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BLACKNESS

Eduardo Arroyo

GC Darkness comes out often in your work, even in your book *Create!*,¹ with the margins of its pages painted black.

1. Eduardo Arroyo, *Create!* (New York: Actar, 2014).

EA I would never use the word darkness for black things. The use of 'Blackness' implies a creative and straightforward intention, while darkness is more a result of an energy loss or a natural process with no inherent aim or insight. I believe in transmitting hidden information and in a certain mind 'manipulation' of the user/viewer. Blackness acts as an instant of confrontation between us and what we are not used to face regularly in our cities or in nature. The presence of black is not so common and means a way of bringing attention to objects and actions that try to convey new information to our lives. For a while, it stops us, makes us stare, be aware of what is in front of us and pushes our minds towards the discovery of hidden understanding.

GC Among your buildings, both Villa Levene, in the outskirts of Madrid, and the Wien University Executive Academy, in Vienna, are clad in black. How did you use black to interpret their very different contexts, dimensions, functions...?

EA I could reply as I did to the previous question. This comparison between buildings exemplifies that blackness has nothing to do with context. Nevertheless, some 'qualities' of blackness might address precisely that context (its brightness, shine, metallic or stone appearance, glow, vibration, etc.). The only direct relationship with a certain context that I can think of would be the opposition to the existing. Yet, again, that might be a more mental and abstract connection than a contextual one in terms of form or matter.

GC Both buildings match their black envelopes with the vivid, acid colours employed inside, which emerge especially in the night view. Is it a deliberate ambiguity, an exploration of figure/ground oscillations, or just a straightforward arrangement of their functional organisation?

EA I would go for the figure/ground oscillation option. Even more for a shell/guts concept that arises from the insight that volumes are not prefigured but found, and so they might be a result of the interaction with the exterior world rather than with its own interior. In this sense, the building's guts, with their colourful contrast, somehow convey a certain 'non-relationship' with the outer black shell.

Drawing attention to the user is more an urban than a private act and therefore black is more a 'territorial' colour to me. Once the user/spectator is inside an object, his/her attention to the object takes a backseat and other powerful forces come into place. We could even say that black works in the long distance while colours have a more intimate character

GC Often you use colours with a referential approach. Does black play such a role?

EA Colours are always treated as codes in our work (they are not only colours). They carry information about functions, the way to use the space, where certain spaces end and start, or even properties to manipulate our senses directed to create atmospheres and states of mind in the user. Black produces a deeper and more mystic effect in the spectator than any other colour (including white) and can only be used globally and at a certain distance. The other colours are more apt to a use in proximity. The use of black as a code is useless, its own presence is more powerful than any other information we would want to combine it with.

GC Since black absorbs light, it tends to smooth surfaces. Do you think the present trend of dark architecture could be a side effect of the shift from three-dimensional articulation to the skin underwent by contemporary architecture in the last decades?

EA I find the 'shell' concept very exciting in terms of its relationship with the exterior world and in terms of structure and gravity. It has nothing to do with the realm of envelopes or skins even though the appearance of both might be the same. I believe a skin can be folded anywhere and a certain detail can be used virtually in any occasion. A shell has a different attitude, the whole system works together as an entity, not only in terms of volume and structure but also in terms of a unique concept. There is only one 'shell' suitable for a building that solves all the problems at the same time: gravity, energy, functionality or light acting all together in a single entity. There can be many envelopes to wrap



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a volume and that's why they are easier to use and the reason why pragmatism loves them. They are somehow exchangeable; shells are not.

2. Rem Koolhaas, OMA, Bruce Mau, S, M, L, XL, ed by Jennifer Sigler (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995).

GC Other architects I talked with mentioned the range of qualities black matter can acquire. Do your projects rely on a sort of ideological black or do they exploit its perceptual, tactile attitudes?

EA Through the ages, black has been charged with many meanings, mostly from the realm of evil. Religion has always defended white (although most priests wear black) as the source of good. On the other hand, there have always been mythical Black Knights, Black Pearls, Black Holes, Black Magic, Black Music... things apparently distant and unattainable to most people. That is the real power of black: a powerful use of black deploys an aura of unreachable bravery and independence...

GC You used a metal cladding in Vienna and in other projects, for instance the tower in Durango, while in other cases, such as the Villa Levene, you employed stone. How do you select your black materials?

EA The Durango tower is clad in brushed steel plates protected with transparent varnish and welded to the façade as part of a structure that works with the steel frame. The use of stone for the Levene house was required by municipal regulations. Each situation provides an external or internal factor for the use and subsequent choice of the material that does not come from an aesthetical or taste reason. There is never a stylistic selection. What we choose and manipulate is the brightness, composition and other properties of the materials but that becomes a more sophisticated decision that relies on other architectural tools.

GC By the way, in SMLXL² you are credited for some projects by OMA (Kunsthall in Rotterdam, Euralille and Congrexpo) where black plays a role. Was it a matter of discussion? How did you come up with this choice?

EA I vaguely remember those times but black was always present in the office, in the sketches with big masses, in the inverted plans white on black background for competitions, and in materials like the big concrete beam in the Kunsthall. I remember Rem talking about 'black' charging the normal concrete with significance and a different meaning (but I might have also dreamt it).



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- GC** I find this issue of how we draw very interesting.
- EA** I draw a lot with coloured markers. I feel more comfortable with black markers when drawing three dimensional images or sketches (projections of how reality will be) but when dealing with concepts or ideas that are kind of complex, colour markers are unbeatable.
- GC** Perhaps Le Corbusier said something similar about how he drew... In *Create!* you referred to Goethe's idea of an 'active black'. Would you like to explain this concept?
- EA** Newton had the idea that blackness (darkness in his words) was the absence of light as a merely passive situation, a lack of energy. Goethe introduced the idea that the absence of light gradually leading to darkness gives birth to colours. In this sense, he explained that colours are an active product, a mix of light and darkness.
This means that anything coming out of pure white (light as the mixed spectrum of colours) always includes some darkness (blackness). In a mystic abstraction, it would mean that once we are out of the purity of white, we are already approaching an 'impurity' the main character of which would be black.
- GC** Southern (Mediterranean) architects grow up in a white environment while northern ones look at darker buildings. This sort of local determinism, though less justified nowadays, still has an influence on architects, consciously or not. How do you feel about it? Has your design attitude anything to do with your Atlantic origin?
- EA** It is true that I feel less attached to Mediterranean architecture but to me white has a perverse meaning unrelated to hygienic or climatic reasons. In the past, white might have been used against the sun, etc., but since the 1930s it has reflected a more conceptual and a propaganda agenda. More than that, in Spain it became a true 'style' in the 1980s and 90s (Campo Baeza, Vicens, Tuñon-Mansilla and many others) with more trendy attitudes and a 'quality stamp' for a group of architects than any other consideration. Using white meant belonging to that approach. Black did not have many followers at that time, and its use is still rare. White and colourful architecture is safer and of a more evident use and so it is easier not to fail with it (developers anywhere in the world do not like/want black).

GC However, there are many clues of an attraction to black among architects nowadays.

3. International Klein Blue (IKB) is a deep blue hue first mixed by the French artist Yves Klein.

EA I do not think there is an attraction to black. It is probably the result of the zeitgeist: being tired of everything else. Some architects might think this can be something new or trendy in opposition to colourful, ecological green or white purity in architecture. I think there is nothing else behind the choice of black in most cases. Somebody has fooled architects, and convinced them that dressing in black is 'elegant'.

GC So, where should I look for my black search?

EA I feel the latest steps in the path towards blackness lead to many art researches like Goya's black paintings, Rothko's Chapel paintings before his suicide, Yves Klein's black objects after the IKB³ or the patent for a light-absorbing black pigment Anish Kapoor recently acquired after working on his mirrored sculptures...

I have the feeling (probably reflected in my work) that the exploration into 'black' is a path we start and travel right after the experience with mirrors and reflected light.

Whiteness might approach the essential but leads to emptiness. Blackness apparently leads to nothingness but is full of invisible things.

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