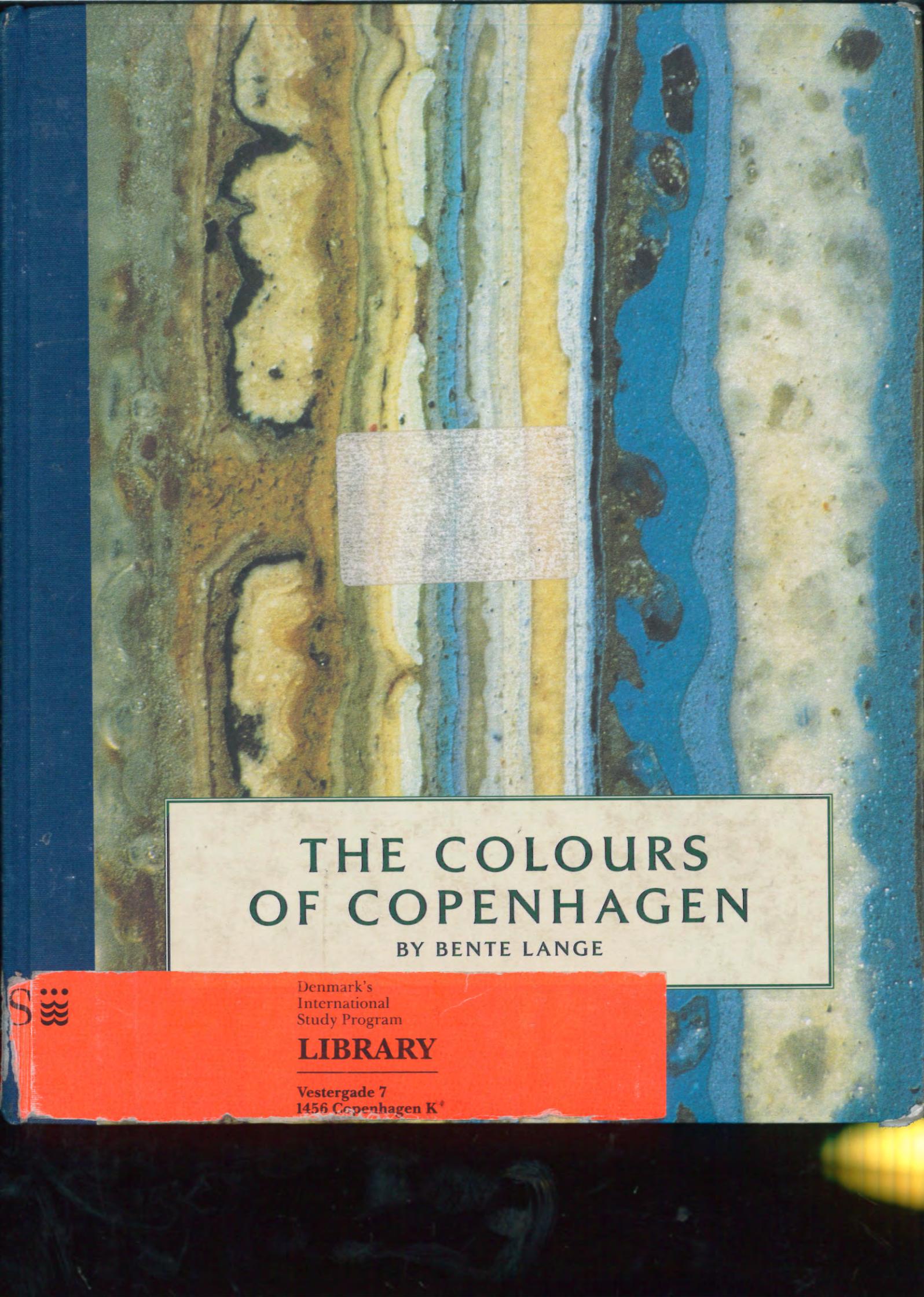


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THE COLOURS
OF COPENHAGEN

BY BENTE LANGE

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Fig. 5. This section of Wolfgang Heimbach's depiction of the oath of fealty to King Frederik III at Copenhagen Castle shows the city as it appeared in the 1660's.

HISTORY OF FACADE COLOURS

The changing colours of Copenhagen's facades are a mirror of the building materials and pigments available, combined with architectural fashions from abroad, adapted to local conditions. Until the 1700's, we do not have sufficient sources to determine the city's facade colours, but some sporadic information about the preceding period can be mentioned by way of introduction.



Fig. 51-52. The Yellow Mansion, no. 18 Amaliegade.

Fig. 52. Rendering by C.B. Hornbech in 1848.



Classicism's penchant for clarity and purity was described like this at the time: "We do not erect buildings that swagger with numerous volutes and faceted sides; overdecorated with lion's heads and curlicues lacking harmony, order and comfort. Thus, our decoration in buildings inside and out and in furnishings must never be without purpose or with jumbled aims, but rather have order, plan, simplicity and beauty in everything⁵⁰".

Colour preferences in the neo-classical period were obviously strongly linked with the Greek model: the architecture of antiquity consisting of natural stone. The polychromy of antiquity was only acknowledged much later.

Jardin brings Neo-classicism to Denmark

After Eigtved's death, the French architect Nicolas-Henri Jardin came to Copenhagen in 1755 to continue the work on Frederik's Church. He gave Danish neo-classicism strong ties to French art, which was reinforced by C.F. Harsdorff's studies with J.F. Blondel in Paris. This early classicism is also called Louis XVI, and facades can be recognised by their festoons and medallions, along with recesses, borders and antique vases. However, decorative elements were not emphasised with contrasting colour, but rather with the aid of light and shadow.

Fig. 53. Jardin's facade of Sølvgade Barracks.



Fig. 54. Nicolas Henri Jardin, French architect, modernised Otto Thott's mansion at no. 4 Kongens Nytorv. The capitals were replaced, the entrance raised, and the little belvedere was replaced by an attic along the entire length of the facade, its mid-section emphasised by a pediment featuring a cornucopia, a typically neo-classic style element. Section of painted target from 1835.



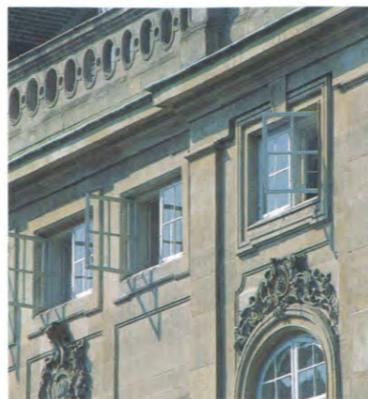
Fig. 55. The 1984 colour scheme of Thott's Mansion, no. 4 Kongens Nytorv, is a mis-interpretation: the entablature looks like two layers of cake with frosting between.





Baroque

184



Rococo

185



Neo-classicism

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THE CHANGING COLOURS OF COPENHAGEN

From the Renaissance to the period of neo-classicism, building materials were given the colour of the material itself. Thus, red roof tile was given a red glaze, yellow brick a yellow glaze, sandstone painted the colour of sandstone, marble marbled and so on. There is considerable evidence that materials were painted primarily for protection, as well as to perfect them by evening out colour differences. As we mentioned earlier, the sandstone of the Chancellery was painted with sandstone-colour oil paint "due to the various colours of the stones". The purpose of Denmark's first brush stroke was presumably to protect material and extend its lifetime, but exactly when people began painting to decorate building materials is a subject that has not yet been studied.

Copenhagen's Master Painters' Guild was established in 1622, and for centuries prior to that, their craft had undergone enormous changes: from the early Middle Ages where painters were largely limited to decorating shields, to the Renaissance, where paint gradually came into use to decorate buildings. The Guild's coat of arms has three shields in memory of their origins. Gradually, it became an important part of the painter's job to 'brush' woodwork - what we today understand as painting, as opposed to decorating using paint.

The Guild's Articles of Association from 1684 show that the main emphasis was still on the decorative; an apprentice had to paint either a sacred or an historical scene in addition to a 'beautiful landscape' in order to complete his apprenticeship. However, in an attempt to ensure that painters could find the means to make a living, the trade was strictly reg-

Fig. 184. No. 25 Strandgade.

Fig. 185. No. 17 Amaliegade.

Fig. 186. Town Hall and Court House at Nytorv.

Fig. 187. Nos. 1-3 Store Strandstræde.

Fig. 188. No. 1 Fiolstræde, University Library.

Fig. 189. No. 34 Vesterbrogade, Hotel Savoy.



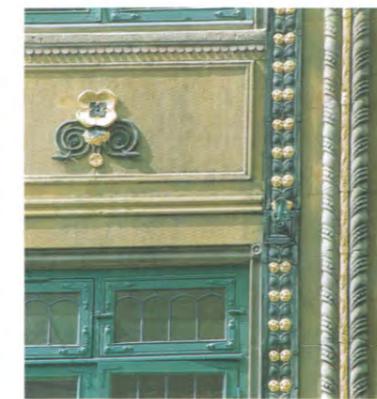
Late classicism

187



Historicism

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Art nouveau

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Fig. 190. Paint peelings from Copenhagen windows display a colourful past.



THE CHANGING COLOURS OF COPENHAGEN

ulated: sculptors were not allowed to decorate or gild the frames for their own works and "builders are not allowed to paint houses either inside or out with oil paint or brush with lime wash¹²⁹". However, painters and masons had some difficulty agreeing over the limits to their respective trades. Professional jealousy brought a case before the court in 1749, with one party claiming that "in our city it has long been the custom for builders to brush their masonry with colour wash, including an amount of carbon black or red stone powder of crushed tile mixed into it¹³⁰". Thus, in fact, it was the binder that determined whose trade it was. Another document in the case makes it very clear that timber was treated for protection, and that houses were painted yellow, red, blue or white.

As mentioned, the reason for colouring stucco is tied to the idea of imitating a material one cannot afford. Yellow brick was often painted red; red brick was considered finer than yellow. In the newer residential areas beyond the ramparts, buildings often had red brick on the facades that faced the street, and yellow brick facing the courtyard.

As we have seen, facades were painted with lively colours in the Renaissance and the Baroque, while rococo facades received their muted colour from sandstone or sandstone-coloured oil paint. Neo-classicism introduced smooth stucco facades that were either washed or painted in light colours, in contrast to the architectural elements of rose-grey Bornholm sandstone, which gave neo-classicism its distinguished bicolouration. The popular rusticated band of the lower storey introduced colour layering of facades, which disappeared again in late classicism, where the use of ash-lars became a low relief that often comprised the entire facade.



Fig. 191. Copenhagen townhouses. Reconstruction in chronological order from 1700-1900.

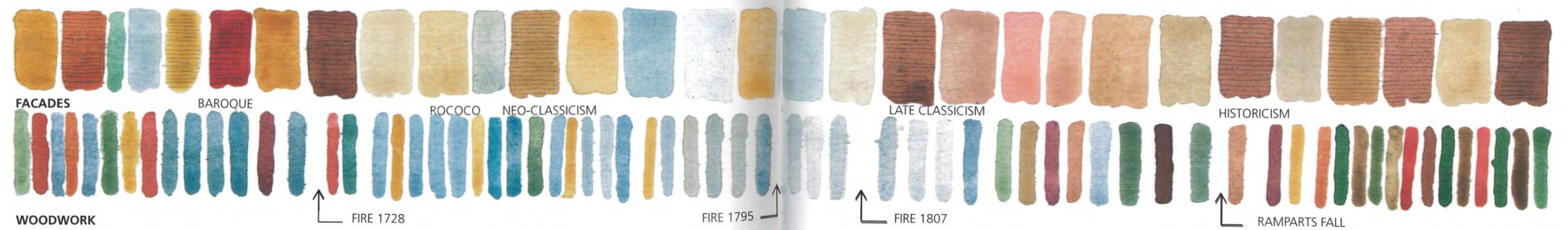
C.F. Hansen's architecture and rebuilding after the English bombardment of Copenhagen are characterised by stone-coloured facades, which were left in bare stucco in many cases. From the mid-1800s, it became common to paint facades in the old part of the city with oil paint in light colours, while the facades in the new quarter were left in exposed brick or cement.

That Copenhagen's painted buildings had very light facade colours at the beginning of our century is supported by a remark in the membership magazine of Copenhagen's Master Painters' Guild in 1909: "If we take a closer look at oil colour; for facades it is largely white, and one might ask if we are to use lead white or zinc white for the facades?" Grey-white facades still dominate the Copenhagen streets that were once inside the ramparts.

Fig. 192. Typical facade and window colours shown on a timeline indicating the great fires of 1728 and 1795, the bombardment in 1807, and the fall of the ramparts in 1856. The upper row shows facade colours; the lower row shows the changing colours of windows.

Windows, doors and entrances in ordinary buildings were usually painted the same colour. Woodwork was only painted in several colours for prominent architectural projects.

In the Baroque period, windows were painted rather dark: cool pearl grey, ochre yellow or Pompeiian red. In the Rococo period, windows were



predominately a slightly lighter medium grey, which is also called pearl grey, while neo-classicism seems to have preferred a grey-white colour. Late classicism used dark colours for windows, which were perceived as voids in the facade. Under historicism, windows were also dark, preferably brown in imitation of mahogany or walnut. Today coloured windows have almost disappeared from the Copenhagen street scene; most of the windows in the city are white, while doors and entrances are dark green. The dark-green colour, mixed by adding zinc yellow to Parisian blue, became common at the end of the 1800's. It is understandable enough that the dark green doors were popular at a time when antique bronze entrances were admired. Since that time, dark green has come to dominate Copenhagen entrances almost exclusively.

After investigating the colour history of Copenhagen, it is clear that the city has had refined colour standards that have been forgotten. Studying the changing faces of the historical buildings yields a treasure trove of imagination and refinement, which can serve as inspiration for contemporary colour choices for the city scene.