PALE NORDIC ARCHITECTURE
Why are our walls so white?
The aim was to investigate the perception of whiteness in Nordic architecture and analyse the reasons behind the pale colour scheme in a public space context. The word pale was used alongside with white, since it gave broader possibilities to ponder over the topic. The geographical research area was framed to cover Sweden and Finland, although the search for underlying reasons extended beyond the borders of the North. Architecture was viewed as an entity, including both exteriors and interiors. The focus was on reasoning around the question “why” to arouse professional discourse about the often-unquestioned topic. Analysing the background of a commonly acknowledged phenomenon strives to make architects more conscious of the background of their aesthetics so that future decisions can be based on a more complex set of knowledge rather than leaning on tradition.

Because of the wide demarcation of the research question, the project started with self-formulated hypothesis, after which they were thoroughly analysed. The formulated pre-assumptions were, that the Nordic paleness is, firstly, a consequence of misinterpreted past architecture. Moreover, natural circumstances of the North, the symbolism connected to white and the tradition of canonising modernism were established as hypothesis. Lastly, architect education, combined with the tendency of prototyping with white materials were assumed to endorse the pale colour scheme. The misinterpretations’ possible implication in the perception of whiteness was also examined as a part of the research. Justification for the hypothesis was found, although broad framing meant that the reference material was splintered. Personal reflection was used as a means for cohesion. The paper includes a concise artistic element in the form of an introductory poem to each chapter.

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White colour is seen to be neutral and white light contains all the colours of the spectrum. White is also the liturgical colour of The Divine in Christianity.
My walls are as pale as my skin.

What does that make me?

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1 FROM WHERE I STAND
– INTRODUCTION

Nordic architecture is commonly perceived as white. It is part of the appeal that is connected to the minimalistic Scandinavian design style. Whether the domestic interiors are as white as assumed is hard to measure. Nevertheless, given the fact that we, architects and interior architects, design for users, I consider the public’s common view of the prevailing whiteness a relevant starting point for my thesis. The same pre-assumption has, for example, been used earlier by Mark Wigley (2001) in the book *White Walls, Designer Dresses*, where he discusses the whiteness in modernist architecture throughout clothing rhetoric, and Henry Plummer (2012) in the book *Nordic light Modern Scandinavian architecture*. Since Finland is not part of Scandinavia, I will define the Nordic countries as my geographical context, although the search for underlying reasons extends beyond the borders of the North. Mainly Finnish and Swedish references are showcased, and when the word “our” is used it refers to this context. The photographs used as illustration are mainly from my personal files, to showcase the familiarity of the discussed topic.

Even though white walls are the most visible materialisation of the topic, I consider “white” being too limited of an expression for describing the subject alone. Instead, I will call the phenomenon concerned “Pale Nordic Architecture” and will attempt to answer the question: *Why are our walls so white?* For example, the architect Alvar Aalto used much white in his works but they also contained a whole scale of muted tones and blonde wood (picture 3). Due to the broad demarcation of the research question the reference material is collected from several keysources. Aforementioned publication from Plummer, for example, is used to proof that Nordic conditions lead for their part to the pale colour scheme. Moreover, Kenya Hara’s (2010) book *White* is used as inspiration in chapter two examining white’s symbolism, whereas comparing differences between Nordic and American schooling with the architect Michael Dudley (2018) is the basis for debating architect education’s impact on the topic. The paper contains plenty of personal reflecting to glue the broad framing together. Each chapter starts with an aphorism or a poem to introduce the upcoming theme.

In the domestic environment, one can customise the surroundings according to one’s personal liking, but in architectural practices the wider impact is accomplished in the context of public space. Therefore, I will define public spaces as an area of interest in this study. The different natures of public spaces make their life cycles remarkably varying, and it is easier to find colourful public spaces where the lifecycle is shorter and more dictated by fashion. For example, in restaurant design fashion colours seem to come in relatively often. That is to say that I am not declining the existence of bolder colours within the framing of this study. Yet, all the schools I have ever studied at during my almost two-decade long study path, have been notably pale in their interior. Interest to this thesis topic aroused during my exchange year at Konstfack, University of Arts, Design and Crafts, in Stockholm. The surrounding white walls are notably in contrast with the colourful pieces
that Konstfack’s students produce. I became to wonder, if the white walls are reflecting the school’s image for what is really is.

Knowledge is crucial whenever there is the will to make conscious decisions. Although there seems to be an agreement of the Scandinavian whiteness, the question ‘why’ still remains under a veil. Maybe the lack of study on the reasons behind the pale colour scheme is a consequence of the qualitative definition. I consider the topic being relevant in its timeless essence. Whiteness appears to emerge in our built environment time after time, even when the nature of interiors is not permanent (Aaltonen 2010, 20). I think, that the question of local identity and recognisable characteristics is, furthermore, an interesting one in relation to the ever-globalising world, where cultures are more mixed together. What is worth maintaining and what ideals are we prepared to give up?

In this study, I will parse pre-assumed hypothesis of the reasons behind the paleness simultaneously analysing and contextualizing through various historical and aesthetic references. I attempt to distinguish and categorise different factors behind the paleness and draw clear strands from them. I aim to impact architects’ consciousness of their aesthetics and make them question why. I will not separate architects and interior architects if the reference material does not clearly delineate since both practitioners influence public interiors. Besides the profession of the interior architect is remarkably young (Aaltonen 2010, 15; 96) considering the framework of this study. Interiors, however, have coexisted alongside the exteriors at least as long as there has been human built environment.

The topic may give an impression of a biased view, since the word pale may be negatively loaded, referring to something inferior or unimpressive, but the word is used as a conscious rhetoric device. I want to question the background of my personal and professional aesthetics, which is naturally drawn to the lighter tones. I want to arouse a discourse within the field of the importance of colours and the education surrounding them.
White is the colour for the virgin bride to wear, the colour of innocence.

It is the colour of pure fresh bed sheets, clean towels and underwear; the colour of the shiny 20 x 20 tiles and the toilet seat and the washbasin. White is the colour for anything tidy.

The appliances are white as well. Paper is white like styrofoam and foamboard, waiting to be transformed into a new form.

Then there is the white canvas.

You can watch the white clouds go by and sit on the white sand picking up white seashells.

You can stare at the white moon and try to capture its essence on marble or snow.

White is the colour of my skin and the dandruff when the skin is too dry. White is the colour of the skeleton underneath. Ghosts are white too.

White reflects light best and white is the light, all colours combined in one.

And yet white is the colour of ultimate neutrality.

Religion has played a significant role as a cultural influencer in the past, and the colour white has a visible role in Christian liturgy. I consider it worth noticing, that in Christianity white is the liturgical colour for joy, thankfulness, purity and bliss, even if I cannot state that the positive connotations to white originate to religion. White is also the Christianly colour of God, Christ, angels and The Divine and is represented in many of the religious ceremonies such as baptisms, confirmations and weddings. (Kairavuo 2018.) Even other spiritual characters like ghosts have been portrayed as white, which I believe suggests that white creates spiritual associations beyond the reach of religion’s influence. Some English sayings containing the word white often imply to the connotations of the colour. White as snow, for example, refers to something that is pure, clean, innocent and unspoiled (Bourn 2018).

There are many similarities with the Christian view of the colour white and connotations which can be considered non-religious. The concept of purity is many times related to whiteness. The innocent virgin bride has traditionally worn white to a Christian wedding, but so have many other religious Practices and care personnel in hospitals. Maybe the association with pure white derives from the fact that dirt shows easily on pale surfaces and therefore demand an effort in keeping them clean. Perhaps it is the honour towards the cleaning act which causes the respect, like the graphic designer Kenya Hara (2010, 69), too, suggests poetically, when describing the maintenance of Japanese garden. Nevertheless, many spaces that require extreme cleanliness, like laboratories are often white, which may partially cause one of the few connotations, that can be interpreted as negative, meaning sterile. Other less flattering associations that can arise in excessively white spaces are emptiness, isolation and ignorance (Bourn 2018). One aspect of white’s symbolism that cannot be ignored is the colour’s presence in racial discourse. In its most extreme form, it is used as a symbol of white supremacy.

Even in cultures where white is the colour of grief, as in Japan, it is still connected to new beginnings (Olesen 2018). The notion of new beginnings can be related to the symbol that an empty white paper or canvas carries, the expectation to be purposed (Hara 2010, 67). The idea of neutrality...
and anonymity can be attributed to the concepts of peace, calm, comfort and hope, often portrayed with the colour white. White light has equal quantities of all the colours in the spectrum (Hara 2010, 8), and can therefore be seen carrying both their positive and negative aspects. Hence white could also be seen as impartial and independent. White reflects light best of all the colours and there are many light-related connotations to white, which can again be traced to the Christian idea of the divine light. Because of the colour’s light reflecting qualities, white surfaces do not get as hot as darker ones. White coolness could therefore be associated with a feeling of relief in warmer climates or even here in the North during the Summer months.

White materials and objects are often perceived to be light weight, however those found in nature, such as marble and chalk used for decoration throughout history are not. While white is conceived to be the lightest of all colours can the white material and objects found in the nature carry a significant amount of weight. Whiteness can be found in flora and fauna, but also in milk and eggs, which can again lead to thoughts of innocence, due to their perishable nature. On the lighter end of nature’s white-spectrum are clouds, which are perceived to be weightless. In Christian rhetoric, heaven lies above us and in religious art, angels are often portrayed sitting on the edge of a cloud.

What makes symbols attractive to use is their openness for interpretation. If we consider white as a symbol, its appeal in both exteriors and interiors is easy to explain through its symbolic values. I don’t acknowledge any God, yet I have a spiritual experience when I go to one of my favourite sites, Erik Bryggman’s Resurrection chapel (1941) in Turku (picture 5). Although I have never attended a funeral in the chapel, which is its intended purpose, I have an emotional encounter with the architecture. The light meets the whitewashed walls, there is serenity as the surroundings breathes. On the white background of the altar, a vine plant reaches towards the light which seems to glare from nowhere. Daylight reveals the uneven finish of the pale whitewash, which narrates a human touch and makes the walls tactile. As Kenya Hara (2010) puts it:

Symbols’ receptivity makes them attract attention and they can represent innumerable meanings. There is no right or wrong reading of a symbol. There may be different levels of receptiveness for a symbol in terms of its functionality; yet, since the symbol itself is empty to begin with, it can be neither evil or good. (Hara 2010, 49.)

![Picture 5. Erik Bryggman’s Resurrection chapel in Turku is surrounded by nature.](image-url)
What?
No. No, I can't.

What?!
Do you mean the white thing?

Well, what do you mean then?

Mankind seems to have an inbuilt desire to repeat known patterns and the repetition has clear occurrence in architecture as well; Maybe, at times, it has been a consequence of not questioning the tradition in the art of building; Sometimes it has been triggered by archaeological findings. We can point out, in the light of history, that some findings have been misinterpreted. Perhaps the most severe known archaeological misinterpretation, the Greek Antique, caused a domino effect, which carried through centuries and thus influenced how the built environment has been tinted. But would we know, if we were basing our decisions, today, on distorted references, too?

Antique is undoubtedly the most reincarnated style throughout the history of our built environment. The admiration to ancient culture was beneficial to architecture, since it was considered the "mother" of visual arts. Greek temples, which became the ideal and reference for beauty and proportion, were long thought to be carved in raw white marble even though they were painted colourful. (Gympel 1996, 6; 10.) While creating the basis for modern art history research in keeping with the 18th century praise for knowledge, Johann Winckelmann attributed to the myth of white Antique, by literally scrubbing away the evidence of history from the surfaces of marble statues. (O’Donnel 2011.) The three column styles from different eras of ancient Antique (Gymbel 1996, 8) can still be found copied on façades and compression members. While knowledge and fashion travelled first slow, are the traces of idolised white Antique apparent in later classical architecture, even in the Nordic countries.

Neoclassical architecture brought the ideals of ancient Greek architecture back to life, when the Age of Enlightenment lifted its head in 18th century (Gymbel 1996, 62). Its Swedish replication got its name after the coeval king Gustav III and was called the Gustavian style. Whiteness was one of the characteristics, that separated the Nordic style from its international reference, Rococo, which was leaning more towards pastel colours. (Isohauta 2017.) When Finland was handed to Russia in 1809, the Finnish classical architecture evolved towards the Empire style. In Helsinki, the Senate Square and the surrounding area became the concentration of the style, when the city became the capital of Finland. The German architect, Carl Ludvig Engel, was hired to plan the political, religious, scientific and commercial buildings around the square (picture 7). The Ancient ideal of white is clearly visible in the market place surroundings shown for instance in various pillars, both on façades and indoors. (Isohauta 2017.)

After the century shift’s National Romantic era, the style pendulum repeated itself and the art of building returned to the tradition of ancient architecture. The 1920s classicism was again a more reduced interpretation of the white ideals of the Antique era. (Gymbel 1996, 80 – 86.) One of the best-known architects influencing that period in the Nordic countries is the Swedish architect Erik
Asplund, who’s City Library of Stockholm (picture 8), built between 1920 – 1928, is an iconic representative to the 1920s classicism (Lindvall 1992, 47; 68 – 67). Viewed from inside, the most striking feature must be the ceiling view. In the whitewashed round shaped hall, the eye is drawn to the monumental white pendant light. The building has earned a canonised status within Nordic 20s-classicism. However, the City Library also possesses characteristics from Functionalism. The transition from Classicism to Functionalism happened slowly during the 20’s and 30’s and many buildings cannot be categorised as either. Functionalism started a new era in architecture known as Modernism.

The architect Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye (1929 – 1931) became a symbol for the new international style. Functionalistic aspiration followed the ideals of the new industrialised society. Industrialisation and technological development was applied to the field of architecture. (Fazio etc. 2004, 481 – 483) Villa Savoye celebrates functionalism with its era-typical characteristics: a line of ribbon windows for good daylight intake and white chalk brush on the outer walls. White became a well-motivated choice in the essence of form follows function, the function of light here being to reflect light. Whiteness and its perceived neutrality was also in line with the “absence of ornament” ideal. Canonised Villa Savoye is probably best known for its white façade, which I think, might be a leading reason for the perception of its whiteness. But by the time Villa Savoye was finished, Le Corbusier was already an avowed polychrome modernist. Polychrome modernists wanted to introduce colour into architecture: One group as an integrated part of the architecture, the other group as separate addition in a form of art. (Klinkhammer 2004., 429 – 430.)

In her article, Creation of the Myth: “White” Modernism, the architect Barbara Klinkhammer (2004) points out four reasons for the perceived whiteness of the modernistic architecture. Firstly, she claims, that there was a conscious creation of the myth through publications, which included both black and white photographs and critiques’ non-existing utterance about used colours. Mono-chrome photos failed to show the muted tones which Le Corbusier used in Villa Savoy. Klinkhammer gives examples of understated discussion about used colours, which also Mark Wigley (2001) pays attention to, although his emphasis is on the discourse about the modernistic whiteness, which he seems to accept. Secondly and thirdly, according to Klinkhammer, the corrupted image of Modernism’s whiteness is a consequence of “emancipation of architecture from abstract painting” and “the absence of an aesthetic discussion during the CIAM congress of 1928” and fourthly, what I consider interesting regarding my thesis “the glorification of modernism by later generations.” (Klinkhammer 2004, 431.)
I claim, that most off the commonly known architectural gems, even in the North, are known by their façades rather than by their interiors. Interiors contain inevitably more variety of used materials, which intrinsically carry a vaster range in colour tones. Some sites which are better known for their interiors, like Aalto’s Paimio sanatorium from 1933, could have suffered from monochrome photographs used earlier. It is hard to tell, whether the conscious “whitewashing” appeared in the Nordic context, but the glorification certainly carried all the way to our high latitudes. We, of course, have our own heroes, like Alvar Aalto in Finland or Bruno Mathsson in Sweden, whose sites we can still go and see, since many of them are protected. But since the conservation system needs time-perspective for approving a building as built heritage, as the architect Michael Dudley (2018) points out in an interview, the interiors have often been changed many times before a site gets the stamp of approval. Klinkhammer (2004) mentions the 1970’s period, when, once more as a name of restoration, the walls of modernistic buildings where painted white “despite evident traces of color”. Funnily enough, the resemblance to what happened with ancient Antique is obvious. (Klinkhammer 2004, 431.)

The sites that are conserved are often part of our public space housing stock and therefore contribute to the common perception of Nordic whiteness. In the light of glorified Modernism incorporated with its possible misinterpretations it could be predicted that the Nordic paleness will continue to be reproduced at the hands of new generations of architects.
“To the light of my life”

I wait for you.
I need you.
I would do anything for you.
When you’re here, I can’t get enough off you.
I will invite you to all the parties:
weddings, family occasions, picnics and grill feasts.
Sometimes you show up
and sometimes you leave me hanging.
But when you are there, you light up the space.
You make my mood.
Your absence makes me blue.
To live with you is the only life worth living for.

People have built temples for you!
Endless testimonies of love!
And yet, you always do as you please.
Oh, Sun,
How I adore you!

Sunlight is a precondition to life and its distribution on Earth is not even. Daylight circumstances in higher latitudes are extreme: During long winter months the Sun barely shows itself whereas around midsummer it does not go below the horizon level in Lapland region and even elsewhere in the North the summer days are long. These extreme circumstances, with clear connections to health (Tragenza et al. 2011, 12 – 14), have undoubtedly contributed to the pale scale used in our interiors, when architects have worked with accessible blond materials to maximise the intake of available natural light. Our native domicile has evolved from a shady shack (Böök 2015) to the praise of paleness. My question is, whether the developments in lighting technology have engendered circumstances where we could work with a broader scheme of colours. Furthermore, can daylight create an effect that adds to the value of the architecture and how does it relate to the whiteness? Plummer (2012, 12 – 13) points out in his book Nordic light Modern Scandinavian architecture, that daylight carries a self-contained state in Nordic architecture, which cannot be explained only via function.

Pale surfaces reflect more light than darker ones, carrying the lightest colour value, does it the best. It has likely been one of the most used motivations of using pale interior colours in Nordic countries, where the daily doses of sunlight is limited. Accessible materials have commonly been used and forest and its trees, also known as the green gold, has been and still is a highly used resource for the Nordic architecture. Wood architecture, for instance, is highly valued. The wood sorts we have are relatively light-toned naturally and therefore even the architectural sites with a broad use of wood are relatively pale. “Reflective finishes, from white plaster and blond wood to ceramic tile and silvery concrete, avoid the premature absorption of light, while helping to spread illumination to every corner of the space” states Plummer (2012), but suggests that light combined with the use of pale materials alludes back to the Nordic nature. Staying true to the surroundings is important, but I am contemplating when does coherence become mimicry?

Alvar Aalto’s way of handling natural light via soft curves on pale surfaces in his later buildings created gradients and smoother shadows was not a common means of working with light among the early modernists (Plummer 2012, 18). Soft shadows in Aalto’s architecture reminded one of snow landscapes, means Plummer, and motivates that precisely the metaphors to nature gives the light a more poetic, independent role in Nordic architecture. Plummer proposes, that the use of daylight with long tinted shadows helps one to situate one’s origin. (Plummer 2012, 8 – 9.) Sometimes material’s natural colour is covered with opaque white paint e.g. to maximise the immateriality of the space (Plummer, 2012, 22), even when honest materials are often preferred in modern architecture.

Sunlight hits Nordic latitudes on a wider angle due to the tilt of the Earth, which creates longer
shadows during winter and causes the light to contain more hues (Ahlin 2018). Plummer argues, that the shadows with blue and beige nuances become colour-like against the white walls (Plummer 2012, 19). Can it be, that architects have wanted to accentuate this unique Nordic feature by working with white surfaces in essence of “emphasise what you cannot hide”? I wonder, if the hype for daylight bulbs a few years back was an attempt to overcome the challenging natural light circumstances. Maybe the trend did not last, because the neutral white light does not feel authentic in our Nordic surroundings. Be that as it may, we have gone through a significant development in artificial lighting during last decades which, I think, gives us the chance to work more consciously with light as a part of interior and maybe even introduce a wider range of shades.

The role of lighting has traditionally been fundamental in art gallery context, and natural light has in many cases been introduced to the spaces via ceiling windows. The “neutral” white gallery space, which the corridors of Konstfack also are, have been criticised, for example, by Brian O’Doherty (1999) for not being what they stand for. In his critique O’Doherty focuses on the apparent illusion of neutrality, which in fact, is appealing to a homogenous group of people. (O’Doherty 1999, 79.) Vita Havet (picture 2), the main gallery space at Konstfack clearly draws certain kind of liberal art interested people. Generous ceiling height at Vita Havet combined with the flood of light elevate the atmosphere, whereas material choices stay true to building’s industrial past (Lindvall 1992, 81). Criticism towards the white walls steams from within the school. Still, white walls create a practical background to the showcased art, in my opinion. Different pale textures, shapes and tones make the architecture yet appealing in all its whiteness.

In gallery context light is used for highlighting wanted objects. It is a part of light’s characteristics that it reveals the hidden, for better and for worse, and thereby can also be a security factor. Sometimes these metaphors are utilised in architecture by using contrast between dark-toned façade and light white inside or, as in Stockholm’s City Library’s entrance (picture 9), to amplify the striking whiteness of the main hall against the gloomy entrée. No matter how the pale materials and textures are used in interiors, can light be the thing that brings it all together. (Plummer 2012, 19 – 20.) Light needs reflective surfaces in order to carry its independent meanings within architecture as Plummer suggests it. But could these reflective attributes in some cases be achieved throughout the finish of surfaces as an alternative to the pale scale?
What is worthy?
Clean and simple, they say.
Honest.

The built environment, including the pale Nordic one, is a materialisation of educated architects’ labour. Architect schooling contains both physical and conceptual aspects, that I believe, lead towards the whiteness. In this chapter I will use my personal study path as a main reference. An interview with Michael Dudley (2018), the U.S. born architect educated in North Carolina State University and Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm, implies that architect education does not have a lot of variation geographically or on a timeline. But should there be more differences in how architects and interior architects are trained? Both schoolings seem to have an ongoing motif of promoting white Modernism.

Everything starts with a piece of white paper, which comes with an expectation that it needs to be filled, touched, formed and folded (Hara 2010, 67). Untouched white paper encapsulates the beginning of one’s creating process: It is the moment, when everything is possible. We, architects, use often white translucent sketching paper because of its convenience; One can put layer after layer on top of each other and still see the earlier drawn lines; It makes refining lines easier. White foamboard is an essential as is milk paperboard, which we cut and bend to the wanted form. I feel, when working with these old-school materials, that I carry out the tradition and become part of a noble chain.

The three-dimensional sketching materials we tend to work with today are often rather pale, as well. Even the technological developments, that allow us to produce exact models faster, like 3d-printers, bow in front of the tradition. With access to many possible colour choices, students at Konstfack pick up white plastic thread almost every time instead of something else (Söder 2017). When prototyping our scale-models using other than white materials, we will still probably paint them white before presenting them to the public – even if the finalised object or space are never intended to be white. That is because we are taught, that white is the colour that leaves room for imagination. It is the colour for neutrality as earlier stated. It is easier to think that an originally white model would finally become red, than to think an end-result being green if the scale model was yellow. I still wonder, whether the tradition of creating white prototypes and sketches subconsciously directs us to design white.

Concerning the canonised architecture, I believe it is fair to say, that the most revered architects in Aalto university are the modernist ones. A similar trend could be said to be affecting Konstfack. They are represented as heroes of our field and their clean function first -style is portrayed as perfection. As earlier mentioned, the whitewash could have been interpreted as a part of the dematerialisation of the architecture (Wigley 2001, 3) and thus fitting to the modernistic aspiration. Do not get me wrong: I adore functionalistic architecture! I like the clean lines and pure simplicity. But
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I question whether I would be as jazzed up about the modernistic architecture, without the hype I have been exposed to during my studies. Is there a conflict between what architects are taught to like and what the public considers beautiful?

The researcher Susanna Aaltonen (2010) writes in her doctoral thesis, Sisustaminen on kuin käsi-
alau (Interior design is like handwriting), that one of the important tasks for practitioners working with interiors was to teach the public “good taste”: It was offered as simple dos and don’ts via mag-
azines. For example “Ett hem” introducing the Larssons’ family home, Lilla Hyttan, was a fash-
ionable model for good living in turn of the century. (Aaltonen 2010, 80.) Ironically, the rhetoric of fashion is applied in the discourse, even when the changes of fashion are at odds with architecture’s endeavour of long life (Wigley 2001, xx). Aalto university’s education for interior architects relies on tradition, teaching what is worthy and what not, compared with the one at Konstfack. It does not support individuals’ artistic growth as much: a case is the authoritarian grading system concerning artistic work. As already pointed out, a tendency to repetition can be identified among humans. When we, who create new architecture and interiors, only get to see the modernistic references, temptation to follow the path of mimicking might be irresistible; Recreating the simplified lines known to be appreciated within our field is a less daunting path.

Safe might be a degrading word for the noble white, but I am questioning if the safety factor plays a part in Nordic paleness. We are taught to pursue to design timeless spaces, which is somewhat in a conflict with the changing nature of interiors as mentioned in introduction chapter. I wonder, if we, architects, get afraid of using colours, when we do not want to be too influenced by the forever-changing nature of fashion. At Konstfack the colour studio had to recede and make place for new technology of 3d-printing, whereas in Aalto there is next to no colour composition education for architects. Examples of both schools backed up with the interview with Dudley (2018) imply that colours are not prioritised. Is it that we are afraid of being doomed not least by other architects? Are we then relying on making pale interiors?

Due to the positive connotations connected with the idea of white, I believe, we might be caught on the easiness of it. Why change something that is already perfect? When we combine symbolism to the fact of how well the colour shows an object’s form as consequence of its good light reflecting capability, it may get even harder to go away from the safety of whiteness. Ever since I started studying design, I have been taught to let material’s natural colour shine through. Honest materials, as Dudley (2018) puts it, are clearly a part of the modernist heritage and not a sole right in the North. Modernistic legacy sits on the shoulder whispering us to make neutral solutions and education of architects seems to support it. Discussing the differences between Dudley’s American/Swedish
picture 18. ateneum had an exhibition to highlight alvar aalto’s influence on international modernism in 2017. ceiling windows and white walls are traditional features in a gallery space.

architect education and my finnish/swedish interior architecture studies, led to a conclusion, that our schooling has been relatively similar. my concern is, that there is twenty years between our studies and our majors are different. i understand, that in dudley’s (2018) words “one cannot play the violin like a virtuoso at first” and thus the entity is shopped into more comprehensible parts in our studies. but, for example, pallasmaa (1994) has mentioned the meaning of colours as a part of architectural sensory experience (pallasmaa edit. weinthal 2011, 48). if we never discuss colours as a part of our studies, are not our tools to comprehend the entity limited? could it be colour composition that separates interior architects’ skills from architects’ mathematical knowledge and thus makes the union stronger?
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New white page, a new beginning?

6 CLOSING THE WHITE DOOR – CONCLUSION

The study was set out to localise the underlying reasons behind the pale interiors of the North, focusing on Finland and Sweden, and to analyse the reasons’ origin. The found reasons were, firstly, that white colour arouses almost exclusively positive connotations, and is therefore pleasant to use and, moreover, white’s considered neutrality suits well to the modernist aspirations. Secondly, the supposedly white Antique architecture influenced the later classical styles all the way to Modernism, which is today’s idolised architectural style. Modernist architecture is conceived to be white, but its whiteness may be yet another misinterpretation. Thirdly, long Nordic winters have required maximising the daylight-intake by using light reflective materials. Long shadows during winter months and shadows’ subtle tones create an architectural effect unique to the high latitudes, which is highlighted on the white walls. Fourthly and finally, architect education was found to support the whiteness by referring repeatedly to the canonised modernistic architecture, where whitewash is an alleged standard. Schooling also teaches working methods that lead the way to paleness.

I wanted to discover where my appeal to the naturally pale colour scheme comes from and hence gain means to consciously work away from it whenever desired. My aim was to provoke a discourse about the meaning of colours via tackling the most recognisable non-colour in our native surroundings. The study gives a better understanding of why the pale colour scheme comes from and hence gain means to consciously work away from it whenever desired. My aim was to provoke a discourse about the meaning of colours via tackling the most recognisable non-colour in our native culture, albeit the culture at some chapters came to cover more of the field of architecture rather than the Nordic context. Making an academic research with a broad framing and using the question “why” were obvious challenges in this study. On one hand, the fact that assumptions had to be made is a normal procedure. I felt that all the themes were crucial considering the topic of my thesis, even when a straight connection from the assumption to the conclusion was hard to proof. When the research question is why, one cannot frame certain aspects outside the study area knowingly. Due to the broad framing, the available reference material was splintered, but the breadth of the topic was handled by sorting the notions into separate chapters. The reflections done in this paper are based on prior research or looking the common perceptions through “paleness lenses”. I believe that the amount of personal reflection is justifiable considering the research question.

I do not want to declare a war against the innocent white. Vice versa, I think there will always be a place for a pale colour scheme in the North, not least due to the extreme daylight circumstances. Instead I want to arouse a discourse concerning colour in architecture. Although the references used in this paper were not always taking a stand on whiteness in architecture as a fact, they did agree on the lack of colour dialogue. I took a stand on the teaching methods from my schooling to provoke a debate. The awareness aims to move the emphasis from teaching traditional aesthetic into supporting artistic growth. I argue, that we should be encouraged rather than discouraged to experiment with colours to move on to the next -ism within Nordic architecture. In the globalising
world, perhaps it is the Nordic aesthetics that we want to hold on to. It should be possible to find harmonious colour schemes, that are true to the Nordic circumstances. A future study could focus on the essence of our perception of “Nordic beauty” as the definition of “Nordic” will be redefined when the culture changes through globalisation. As architects, are we not in a privileged post to have the possibility to reconsider the Nordic aesthetics?

Picture 20. Copper door and orange dyed concrete façade on Östgötgatan 14 in Stockholm. This colour combination is not alien to Nordic nature.
Dialoggatan 22, part of the old Ericsson’s factory. This staircase is now in a residential use, whereas some parts of the old factory are occupied by Konstfack University.

PALE NORDIC ARCHITECTURE – WHY ARE OUR WALLS SO WHITE?


7 REFERENCES

AND PHOTOCREDITS
Nordic sky offers non-monocrome inspiration for colour setting.


Photocredits:
Picture 1 – 4, 6 – 22: Sisko Anttalainen
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