On Notes on Colour in Irish Building Regulations

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Abstract — **The paper discusses selected methods colour is coordinated in the architecture of the Republic of Ireland. Research on colour planning was undertaken in order to examine the ways Irish councils try to execute harmony within the built environment by regulations on colour. The methodology used included analyses of written sources, e.g. building regulations and guidelines provided by city and county councils. The study revealed that colour is treated with special care in rural Ireland.**

I.   INTRODUCTION

The following paper focuses on the methods colour is regulated in the architecture of the Republic of Ireland, a subject that, to the best of my knowledge, has never been examined. Research on regulations and guidelines on colour has been undertaken in order to deepen the knowledge of the phenomenon of colour planning in the built environment, and as a result, to develop guidelines on colour in the future.

The methodology used included analyses of written sources and, if needed, communication with public officials, architects and conservationists involved in the care of monuments and landscape. Sources included building regulations, reports and guidelines provided by the councils of twenty six counties in four provinces of the Republic of Ireland.

As a result, numerous documents on colour were detected. It was established that, apart from compulsory building regulations, Irish councils provide additional guidelines on design. Especially design in rural areas is treated with special care as most of the county councils provide guides on good design of single houses in the countryside. Research revealed that of twenty six county councils, sixteen include suggestions on external materials and colour either in county development plans or, more commonly, in guidelines on design in the countryside. Additionally, two city councils, the council of Dublin and the council of Galway, provide guidelines for shop fronts that include advises on external materials and colours.

The reasons for providing additional guidelines on rural houses are explained in some of the documents. For example, public officials from the County Laois council provided a guide in order 'to describe the site planning and design issues that need to be addressed' and 'to clearly set out what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in terms of one-off houses in County Laois'. In Offaly, notes on materials and colour are included in a design guide in order to know 'what to avoid and what to aim for'. The council of County Kilkenny explains that 'the guide aims to promote the highest standards of design

[…], it is intended to explain and endorse the principles of good rural house design'.

As colour of architecture is either a result of bare materials or is an effect of coating (applied externally by painting or internally by pigmenting plaster, etc), comments on both materials and colour are presented below in two separated chapters.

II.   GUIDLINES ON MATERIALS

A. Province of Connacht

Galway_ The County Galway council approves of contemporary design that reinforces the local vernacular identity and strongly opposes any kind of pastiche. For this reason, public officials recommend the use of locally sourced building materials such as those that defined the region in the past.

While choosing external finishes it is strongly recommended to follow the 'less is more' rule. Generally, external materials should be durable, minimised in amount and variety, assimilate well with the surrounding [6, p. 46].

Stone is part of the heritage of the region due to stone walls field boundaries and cut-stone elevations of public buildings. This is why, the use of stone is recommended in some circumstances, e. g., when the landscape will benefit or stone and glass can provide an interesting composition of heaviness and lightness. However, the council strongly recommends to use only local stone and in accordance with the geological base: limestone in East Galway and granite in Conamara [6, p. 47].

In regard to roofs, thatch, corrugated metal and slate are suggested (as these materials allow maintaining architectural quality and regional identity). White plastic should be avoided on gutters and white PVC cladding should be avoided on dormers [6, p. 38].

In regard to external doors, timber 'which is sourced from managed forests are the preferable long-term environmental solution'[6, p. 44].

Mayo_ The County Mayo council recommends simplicity in design of a rural house by reducing a number of materials, window types and roof features. The following materials are recommended on walls: smooth plaster (in all locations), dash plaster (in some locations), and hardwood sheeting (wooded locations). Metal and other cladding is not recommended, and artificial stone and brick are perceived as not suitable at all. In regard to roof finishes, natural slates are especially welcomed, and thatch should be used on single storey cottages only. Hardwood is the preferential material for window frames [12, p. 20].

Roscommon_ The County Development Plan includes general comments on external materials in County Roscommon. The council asks to use materials that

'reinforce the texture and colours of the surrounding landscape'. Public officials advise to: limit the amount of materials; avoid marble chip finish and pebble dash; use plaster, especially nap and dry dash finishes; use local natural stone [15, p. 239].

To sum up, in the province of Connacht three county councils provide guidelines on rural houses. Two councils ask for limited amount of external materials. Two councils ask to use traditional materials and one council requests the use of locally sourced materials.

B. Province of Leinster

Carlow_ At present, the council of County Carlow provides only very general suggestions on design in the County Development Plan in section 'Qualities of Urban Design', and informs that a detailed guide on rural houses will be published in the future. In terms of appearance and materials, the plan says: 'The richness of a building lies in its use of materials which contribute to the attractiveness of its appearance and the character of an area. Successful streets, spaces, villages, towns and cities all tend to have characteristics in common' [1, p. 60, 272].

Dublin_ The Dublin city council provides guidelines for shop fronts. In terms of materials, the council says that a vast range of materials are suitable, as long as they integrate with the character of a building and the whole street. Materials of high quality and durability are especially recommended. The council advises to use dark coloured-stone on recessed floors, and advises to omit small, light-coloured ceramic tiles - those are perceived as inappropriate in public areas [20, p. 25].

Kildare_ As external materials contribute to a building's identity, the council of County Kildare makes several requests in regard to materials on rural houses. Public officials ask to: limit the amount of the materials on exteriors to the minimum; use local materials such as stone or timber; use dark slates on roofs; minimise the use of PVC, brick and artificial stone as not suitable in rural landscape [8, p. 17].

Kilkenny_ In County Kilkenny, the council strongly advises to keep the unique character and identity of the county. In order to achieve this goal, the council listed the preferable finishes. Regarding roofs, public officials ask to use the following materials: slate, profiled steel, metal e.g. zinc or lead, thatch, timber shingles. Regarding external walls, the council recommends: Kilkenny limestone or granite, local rubble stone, cement render (unpainted or painted), modern renders, traditional lime renders, lime washes, glass, timber (painted or durable unpainted), some roof materials, well detailed concrete. Rainwater goods should be made of painted cast iron or cast aluminium. Window frames and doors should be made of painted or untreated durable timber. However, the council does not limit materials to those listed in the guide, as architects are welcome to experiment with new and innovative materials, as long the use of such materials provides the positive answer to the question: "Does this design and its proposed materials draw on and reinforce the palette of materials and colour range identified as locally distinctive in rural County Kilkenny?" [9, p. 26].

Laois_ The council of County Laois provides a few suggestions on external finishes. Public officials ask to use sustainable materials, e.g., clay blocks and clay tiles as an alternative to concrete based products. They also suggest avoiding a random mix of materials and artificial materials. Stone should be limited and should help to integrate the dwelling with the landscape [10, p. 20-21]. (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: An example of contemporary rural dwelling with limited amount of external materials, traditional timber and contemporary zinc. Reproduced from [10, p. 21].

Meath_ The council suggests to use either natural materials or synthetic that simulate natural materials, e.g., natural slates are acceptable on roofs, but also synthetic man made. Roofs can be also covered with zinc, copper and weathered copper. Local natural stone can be used on external walls providing that the full 3D element (a whole dwelling or an extension, but not a single elevation) is made of stone. Apart from stone, nap plaster and dash finishes are generally recommended for walls, but also pigmented renders and cladding (copper, zinc) could be used on walls. As brick is not the traditional material of the county, it is only accepted in areas were 'a long established tradition of brick as a finish exists'. White plastic should be avoided on window frames and external doors [13, p. 48-49, 52, 54, 57, 59].

Offaly_ The council of County Offaly makes only very general suggestions. Public officials advise to use limited amount of a high quality materials, such as natural slates and stone. The latter should be used with care, as traditionally it was only used on public buildings. Some materials are not recommended, including PVC, brick, artificial stone and dry dash [14, p. 14-15].

Westmeath_ In County Westmeath, the council's general advice is to 'limit the range of building materials'. Public officials ask to consider finishes that were traditionally used in the county, such as slate roofs, plastered walls and timbered windows and doors [17, p. 43, 65].

Wicklow_ The council of County Wicklow discusses design of rural houses in the County Development Plan. The council advises to use local materials [18, p. 4].

To sum up, in the province of Leinster six county councils advises on rural houses. Two councils ask to limit

the amount of materials on exteriors. Three councils suggest using natural materials and two councils suggest to use local materials.

C. Province of Munster

Clare_ The council of County Clare makes a very general suggestion on external materials. Those should be 'generally in keeping with the local character of the area' [3, p. 50].

Cork_ The council of County Cork provides detailed information on characteristic traditional materials in different parts of the county but does not provide direct recommendations. In regard to stone, it should be limited as the council would like to continue the characteristic of the region: a domination of plastered finishes [4, p. 96].

Kerry_ The council of County Kerry advises to limit the amount of external materials and lists materials that are perceived as the most appropriate in rural settings. These are: rendered and painted blockwork, black/dark grey or blue-black slates, timber for windows and doors. Stone could be used in some cases, e.g., when it would help to integrate a dwelling into the local landscape [7, p. 46]. (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Examples of rural dwellings with limited amount of external materials and colours in Cork county. Reproduced from:[7, pp. 32, 48, 49].

Limerick_ The council of County Limerick advises to limit the amount of external materials and to use local and natural materials instead of artificial finishes. Public officials also point out that 'a change in material should reflect a change in structural function' and suggest to avoid a random mix of materials [11, p. 50-51].

Tipperary_ The council advises to use sustainable materials whenever possible, such as natural raw materials, timber, natural paints, lime-based mortar and plaster [16, p. 25].

To sum up, in the province of Munster five county councils provide guidelines on design of rural houses. Two councils ask to limit the amount of external materials. Three councils advise to use either natural or traditional materials.

D. Province of Ulster

Cavan_ The council of County Cavan suggests to keep a simple range of materials in order to 'integrate well a dwelling into the landscape'. This is why, natural materials are also encouraged: plaster and natural stone on walls, and natural dark slates on roofs [2, p. 22].

Donegal_ The plan developed by the public officials includes suggestions on external finishes. Generally, materials should be limited in order to simplify the elevations. Additionally, in case of using stone locally sources stone is recommended [5, p. 19].

In the province of Ulster, two county councils provided guidelines on rural houses. Both councils recommend to

limit the amount of external finishes and to use locally sources materials.

III. GUIDELINES ON COLOUR

A. Province of Connacht

Galway_ In the past, cottages in county Galway were white-washed and intense colours were only applied to smaller surfaces, such as doors and windows. In order to keep the identity of the place, owners are advised to paint their houses light hues that would contrast with dark roofs and with colourful accents of smaller surfaces. Generally, intense hues should be avoided in rural areas (public officials suggest that they are much more suitable in urban areas), and earth colours are recommended as more suitable in the natural landscape.

The council recommends the following way of selecting colours: 'it is best practice to first prepare a sample chart of the colours and hues of the natural landscape near the site and its seasonal changes'[6, p. 48].

Colour of roofs should be a result of bare materials suggested by the County Council: golden thatch, corrugated tin of oxide red hue and blue/grey slates. Rainwater pipes should be executed in the same colour as roofs. Similarly, all parts of dormers, fascias, soffits and windows, should be of the same colour like the main roof [6, pp. 39,41].

External doors should 'introduce a visual interest' by a strong hue, as in the past doors used to be the only element of a house to express the house's identity by the application of a contrasting colour or by the use of stained glass [6, p. 44].

The Galway City Council also published a design guide on shop fronts as those are an important feature of the city's historical streetscape. In the past in Galway, buildings were erected with local dark grey limestone, plastered with lime and sand but left unpainted. Additional colours of elevations were those of unpainted timber windows and slate roofs. The council recommends to keep this simple palette of colours above the ground floor level. However, colours of shop fronts should be applied to 'add richness, variety and warmth' (vibrant colours are welcome), but not to 'make a building or a shop front stand out' and in this way to upset the harmony of a whole street (bold primary and very intense colours should be avoided) [19, p. 8]. According to the council, heritage colour palettes that include more subtle hues may be a good choice. Timber shop fronts should be painted in a single colour, and a contrasting hue should be chosen for the lettering. In case of cut-stone facades, colours on the lettering should be muted. Window sills and cornices, made of natural stone, should be left unpainted [19, p. 44]. (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: The Galway City Council encourages colours of shop fronts that add richness but not stand out (William Street in Galway before and after improvement, drawing by Howley Hayes Architects). Reproduced form: [19, p. 18] with permission from James Howley.

Mayo_ As a rule, bright strong colours should be avoided in the countryside. Pastels (pale pinks, yellows, blues, greens, etc) are also perceived by public officials as colours that work well in urban environment, but should be avoided in the countryside. White and cream white colours are strongly recommended as colours that always look good in rural landscape, whereas cream and grey are perceived as dull and lifeless. Sometimes, deep dark intense hues are suitable, especially in case a house is located among the trees. If precoloured dash is to be used, dark brown and dark sandy are recommended as hues that merge well with the landscape [12, p. 22].

Roscommon_ The County Development Plan provides very limited comments on external colours in County Roscommon. Dark hues are recommended for roofs, especially black or blue/black. Ridge cappings should be of the same hue as the main roof [15, p. 238].

To sum up, tree county councils provide guidelines on rural houses. All of them suggest to maintain the traditional colour schemes (at least partially) : light walls, dark roofs an vividly painted entrance doors. Two councils request to avoid bold and vivid colours. Only one council pint points exact hues for external walls (County Mayo).

B. Province of Leinster

Dublin_ Provided by Dublin Corporation Planning Department, the design guide on shop fronts provides very general suggestions on colours. Colours 'that harmonise with the rest of the building and the streetscape' are recommended and colours that cause an unpleasant effect should be avoided [20, p. 26]. Similarly, South Dublin County Council advises to use colours that harmonise (are complemented) with the rest of the building and the neighbourhood, and require to avoid corporate colours as being not in line with the rest of the building or the area [23, pp. 25, 41]. (See Figure 4).

Figure 4: Examples of signage in Dublin that harmonise with the rest of a building. Reproduced from: [20, p. 1, 26] with permission from John O'Hara, Dublin City Council.

Kildare_ The council advises to use natural and soft colours on external walls, dark hues on roofs and strong hues on windows and external doors [8, p. 14, 17].

Kilkenny_ The councils lists the preferable colours. Roofs should be dark or light grey. Brighter red or green, historically appropriate, are suggested to be kept to the small areas only. Rainwater goods should harmonise with a hue of a roof and walls (various shades of grey are advised). Walls should be: grey (prevalent colour that blends well into the landscape); traditional subtle hues, e.g. white (expect form very big dwellings), soft buttermilk, cream, beige, fawn (the council asks to avoid yellow and pink). Even though windows were traditionally painted white, the council suggests painting window frames dark grey or use untreated durable timber that will weather with time to a silver grey. The use of contrasting colours on walls and roofs would help to keep local tradition [9, p. 27].

Laois_ The council suggests that colours 'should aim to blend with the local landscape'. 'Earthy' colours should be used on external walls (the council lists traditional colours of walls: whites, off-whites, light greys and ochre). Bold, vivid hues should be generally avoided, but could be applied on smaller surfaces. Walls should be the lightest, roofs – the darkest, external doors should be brightly painted, and windows should be muted in colour [10, p. 21].

Meath_ The council suggests the following colours on roofs: blue /black, dark grey dark brown of natural slates; blue, black or grey of synthetic slates; grey zinc; copper that will eventually weather green or pre-weathered green copper. Apart from colours of natural stone, zinc and copper, shades of yellow render are advised on walls [13, p. 48-49, 52, 54, 57, 59].

Offaly_ The council provides general suggestions on colours. As a rule, bright, garish and unnatural colours are not recommended. External walls should be of light soft colours. Window frames made of timber could be painted light and pine-type colours, and external doors could be painted with strong colours. The council also recommends using dark slates and black rainwater goods [14, p. 14-15].

The county council also advises on shop fronts. Those should be painted colours that 'should not be garish, discordant or clash with adjacent fascias' [21, p. 1].

Westmeath_ The council advises on colours in a very general way: 'use colours which fit in with local traditions' [17, p. 43].

To sum up, five county councils recommend maintaining the traditional colour schemes: light colours on walls, dark colour on roofs and strong hues on the entrance doors. Four councils advises (more or less directly) to use light and soft hues and to avoid bold and vivid colours. Two councils name directly some of suggested hues [Kilkenny and Meath].

C. Province of Munster

Clare_ The council of County Clare makes a very general suggestion on external colours. They should be 'in keeping with the local character of the area' [3, p. 50].

Cork_ The council stresses that the most important principle is to chose colours that 'blend in local traditions and surrounding buildings', and advises that especially earthy colours would blend very well in the countryside.

In order to make a good choice on colours, the council advises to create a colour chart of the main hues of vegetation that appear on a site including seasonal changes.

The council also would like to keep traditional colour schemes: light walls, dark roofs and strong colours of the entrance doors, so public officials recommend to use light colours on external walls and dark - on roofs [4, p. 101]. (See Figure 5).

Figure 5: Traditional colour schemes on contemporary dwellings as suggested by the Cork County Council. Pictures by Mike Shanahan, Architects. Courtesy of Mike Shanahan.

Kerry_ In regard to colour, the council advises to follow the rule 'less is more' and to keep the colour palette simple. Generally, colours should aim to help integrate a dwelling into the landscape. Therefore, muted earthy colours should be used (e.g. brown, grey, green); and bright garish hues should be avoided (e.g. blue, pink, red, yellow) [7, p. 47].

Limerick_ The council suggests that 'the colour of a new building should aim to blend with surrounding buildings and the local landscape'. The council asks to limit the amount of colours and to use muted, earthy colours. Traditional colours on walls, such as white, off-white and grey are recommend. Windows should be muted in colours, but the entrance doors should be bright painted [11, p. 50-51].

Tipperary_ The council asks to use colours that 'would blend well into landscape'. Earthy colours are especially recommended for bigger surfaces on walls and dark hues should be used on roofs [16, p. 26].

To sum up, all the five county councils that provide guides on design suggest, more or less directly, to keep the traditional colour schemes: light walls, dark roofs and doors painted strong hues. All of them also ask to use colours that would create a harmonious combination with local landscape. They usually describe desirable hues as 'muted', and 'earthy'. Two councils name some of recommended hues (white, off-white and grey are welcomed in Limerick, and brown, grey, green in Kerry).

D. Province of Ulster

Donegal_ The county council makes a general comment on external colours in the County Development Plan. Colours and texture of finishes should reflect colours and texture of the Donegal landscape - a strong feature of the county [5, p. 19].

In the province of Ulster one county council provides recommendations on colour of rural houses. Those should be in line with local landscape.

IV.   CONCLUSIONS

The above analysis explains the methods Irish councils coordinate colour in the built environment. Of twenty six, sixteen county councils provide additional design guides for rural houses or discuss exteriors in county development plans. Two city councils provide guidelines on shop fronts. Most of those documents include recommendations on both external materials and colours.

Generally, the examined design guides provide information on external materials, their sources and amount. In terms of colour, documents generally comment on amount of colours and on hues, saturation or lightness. Two councils indicate source of inspiration: colours of site's vegetation in different seasons (Cork, Galway).

The documents vary, as some of them include only very general comments, whereas others provide more detailed recommendations. Several county councils express their wishes in a vague way, e.g.: 'colours should blend well with the local landscape', 'materials should keep local traditions', whereas other councils provide lists of preferable materials and colours.

The analysis indicates that in rural areas the county councils search for designs that would maintain simplicity of traditional farmhouses. For this reason, most of the councils request to limit the amount of materials applied on elevations and roofs.

Furthermore, some of the authors of the guides stress that external finishes and colours play an important role in maintaining local traditions, so they seek colours that keep traditional colour schemes and blend well with the local landscape.

In order to keep local traditions, the county councils try to maintain an image of a traditional farmhouse (most of the councils discuss materials and colours of the following elements: roofs, rainwater goods, external walls, window frames and external doors). The councils generally ask to use traditional materials (locally sources if possible) and only a few councils welcome new finishes like metal cladding on elevations. As a result slates and plastered walls dominate in the countryside across the whole country.

In terms of colour, the councils usually advise to keep the traditional colour scheme: light walls, dark roofs and strongly painted doors. Only the attitude towards windows vary, as some councils request windows to be painted strong hues, whereas other councils prefer windows to be muted in colour.

In order to blend well into countryside, majority of the councils advise to use soft, muted or earthy hues and to omit bold and vivid colours. But in many cases exact hues are not listed and this is an architect's decision to chose the right colours that would keep tradition and blend well into the local landscape.

The study indicates that the county councils encourage contemporary design in the countryside but they oppose any kind of pastiche. In the same time, suggestions on details (including external finishes and colour) provided in design guides are constructed in such a way that contemporary dwellings resemble traditional farmhouses,

and in this way local traditions are maintained in rural Ireland[1].

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[1] Form the other side, too general requests result in very similar rural houses erected across the whole country and no huge difference is visible among separated counties, despite the fact that local traditions differed from county to county in the past.