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Colin McCahon's House and its Colours: A Glimpse of New Zealand Beyond its Colonial Past

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Abstract

Colin McCahon's Titirangi Kauri-forest nestled house was not only a tiny and humble house for his wife and 4 children for the years of 1953-60, but it was the birthplace of some beautiful paintings and (what has turned out to be) culturally important images for New Zealand emerging from its colonial past. This period of Colin's work was totally focussed on producing warm colourful images, as opposed to the Black paintings with White lettering of his later years. The Northland panels, 1958, is an important painting of that period, made up of eight vertical unframed canvas panels. They evoke a spirit of place that seemingly many Kiwis can easily relate to. The colours of these panels seem to also adorn the surfaces of the house. This paper unpacks the colours of his house, which still stands today. The colour palette collection, surveyed and analysed through a field study, has been compared with colour theories and relevant palettes available at that time. The final aim of the paper is to extend our knowledge on this important artefact for New Zealand's culture and help with its future conservation.

Keywords: *New Zealand, Art, Architecture, Colour palette, Colour conservation*

Introduction

One hypothesis of this piece of research came from a casual conversation: that the paint used in the iconic *Northland panels*, 1958, was house paint. An idea that has stuck for many years stemmed from a personal conversation with Landscape Architect Rod Barnett: about where might Designers' find clues and cues for their Designs? Rod replied, 'the answers are often close at hand,' (Rennie, 2000). It seemed possible given that the McCahon family was very poor, making a living off art alone in New Zealand was (and still is) very risky, especially if the artist had to support a family. Julian should know, his artist father: Bruce Rennie, (Thomas, 2018), had to support his wife and three children with income gained solely from teaching Art at the local Secondary School, (often gifting his drawings and pen & ink works away to friends).

Colin McCahon and his family lived at the 67 Otitori Bay Road, French Bay house between 1953 and 1960. The family's poverty is clearly expressed by the small

bedrooms given over to the children whilst the parents slept in bunks under the house in a cave-like space exposed directly to the damp Kauri bush and wet weather. Yet the joyous *Northland Panels*, 1958, were “painted on the sun deck at Titirangi all on one Sunday afternoon and corrected for weeks afterwards” (Brown, p.58, 2010). The same deck is used for parties with friends and students. This setting of house in the bush: ying to yang, colour of nature/material poverty, family nest/image-making, making do/timeless nuances brought forth a unique and primal expression of local colours that have become primal road makers for visually portraying this unique milieu. The *Northland Panels* painted colours and even the titles of the eight panels evoke a spirit of place, (viz. reading the artwork from left to right): *Black and White*; *Red Clay Landscape*; *Manuka and Red Clay Landscape*; *Rain*; *A Landscape with too few lovers*; *Tui*; *Landscape with White Road*; *It can be dark here.*” (*Te Papa Tongarewa*: “McCahon’s Northland Panels”). The colours of those paintings are reflected in the surfaces of his humble house which, at the same time, seem to embrace the colours of the surrounding environment. Refer for example, to the third panel (from the left-hand side): *Manuka and Red Clay Landscape*.

The house interior with its pull-out drawers and cupboard doors that open to reveal McCahon histories (designed by Architect Rick Pearson), to expose glimpses of joyous colour, and other ‘built-in’ colour creates (during a Covid-19 ravaged world) a haptically child-like magical atmosphere and a time-warp back to the 1950’s. The goal is to understand how the Artist transferred his colour palette (and the colours of local nature) into the design of the house, and test whether he used those same house paints in his painted canvases, blending his daily life with the vividness of his art.

Research Methodology

The research was carried out in two directions following a methodology based on literature review and a field study using a NCS Colourpin SE tool. The literature review, based on resources available in Wellington where the *Northland Panels*, 1958, are held at *Te Papa Tongarewa*, (Museum of New Zealand). Along with various texts and online resources helped galvanize the research in its two-pronged approach: namely to establish what the colour palette of the house was. And to try and find out whether those same paints were used in the production of the *Northland Panels* themselves. Relevant colour theories, schemes and artist paint usage of that time were also considered in comparison.

It is important to specify that we based our research on the current surface colours of the house, as it is not possible to capture the original colours due to the intervening modifications that have occurred over the years. However, some information was helpful from Burgess and Mace’s Heritage report (2003) which was developed for the recent house conservation project.

To establish the colour palette of the house a field study was carried out. Using the “Natural Colour System (NCS)” which is the colour model most used by professionals in this field. Surface colours were detected by pressing the NCS Colourpin SE tool directly against each surface and reading the possible matches on the Colourpin software on an adjacent smartphone. The colours have been tabulated via the NCS 1950 chart and the relative RGB values, (refer below).

To carry out a comparison with Le Corbusier’s colour palette we considered the NCS codes already identified by Juan Serra and others (2016). In relation to Frank Lloyd Wright’s palette, we converted the colours printed in Wright’s Complete Works 1943-1959 (Brooks Pfeiffer and G. ssel, 2009) using the same NCS Colourpin SE tool.

Given that *Te Papa* would not allow the physical touching of any artwork within its collection, (by such a Coloupin device), we had to research various texts and videos to back up our house paint for artwork hypothesis.

Results

The colour palettes of McCahon house are represented in Figures 1 and 2 below. Figure 1 shows the surveyed exterior colours superimposed upon Colin’s very own 1955 drawings for an application for a Building Consent. Figure 2 covers the colours of the indoor spaces.

Elevations

Three elevations of the house are painted in ‘ferric oxide’ red (5040-Y80R) and only the south-west elevation is a darker grey (8005-G50Y). The cladding of the basement is painted in black (9000-N). Window frames are white (0804-Y10R), and windowsills are black (9000-N). Gutters are of galvanized metal and the metal roofing is a light grey, as well as the upper part of the chimney. The colour that stands out with great clarity is the red cladding.

Floors

Timber floors are generally dark brown (e.g., living rooms 7010-Y70R) while the entry, kitchen and dining room are covered with a sand-coloured linoleum. The outdoor deck is covered with a dark grey tar-type membrane.

Indoor spaces: ground floor

Walls and ceilings are generally whitish (0502-Y) with a greyish skirting (3005-Y50R). The part that stands out the most are the kitchen walls, storage, and shelves which are all painted in yellowish green (3030-G40Y). The ceiling battens and cornice are closer to a natural green (5020-G10Y).

Indoor spaces: basement

Ceiling, structure, beds, and shelves of the open bedroom are characterized by a colour similar to the 'ferric oxide' red cladding, but less vivid (e.g., 4020-Y70R). The room that stands out is the bathroom which was built by McCahon. Walls and ceilings are organized in a Mondrian-like scheme with black cover battens (between sheet linings) frame, and panels of different colours: 5010-B30G grey, 5030-R red, 6020-G90Y brown, 7010-B70G blue-green, etc.



Figure 1. Colour palette of the exteriors and ground floorings (A. Premier).

GROUND FLOOR											
ROOM	NCS 1950	RGB	ELEMENT	ROOM	NCS 1950	RGB	ELEMENT	ROOM	NCS 1950	RGB	ELEMENT
ENTRY	S 0505-Y20R	247, 237, 212	CEILING	DINING/WARDROBE	S 2020-Y20R	213, 179, 115	CEILING	LIVING ROOM 2	S 5020-Y40R	147, 107, 79	BENCH
	S 5020-G10Y	87, 119, 90	CEILING BATTENS/CORNICE		S 6030-Y10R	113, 84, 37	WALL (MURAL)		S 3060-Y20R	188, 125, 31	DOOR (LADDER)
	S 3030-G40Y	140, 159, 108	WALL/STORAGE/SHELVES		S 0502-Y	246, 240, 228	WALL (WHITE)		S 0505-Y20R	247, 237, 212	FURNITURE/WINDOW FRAME
	S 2010-Y	203, 192, 162	DOOR FRAME		S 0603-Y20R	241, 234, 218	WALL (WARDROBE)		S 5020-Y90R	147, 107, 86	WINDOWSILL
	S 0904-Y10R	239, 231, 214	DOOR PANEL		LIVING ROOM 1	S 0505-Y10R	246, 237, 215		CEILING	BEDROOM	S 3030-Y20R
KITCHEN	S 0502-Y	246, 240, 228	WALL	S 0502-Y		246, 240, 228	WALL	S 2020-Y10R	207, 184, 138		WALL
	S 0505-Y	247, 240, 218	WINDOW FRAME	S 3005-Y50R		181, 165, 153	SKIRTING	S 3030-Y20R	187, 147, 93		WINDOW FRAME (OPENABLE)
	S 2030-Y10R	213, 179, 115	BENCHTOP	S 4030-Y30R		173, 123, 78	FIREPLACE CORNICE	S 0804-Y10R	239, 231, 214		WINDOW FRAME
BASEMENT											
ROOM	NCS 1950	RGB	ELEMENT	ROOM	NCS 1950	RGB	ELEMENT	ROOM	NCS 1950	RGB	ELEMENT
OPEN BEDROOM	S 5030-Y80R	136, 78, 67	CEILING/STRUCTURE	BATHROOM	S 5010-B30G	107, 125, 127	CEILING (GREY)	BATHROOM	S 5020-Y40R	147, 107, 79	WINDOW FRAME (BATHROOM)
	S 2002-Y	199, 195, 187	WALL		S 0603-Y20R	241, 234, 218	CEILING (WHITE)		S 5040-R80B	21, 65, 117	CEILING (SHOWER)
	S 4020-Y70R	166, 121, 106	BED/SHELVES		S 2020-Y20R	214, 182, 137	CEILING (BROWN)		S 0603-Y20R	241, 234, 218	WALL (SHOWER)
	S 0804-Y30R	238, 228, 211	WINDOW FRAME		S 5030-R	126, 67, 71	WALL (RED)		S 3030-G40Y	140, 159, 108	WINDOW FRAME (SHOWER)
	S 3010-Y30R	187, 164, 139	FLOOR		S 0505-Y10R	246, 237, 215	WALL (WHITE)		LADDER	S 5010-Y10R	145, 129, 105
BATHROOM	S 5020-Y30R	145, 109, 75	SINK	S 5010-B10G	107, 125, 131	WALL (GREY)	S 8005-Y80R	69, 53, 49		STEPS	
	S 5030-Y90R	133, 75, 71	FLOOR	S 6020-G90Y	111, 98, 63	WALL (BROWN)	S 1510-Y20R	224, 204, 172		WALL (GROUND FLOOR)	
	S 9000-N	26, 25, 26	WALL FRAME	S 7010-B70G	59, 82, 80	WALL (GREEN)					

Figure 2. Colour palette of the interiors (A. Premier).

McCahon painted the *Northland panels* after a 1958 United States trip “viewing the work of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Willem de Kooning. Their work inspired him to paint at larger scale and in a more expressionist style.” (*Te Papa Tongarewa: "Northland Panels"*). This included larger scale paint brushes to apply the paint to canvases.

Researching the possible use of at-hand materials to complete the artistic *Northland panel* canvases: Melanie Carlisle says on a *Te Papa* video: “...people often think conservators only work on old paintings, 100 years or more...Colin McCahon used a particular paint to complete this painting, it was a commercial house paint...” (*Te Papa Tongarewa: "Tales from Te Papa Episode 64: Painter's Nightmare"*).

Comparison with relevant architectural colour palettes (1931-1959)

At that time a few architectural colour palettes were available. Two of the most relevant ones were Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright.

Le Corbusier developed the Colour Keyboards in 1931 for the company Salubra, with 43 shades, and the Salubra collection in 1959 with 20, for a total of 63 shades. The comparison between the NCS codes of the Colin McCahon house palette and the NCS codes of Salubra 1931 has shown that earthy colours – in particular Sienna 6020-Y80R and 4040-Y70R – are somewhat similar to the colour of the external cladding (5040-Y80R) and of the chimney (4020-Y70R). Similarities have been found in the yellowish landscape-green (1030-G40Y) and the colour of the kitchen (3030-G40Y), with slightly different values of blackness and chromaticity. The ultramarine blue (3050-R80B) is also close (but lighter) to the one used by McCahon for the ceiling of the shower (5040-R80B). However, if we observe the

work of Le Corbusier, like the Maison La Roche-Jeanneret in Paris (1923-25) or the Unité d'Habitation in Berlin (1959), we can easily infer that colour-combinations are very different from McCahon's approach.

Wright's colour palette was created for Martin-Senour Paints in 1955. The collection included the original Frank Lloyd Wright colours used in two of his most acclaimed projects, Fallingwater (1936-39) and Taliesin West (1937). The palette included 36 original colours and it was called 'Taliesin Palette'. As per Le Corbusier's palette, there are some similarities in the earthy colours and in the greens. In particular, Wright's 'deep rust' (no. 370) is close to McCahon's 'ferric oxide' cladding. Wright's 'spring green' (no. 396) is also close to the green of the kitchen and the white colour of the walls may be close to Wright's 'pearl white' (no. 994). In general Wright's palette seems to be less saturated than Le Corbusier and McCahon ones.

Comparison with relevant colour theories (1921-1933)

At that time, the colour theories that were more popular amongst artists were those developed under The Bauhaus School (1919-33). Those theories were brought to the USA by Joseph Albers in 1933. It is possible that McCahon came into contact with them on his trip to the USA or through literature. Those theories were based on the interaction between different colours (Albers, 1963). According to Johannes Itten's theory of contrasts the ferric oxide red of the external cladding of the house is diametrically opposite (in his colour wheel) to the green of the surrounding forest and the colour of the kitchen. This is a typical red-green contrast. They are opposite and they incite each other to maximum vividness when adjacent (Itten, 1961). In this way, the house is part of the environment with its ferric-oxide-red but it is also clearly distinguishable from it (Figure 3)



Figure 3. Colours of the house very close to McCahon's Northland Panels (1958).

Albers' lessons on colour may help us understand the effect of McCahon's colour combinations. In particular, the mix of so-called warm and cold colours. In the complex organization of the bathroom, blue and red are combined with achromatic colours, like white, black, and grey and their blend with green (of neutral temperature). With such organization, the interpretation of warm and cold colours becomes totally arbitrary, and this tells us that McCahon was probably aware of this fact.

Conclusions

The research has proved our hunch about 'needs must,' was correct. That the inner artistic urges find ways and means to express that which needs to see the light of day. Colin McCahon's use of what was close-at-hand everyday house paint was a practical vehicle to express his poetic memories of New Zealand's North land and skylines.

The survey carried out on the colours of Colin McCahon house has revealed the colour palettes of the outdoor and indoor spaces. Palettes have been described through the NCS notation in order to be able to reproduce the colours in the future. This will help stakeholders in the conservation of this important artefact of New Zealand heritage. The study also highlighted that McCahon was aware of current theories on colour interaction, and he applied them also in his house. Comparison with architectural colour palettes of that time has revealed some similarities with earthy colours and greens used by Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright. However, McCahon's approach to colour design has been revealed to be quite different.

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