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COLOUR IN THE CITY

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INTRODUCTION

There is a renewed interest in the use of colour, one of the most effective methods of decorating the city. Colour in the city is at the core of the subject matter of this book, the decoration of the urban realm. This chapter is the synthesis of much that has been discussed earlier. Colour should be used to strengthen the image of the city by giving emphasis to features such as landmarks, by developing colour schemes which are associated with particular districts, streets or squares and by the colour coding of street furniture.

There is great potential for polychromatic colour effects in the built environment. For much of this century the subject of colour in the city was not a matter for serious attention. A classical ideal, subscribed to by many designers, mistakenly associated with the architecture and sculpture of Ancient Greece, sees colour in architecture as a product only of natural finishes. The standing remains of ancient civilizations which have survived the ravages of time have been bleached of their original colouring by sun, wind and rain. They have, therefore, functioned as a monochromatic source of inspiration. To many the discovery that the great

monuments of antiquity were stained or painted with bright pigments has proved quite unacceptable, particularly to those with a puritanical reverence for the expression of the inherent appearance of natural materials. The facts, however, are quite clear: 'Statuary was deeply dyed with garish pigments. The marble figure of a woman found on the Athenian Acropolis was tintured red, green, blue and yellow. Quite often statues had red lips, glowing eyes made of precious stones and even artificial eyelashes' (Porter, 1982). The Greek Temple from the point of view of colour was closer in feeling to the Chinese Temple, than to those pure but lifeless nineteenth-century copies found in many European cities.

The love of colour survives in the modern world. The church in its vestments retains a strong link with the past symbolic use of colour while colourful vivacity occasionally breaks out in the guise of the latest Parisienne or Italian fashions in women's clothes. In the environment colour was kept alive by those not schooled in the centres of artistic excellence - the working class in the suburban home, the art of the bargee, the gypsy or fairground artist. In this spirit are the monuments to Art Deco of the late 1920s and 1930s. Such buildings as those by Wallis, Gilbert and Partners for suburban London fall neatly within this populist genre. Within the