The effects of colour

That different colours have different psychological and physiological effects is well documented[1]. For example reds are viewed as active and exciting, whereas blues and greens are viewed as soothing and passive. Artists are taught the effect of colour on apparent distance "Colours convey a feeling of distance, cool colours recede and warm colours come forward. Yet intensity of colour can greatly affect this. A saturated ultramarine appears closer than a pale orange. Strength of tone by itself can give a feeling of relative distance. The darker the tone the more readily it will come forward"[2]. Colour is a major factor in how the outdoor environment is experienced. Hillsides in shades of green are soothing, whereas funfairs with a multitude of bright colours are stimulating. It is clear that different colours have different effects depending on their hue, brightness and intensity and are not merely a matter of personal preference.

In town centres and commercial environments a wide variety of colours is expected and has the positive effect of creating a sense of activity and vitality. Colour is a potent device in marketing. Individual premises use wall colour as well as signage to attract attention to themselves and colour can give an indication of the type of goods or services being offered. Generally individual choices about the use of colour on buildings come together collectively to form a harmonious townscape. However, in some cases the way in which colour is used can have an adverse effect either on the commercial centre or the wider environment.

The major adverse effect that is experienced is that of undue dominance. This occurs when there are large expanses of bright intense colours (referred to here as strong colours). The hue (i.e. whether it is pink, yellow, blue etc.) is of less importance. The eye is drawn to a building painted in strong colours, just as it would be to say a six storey building in a cluster of one and two-storey buildings. While it is true that a large building is likely to be more dominant anyway due to its greater size, its visual impact is heightened or lessened by the choice and distribution of colour on its facades and roof.

Visual dominance can spoil the overall appreciation of a townscape or landscape. That this is of concern to the wider community became clear in Christchurch in 2007 when a large format retail warehouse was erected in Ferrymead. The exterior walls were bright orange and in this case this was of particular concern because the building was adjacent to wetlands and visible across a wide area. A public campaign put pressure on the owners, leading to the colour being toned down (see attachment 1). This was not an isolated concern however, the same company had previously outraged residents in Dunedin with their colour choice (see attachment

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[1] See for example the works of Birren, Faber: *Color psychology and colour therapy* first published in 1950. Sharpe, Deborah T. *The psychology of colour and design*. Chicago Nelson Hall 1974. Mahnke, Frank and Rudolf: *Colour and light in man-made environments.* John Wiley 1996
[2] Schwarz, Hans. Colour for the Artist. Studio Vista London 1968

2). It now realises that colour is a sensitive issue and apparently will adjust its use of colour depending on the context of the building.

Buildings that are dominant due to their colour can have an adverse effect in that they are visually distracting and overbearing. They can also have an adverse effect on the public's image of a place. Dominant buildings are noticeable and therefore memorable. They become landmarks. Whereas once a township might be known by a prominent heritage building such as a church; by a central feature, such as a war memorial; or by its location (at a crossroads for example) it could become known by an uninspiring, but brightly coloured, commercial warehouse. This can devalue and skew the role of traditional community landmarks and reduce a communities sense of pride in its place.

The use of a strong colour (or colours) draws attention to a building. This may be acceptable (or even advantageous) where the building is well designed and has an important role in the community, such as a library. However, there is a tendency for strong colours to be chosen for buildings which have little architectural merit and therefore, they are in effect advertising their poor quality for no community benefit.

Large expanses of strong or highly reflective colours can have an adverse effect on the enjoyment of neighbouring residential properties. Residents expect to be able to relax in their gardens. Where walls of strong colour are adjacent to, or even clearly visible from a private garden they intrude upon and compete with the generally calm greens and greys of the garden, which are punctuated perhaps by small patches of colourful flowers. Strong and highly reflective colours are straining on the eye. Strong colours tend to glow, particularly in sunlight, so that the whole garden can be tinged with the colour of the wall.

Restraint in the use of strong colours therefore leads to a more harmonious townscape and avoids impacting upon peoples enjoyment of their home and community. Furthermore using one colour rather than another is unlikely to have cost implications of any significance.

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11 March 2011