

Mustafa Sabbagh, A
Portrait in Black,
2014, projects of
the students of the
Master in Visual
Arts and Fashion,
Iuav University of
Venice.



THE COLOUR OF CHANGE

Maria Luisa Frisa, Mario Lupano

GC In the last century, architecture has become very dark. If white was the ideological colour of modernism, it is black that seems to drive or mark now every ambition of contemporaneity.

1. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: a Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978).

ML The white architecture of Modernism is also the result of an idea of hygienic order connected to the affirmation of clean, electric energy, the source of a new luminosity on the industrial landscape, so different from the black landscape of the early industrial age produced by the energy derived from the combustion of coal. The desire to forget the sooty 19th century black city pushed this idea of white that erased the early 20th century expressionist impulses as well as the search for a coloured new architecture, also rich in gloomy recesses (only the Surrealist avant-garde will carry on a battle for the black and its intrauterine obscurities within Modernism). This theme, already investigated by some critics of Modernism in the late 1970s and '80s, was the subject of conversation I had with Italo Rota when we were working as editors for the *Electa* magazines.

The black city was the compact city of the 19th century – Victorian London (that would return in the 1980s with the revival of Victorian black and dandyism) as well as New York. This rediscovery of black and its complexity has certainly a long history. *Delirious New York*¹ is a quest for the black city, the city of Batman filmed by Tim Burton.

GC They say that Metropolis is New York in the daylight and Gotham City is its night vision.

ML Gotham City is at the core of Koolhaas' book. Much research on the contemporary condition starts with this attraction for the black, for its complexity and contradictions. Now, the preference for black has almost become a fashion. Anyway, even within the other field there are whites that are nothing like Le Corbusier's white (or rather the white created by canonical Modern historiography), for example that of Martin Margiela. A white

with depth, a dirty white that covers everything and takes possession of everything, even its replicas.

MLF It is the strength of absence: Margiela's labels are simply white, with no written information or trademark.

GC A white that appropriates some characteristics of black.

MLF The leading role of black in fashion is a relatively recent achievement. For a long time it was used for uniforms and related to poverty: dirt and worn-out spots were less evident on black. The gaudy silks, and very expensive colours like lapis lazuli, used by nobles symbolized their wealth. Black was the colour of renunciation, of mourning, of the lower classes.

The period when men decided to wear the bourgeois uniform, which is dark anyway, is defined as the 'great renunciation'. The renunciation of a highly decorated, invasive, even feminine style of clothing. In fashion, we also speak of 'Victorian black', a black that covers everything. The death of Albert and Queen Victoria's long mourning helped black extend its dominion on women's clothing.

GC It is a case of a colour becoming almost institutional.

MLF At that moment it was, although it is also and definitely the colour of change. Consider the meaning black acquired in the 1920s with Coco Chanel, a great revolutionary. She started from the uniform of the orphanage where she grew up and got to a very simple dress, defined by a colour that gives an idea of precision and modernity.

The ascent of the Japanese, Yohji Yamamoto and Comme des Garçons, in the late 1970s was one of these moments. When they used a very dark blue together with black, they broke the rules that had forbidden such combination until then. At the beginning, they worked on a non-form, the so-called post-atomic, something that goes beyond the body and does away with the need to follow or improve a silhouette. From then on, black becomes a unifying factor that opens up to the daily use we see today.

GC I was thinking about a similar role of black as the harbinger of change in architecture. Maybe the darkness explored by Le Corbusier after WWII at Marseille, at La Tourette, or the black ceiling of the assembly hall in Chandigarh. However, the blankness of white makes it a better candidate.

MLF Alessandro Michele, Gucci's creative director, recently told me a meaningful episode. His last show was a reaction to the comments on his previous ones: everyone said that they were too black, that things were almost invisible, immersed as they were in darkness. For this reason, he decided to explore the opposite condition, using this very white, violent, almost quivering light.

GC Another attempt to blind.

MLF White and especially black have an ambiguous relationship with innovation and tradition. For instance, a spectre haunts fashion and always comes back: the Little Black Dress (attributed to Coco Chanel, even if she never designed a LBD like the ones we are familiar with now). The LBD is the most difficult thing: it must be very precise and take advantage of the contrast with the body.

ML Indeed. It also happened in the 1980s after the rise of the Japanese mentioned by Maria Luisa before. Black has become a sort of uniform for those who do research in the field of form: in fashion, art, architecture... It is a way to signal a personal presence and, at the same time, to communicate an absence with respect to the field of research; a willingness to investigate it without prejudice. It expresses the belonging to a category of people who design without affirming what is designed.

MLF Again, it represents a renunciation. People working in the fashion field are overexposed to a constant variation of shapes and colours: the choice of a non-colour, of darkness, means creating a distance. In this sense, black acquires an intellectual character, either because people choose it as a uniform for their status or for its effect once worn. The black dress is often used to highlight the face. It says 'Look at my face!' It diverts attention from the body and highlights the 'head'. It is a denial of one part to exalt another. At the same time, black defines, exalts and fragments the body: the neckline on the back, the porthole, the white arm...

ML It cuts the body into pieces and therefore conveys a different reflection on the body itself. The fetishist component of black is very important too. Fashion also deals with sexuality and desire mechanisms. If the Japanese have proposed an intellectualized approach, others have used black in another, opposite direction. The glossy finishing, the latex, come back in this sense, as allusions to the desire mechanisms.



MLF However, at the Golden Globe 2018, Hollywood stars expressed their allegiance to the #MeToo movement by dressing in black: a not too bold form of protest, in my opinion, since black is the most normal colour for an evening dress. What's more, it is notoriously the sexiest colour and all the fashion houses have committed themselves to making fantastic models for the occasion... If they really wanted to protest, a white t-shirt would have had a stronger effect.

GC Is there a relationship between fashion designers' identification with black and the use of this colour in their production?

ML The silhouette, traditionally used to represent the idea of a dress, is a device that can play a decisive role. It is a synthetic way to trace, capture and communicate the volumes.

MLF The silhouette is a feature that has been used in fashion since the beginning of its history and is also used to make comparisons. The so-called 'wheel of time' shows immediately how the sense of volumes has evolved in fashion, for example by increasing or reducing shoulders, breasts and backside. Fashion forces and expands the body.

GC Therefore, the body is always present.

MLF Yes, and black is a colour that needs human skin to give its best.

GC It becomes a background. One of the reasons of the modernist white, in addition to its 'hygienic' aspect, can be its ability to make the volumes visible 'under the light', to offer itself perceptively to the *promenade architecturale*. Therefore, the recent success of black would seem to be the symptom of a greater attention to the surface.

ML When we talk about Modernist white, we must remember the Weissenhof, all whitewashed by the imposition of Mies who had thus mortified the Expressionist imagination of many of the architects invited. In that case, it was a choice aimed at comparison, at the evaluation of outcomes. In fashion design, something similar happens with the use of 'calico', a neutral, ecru fabric that allows to gauge all the constructive aspects, the volumes, and to focus on this specific design feature. I always thought that Mies' white at the Weissenhof had a similar function, of comparison with a precise architectural vision. This curatorial choice made

←
Mustafa Sabbagh, A Portrait in Black, 2014, projects of the students of the Master in Visual Arts and Fashion, Iuav University of Venice.

the Stuttgart exhibition a manifesto, probably beyond his intentions.

Regarding the relationship between volume and surface, there has certainly been a cross pollination between cultures, between East and West. Something that Bernard Rudofsky explored in architecture and that also belongs to a certain Modernism. The Bauhaus didn't like fashion, it loved fabrics. The Western tradition is less respectful of fabrics, because it cuts and reassembles it with the modelling technique. While in the Eastern outfit idea the fabric is preserved, it remains untouched. When they came to Europe, in Paris, the Japanese got closer to our approach and appropriated it in an original way. If we considered the cutting of the fabric as both the instrument and the consequence of an idea of the body and its forms, of their constriction and exaltation, in their hands it becomes something else. They build architectures that are virtually independent of the body, with asymmetrical volumes, protuberances in surprising places that hide, deceive, and work with postures in a completely different way (for example, their models wear flat shoes and stride down the catwalk rather than walk it).

- MLF** The Japanese traditionally have only one dress, the kimono, which changes in the fabrics but not in the forms.
- ML** This trend has also made the fortune of Bonotto, an Italian fabric manufacturer who at some point decided to give up with the continuous variation (of colours, wefts, etc.) so intrinsic to the idea of fashion season. In a sense, he had to because of too many imaginative, even bigger competitors he could not keep up with. Therefore, he specialized in the infinite variations of blacks obtained with different materials and looms. And he managed to start a new, hugely successful story, also thanks to the darkness of the Japanese fashion.
- GC** Probably, they too had to deal with the various meanings and uses of black that were emerging in the Western world.
- ML** Black was the colour of dark romanticism and later of punk. It belongs to some youth cultures related to music that are also very important in defining the contemporary condition. Although these are not usual references for architecture, they are part of a collective feeling: something architecture has to address. It is the black soul of introspection, even of despair, experienced with great pride in places where this music is played: dark caves,

Kieslerian interiors, a prenatal black... An architecture differently based on positive rhetoric, on its 'magnificent and progressive fate', can hardly grasp this dimension.

- MLF** Yes, black is also a romantic colour. While Mario was speaking, the figure of the dandy came to my mind. I thought of Baudelaire and other characters of that historical moment. They wore black as a kind of uniform, which later came back as existentialist, new romantic, neo-Gothic... Recently, this attitude passed from the Japanese to the Belgian school.
- ML** Therefore, it is also necessary to distinguish between black and black, between the dimension of the project and that of consumption, between a black the effects and the performances of which I can control, and a perceived, narrative darkness that relates to a certain type of experience. It's a black that has to do with dirt, waste...
- GC** One of the 'functional' uses of black in architecture plays precisely this role, dealing with the wear and tear of time, the accumulation of filth. Black lasts longer, especially outdoors.
- MLF** When Irene Brin dictated the rules of style in the post-war period, she advised the ladies that could not afford large wardrobes to have at least one grey dress for the afternoon and a black one for the evening. This way, by changing the accessories, they would have coped with all situations. Black (also diluted in grey-scale) is the colour of decency.
- GC** It becomes a sort of blackboard.
- ML** It is always somewhat graphic, whether it is the Oriental tradition, Modernism or punk fanzines.
- GC** One of the aspects that frequently emerges when analysing black is its depth, its ability to react to light in the distant and close vision according to its material characteristics.
- ML** From the point of view of customers, a black suit or dress requires a greater effort of interpretation. In some ways, it aims at educated people. Since the 1990s, many trendy shops have displayed monochromatic collections that often become almost indistinguishable and require a specific interest and knowledge. These shops are set up like galleries.

MLF In the case of fashion shows, the overall impression is very important. There are individual pieces, but they must work in dialogue with each other. Then, communication needs photography, and black can give some problems. This is why I find it more effective to include some form of contrast of tones: in order to give shape to black, because it risks becoming shapeless.

ML However, there are different kinds of audience. There are those who remain on the surface, but we work also and especially for those who can grasp some subtlety. Niche or research brands use other channels; they don't partake in fashion shows and lean, for instance, on word of mouth. And often they are among those who rely more on black.

The highly designed dress may be viewed as an object, it offers itself to a possible understanding even if only by hanging. When worn for a presentation, it becomes a performative act that naturally includes the intellectual investment of its design. And the greater attention and longer vision time required by black are part of this performative interaction. There are those who can grasp the nuances and connect the reasons of the project with its modes of perception or fruition. But everybody can get its aura of mystery, an intentional departure from glamour, a complexity that induces respect: qualities that black never fails to communicate.

GC Are there any episodes or issues you would suggest for a further investigation?

ML I would say the total black of Viktor & Rolf's Fall 2001 show: an all-black collection shown by models with blackened skin. For them it was a turning point that projected them on the international scene (confirming the role of black as a catalyst for change that Maria Luisa described before).

I also think of Diane Pernet, a very well known journalist, photographer, and designer in the 1980s, who later became a protagonist of the fashion film phenomenon. She still wears a sort of mournful uniform, always black, long and with a black Spanish veil. In her case, it is also a way to establish a form of independence, to obtain (and represent) a distance of observation from the world she deals with.

MLF I would insist on the role of darkness in Japanese culture: I think of Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows*² The geishas tinted their teeth black to bring out the glow of the complexion and,

in turn, the whiteness of the face made the black hair stand out. Even the great Diana Vreeland, director of *Vogue*, gave her face a white powder that, in contrast to her very dark hair, became almost a mask, which brings us back in a different way to Japan and the Orient.

2. Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, translated by Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker (New Haven, Conn.: Leete's Island Books, 1977 (1933)).



↑
Mustafa Sabbagh, *A Portrait in Black*, 2014, projects of the students of the Master in Visual Arts and Fashion, Iuav University of Venice.