrial heritage mainly entrusted to colour as a preferential means of expression to transform the buildings’ skin, as a requirement to initiate a process of collective re-appropriation of industrial sites making them visible to eyes and consciences and, finally, as a clear and strong sign of new possibilities of re-signification.

## **Conclusions**

Colour, as emerge from this type of interventions, appears an effective means to solve the visual and social impact of industrial evidences in the urban and natural landscape, both through mitigation and re-signification operations, which lead to the configuration of new forms of coexistence, if not even integration and interaction. Operations carried out on the skin of plants and infrastructures both as historical ones, falling therefore in the definition of industrial archaeology, and as modern ones, where every attempt, and interest, to conciliate functional aspects and architectural quality often has been gradually disappearing.

Essentially, colour may be the first sign of a reconversion and re-appropriation process of the industrial heritage in presence of a recognized visual value as well as historical and functional<sup>11</sup>, and also in presence of evidences where today it is more difficult to recognize a visual value but that are, and will be in the future, evidences of a society, our contemporary one.

Colour, the more ephemeral among the design components, proves to be capable of transforming the meaning of things while leaving unchanged the substance.

A new intervention, of project, that preserves the existing, without selection or value judgments. With the dual purpose, and meaning, of preserving as much as possible intact the industrial heritage of the past, in a common understanding of restoration as conservation, offering a new interpretation, and acting in a sustainable way on the today’s and working industrial apparatus.

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<sup>10</sup> STEVENS & KRANEVELD, 2013: 397-400. Let’s Colour is promoted by the paints and coatings company AkzoNobel.

<sup>11</sup> LOURES, 2008: 24.

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