

## **STILLED IN THE CITY BY COLOURED LIGHT**

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### **Abstract**

Does coloured light still have the power to silence us? In the current urban world of social media and 30-second sound bites, do we have any retreats from our “uba-paced” lifestyle? Is there time and are there places where we can pause and take stock? Church architecture of the medieval period made use of coloured, (stained), glass helped to create an atmosphere that religion claimed as appropriate to worship. With the decline of religion what is to be done with such spaces? 19.03.2011 would have marked the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Futuna Chapel, (in Wellington city’s suburb: Karori), New Zealand. Events however overtook the chapel, in 2000 the Fellowship of Brothers who had commissioned it, deconsecrated the chapel due to a falling membership. They sold the whole site to developers, and Futuna now finds itself surrounded by 90 housing units. “The Friends of Futuna Charitable Trust” has since purchased Futuna and is currently raising funds to restore the building. However, the question remains: what use can a such restored building be put to, given that it is no longer a religious space? This paper explores the ideas of writers such as Maitland who “loves Silence;” Ehm and Löfgren who adore “doing nothing;” together with artists such as Turrell who works directly with light; colourist architects such as Barragan who sometimes detailed “paint on glass,” amongst others in an attempt to explore how coloured light might activate “being still” for a time in the city.

### **Keywords**

Coloured Light, Futuna Chapel, Silence

### **Introduction**

Today we like to recycle, reuse, and, (in this case), reinvent, to stretch our limited resources. It would be easy to treat a space regardless of its past history as nothing more than a mere shelter, by renovating and occupying it. A greater challenge would be to honour a building’s history and purpose in a meaningful and ongoing way. It is the intention of this paper to discuss and show how this could be done. This paper’s case study is The Futuna Chapel, at 62 Friend Street, in Karori, Wellington, New Zealand. It was commissioned by the Brothers of the Society of Mary to commemorate “the martyrdom of St Peter Chanel on the French Polynesian Island of Futuna, in the Pacific, (28 April 1841),” (Walden: 1987, p.15). The Chapel was designed by the New Zealand Maori Architect: John Scott. The “glass” windows were designed by artist: Jim Allen. Consecrated and opened on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March 1961, this Chapel functioned as a religious retreat until it was “deconsecrated around the time the Brothers sold to the developer in 1999,” (Bevin: 2010). The Futuna Chapel may not be that well known beyond Australasia, but is highly revered within local architectural circles, receiving a NZIA, (New Zealand Institute of Architects), Gold Medal in 1968, and also a NZIA 25 Year Award in 1986 which confirms its enduring merit within the community.

This paper's idea is to investigate some of the central themes of the chapel: the coloured light and the stillness of such a sacred space. To show through precedence, via writings of various authors, artists and architects how this deconsecrated chapel could be used as a "coloured light-retreat." It would be a place and space for people regardless of their beliefs or non-beliefs, to savour the delights of coloured light for its own sake.

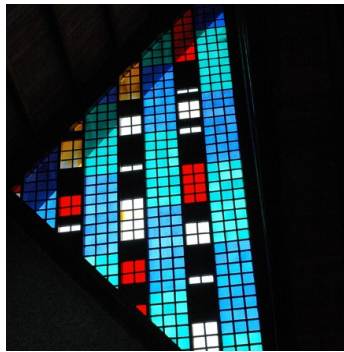


Fig. 1. Coloured Light: Futuna

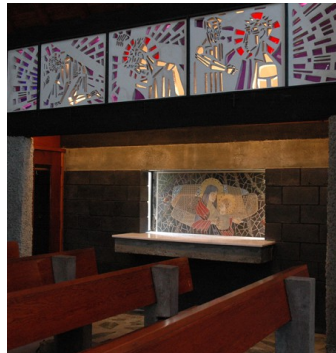


Fig. 2. Stations of the Cross: Futuna



Fig. 3. Bench seating, (2010): Futuna

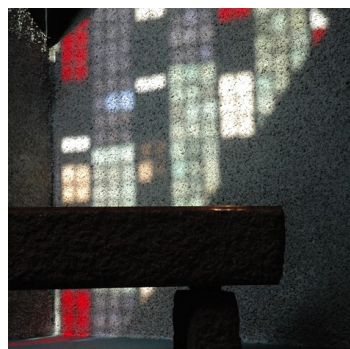


Fig. 5. Coloured Light: Futuna

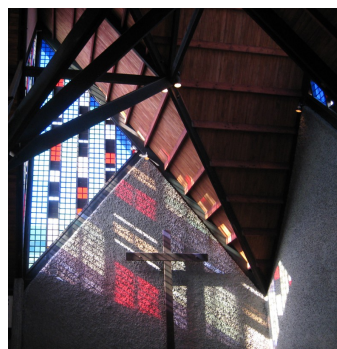


Fig. 4. Coloured Light: Futuna



Fig. 6. Coloured Light: Futuna

## Precedence

The interest in natural light, and allowing lots of it into built interiors, was one of the foundations of Modern Architecture. The use of clear float glass with its transparency, as a way of linking the inside to the outside epitomised what a "modern" space was.

But what of coloured light?

In Chapter 106 of *Glasarchitektur* by Paul Scheerbart, (first published in 1914), exclaims: "More coloured light!...We must not strive to increase the intensity of light – today it is already too strong and no longer endurable. But gentler light is worth striving for. Not more light! – 'more coloured light!' must be the watchword," (Scheerbart: 1972, p. 72).

These words could still apply today where too much glass has made for mundane spaces, (such as glass office buildings), which tend to overheat, (due to the lack of shading), and often rely on nature to be viewed as though a precious jewel like pavilion in a field.

"Scheerbart [also] published *Der Lichtklub von Batavia: Eine damen-Novelle* (*The Light Club of Batavia: A Ladies Novelle*) in 1912. It is a little known text; the tale is rarely included in bibliographies of Scheerbart's collected works," (McElheny: 2010, p. 3). The gist of this short tale is about a proposal by a patroness who wants to build a spa at the bottom of a mineshaft, not for bathing in water but for bathing in light! Many of

Scheerbart's ideas related to glass from 1914 have been correctly forecast such as: "double walls of glass," which we now know as double-glazing, and "glass fibres," which became fibreglass. Maybe his "bathing in light" could be another? So why not have "more coloured light?"

Looking back at the history of coloured light, one associates the idea with stained glass in windows of religious chapels, churches and cathedrals. On a visit to Saint-Chapelle in Paris, (14.09.1988), the author has stood back and watched peoples' reactions to the blaze of coloured light that literally hits the visitor, as they came up the tight curving staircase, (from the Chapelle Basse below), into the Chapelle Haute. Their mouths dropped open in awe, their breath seemed taken away, at the experiencing of the overwhelming affect of the Chapel's coloured light flooding in over them. Often such stained glass is overlaid with religious iconography. However, it could be argued that these literal images, (especially in cathedrals), are often too far away to be seen clearly by the naked eye to put the effect down to recognition of religious motifs.

So it seems, there is some sort of experiential phenomena at play. The direct "assault" on our sense of sight triggers a reaction in our brains to such coloured light, seemingly independent of religious belief. The resulting "coloured light splashes" seem to affect us in a primal or fundamental way.

One person who experimented with coloured light was Mexican artist: Jesus "Chucho" Reyes Ferreira, (1880-1977); he built himself a "yellow" living room where "the glass was painted yellow so that the room is washed with yellow light, giving the effect of sunshine. [This] idea...resurfaced later in the houses of [Luis] Barragan," (Street-Porter, 1989, 144). Such an example being: the hallway of the Gilardi House, (1978), which has the frosted glass paned slots painted with yellow pointillist paint splodges, resulting in a "spacelight." And, as Saito describes the experience:

"[the light], dyes the white wall and ceiling...so that passing through it becomes a surrealistic dream-walk... the yellow corridor, the very air of which is tinged with particles of golden light, functions as a type of space converter. As you walk down this long tunnel through the shower of golden light, you can feel your mood change. No architect has explored the effect of colour on space and the human psyche to the extent that Barragan has." (Saito: 2002, pp. 195-197 and 31).

Another explorer of coloured light as pure form, is the artist James Turrell, who says: "I make spaces that apprehend light for our perception, and in some way gather it, or seem to hold it. So in that way it's a little like Plato's cave. We sit in the cave with our backs to reality, looking at the reflection of reality on the cave wall," (Turrell: 2006, pp. 26-27). In his so-called "Skyspaces," Turrell merely builds a seat for the viewer, as though inviting the viewer to stop, to be seated for a while, and let the overhead phenomena wash over the viewer. (As noted by the author during my visit to the "Skyspace," at the De Young Museum, San Francisco, (31.05.2010)). Furthermore, within Turrell's: Live Oak Friends Meeting House in Houston, Texas, (2000), which was commissioned by the local Quakers, there are bench like seats gathered around and under the "Skywindow," proffering the same invitation to pause and reflect on the sky's, coloured, light.

By way of a living example of how a space can be transformed just by light: the author has over the years frequented Sir John's Soane's own house, (now a museum of itself), at Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, however on a recent evening tour, (22 November 2011), the affect is rather magical due to the whole house being lit by candles alone, the silence and whispered voices of the visitors, (who had queued for hours outside), was at marked contrast of a daytime visit with tourists chattering as they shuffle through the complex of tiny rooms. Quakers are renowned for their "meeting[s] in which any words emerge from silence." (Maitland: 2009, p. 141). Sara Maitland, in her book entitled: *A Book of Silence*, describes the phenomena associated with her various deliberate immersions into different "silent" environs, and she says: "I am convinced that as a whole society we are losing something precious in our increasingly silence-avoiding culture and that somehow, whatever this silence might be, it needs holding, nourishing and unpacking," (Maitland: 2009, p. 32). Contrast this with the overloading of "visual noise" we put up with our daily contact within various cyber-worlds, which we increasingly have to inhabit, (for example, on-line shopping and on-line social networking). Busch argues that in fact we need real experiences that revolve around tactility to counter those other virtual

activities in equal and opposite measure, to partake in such “tangible experiences...[it is essential to] demand we use our abilities to see, smell, hold and touch in a real and visceral way[s],” (Busch: 2004, p. 4). One of the few non-ecumenical “chapels” built is The Rothko Chapel, in Houston, Texas, (1971), which displays 14No. of Mark Rothko’s paintings mounted around the walls of the octagonal plan. (NB. the author found himself willingly staying for a half day during a visit on 24.07.1986). Despite varying opinions of its success, the “chapel” continues to draw people as a place of tranquillity. A recent check of the YELP website, (which claims: “real people, real reviews”), shows 87 reviews, of which: 33No. were 5-star rated, and 20No. were 4-star rated. Although this is hardly scientific research it however makes the point. One woman, Cara D. from Houston, commenting: “It is a place to mediate, to think, to pray, to use however you wish – so long as you are not disturbing other dwellers, of course...I visited here with a friend from Chicago...and once we were outside she exclaimed: ‘If only every city could have a place like this.’” (YELP: 2013).

## Discussion

The above texts seem to support this paper’s main proposal: “Why not use this deconsecrated chapel, Futuna, as a “coloured light-retreat?” A refuge that can be enjoyed for its peacefulness, within a busy suburb. A space open during sunlight hours, for all-comers. A space to take rest in silence and watch the coloured light fall within the “lightspace”. Compare this to what has happened to various Churches and chapels within New Zealand, some have been reused as houses or bingo halls. These reinventions may be practical but often show respect little of the original “being” of the building.

A question might be posed: “Are images essential to our wellbeing?” If one considers the 29 coloured photographic images of Gavin Woodward’s in Waldren’s 1987 book, these astounding images leave the reader in no doubt as to the palpable atmosphere that light can generate within what was once a small chapel. Author: Tim Parks in his book *Teach us to sit Still* interestingly notes, “over the period when I wasn’t well...I found myself spending more and more time looking at images...images of any kind...seemed to offer relief from the language driven anxieties inside my head,” (Parks: 2010, p. vii). The inference being: could a space activated by natural light provide such images that evoke some stillness, (in our minds), to those requiring a refuge from our daily worries, stresses and strains?

In the book *The Secret World of Doing Nothing*, (2010), its authors: Ehm and Löfgren, discuss at great length the rather delicious aspect of our lives where we supposedly are “doing nothing” (Ehm and Löfgren: 2010, p. 6). They discuss in detail what we actually do when we are “waiting,” the nuances of “routine,” and our “daydreamings,” all which they consider are essential for serious study in comparison to those writings related to “doing something,” (work, play, etc). The authors argue that such times of “doing nothing” are of full significance to each individual and are of great importance to our overall wellbeing.

To give some idea of the powerful affect the coloured light had in the original chapel:

“Jim Allen described this event vividly: ‘You can imagine the very first time we saw it – I think it was John that saw it first. He came running in – as we were in another building – come on, come on, and have a look at this. We all ran across to the chapel – the yellow and blood-red light was on the wall – the most amazing thing, because for the next hour there were people standing there in silence – just watching the light... And it was the first time it had been seen’,” (Walden: 1987, p. 122).

And still more recently: the author attended a Futuna fundraising lecture, (11.08.2010, in Auckland, New Zealand), presented by Architect: Nick Bevin, (current chair of the “The Friends of Futuna Charitable Trust”). Before getting to the digital slides of the coloured light, (which were actually Gavin Woodward’s beautiful images), Nick rather poignantly told the audience, “he was going to stop talking, while he showed the next images,” The silence was palpable, as about 50 design professionals stood stock still, (no sipping of wine or chatter), while the coloured light images, (similar to figures 1 to 6, below), worked their magic.



In terms of the detail of how the coloured light is “generated” with Futuna, the coloured light windows have many squares that are actually made of perspex, set into black painted aluminium “H” sections for support, (as opposed to stained glass with lead canes). The creator of this system, artist: Jim Allen was “interested in a floating atmosphere of colour...[and he was looking for a way that] the hue of the colour could be intensified...he learned that if he isolated colour by embedding it in black, the colour became far more intense. He also learned the value of having small panes of clear [perspex] which could focus light and make it flash, like sun reflecting off a car window,” (Walden: 1987, pp. 86-87).

This gives the amazing coloured light splashes that rain down within the “retreat.” These perspex squares are also devoid of religious iconographic images, they are made up of abstract groupings of primary colours: red, blue and yellow squares, which sometimes combine to create secondary colours of purples, greens, and oranges. These colours can be savoured in their own right, with no religious overtones, just colour, (e.g Fig.1). The original bench seating, has been recently reinstated without the kneelers, thus removing the cue to worship and further freeing the space’s use, (e.g Fig.3), encouraging simply sitting and being “in the moment”.

The Stations of the Cross, which were also done by Jim Allen, were carved out of cast plaster and backlit by perspex covered electric lights. Why couldn’t switching the back-lights off, or installing a dimmer device downplay such icons? (e.g Fig.2).

For approximately 12 years, (the period 2000-2012), Jim Allen’s original carved timber Crucifixion went missing from the chapel, (the crown of thorns and the crucifixion “nails” remain missing at the time of writing). Although the “Christ’s” return has been hailed as a triumph of community awareness and police perseverance, and indeed this Christ figure was justly central to the original space when it was a chapel. The question remains: “in losing this icon did the space really lose something?” This is contentious of course with differing opinions in relation to religious belief. But, has the sun failed to rise and set each day, (since the Crucifixion’s theft), and failed to activate the space with coloured light? I think not.

While there is a lot of scepticism about the worth of colour therapy, (also known as Chromotherapy), an example might be: a blue room may initially cause feelings of calm, but the affect soon dissipates after a short period of time. In this case-study, that is all that is being asked for: a space where one could go for a small period of time, to retreat into a space of coloured light, before leaving to go back into our noisy full lives.

This notion of the change of use of a building is common enough with buildings over time, buildings outgrow their original intended purpose, but with spiritual buildings this is always a more delicate situation. The reader will no doubt have seen churches converted into houses and so forth. The sacred building has to be deconsecrated before the new use can be put into place. Opinions may vary on the validity of this but by way of example, some illustrious cousins to Futuna are: Ronchamp, La Tourette and church of Saint-Pierre at Firminy, (all by Le Corbusier),

“Each has led a difficult life... Ronchamp remains a pilgrimage chapel, whose serenity returns very early and late in the day, but at other times can be overrun with tourists... La Tourette is still occupied by a small number of Dominican monks, but the monastery is otherwise filled with overnight visitors, primarily architects...Saint-Pierre is more problematic, for it was abandoned by the church decades ago and had to be completed with state funding, so that, while it has been consecrated and is periodically used for Sunday mass, it generally functions as a venue for tourism and cultural activities.” (Plummer: 2013, p. xii).

So why not overlay another use for such a jewel like space? With the new purpose that is close to the original, that respects its original essence, better than turning the chapel into a storage shed for the much too close housing development adjacent!

Futuna could be just one “coloured light-retreat” for any and every person to stop by at this little gem of a building, tucked away in suburban Wellington, and merely sit and be mesmerized into silence by the coloured light – a “retreat into coloured light.”

Again quoting Henry Plummer:

“The contemporary artist James Turrell has said: ‘Light is not so much something that reveals, as it is itself the revelation.’ Attention to light itself, and not to the object it illuminates, is the point. In a similar way, by providing the time to live with light to watch its movement and feel its presence, to think about it and see into it, the twentieth-century work of “phenomenal architecture” as never before to evoke moods and feelings we feel inside ourselves – helping modern man escape the loneliness of his social system, and fill the void left by a ‘disappearance’ of God,” (Plummer: 2003, p. 28).

## Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the support of the current Chair, (Nick Bevin), of The Friends of Futuna Charitable Trust, in allowing the author access to photograph Futuna.

I am also indebted to Roger Thackery and Ross de Rouffignac who kindly accepted the task of taking many photos of Futuna on my behalf.

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## Biography

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