



3 / PAINT AND COLOR MATERIALS

To get the color right in a building, even the paint *materials* must be chosen correctly.

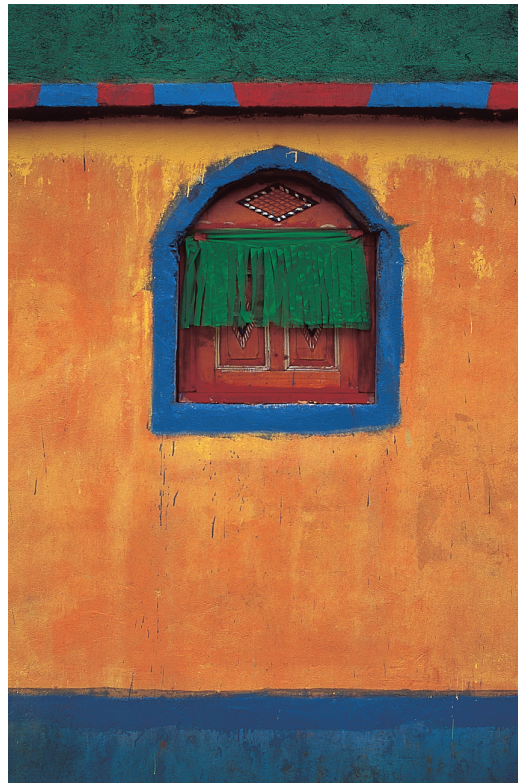
The present-day norm for paint is this: You go to the paint store with a sample of the color you want. The people in the store match it by mixing drops of dye with a white base paint. Then you put these premixed paints on the building. There are two problems. First, the actual paints themselves that you can buy commercially today have terrible colors. Second, you don't (and cannot) know what colors you need until you are in the middle of the work, so premixed colors don't work anyway.

The first problem (quality of color) is fairly easy to solve. Present day commercial paint uses a white base mixed with tints. This produces pastel shades, but cannot get saturated colors except with difficulty. To get pure colors, you have to use *pigments*, not tints. In the United States, for exterior use I often mix pure pigments or concrete pigments in a lime or cement base, myself. This way you can get it as saturated as you want. In any case, the color must be of a type which you can mix yourself and which uses pigments, not dyes. We sometimes use automobile enamels, which have very good pigments, and do not suffer from the pasty quality of commercial house paint for interiors. I have also used artist's gouache or oils, painted directly on a gesso base. Here the color is as subtle as you want. In Austria, in the Linz Café, I used something unknown in the United States called *dispersionsfarbe*, a pigment-based, vinyl-based paint. Again the pigments and saturations were excellent. I got colors by mixing different paints, not by tinting a white base.

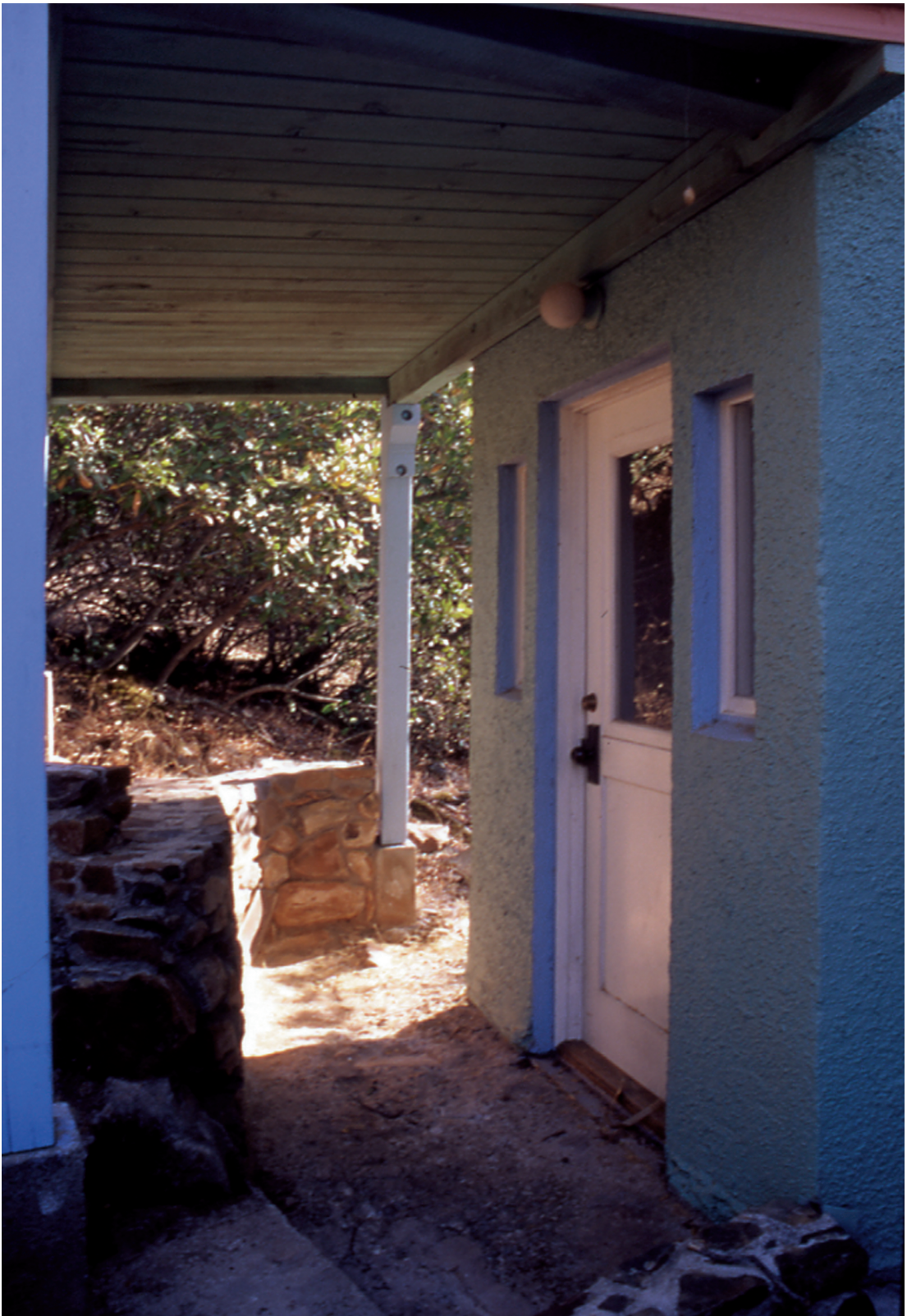
The second problem (knowing the color that is needed) is more serious. It lies in the fact that you *must* have direct control over the colors while you are painting in a room, to get inner light there. *This means you cannot use swatches, then have the color mixed in a store to match the swatches (the conventional commercial paint-store process), and then*

expect to get good results in the room, or on the surface you are coloring. Usually I do literally dozens of experiments mixing my own colors, and experimenting with the actual colors in the real place, before knowing exactly which ones will be just right. Once you find these colors, you must reproduce them with the exact formula you used in the first place. You can't give a sample to someone else afterwards to match. More important, you sometimes need to vary colors as you go, when you see that a color needs a lighter or darker shade, or a slight change of hue to make it whole.

It is therefore absolutely necessary to use a type of color which allows you to do experiments, test colors, change colors, experiment again and again with gradually changing formu-



Painted house, Guatemala. The pigment and hand-made character of the lime wash are clearly visible in the intense hues that were achieved.



Luminosity of color, appearing by judgment. Hand-painted entrance, Berryessa house, Christopher Alexander



The tile shop in our offices and workshop complex in Martinez, 1989

as, and then finally, once you hit what you need, have control of mixing the final colors. Again, the pigment mixing with the pigment-based paint is OK — provided that you mix your own. Lime or cement based washes, with pigment mixed in, are OK. On furniture I use gouache on gesso. When it is finally OK, I varnish it with clear, glossy spar varnish. This gives you almost complete control.

Terrazzo is all right, too. Marble dust and chips mixed with pigments provides permanent color in a building. We have also used lime plaster in which pigments are mixed directly in the

same way. Tile glazes are all right, too — provided that you glaze your own tiles. Once again, you can't get it right if you buy pre-glazed tiles. We keep our own tile workshop, and glaze the materials we need for the building.

It is surprising to realize that in the present day even something as simple as painting materials are inadequate to support true unfolding well. The techniques and materials that are used by 95% of building industry painters today cannot attain the right color quality because they just do not allow the gradual fine-tuning of the colors to get them exactly right.



4 / THE SURPRISING NATURE OF THE COLOR THAT UNFOLDS

In the search for color, when you really pay attention and try to find out what produces inner light, step by step, the result is often very surprising.

I will give three examples. In two of them, I started out expecting to find blue, but it turned out that something else — in both cases unexpected — was the right color.

The first happened during construction of André Sala's house. On the second floor there is

a children's room with two alcoves for the children. From the beginning, André had been telling me how he had been wanting to paint the room a beautiful light blue. He described it to me — a soft, milky blue, almost transparent, that he had once seen in a house in France.

I was worried. It sounded beautiful, but it had nothing to do with *this* room, in *this* house. I had lunch with André and told him that I