



The Colour Wall



Burghard Müller-Dannhausen

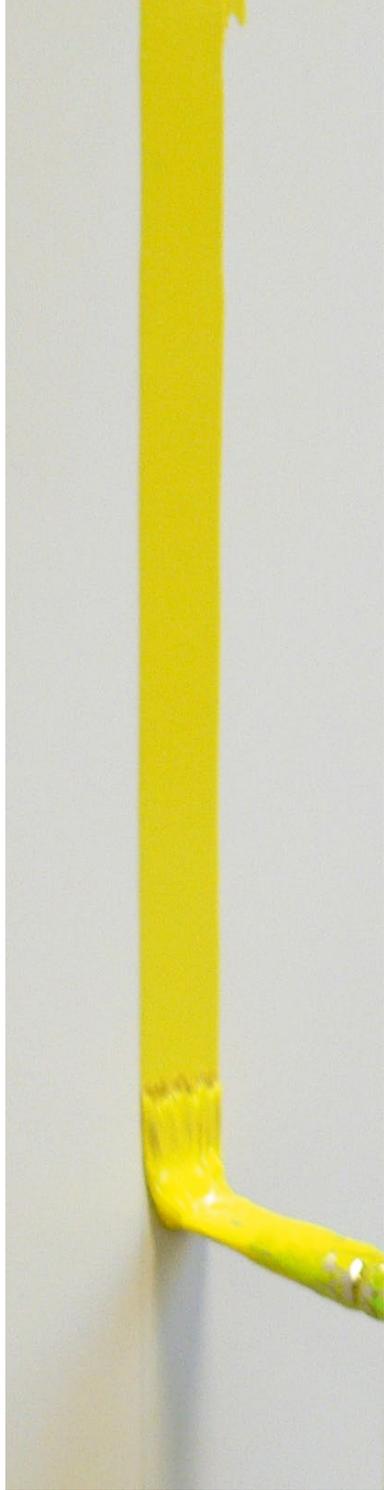
The Colour Wall –
Painting as a contribution to the design
of the main axis of the Rems-Murr-Klinikum
in Winnenden/Germany

The reality of a painting is more than its structural characteristics. Perception of it too – perception above all – is a constituent factor. This applies particularly to the Colour Wall, because this painting is subject to exceptional conditions of perception, on the one hand in consequence of its function as a mural, and on the other hand as a result of its extremes of dimension, proportion and contour. As a mural, or to be more precise as an example of the genre of wall painting as distinct from easel painting, the Colour Wall is tied to a place – to the meaning of a place, to the design of a place and to the stakeholders in, the users of, a place. This means that function, architecture and people are the determining conditions.

The Colour Wall is the north wall of the main axis of the Rems-Murr-Klinikum in Winnenden/ Germany, a hospital with about 600 beds that was built between 2009 and 2014 to provide central medical services in the Rems-Murr-Kreis, an administrative district north of Stuttgart. In this way the Colour Wall is anchored not only to a place but also to a function. A hospital is an institution oriented to efficiency. Everything there has its purpose and must have its purpose. A mural is supposed to add something to the utility of the hospital; otherwise it is out of place. Its utility lies in its effect. Which brings into play the people who spend time in this place, in a place that one does not encounter by chance: the hospi-

tal and the people there are closely and significantly connected.

The architecture, the third conditioning factor named above, takes account of this. If the architecture is oriented to the function of the hospital and the people in it, then the Colour Wall is seamlessly incorporated into this framework of meaning. We can conclude that the painting takes the architecture into consideration, in order to support the task of the clinic and to give something to the people there. Conversely this means that the mural can be effective only if it is integrated into the scheme of the architecture.





The architects of the Rems-Murr-Klinikum, the architectural office of Hascher Jehle in Berlin, conceived a main axis that links together the individual parts of the building – here known as pavilions. However, architecture as a spatial language has a communicative function in addition to its practical purpose. The main axis in Winnenden represents the motif of a path. Its abstract symbolism is enhanced by the fact that it is completely straight and thus addresses the principle of direction. A path is something that affects the people in the clinic in a fundamental way. Whether patients, visitors or staff, they are all focussed on a hoped-for, intended, supported, controlled or observed development,

on progress, on a process. A hospital is about the body, about processes of healing, recovery, rehabilitation or simply of becoming accustomed. It is also about the mind, as changing physical states are always connected with processes of awareness.

All of this is experienced in a concrete way by people in the hospital. And as psychological considerations accompany and support medical ones, it makes sense to strengthen the experience of progressing. The architecture achieves this with the means at its disposal. Painting joins it as a factor for reinforcement. It helps the architecture to make perceptible the motif of a path.

The repertoire of architecture holds a further prerequisite. It provides a colour scheme that connects the outside and inside. The definitions of the colours inside and the colours outside may differ, but the principle of using the basic colours yellow, green and orange applies to both. In this way the building sends a signal by means of its façades. The connotations of the colours are fresh, lively, cheerful and positive. They convey the feeling that the hospital is in truth a place of health. Furthermore, the colours build a harmonious bridge to nature and the landscape. The references that they make are tuned differently at each time of year, but at all times they broadcast their message. Inside the clinic, this

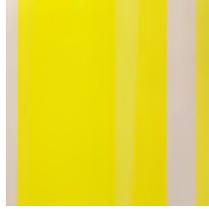
message is conveyed by means of significantly toned-down colours, which create an unobtrusive interior atmosphere. They also serve the purpose of orientation. Painting as the language of colour takes up this message, so that together the architecture and the mural speak – with each other and with people. By means of an opulent orchestration of the basic colours, painting works with its own means of expression. It increases saturation, reduces brightness in gradations, exploits the play of simultaneous contrasts, places complementary colours in opposition, creates disharmonious notes – in short, it lives colours to the full. The path becomes a progress, with tensions and relationships between colours

and changes of colour. Colour leads. And it leads onwards.

This teamwork with architecture, this link to its scheme and enhancement of its message, relates directly to the other aspects of the place that have been mentioned: the function and the operation of the clinic. The clinic is not just a building; it is also a task, and the clinic is people. These three dimensions cannot be separated from each other where the aura of the Colour Wall is concerned. By cooperating with the architecture, the mural is incorporated into the effect of the clinic and is directed towards the condition of the people there. Although their situations

differ greatly, the three groups of people who encounter each other in the clinic, patients, visitors and staff, have in common a degree of strain and tension. The patients suffer from handicaps, pain, fears, loneliness and boredom. The visitors bear a burden of care and worries. They either share the suffering or experience repeated visits as troublesome. Finally the staff are subject to the stress of challenging and exhausting work. All of them need a positive counterweight.

For this reason the Colour Wall eschews organic forms of all kinds. Everything that is organic carries associations and connotations in a hospi-





tal, which has an impressive abundance of visual scenarios ranging from the abstraction of an X-ray image to a tangible open wound. The images that have to be seen and digested, and are usually laden with meaning, are quickly recalled to mind when organic analogies are presented by art. The clinic is a highly sensitive frame of reference for visual impressions. Images are perceived and interpreted in a more problematic way here than in other areas of life. This is why the Colour Wall is based from the very beginning not on an organic but on an entirely innocuous, geometrical visual language, a structure that is directed towards organising colour. In respect of colour, the painting adopts

the voice of the architecture. The potential represented by the basic architectural colours is opened up and used to the full. The suggestive power of painting is needed in order to make the message of these colours so perceptible that they touch people. The characteristics of being healthy, bright, fresh, hopeful, cheerful and positive establish a counterpoint to the everyday business of the clinic, reviving and breathing life into people, whether they come for a single visit, are waiting impatiently to recover, or perform their strenuous duties here every day.

The response to the eloquence of colour is increased identification. The hospital acquires its own

unmistakable character. Everyone can say: I am not just in some clinic or other, I am in my clinic. Visitors find here not only people who are close to them, but on repeat visits also a spatial situation which they can recognise, which they have made their own through their perceptions and accept as something familiar. The feeling of familiarity that is attached to the occasion of the visit is thus echoed and reinforced. Visits can quickly be experienced as encounters with relatives and friends on familiar terrain. For patients, closer identification promotes the feeling of having a temporary home. They settle into their hospital ward, which gives them little scope for individuality. If they are able to leave the room, their short

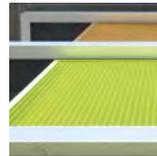
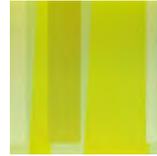
“excursions” are usually confined to the building. This building receives them, not with cold anonymity, but by providing sensations with which they can emotionally “settle in”, which they can visit and return to, and about which they can talk with others. This community-related identification, this feeling of togetherness, is of particular importance for all those who work in the clinic – for doctors, nurses, auxiliary staff and administrators. The community feeling for “our clinic” is founded on many factors, especially on the collegial spirit of those who work together. All of these factors are combined when there is an image at the centre of perception and imagination to which the feeling of togetherness can be

related. The common feelings of everybody come together in an image. However, the prerequisite for identification is identity. By collaborating closely in their conceptual approach, architecture and painting jointly underpin the identity of the clinic.

All of the above refers to the perception of the Colour Wall in its character as a wall painting, in its connection to the conditions of a place and in its relationship to a definable group of people. These things determine the Colour Wall. It is a public surface from its origins. Whereas in easel painting a piece of canvas is the artist’s private surface – entirely his own surface, for which he is

empowered to take every imaginable decision – the wall that is to be painted is a public surface which is connected to dependencies and expectations. The canvas belongs to the painter. The wall, by contrast, belongs to the others, to those who are present in front of it. On a canvas the painter looks to his own development, but on the wall he enters a relationship to fellow humans in their situation in life. Easel painting too is communicative and directed to the beholder. But here it is the beholder who enters the world of the painter. When painting a mural, by contrast, the artist enters the world of the beholder and adds something to this world. His responsibility is not to anonymous, random viewers of art, but to





people who can be specifically described and are defined by the place at which they encounter the wall painting. They have in a sense proprietors' rights to the wall, and the painter is only a person who has come to that place. Overstating, it could be said that in easel painting the onus is on the beholder to perceive, while in the case of a mural the onus is on the artist to create. People do not spend time in the clinic for the sake of art but for other reasons. Even if they notice the art and perhaps enjoy doing so, other things have priority. The artist must accept and respect this. The Colour Wall takes a constructive approach to this fact by responding to people's concerns, wishes and occupations, in short to their priori-

ties, and reinforces a message that is addressed to the life of the clinic. This is what characterises the status of a public mural.

The Colour Wall conveys an additional message. The above-mentioned functions of providing emotional impulses and bringing about identification are not necessarily tied to the genre of painting and the status of being art. Interior design and decoration could also be employed to this end. Art, by contrast, has potential with a wider reach. The Colour Wall as a work attempts to transcend painting and to unfold a poetry of its own. It opens up to pure artistic contemplation. In this way it "speaks" on two levels. For the

numerous people who walk to and fro each day on the main axis, it provides positive signals and changes the way they experience the space. For those who examine the Colour Wall as a painting, as if they were standing in a museum gallery, it makes accessible the expected depth, and in this case an epic dimension. In this way the Colour Wall is at one and the same time a programme for the "majority" and also for the "minority", and provides everyone with an opportunity to contemplate art. It is an open offering, always available and accessible for the eye that wishes to see more.

So much for the description of the Colour Wall as a mural. It responds to an authentic functional

location, to the people in the location and to individual architecture, in this case to the design of Hascher Jehle.

However, as mentioned at the beginning, the Colour Wall can also be described as a painting on an unusual surface. This relates to its dimensions, with a length of 176 metres. It relates to its proportions: two extremely thin rectangles lying one above the other. And finally it relates to its contour, which is characterised not only by a division into levels on two storeys but also by many diverse recesses and projections for doors, equipment or functional surfaces. To this is added the positioning of individual surfaces on a plane

further back. This complexity in the contours of the surface has fundamental effects on the way it is perceived: what the eye encounters here is not only a confrontation with the artefact, which is regarded as the usual and almost as the natural state of affairs. On the contrary, the eye has to submit to a process of walking along the artefact. The Colour Wall cannot all be registered simultaneously. It can only be taken in successively.

Thus perception of the wall is identical with everyday movements on the main axis. The Colour Wall has been conceived for the passer-by who walks along the axis as if along a street. His movement coincides with the progressive act

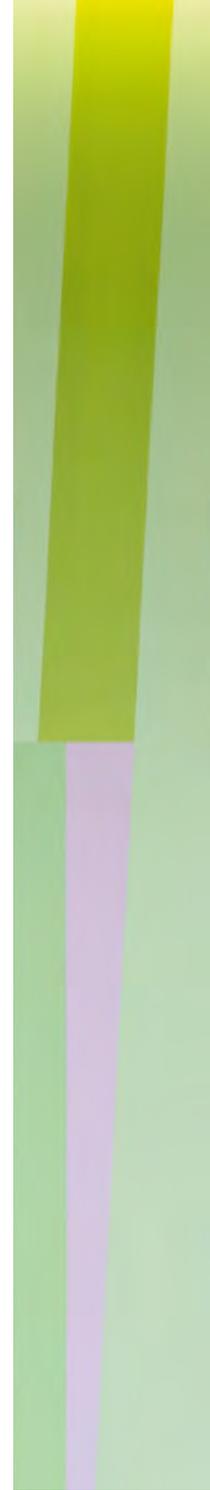
of perception. In this way, seeing is integrated into everyday life in a coherent way. It becomes authentic. And it becomes natural.

Successive perception is part of the distinctive nature of the Colour Wall. This has a number of consequences, first of all for its dramaturgy. Dramaturgy as a parameter is transferred outward to the point of view of the beholder. The beholder's dramaturgy is substituted for the dramaturgy of the image. The Colour Wall itself contains no kind of focus, no differentiation of emphasis, no departure from the continuum. The dramaturgy is replaced by the progression. This produces a continuum of steps and changes









in colour, of the sequence and rhythm of surfaces, and of the steps and phases of change. Above all it produces a continuum of vitality. The continuum ensures the consistency throughout that is indispensable in the extreme format of the Colour Wall. The highly fragmented perception of it, its division into levels on two storeys and the numerous gaps in it for doors and niches, inevitably weakens the perceptible identity of the image. This must be counteracted by a high degree of consistency in its structure, so that the content of the mural retains its identity at all times and in all places. The beholder has to remain “at home” in the Colour Wall, always and everywhere. Even though the Colour Wall consists

of many possible impressions and seems to generate many images, it in fact remains one single image. Even though viewers recognise the same image everywhere, they always see different colour content. In the continuum of changing colour chords, they find “colour locations” that either welcome them or keep them at a distance. The Colour Wall takes account of preferences. Successive perception favours this arrival at places. Places arise not only through their own particular colour character, but also through sections that differ by means of their surface structure from the other sections. The sequence of sections is, like everything else, subject to a systematic continuum. The combina-

tion of section-specific surface design and colour allows beholders to identify and recognise places, to stay clear of them or to take possession of them. They always know where they are and are therefore never abandoned to a sensation of being lost on an anonymous strip, but are always at a place to which some relationship can exist.

Successive perception is at the same time perspectival perception. This makes a chronological process evident in an intense way. Those looking forwards see a continuum of coloured surfaces that diminishes more and more as it approaches a distant vanishing point. That which approaches becomes larger in scale, then monumental, and

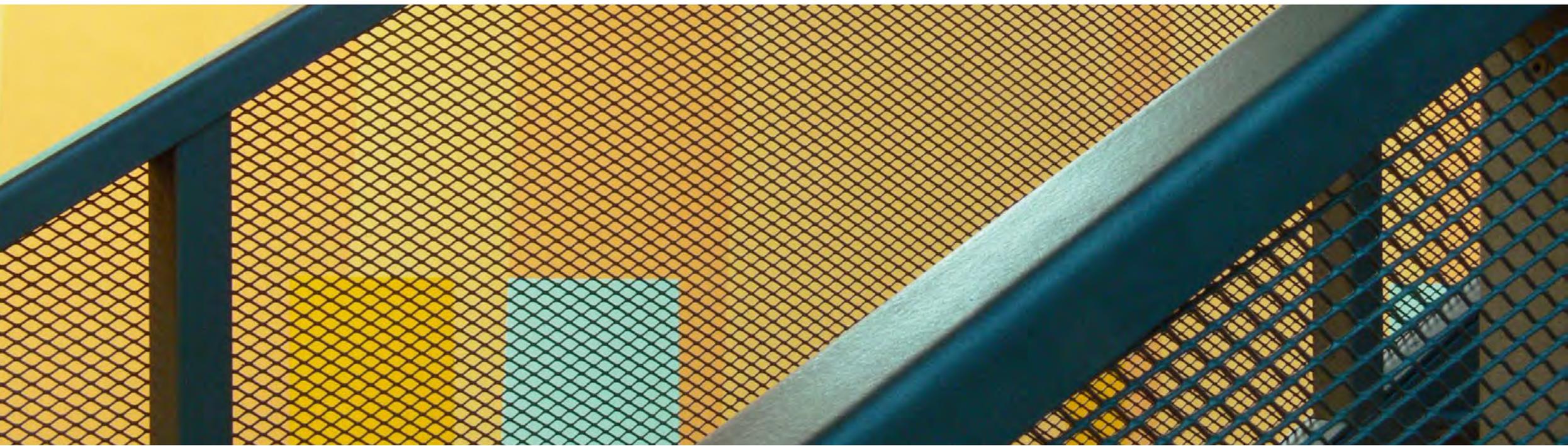
exceeds the scope of view before suddenly switching to invisibility. At the zenith of its visibility and proximity it thus develops a forceful presence and dominates everything else for one extremely short moment. Here an analogy to the phenomenon of time is perceived: from the future there emerges a present, which gradually announces itself and then grows to a dominance that displaces everything else before being swallowed up by the past. In this system of perpetual motion, one present succeeds another – on the wall, colour by colour. All of this is part of the dramaturgy of viewing. To this is added a phenomenon that could be termed “colour-centricity”, because wherever the viewer is

situated, the colour of that particular place forms the dominant centre. In the course of a walk along the wall, the verticals shift and form a continuous flux. Although the distance between them varies, it is based on the size of a human step. Even if they are considerably greater or smaller, their arithmetic mean lies within the range of the human step. While the verticals flow like a marching column of opened-out blades, the horizontals shoot past like a chain of lying arrows. Their relationship to humans lies in their height, which changes from one section to another. On the upper storey it is on the one hand the height of a child that is held up with outstretched arms, on the other hand the height of

the surface of a bed that is being wheeled past. On the lower storey it is the height of a raised foot, and eye level.

As soon as the beholder moves out of the dynamic process of successive perception, he can take up a static position. He can find a position in relation to the Colour Wall, pause in a state of rest, and immerse himself in the section of the Colour Wall that lies before him. He switches to a conventional, simultaneous viewing of at least one small part of the Colour Wall. The physical motion that has determined the process of perception has come to a standstill and been replaced by motion that is intrinsic





to the image. The beholder notices this when he has become accustomed to standing still and pays attention to the painting without distraction. He sees the dominance of the vertical boundaries, some of which are precisely upright, while others are set at a slightly diverging diagonal. The interplay of the diagonal with the upright appears to relax the vertical principle, but in fact confirms it. It creates the impression of a gently moving curtain or the feeling that the wind is moving through grass, reeds or a cornfield. The painting seems to breathe. It also seems to open up, because the sequence of colours and their arrangement in seemingly moving vertical strips unlocks spatial depth, as if the

beholder were looking into a forest. The impression of a forest of colour is strengthened by the broad panorama, as the eye is not constrained by boundaries to the image. It becomes autonomous, breaks free and loses itself to the left and at the same time to the right in the boundlessness of the long Colour Wall.

The continuum in the organisation of this mural reinforces this sweeping of the eye. Thus the beholder will not be able to concentrate on the one image that he has chosen, but will see many different images in a continuous changing, and thus revert to the successive perception of being in motion. His gaze cannot reach the

boundaries of the Colour Wall. The sheer length of the wall prevents this.

The way in which the Colour Wall engages with the person viewing it has already been discussed. It takes effect on a heterogeneous public. A distinction can be drawn between viewers who turn to the wall with interest and readiness to regard it, and those who walk along the axis with other thoughts and a different focus, and are hardly able to avoid perceiving the Colour Wall. The fact that the wall is able to fulfil its responsibility to both groups of persons, and offers communicative added value to both, is due to its structure, its syntax, the shaping

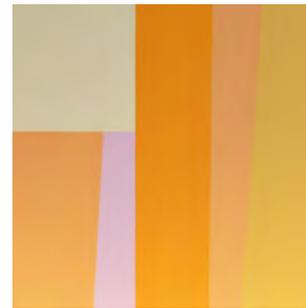
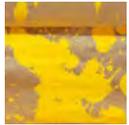
of its identity. Therefore the above description of the Colour Wall on the basis of the reality of its perception now needs to be complemented by an examination of its structure.

The Colour Wall describes a path. Its physical extent and to the same extent its substance and content are determined by the idea of a path. This motif is expressed in colour, so that the Colour Wall could with equal justification be called a Colour Path. Colour is made into a path by putting into a logical sequence the three basic colours, and as a next step the orchestration of them by means of differentiation and variety of colour. This logic is the continuum. It is not

the static coexistence of blocks but the successive flow of a colour movement that corresponds to the motif of a path. The task therefore consisted in defining a meaningful sequence of colours. The starting point was an overall orientation by allocating the basic colours to the organisation of the building. Taking the west-to-east direction, the clinic consists, in terms of the colour design of the system of orientation, of a yellow, a green and an orange pavilion. The Colour Wall thus adopts a basic order of yellow – green – orange. In order to form a path without hindrance, these zones of colour must visibly be linked. They must flow into each other. This flowing of the zones into each other is the chromatic programme

of the Colour Wall. In this process a given colour tone is not changed imperceptibly, but – to stay with the musical analogy – many notes are used, forming a melodious and rhythmic composition. Legato and staccato, leaps and intervals, rhythm and syncopation enrich its microstructure, while the macrostructure performs a gentle transition from yellow to green and then orange.

In each colour zone, the basic colour is complemented and extended by 15 further colour tones. The yellow zone begins with colours that are marked by an unambiguous yellow character, and then evolves to shades of colour that are





increasingly close to green. The green zone takes up this movement in that yellow-green tones are initially dominant, until they are gradually replaced by colder, but still very light greens. This section concludes in an intertwining with colder shades of orange. The orange zone begins here, with the colour orange gradually displacing the greens. This development then moves towards warmer shades of orange of increasing redness. The flow of colour is enlivened by contrasting colours that do not originate in the scale of yellow, green or orange but add a chromatic counterpoint, so that the yellow is experienced more consciously as yellow, the green more strongly as green, and the orange

more intensely as orange. The counter-colours open up additional potential of the basic colours to take effect.

The colour programme is linked to the structure of the surfaces. Each of the three zones is divided into 10 sections (each 5.80 m wide). These sections can be distinguished thanks their entwined alternating horizontals. However, they can be experienced only as “colour locations”, which provide orientation and, beyond that, make identification possible. For it is only a colour that makes a section unique. The viewer will find greater appeal in one colour location than in others. This too is part of the vitality of the path.

The sequence of the colour locations and their colours is subject to a principle. This principle is repeatedly breached, in order to give more effect to the artistic energy of the mural, but these divergences confirm a rule that the viewer can see for himself. In each section, 3 of the 15 colour tones of a zone are employed. These three are joined in each section by a fourth, the basic colour. In the next section but one, three different colours are used. The section between these two always interlinks the different colours of its neighbouring sections. Thus 3 of the 15 colour tones are present in 2 sections, which means that 5 colour scenarios cover a total of 10 sections. In the whole Colour Wall with its

three zones, 15 colour scenarios are employed for 30 sections. The Colour Wall therefore uses 45 colour tones in addition to the basic colours.

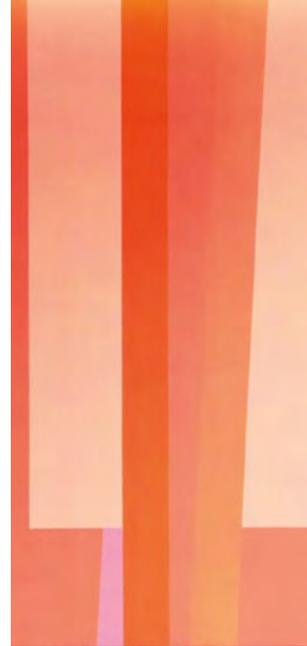
So much for the colour structure of the wall along its length. To this are added the formal relationships between the two levels on two storeys. The sections on the two storeys are exactly positioned one above the other. The individual vertical strips of colour continue from one level to the next, not only as verticals but also when they are slightly diagonal.

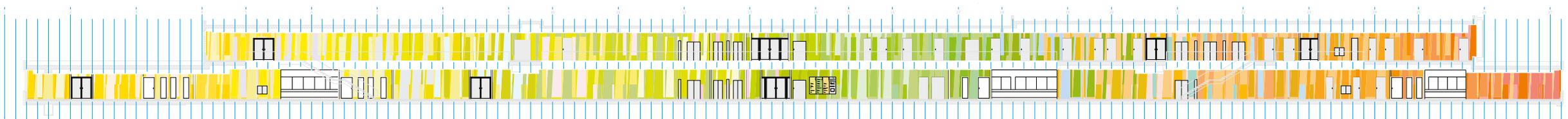
The horizontal break creates a further relationship. This break, at a different height in each

section, produces boundaries for fields that do not, like the other areas, extend over the full height of the wall, but end at an intermediate height. By this means the Colour Wall consists of full-height vertical fields – from the floor to the ceiling – and reduced fields, tongue-shaped and inserted from above or from below into the height of the wall: from above when the horizontal break is placed low, and from below when it is placed high, so that the rectangular “tongue area” always crosses the mid-point of the wall’s height. The sections with tongues from above are followed by sections with tongues inserted from below. Seen across both storeys, this is always a counter-acting movement.

The surfaces either pull away from the division between the storeys, or they move towards each other.

The change in colours reacts to this structure with its own logic. In full-height fields there is an alternation of two colours, which applies to the section in question. For fields which do not cover the full height of the wall, by contrast, the two other colours of the section alternate. This alternation is repeated in reverse on the other storey. In this way the alternation of colours from storey to storey “crosses over”. The counter-point of the fields is thus accompanied by a divergence of colour.





This explanation of the design principle does not, however, always correspond to the reality, because the design of the Colour Wall is adjusted at certain points if the desired quantity and weighting of colour, the harmonious flow of the sequence, or an interruption through a door or a niche make optimisation necessary. The purpose of the principle is not that necessity or rigidity dictate, but that the whole is coherent. This coherence remains perceptible as the dominant motif despite numerous divergences.

It is only the coherence of the image that makes the Colour Wall what its name says: a wall, and thus a single entity. As the Colour Wall is usually

perceived in part, and if it is perceived as a whole then only in succession, the individual perceptions require strong structural relationships in order to establish the impression of one whole. The whole is the path, which only retains its continuity throughout if the perceptions are not uncoupled and detached. The path may therefore not be uneven. On the other hand, a feeling of monotony may not arise. Coherence must be coupled with vitality. These two criteria and the tension between them determine the strategy of the mural. Coherence and vitality together constitute the nature of an organism. And they find a purpose in the function of the Colour Wall and what it offers the beholder.

These explanations have now come full circle: both characteristics create identification. Coherence reinforces the relationship to the entirety of the Colour Wall and thus to the clinic. Vitality reinforces an association to individual places and thus to points of orientation. This is the concept of the Colour Wall in the Rems-Murr-Klinikum Winnenden. – The path is open.

The Colour Wall of the Rems-Murr-Klinikum Winnenden/Germany
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