

Colour of Buildings

■ OBJECTIVE

To provide detailed guidance on the use of colour in buildings, in support of local plan conservation and design policies.

■ POLICY CONTEXT

Local plan policies promote high quality design and protect the character and appearance of listed buildings and conservation areas. For example, policy CD19 of the Central Edinburgh Local Plan states:

“The Council will permit alterations and extensions to buildings which in their design and form, choice of materials and positioning are compatible with the character of the original building, will not result in an unreasonable loss of privacy or natural light to neighbouring properties and are not detrimental to neighbourhood amenity and character. Particular attention will be paid to ensuring that works to listed buildings and non listed buildings within conservation areas do not damage their special character”.

■ SCOPE OF GUIDANCE

This guideline applies city-wide to proposals for new buildings or to change the colour of existing buildings.

■ STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

Planning permission is required for the painting of the exterior of any building or works only in the following cases: * for the purpose of advertisement, announcement or direction; and * where the building or works are in a Conservation Area; or * where the building is a listed building.

In addition, the colour of external finishes and features of new buildings may be controlled under the original planning consent. Conditions may also be imposed as an additional control mechanism at the time of granting the planning consent.

Listed building consent is required for the alteration or extension of a listed building in a manner which would affect its character as a building of special architectural or historic interest. Painting is regarded as an alteration and most paint schemes will have an affect on the character of a listed building if the colour is changed.

Repainting in the same colour is considered to be part of the normal upkeep of a building and will not normally require planning permission and/or listed building consent.

1. COLOUR OF NEW DEVELOPMENT

- a) The predominant materials and colours of existing good quality neighbouring buildings should generally be reflected in the choice of colours for new development. Colours should reflect, complement and be part of the design characteristics of the new building and the streetscene in general. Large areas of incongruous colours which are not “earth colours” or “natural colours” must be avoided. Stone and brick walls should not be painted.
- b) In areas where the Scottish Vernacular style predominates, there is scope for allowing a more innovative treatment such as the use of coloured rendering on facades, although it will usually be inappropriate to use strong, non-traditional colours on large and prominent areas of walls and roofs.
 - (i) Large expanses of assertive and brightly coloured surfaces should be avoided. They can emphasise bulk and make a facade look overwhelming.
 - (ii) Contrasting shades of colour can help to accentuate and link proportions between new and old buildings, give variety and interest, and help to break the scale of bulky elevational compositions. They can also help to enliven the streetscene.
 - (iii) Architectural details can be picked out in neutral tones or highlighted to contrast with their background.
 - (iv) Buildings that have roofs darker than their walls tend to create a more stable and robust effect and are encouraged.
 - (v) For major new buildings and complexes in a modern style, the choice of colours should reflect the context but also be an intrinsic part of the architectural design concept. In such cases, colours of buildings will be assessed on their individual merits, taking into account texture/context and aesthetic balance.
 - (vi) Innovative schemes of demonstrable quality may justify a departure from recommended guidance, and provided they are acceptable in the context of their surroundings.

2. COLOUR ON LISTED BUILDINGS & UNLISTED BUILDINGS WITHIN CONSERVATION AREAS

a) Residential Properties

(i) General:

External stonework must not be painted. If the stonework has previously been painted this should be removed (consent will be required), or where this is not appropriate the property should be repainted in a matt finish stone coloured paint to tone with the adjoining stonework.

(ii) Basements:

Unpainted stonework must not be painted with the exception of the following areas, which may be painted white or a stone colour when they are not visible from the pavement:

- (a) infacing wall adjoining pavement;
- (b) underside of entrance platt.

Coping stones and the edge of steps should not be painted.

(iii) Render:

Walls covered with a smooth cement render or harled (wet dash) finish should generally be painted in earth colours or neutrals (grey, cream or beige). Rendered bands to windows should generally be in stone colours.

(iv) Windows:

These should generally be painted white/off white. Other colours may be considered when a unified scheme for a whole building is being proposed on non-domestic buildings, eg schools/warehouses. Colours other than white/off white are unlikely to be acceptable in town house or tenemental areas.

(v) Doors:

Black, rich dark or muted colours are generally appropriate although varnished hardwood or woodgrain may be acceptable in certain areas. Pastel or bold primary colours are not generally acceptable.

(vi) Fanlights and door facings:

In Georgian properties fanlights and door facings should generally be white/off white. Painting to match the door colour may be acceptable in Victorian and some other properties.

Where doors are varnished hardwood or grained the facings and fanlights should be given a matching treatment.

(vii) Railings, balconies and other ornamental ironwork:

These should be painted black gloss, although other very dark colours may be appropriate such as dark green for railings around gardens.

(viii) Downpipes and gutters:

These should be painted either black or to tone in with the adjacent stonework and roofing respectively.

(iv) Dormers:

All areas other than the window frames should be painted to tone in with the roofs, ie dark grey. The window frames may be painted white/off-white to match the colour of the window frames in the building below or to match the rest of the dormer.

b) Shops and Business Premises

(i) General:

(a) The creation of a strong identity for the individual unit is secondary to achieving an appropriate balance within the street scene as a whole.

(b) Colour schemes should clarify the architectural form of the frontage and should not merely apply alien treatments and designs.

(c) Any scheme for the painting of shop or business frontages should be sympathetic to the treatment and character of the main facade and adjoining properties.

(d) Most successful colour schemes employ only one or two colours. The use of several colours requires a careful balancing of elements which can be difficult to achieve. A formal application will always be required for such proposals.

(e) The junction between painted and other surfaces of a shopfront or business frontage should be provided by an architectural detail, eg string course, cornice, pilaster, moulding, downpipe. If no such details exist this may indicate that removing the paint or painting the frontage to blend with the surrounding stonework would be more appropriate.

(f) Unpainted stonework and other good quality materials should not be painted.

(ii) In converted residential stone built properties:

(a) External stonework must not be painted. If the stonework has previously been painted this should be removed by an approved method (consent will be required), or where this is not appropriate the property should be repainted in a matt finish stone coloured paint to tone in with the adjoining stonework. This should be slightly greyer than the external stone.

(b) Basement properties in residential blocks should be treated as above. The string course between ground and basement should not be painted, or where already painted, very dark grey/stone colours only are appropriate.

(iii) In original individual stone units (defined by cornices, pilasters etc):

Original unpainted stone shopfronts should not be painted. Where a unit has been painted and is within a residential block stone colours are likely to be acceptable.

(iv) In original or applied individual timber shop units (defined as above):

The frontage should be painted in a rich dark or neutral colour.

(v) Groups of uniformly designed shopfronts:

(a) Where a unified paint scheme exists this should be retained, or another co-ordinated scheme agreed by the shop owners. Where a co-ordinated scheme does not exist, the shop units should be painted to respect the architectural coherence. This can be achieved by one of the following approaches (in descending order of preference):

- a uniform paint scheme for the group (a return to natural stone may be appropriate in certain circumstances);
- a common main shopfront colour with some variations in colour of details (doors, window and lettering);
- individual paint schemes to units but each shop painted in a similar weight of colour (no strong contrasts), and unified by a similar approach to the painting of shop elements (lettering and location of signage).

(b) Where a group of shop units have common details which unify the facade (arches, pilasters, brackets or ornate mouldings) a uniform treatment of these elements may be necessary to avoid destroying the unity of the design.

(vi) Uncoordinated groups of shopfronts:

(a) Where shopfronts form part of one block but are of unrelated design, the paint scheme should be simple to avoid creating visual confusion in the street.

(b) Limiting the range of colours within a block and avoiding multiple strong contrasts between units helps to unify the group.

(vii) Two storey shop units:

Two storey shop units should be given a unified treatment to the two storeys. Where occupancy differs subtle variations are acceptable.

(viii) Projecting shop units:

A projecting shop unit should be painted in a muted/dark colour which relates to the main facade to reduce the impact of the projecting unit, particularly the blank gables.

(ix) Common stairs in groups of shops:

The surround to common stair openings should be included in the paint scheme of one of the adjoining shops, where this is acceptable to the residents. Stone surrounds should remain unpainted.

(c) Shopfront Details

(i) Fascias:

- (a) Fascias/sub-fascias should generally be painted in the same colour as the shopfront.
- (b) Traditional fascias framed by a cornice, mouldings, pilasters or brackets may be painted in a complementary colour (normally darker).
- (c) Existing applied fascias on unpainted stone shopfronts should be painted to match the door and window frames.
- (d) Existing sub-fascias located within an original window opening should be painted in a dark colour to reinforce the original window proportions.

(ii) Shop windows, frames and doors:

- (a) Where a shopfront is painted in a strong colour, window frames, facings and doors can be painted white, black, neutral or a dark colour or to match the main facade.
- (b) Where the shopfront is a dark or neutral colour, stronger colours can be used on door, window and lettering elements.

(iii) Basecourse and stallriser:

- (a) These should be painted to match the shopfront or painted black or a dark colour.
- (b) The approach should be consistent for any group of shops.

(iv) Lettering:

- (a) Strong colours should only be employed where the main frontage colour is dark or neutral. White, black, creams or muted colours are appropriate for other situations.
- (b) Gold leaf can be used on individual letters or applied directly to a painted shopfront.

(v) String courses/cornices

String courses above a group of shopfronts should be uniformly treated (unpainted stonework should remain unpainted).

(vi) Stone brackets and corbels supporting oriel windows and bartizans:

These architectural features should not be painted. If already painted they should be unified with the property above by removing the paint or painting in a neutral/grey stone colour to tone with the stonework.

■ REASONED JUSTIFICATION

Much of the architectural and urban design character of Edinburgh is derived from the use of a limited range of traditional materials and colours.

Natural materials tend to be richly textured and subtly coloured and Edinburgh, through its widespread use of natural stone in its many forms, including dressed stone and rubble, has an established pattern of shades of buff, grey, and soft terracotta over sizeable parts of the City.

There are relatively few large-scale, striking and incongruous examples of the use of unacceptable colour in the City. In general, local characteristics have influenced sensible choice where controls do not apply.

Colour traditions and fashions are never static but, in the past, the use of natural and semi-natural materials, and the relatively limited range of exterior paint colours imposed a certain restraint. Over the past 15 years or so, however, new ranges of synthetic paints have been introduced with qualities of colour fastness, weatherproofing and durability, which make their exterior use attractive economically. In addition, they are available in a wide range of shades, including intense green, purple, deep blue and orange, which could potentially pose a seriously disruptive effect if their use were to become widespread. The introduction of unfamiliar hues can easily impair any visual unity and harmony, because some buildings become targeted inappropriately. The low light angle in Edinburgh may also exacerbate the impact of some striking colours.

An inappropriate paint scheme on a listed building, or on an unlisted building in a conservation area, can often have a seriously adverse effect on the appearance of the building. Moreover, such schemes can be visually disruptive within the street scene, leading to a failure to preserve or enhance the character and appearance of the Conservation Area. It is therefore important to ensure that any paint scheme for a listed building or unlisted building within a conservation area is sympathetic to the treatment and character of the main facade and surrounding properties. Prior to undertaking any painting or repainting work within a conservation area or affecting a listed building, contact should be made with City Development (Planning) (Conservation).

Note: When considering a paint scheme, it should be borne in mind that not all existing paint schemes have been approved by the Council and may become the subject of enforcement action. Always check with the Conservation Section.

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