

the colors which do produce something towards inner light (the only thing I know is my formula on some scrap of paper at the building site), I cannot then take samples and try to get a paint shop or a factory to mix them. The discrepancy they produce, even if it is quite tiny, is greater than what is tolerable. The right color is “right” by a fraction of a percent of the amount of pigments that are in them. Most attempts to have a factory or a paint-shop mix the same colors, fail. So I always make the tests myself, paint the colors, and then when I have a sequence of colors that really works in the real places on the building . . . then I go ahead and mix the actual batches of the paints that are used for production, according to the same formulas exactly.

*Gernot* And just tell me once again how this helps to understand the theory as a whole.

*Chris* What you have to understand are two things. First, understand that anyone who says he can do this, at a distance, by choosing color chips from sample books, without actually being there, painting and mixing colors on the building, at full life-size, is simply mistaken. You *must* do it yourself. There is no other way to achieve these results. It is the actual reality of the building which speaks to you. The color — its connection to the eternal

self — is an empirical thing. It is only trial and error, in the real situation, that can achieve it.

Second, you must do it with your own hands. When you tell someone to mix the color, and stand there and watch, you can get close — but you are still too removed to allow the real intuition and knowledge you have to go to work. It is when you mix the paint yourself — mix the color yourself, move the color on a bit of scratch material gradually to where your eye tells you that the wholeness is being fulfilled — then you can achieve the right result.

The completeness of the building, if you finally achieve it, comes from your own presence on the building site and your own reaching this completeness in yourself. The columns on the Martinez building may look white in a photograph (page 619), but actually they are the palest green. It is a beautiful green, that looks almost white . . . in that particular place, with that burnt grass and that sky. Real white was too harsh, too dazzling. It was only at the moment of standing there that it was possible to see that the white needed to be softened, and to find out by experiment that it was just *this* milky green which made the blue harmonious in the land.



## 2 / THE PAINTED KITCHEN

In the 1980s we began to consolidate our CES efforts as general contractors, and we entered a normal phase in which we were able to do building projects easily and successfully.

My love of color blossomed in these years. Color was always an essential part of what I did, but I began to see it, consciously now, as one of the essential ways in which life may be reached. The most extreme case, possibly the most extreme case I ever built, was a kitchen in which the whole room was viewed as a painting, and in which the whole interior wall surface was hand-painted in gouache.

I believe that color, like music, holds the key to life as it appears in art; it is, perhaps, the most

fundamental way in which things in geometry — that means real physical things in the world — make contact with God. It is the blue of the bluebell, the deep green of the sea, the yellow of the crocus, the white of the snowdrop, the awesome darkness of the mountains at night, which reveals their wholeness, and lets us reach God.

As a maker of things, I found that it is through color, above all, that one has the chance — however slight — of reaching this domain.

Once again, unfolding. When the room was getting near to completion, the plaster was on the walls, I began to think that color — more exactly sunlight and joy — needed to fill the walls more completely.



*Fireplace in the finished, hand-painted kitchen. Christopher Alexander, Stephen Duff, Kleoniki Tsotropoulou, 1986.*



*Paper mockups of the San Anselmo kitchen, in gouache on butcher's paper.*

*Two stories may give you some idea about the way people felt about this room. Our client, Dan Potash, a banker, asked me repeatedly while we were doing the color mockup work with him, "Is it really OK to have as much fun as this. . .?"*

With two apprentices (Stephen Duff and Kleoniki Tsotropoulou), I began trying to find out what colors were indicated in this room. We started with tiny sheets of colored paper from Amsterdam Art (our local art supply shop). I had a whole book of hundreds of swatches, each about two inches by five inches, beautiful brilliant colors, every shade.

I went to the room and held up swatches one by one, just holding them in mid-air, trying to see which ones had a feeling of the color completing or intensifying the inner beauty of the room, bringing it to life. I got four colors; it was a spring day. Light green, yellow, a reddish red, a blue with a little turquoise in it. This was already the fundamental process in action. Each time I found a color that worked, that said yes to the question "Is this color enhancing and intensifying the spirit of the room?", I laid it aside.

Once I had a feeling which individual colors were called out by this place, I took the small swatches and laid them over each other, like cards, so that different amounts of the four colors were visible. I nailed them on the wall to look at them. Each different arrangement (50% greenish yellow, 30% green, 10% red, 2% turquoise-blue, and so on), each combination looked different, felt different. When one took the group of colors with their quantities and nailed the overlapping swatches on the wall, you could tell if it completed the light of the room, more or less. So, we did experiments, trying different combinations until it was as good as possible. I still remember the feel of that color, like a spring day.

Then Stephen and Kleoniki began mixing big bowls of gouache to match these colors. They mixed in huge batches and painted large pieces of butcher's paper.

COLOR WHICH UNFOLDS FROM THE CONFIGURATION



*A second, more touching testimonial came from my lead carpenter on the project, Chester Cervellino, who told me when the room was approaching completion: "I wish I could have been born in this room."  
House for Dan Potash and Maureen McCabe, San Anselmo, California.*



*The finished, hand-painted kitchen: benches, table, fireplace seats—we built them all, and then painted them.*

I hung these sheets on the wall, draped them all over the place. As we did this, the room came to life, more or less. We kept pinning up more and more sheets, moving them, taking them down, reducing or enlarging the area of a given color until the whole interior surface of the room had life, as much as we could get of it.

Towards the end I cut little blue dolphin-whale figures out and pinned them around the wall near the ceiling.

The whole process, which lasted perhaps a week or two, was a process of finding that arrangement of colors which was most structure-preserving in that place. It was a true unfolding, we had no constraint, only perhaps fear to fight against.

The whole interior wall surface was first mocked-up in paper painted in gouache. Once

the room worked and the painting was complete, we started all over again on the actual wall surfaces themselves. The gouache color was then gradually transferred in real gouache, and repainted from scratch on the actual plaster surface, and on a gesso-prepared surface wherever there was wood.

Finally, of course, we varnished the surface to make it permanent. I had used this technique a number of times on furniture I made—painted it with gouache, over gesso, and then varnished it. This was the first time I had ever done it for a whole room.

The effect of the unfolded, structure-preserving color and ornament was dazzling, emotionally dazzling. The fundamental process works. Ornament and color are part of what is needed to complete a room.