

If in doubt

The old stricture of painting every single wall white has evolved. This essential aid to decision making during the design process (*if in doubt, paint it white*) partly owed its significance to its intrinsic property of reflecting heat on one hand, and, to a certain extent, the restrictions on importation imposed by a paucity of foreign exchange.

For over a decade, the colour of buildings in Dar es salaam (and elsewhere in the country) was determined by the state of the economy.

The legacy of white walls also stems from the time when limewash – there were no paints – was applied both to mud and lime plastered buildings, the most common building material, beside stone, in the world until recently. It was cheap, easily mixed (and therefore easily transported), a deterrent to termites and more importantly, it allowed the coral or mud brick walls to breathe – unlike the cement based plasters used nowadays.

Tradition was rooted in engagement with material reality.

White also minimised the visual bulk of those heavy early buildings in Dar. Its use was perhaps derived from, and contributed to, the somnolent notion of white washed tropical cities set against blue skies with palms as extras, a notion that is still cherished by newcomers and 50+ year olds.

Its sanctification in the 20s by the Modern Movement in architecture in Europe was prompted by the discovery of Greek villages and excursions to North African colonies.

Oblivious to the inherent paradox – the Movement advocated breaking tradition by allowing use of free forms and volumes yet restricted the airing of personal preferences in colour – white walls were seen as a reminder of the Movement's efforts to bring light, air and good health to the general populace, a mission that it took on board after town planning legislation was enacted in the late 19th and early 20th century in Europe in an effort to reduce the fatalities of the newly born industrial working class. White was the colour of the Modern Movement's banner.

The dominance and pressure of the ideology of the Modern Movement, part of that whole colonial enterprise, dovetailed with tradition in some, but not all areas of the tropics.

Architects here could not but follow suit, discarding, or not really paying attention to, the traditions of decoration and colour, largely based on vegetable dyes, that could at that time be found in Tanzania and other parts of Africa ranging from Nigeria and Nubia, to South Africa.

During the colonial era, the expression of colour was often seen as being symptomatic of one's class or ethnic origins. Decoration was discouraged – unlike nowadays – but this is another subject.

Bars and small *dukas* could be painted a vivid colour but restraint was expected of the well to do, who, if pushed, would perhaps condescend to grey and brown, on the pretext that these emblematic committee colours would hide the effect of dust storms (see most town halls and courts of the 50s and 60s).

Once upon a time, certain buildings types were painted in accordance with the symbolic nature of colour that was culturally determined, that is, a particular shade represented a certain meaning or a set of meanings.

Nowadays colour, like language and most signs, has divorced itself from accepted meanings (eg bringing democracy to a country can actually mean bombing it). Everything is loose and spinning away, allowing personal inclinations, whims and institutional double-speak to fill the resulting void. Anything goes.

Now that imports are freely allowed and the range of available shades has increased spectacularly, clients ask for colour suggestions.

For architects, making a selection from this seemingly bewildering abundance is extremely painful; but this task is often made easier by clients who ask for:

The colour of their favourite shirt or dress (which is generally worn to a party);

The client committee who can only agree on magnolia (or green);

The colour of a particular building they saw driving past the other day, and

The colour of *that* building they went shopping in during their last visit abroad.

If the client is not forthcoming, many architects approach the selection of colour in a similar manner, that is:

They select a colour of their favourite shirt or blouse, their son's predisposition, the colour of *that* building in the last issue of *that* architectural magazine, etc.

The simplest (and the laziest) way for architects to avoid engagement with the spectrum is to specify a colour that has already been applied to another building, a colour that works, so to speak. It saves time, that precious architectural commodity though lack of self confidence also plays a part.

Imitation and arbitrariness based on personal inclinations guide the choice of colour; meaningful tradition or knowledge of the nature of Dar's light (and shadows) or the technical knowledge regarding a shade's resistance to the unforgiving tropical sun, are rarely considered.

Witness the replication of a particular shade after it has been used in a building. A paint manufacturer once told me that he had a client all the way from Arusha who dragged him to a school in Upanga and said: "That's the colour I want". *That* colour became their best selling shade for the next two years as other developers followed suit.

A current infection is illustrated by the photographs of three buildings in Seaview.

The choice of a colour depends on the volume and mass of the building, the way the light falls on the wall, the varying lighting conditions during the different seasons (rainy season gloom versus blinding morning sun), the function (activities housed in a room or building), the message to be conveyed (bright and cheerful, foreboding, stately, exciting), the articulation of the form of

the building (straight blank wall or broken up), and the sought ambience. One can draw attention to a building or allow it to merge with surrounding structures.

As a building is an element of the cityscape that is perceived and lived in by all citizens, the choice of colour for the external walls should perhaps not be subjected to personal whims or inappropriate imitation. (Obsessions can always be exercised within the confines of a bedroom).

It is a process fraught with trial and error requiring patience; it also requires confidence to take risks, and the ability to exercise restraint in order to avoid degenerating into a medley of garish colours.

Perhaps, when in doubt, one should paint it white. You can't go wrong with it in Dar.

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