

Color as a sign of urban transition in the city of Bordeaux

Aline Barlet¹, Audrey Bousigues¹, Alice Herbert¹

¹ GRECCAU Laboratory, ensapBx, Bordeaux, France. aline.barlet@bordeaux.archi.fr, audrey.bsgs@gmail.com, alice-herbert@orange.fr

Corresponding author: Aline Barlet (aline.barlet@bordeaux.archi.fr)

ABSTRACT

Color in architecture, despite its functions as a signal, a landmark and a symbol, remains largely absent at both the urban level and at the building level. The trend is towards the color chart, seeking harmony, but which sometimes gives way to monotony. In the case of a heritage city such as Bordeaux, the question of the use of color has also to cope with the UNESCO World Heritage protection of a large part of the city. Actions are limited by a concern for the relationship with what exists already, and as a result, respect for the historic and visual context gives rise to architectures that are discreet, or sometimes even banal. Nevertheless, there are designers in Bordeaux who dare to use color. Most colored buildings are part of a specific program or are in a key location in the city. By analyzing some urban and architectural examples, we show that buildings may be located in places of urban divide or that color may be used to identify a specific function. Logically, the further we move from the historic city center, the more colored buildings we encounter, yet colors nevertheless seem to be complex to manage. However, by determining the predominant colors and identities of a place, it is possible to focus a project more precisely and make it easier for residents to appropriate the space.

KEYWORDS Color, Architecture, Heritage, Function, Visual Integrity

RECEIVED 15 October 2019; **REVISED** 16 December 2019; **ACCEPTED** 07 January 2020

1. Color and architecture

Color is an integral part of our daily lives. Color conveys codes, taboos, and prejudices that we adhere to without knowing it. It influences our environment, our behavior, our language and our imagination (Dérivé 1964).

In every country in the world, since prehistoric times, man has been attracted by color, creating symbolic messages around it that have been passed down through the ages in diverse activities and have become imprinted in his subconscious.

In the field of architecture, while color is ubiquitous in interior decoration, it is more unusual to find it used on façades, apart from the color of the materials themselves.

1.1. The many functions of color in architecture

Color in architecture becomes a signal in our environment when it contrasts with its urban context.

Color can assume different functions in architecture. When used as a landmark, it helps to find a place, and gives a city 'legibility' as described by David Lynch (1960). When used as a symbol, it becomes a collective sign, the result of an historical-social convention. It mobilizes people around a community identity, a basis for recognition and membership of a group (Soulié 1988). The color of buildings and urban spaces enables us to find our way, to find our identity, and to dream.

However, above all, color is the means by which the architect is able to express his sensitivity, his tastes, and his desires. Following trends is therefore neither an obligation nor a necessity. Today, however, the color chart is widely used and restricts the possible color choices for architectural façades, seeking harmony and thus giving way to repetition and sometimes monotony.

1.2. Patrimonialization and coherence: many channels of vigilance

Many cities that are UNESCO World Heritage Sites, such as Bordeaux, are 'living historic cities' and continue to evolve.

As a result, the aim of the approach proposed by UNESCO (2011) is to ensure that contemporary interventions blend harmoniously with heritage in a historic framework. In the case of Bordeaux, as described by Callais and Jeanmonod (2017), UNESCO recommends a degree of vigilance regarding "the coherence and unity of the ensemble of classical and neoclassical buildings [...] and the quality of the public spaces." Some buildings, however, are colored with different and remarkable colors contrasting with the dominant colors of the surrounding context. Some other buildings are of natural materials, contributing to a rather monochrome landscape.

In order to respect the requirement to maintain a relationship with the existing architecture, the city of Bordeaux is well equipped with tools and experts.

We should mention the CLUB (Local Bordeaux UNESCO Committee), which has an advisory role in architectural and urban projects.

The PSMV (Safeguarding and Enhancement Plan) deals with the area within the protected perimeter, and the PLU (Local Urbanism Plan) with heritage throughout the rest of the city and protection of the areas around historic monuments across virtually the entire city.

The ABF (Architect for the Buildings of France) supervises all projects carried out within the protected areas.

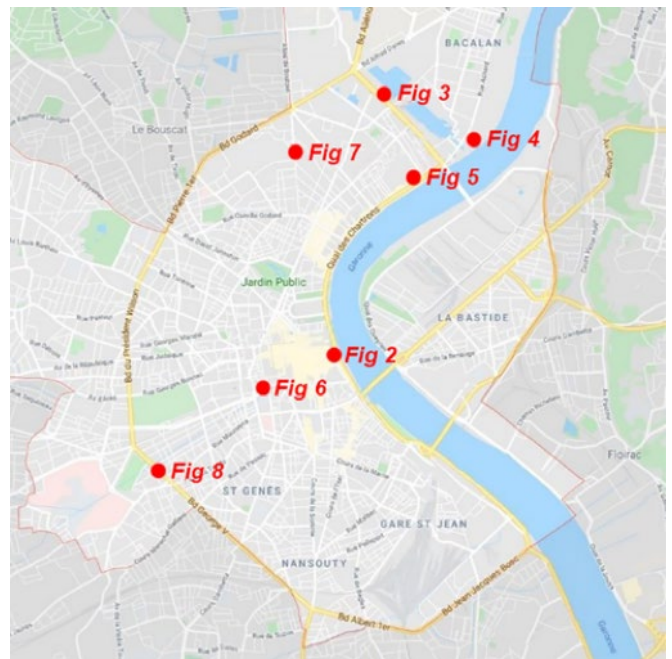


Fig. 1. Location in Bordeaux of buildings discussed.

1.3. Color and visual integrity in Bordeaux

Today, the only projects that are permitted are those which are simple and unremarkable in style, with a stone façade, and which do not disrupt the landscape, or projects whose architectural quality can allow for a degree of individuality, especially through color, and particularly in the case of public facilities.

In some cities, UNESCO experts have refused projects because they detracted from the city's visual integrity. This is defined as the means of "identifying, conserving and managing historic areas within their broader urban contexts, by considering the interrelationships of their physical forms, their spatial organization and connection, their natural features and setting, and their social, cultural and economic values." (UNESCO 2011).

However, being listed as a World Heritage Site is not necessarily a constraint to architects' creativity. Some designers venture to use color, whether at the urban scale or the architectural scale.

In this paper we explore the various manifestations of color to be found in the city of Bordeaux and identify their specific features by analyzing a few examples (Fig. 1).

2. The colors of the city

When we talk about color in a city, we must first distinguish between short-lived color and long-lasting color.

Short-lived color lasts for only a short time and includes advertising posters, paintings, street art, shop signs, etc. These colorful elements are ubiquitous in urban space and may even be predominant in relation to the color of the architecture. Therefore, short-lived color should not be neglected in the case of a global approach of color in urban areas.

Long-lasting colors give a place its chromatic identity, whether the colors are natural or created artificially using dyes. Jean-Philippe Lenclos (1982) talks about the "Geography of Color" as the result of close interactions between the use of materials found on-site and the application of colors linked to local traditions.

In Bordeaux, the stone has a range of hues, associated with different local quarries, and these dominate the landscape of the historic center, giving it its homogeneity (Fig. 2).

However, Bordeaux history shows that it was not always like that. In the Middle Ages, colors were only on public monuments and homes were characterized by half-timbered façades. Bordeaux was then the city of wood.

Then, the façade coatings from the 14th to the 19th centuries, as well as natural or varnished brick introduced by the Art Nouveau and Art Deco movements of the early 20th century, led to the colors of Bordeaux, in a city of stone mostly built in the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries.



Fig. 2. Bordeaux, city of stone. Photos © A. Herbert.

Subsequently, the Modern Movement was accompanied by two postures regarding the use of color in architecture.

On the one hand, architects such as Adolf Loos (1913), defending the notion of truth in architecture, claimed that ornament (and thus color) was a crime and therefore refused to apply color to natural building materials. Some decades earlier, John Ruskin (1880:137) stated: "I think the colours of architecture should be those of natural stones; partly because more durable, but also because more perfect and graceful." Yves Charnay (2017), however, claims that material alone does not explain the use of the restrained stone colors. Rather moral and ideological reasoning going back to the 12th century has profoundly influenced French culture. Cistercians, thus, in contrast to Abbot Suger of St Denis, regarded color and ornament as representations of vanity but associated color of natural materials with truth and beauty.

On the other hand, color could be used to mark volumes or to make architecture more abstract such as promoted by the Dutch art movement De Stijl. In La Cité Frugès in Pessac, Le Corbusier used color to enhance space because "gray cement houses make an unbearable compressed clump, without air" (Barba and Peinado 2017).

Therefore, Bordeaux has been marked by different architectural styles over time, bringing other new colors to the architecture.

Now, when an urbanization or architectural project is carried out, color is used either to enable the project to merge into its setting, or to differentiate it. Although stone is the predominant material in Bordeaux, building in stone or respecting the stone color tones is not a stipulation in the planning documents.

Although there is no stipulation, a certain hierarchy emerges in Bordeaux, linked to the nature of the urban landscapes and the degree of heritage protection. The further we move from the historic center, the more freedom we see in the choice of colors.

For example, the Bassins à Flots district is differentiated from the historic city (Fig. 3). It has uniformity through its dominant material, metal. The colors of the metal cladding are varied, ranging from blue-gray to azure through black. The city of stone and the city of metal are adjacent yet differentiated, while both have the same underlying principle, that of unity.



Fig. 3. The Bassins à Flot district: two apartment buildings. Photos © A. Herbert.

Architects are rational in justifying their choice of colors for a project. This was the case for the wine museum Cité du Vin (2016) designed by Agence XTU (Fig. 4), whose “golden highlights evoke the blond (golden) stone of the Bordeaux façades.”



Fig. 4. Cité du Vin. Photo © A. Herbert.

To objectify the choice of colors as much as possible, it is interesting to understand the surrounding colors in which the project is created. In this way, the colors of a building can be defined more precisely according to the approach to be adopted (tone on tone, contrast, and more).

Despite the development of these methods, color still eludes us and always has an element of subjectivity.

However, by determining the dominant colors that identify a place, as can be carried out for example using Lenclos' method (1982), one can position oneself more rightly within a project. This enables a better appreciation of the color context. The color choice is then not just a personal but a more objective, issue. Color is complex to manipulate, this is why there are different systems and tools available, such as color charts, to help deal with color in the city, especially in a historic city.

The complexity of the issue lies in the balance between the preservation of a chromatic identity and creative freedom.

3. Colored architectures

Differentiating a building from its context is not a straightforward process, nor is it without repercussions; the decision must justify the risk, otherwise it can result in the city being less legible with many landmark buildings.

Noury (2008:124) points out that, “Regarding colored architecture, there are two ways in which it can be embedded into its surroundings: integrating a new building into the urban landscape by harmonizing shades of color, or making a new construction contrasting visually with its environment.”

In Bordeaux, we find that most contemporary colorful buildings are part of a specific program or are in a key location in the city.

3.1. Color as transition in the city

The Hotel Seeko'o, located at the corner of Cours Edouard-Vaillant and Quai de Bacalan, was completed in 2007 by King Kong Architects (Fig. 5).

The remit was to produce a high-end hotel, and this building aspires to be seen and to be a reference point in the city. What is striking at first is its large volume made up of perfectly smooth white Corian®. According to the architects, the project was designed on the scale of the city and connections between the neighborhoods.



Fig. 5. Hotel Seeko'o. Photo © A. Herbert.

Although a large part of the Bordeaux quayside offers up a uniform landscape, the urban fabric in this part of the city is “freer and less ordered”, according to Costedoat (2007). Traditional in terms of its urban location yet contemporary in its architectural style, construction material and color, the Seeko'o perfectly masters its role in the transition between the classical city and the renewal taking place in the northern neighborhoods.

Square Pey Berland also illustrates this urban transition (Fig. 6). Designed in 2006 by architects Arsène-Henry and Triaud, this building contains apartments, offices and shops and is located at the junction between the traditional

city and the largely concrete-dominated ensembles in the Mériadeck district.



Fig. 6. Square Pey Berland. Photo © A. Bousigues.

With its façade cladding with Brazil stone colored brown ochre, it has been nicknamed the 'gingerbread' building. When the sun shines on it, the block looks very bright.

This is a very heterogeneous building in a heterogeneous place, creating the link between the classical city and the modern city, and is a reference point in the landscape.

Finally, the Arc-en-Ciel Building, designed by the architect Bernard Bühler, is also located at the edges of different sections of the city, between the city of stone and some of the new urban ensembles (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Arc-en-Ciel building. Photo © A. Herbert.

As its name suggests ('rainbow' in French), the specific feature of this social housing complex is its aesthetics, defined, beyond its overall form, by glass strips in a dozen different and contrasting colors which alter the perception of natural light. The architect justified this approach by the need to enhance social housing, which, in his opinion, is usually "sad and somber".

Although the intentions of the architect, here or in other examples, are to enhance social housing and make it an enjoyable place to live, it can be argued that paradoxically, this addition of color may in itself be stigmatizing. Indeed, the use of color is often reserved for this type of housing.

3.2. Color as a means of identification

Putting color on the front of one's home is a means of appropriation; it makes the building stand out from the rest. This color is a sign of identification for its occupants, it defines a unique space, their home; a customized dwelling which seems to be everyone's dream.

If we consider collective housing, then the theory is quite different. The occupants are distanced from these issues and the framework for decision-making seems to give the architect sole responsibility for this choice.

If we look at the different stages in the design of the façades of the Stadion building, we see how this decision-making takes place in a way that is becoming more and more widespread (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. The Stadion. Photo © A. Bousigues.

The Stadion is a collective housing building containing 15 homes, built by LS Architects and Associates in 2011 on one of the Bordeaux boulevards. The site marked by a great architectural diversity, even with the presence of buildings with exceptional architecture, legitimizes the proposal of a unique building in terms of color. On its contemporary façade, volumes are highlighted in gray and yellow. These colors were chosen after a three-way discussion between the architect, the city's architect-consultant and the client. The objective was to use a material that would enhance the aesthetic aspect of the building while being resistant and affordable financially.

3.3. Color and materiality

The colors on the façades of the Stadion are used differently. The reconstituted fiberboard panels, the main constituent element of the façade, are through-dyed in gray. The manufacturer guarantees the consistency of the

material over time, especially its weather resistance. Meanwhile, the loggias are painted yellow. By its very nature, paintwork requires maintenance. It is much less long lasting and is therefore easier and less costly to change over time.

According to Van Doesburg's definition (1924), the yellow on this façade is a decorative color, a means of decorating the surface, as a simple addition or ornamentation; the gray, however, is a plastic color as it becomes a material of expression and has "a value equivalent to all materials such as stone, iron, glass."

4. Conclusion

This analysis of some urban and architectural examples shows that in a UNESCO World Heritage city the use of color in architecture is associated as much with the architect's position and reputation, as with the building's location in the city or its function.

Designers opting for color in architecture often feel the need to justify and rationalize their choice, in particular by focusing on the existing environment. Yet the color choice is usually influenced by subjectivity and hence by the architect's own taste, or the tastes of other players in the city who intervene at different stages of the project.

Colored buildings may be few and far between in the city of stone, but they are often to be found in places of urban divide between two landscapes. The further we move from the historic center, the more colored buildings we come across. Color is also used to identify a building, to distinguish it from others, to allow its appropriation by adopting shades that are thought to be appreciated by the citizens concerned.

In any case, colors seem to be complex to manage (Servantie 2007). Nevertheless, by determining the predominant colors and identities of a place it is possible to focus a project more precisely, thus making it easier for residents to appropriate the space.

In the case of Bordeaux, it seems that the acceptance of a colored building depends of its level of adaptation regarding the territory concerned more than the use of a common reglementation for all the city.

5. Conflict of interest declaration

The authors declare that nothing affected their objectivity or independence and original work. Therefore, no conflict of interest exists.

6. Funding source declaration

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public or not-for profit sectors.

7. Acknowledgment

The authors wish to thank Chantal Callais and Thierry Jeanmonod, who initiated this study, as well as the architects who agreed to answer our questions, allowing us to collect the data needed to finalize this work.

8. Short biography of the authors

Aline Barlet - Environmental psychologist, PhD Psychology - Behavioural Sciences and Social Practices, Master Degree of Architectural and Urban Acoustic. Co-director of the GRECCAU Laboratory, Associate professor at Bordeaux Higher National School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, France (ENSAP Bordeaux). The research and teaching topics are sustainability issue, comfort and atmospheres and particularly in the fields of territorial consultation, energetic and environmental transition.

Audrey Bousigues - Architect. Master Degree of Ambiances and Comfort for Architectural and Urban Design.

Alice Herbert - Architect. Master Degree of Ambiances and Comfort for Architectural and Urban Design.

References

- Barba, J. J. and Peinado, I. (2017) Le Corbusier's Cité Frugès: prototype city of workers in the 1920's. *Metalocus*, 8 October 2017, <https://www.metalocus.es/en/news/le-corbusiers-cite-fruges-prototype-city-workers-1920s>. (Accessed: 16 December 2019).
- Callais, C. and Jeanmonod T. (2017) Bordeaux, la fabrique d'un patrimoine: Paysages d'une 'cité historique vivante'. Bordeaux: ensapBx.
- Charnay, Y. (2017) 'Paris, une ville lumineuse aux couleurs discrètes,' *Environmental Colour Design: Theory and Practice*, Schindler, V. M. and Griber Y. A. (eds.) *Social Transformations*, 27, Smolensk: Smolensk State University Publishing House, pp. 37–49.
- Costedoat, D. (2007) Hôtel Seeko'o, atelier d'architecture King Kong. Bordeaux: Overworld.
- Déribéré, M. (1964) *La couleur*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Cité du Vin (2016) Available at: www.laciteduvin.com/fr/explorez-la-cite-du-vin/architecture/edifice (Accessed: 12 December 2016).
- Lenclos, J. P. and Lenclos D. (1982) *Les couleurs de la France: maisons et paysages*. Paris: Le Moniteur.
- Loos, A. (1913) 'Ornement et Crime.' *Les Cahiers d'aujourd'hui*, 5, pp. 247–256.

Color as a sign of urban transition in the city of Bordeaux

Lynch, K. (1960) *The Image of the city*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.

Noury, L. (2008) *La couleur dans la ville*. Paris: Le Moniteur.

Ruskin, J. (1880) *The seven lamps of architecture*. Mineola NY: Dover Publications.

Servantie, M. P. (2007) *Chromo-Architecture: l'art de construire en couleur*. Paris: Alternatives.

Soulié, L. (1988) 'Contre les rues supermarchés.' Parinaud, A. (ed.) *La couleur et la nature dans la ville: murs peints, sols, fontaine* Paris: Editions du Moniteur.

UNESCO. *Recommendations on the historic urban landscape* (2011) *Records of the General Conference 36th Session, Vol. 1*. Paris: UNESCO, pp. 57–62.

Van Doesburg, T. (1924) 'La signification de la couleur en architecture.' *La Cité*, 4(10), pp. 181–187.