

COLOUR

ME



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Fig. 1: Unknown Maker. Crayon graphic

Fig. 2: Berryman 2008. Becky with crayon

A CRITICAL REPORT BY  
BECKY EVANS.

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Fig. 3: Finlayson 2008, Scarlet with crayon

## INTRODUCTION

Every space we inhabit evokes a human reaction. These spaces and environments “build up to form a picture” that we digest “through our senses” every day (Burnett 2025). Whether it be through colour, texture or scent, these senses gather “through all the stimuli in our environment”, as Lauren Burnett made clear in an online conversation interview (2025). This report will highlight the psychological impact colour has on our lives, and examine how it is used in interior design to manipulate our emotions. Drawing on philosophical and industry examples, I will explore the neurological effects a space can have on individuals to determine the extent to which colour can be used psychologically to create emotional responses in space design.

We tend to forget poor designs, as they lack emotional connection. As time passes and spaces are rebuilt, this emotional deficiency becomes more apparent. Memories we may have once associated with the space fade. “Emotions are formed through our hormones and neuropathways... therefore creating an emotional response” (Burnett 2025). The use of biological terms such as “hormones” and “neuropathways” emphasises how embedded an “emotional response” is within us. We appreciate good design because of the emotions it can evoke. By allowing our senses to take over, feelings are fostered, creating a space for emotion that changes the way we remember.

I have never seen the world in black and white. From birth, my wardrobe flourished with colour, shaping the creative person I am today. Exploring bold designs, colour harmony, and innovative spaces, I find colour at the core of my creative process. Personal style is unique, and preference is personal. The term “preference” is defined as “the fact of liking or wanting one thing more than another” (Cambridge 2025). Josef Albers explores “preference” in his 1975 book, *Interaction of Colour*: “As gentlemen prefer blondes, so everyone has a preference for certain colours and prejudices against others” (Albers 1975: 17). These prejudices may arise from simple experiences or deeper-rooted causes. They can result in negative connotations associated with specific shades and tones due to past experiences, and can be triggered by something as minor as excessive use of a colour.

A key example of “preference” goes back to when I was thirteen and wore only yellow. In many western cultures, “Yellow is strongly linked to happiness, optimism, warmth, energy, and creativity” (Sanvicente, cited in Meliksetyan 2025:12). After my fifteenth birthday, coincidentally the thick of my teenage angst, I avoided yellow, but now, as a young adult, it’s a colour I embrace most. I incorporate shades of yellow into my wardrobe, personal spaces, and design choices. Albers supports this, stating, “We change, correct or reverse our opinions about colours, and this change of opinion may shift forth and back” (Albers 1975: 17). My sudden disdain for yellow can be justified through a “change” in hormones, which aided the neurological manipulation of my “preference” for colours. Over time, colours remain while our relationships with them shift.

As “colour is one of the most dominant elements that affects every part of our lives” (Helvacioğlu 2011: 66), I aim to explore the extent to which it can be utilised in design.



# 02

## PHILOSOPHERS

The combined theories, despite being 95 years apart, of *The Theory of Colours* (Goethe, 1810) and *The Munsell System* (Munsell, 1905) explore psychological links between colour and its influence on emotional response. Both studies branch from Isaac Newton's theories of light (1672), which is the discovery of seven different colours seen through a prism and the theorisation of the relationship between colour and light (Cochrane 2014). Munsell's system adapted Newton's discovery to become the first scientific theory to "accurately and quantitatively describe the psychological experience of colour" (Cochrane 2014). Munsell defined colour by measuring hue, chroma, value and saturation, practised through centuries to mathematically organise and separate colour into what we see today, supporting the research that we will never see a single shade due to light intensity.

Goethe, however, challenged Newton's approach by applying "colour from a holistic and subjective perspective, focusing on its psychological and philosophical properties" (Richman 2024). He generalised about how humans perceive colour, suggesting that colour perception depends on darkness, and addressed not only the properties of colour and light but also their psychological effects on humans. He believed that colours may have different emotional impacts on people based on their cultural roots, as artist Ann Richman states in her 2024 blog 'Goethe's Colour Theory'.

Without these theories, I wouldn't be able to acknowledge my chosen philosophers and the theories they have put into place in modern day, in which Josef Albers' *Interaction of Colour* (1975) takes precedence. Throughout his career in education, Albers explored the science and knowledge behind harmony, hues, and light, blending them with theories of colour relations and human perception, much as Goethe did. His belief in the power of colour and its psychological effects supports the themes of my report.



In this essay, I combine Albers' practices with the writings of Elif Helvacioğlu (*Colour-Emotion Associations in Interior Spaces*, 2011) and Gor Meliksetyan (*The Psychological Meaning of Colour in Design: A Semantic Review*, 2025). Both examine the literal connotations of colour shades and their universally agreed qualities, similar to Munsell's system. This highlights how emotional responses are fostered, echoing Albers' ideologies and supported by Goethe's analysis of how an individual's life alters those responses.

03

## EXPLORATORY QUESTION AND KEY THEMES

Human reaction is tailored to each individual. For example, “The human eye can differentiate ten million colours” (Fehrman & Fehrman, cited in Helvacioğlu 2011: 45). Helvacioğlu’s use of the word “differentiate” highlights that no colour is ever the same. This emphasises how colours influence preferences, which, in turn, result in a customised emotional response. For instance, a yellow bottle I own appears more saturated under bright white light than under natural light, and that sudden saturation changes the way I feel about drinking from it.

Building on this, Josef Albers states, “If one says ‘red’ and there are fifty people listening, it can be expected that there will be fifty reds in their minds. And one can be sure that all these reds will be very different” (Albers 1975: 3). Albers captures the extent to which individualised perception can “differentiate” (Fehrman & Fehrman, cited in Helvacioğlu 2011: 45). As designers, you cannot just paint a wall red. We design not just for our own “preference” or a single light intensity, but for others whose perspective has been formed “through all the stimuli” of their “environment” (Burnett 2025). This raises the question: What are the possibilities of using colour psychologically to elicit emotional responses in space design?



Fig. 6. Norton 2010. Ela with crayon

## COLOUR AND EMOTION

Exploring the neuroscientific impact of colour on individuals, this chapter introduces colour psychology, the study of the emotions evoked by colour and human perception (Cherry 2024). “Human perception” captures Goethe's emphasis on the philosophical “subjective perspective” (Richman 2024), which is further supported by colour theory, the scientific study of the interaction between colours (Lisa 2024). “The basics include understanding primary, secondary, and tertiary colours, various properties like hue, saturation, and brightness, and the concepts of colour harmonies and temperatures” (Lisa 2024). Lisa supports Albers' ideology through her use of the words “hue, saturation...colour harmonies”, which reflect the fundamental elements of Albers' scientific research.

Fig. 7: Majdak 2009. Maja with crayon



There are thousands of theories surrounding colour, but when applying colour to interiors, everything becomes about fostering an emotional response and how Different colours harmonies, hues, and brightnesses can “generate different feelings”; therefore “, it's crucial to think about” the emotional response a space invokes “and which colours will help do so (Rockfon 2022). The reason being that “colour functions as a powerful, non-verbal communication tool capable of... influencing mood, altering perception, and even triggering physiological reactions” (Rider, cited in Meliksetyan 2025: 7). We are all aware of how certain spaces can make us feel, especially the spaces we tend not to want to be in, and for that, there is always a reason. There are no rules on how much reaction a space needs to imprint, because inevitably, one will be fostered. Either resulting in a memory of that space or no recollection at all. Though to remember a space, a positive experience does not always need to be had; it could be designed with such poor effort and no emotional intent that your mind takes you back every so often. Which then helps substantiate the former point about forming a judgment based on negative connotations, specifically regarding a colour with no pleasant recollections. John Pile, professor of design and author of ‘Colour in Design’ (1997) suggests similarly that

“Some reactions to colour are inborn, intuitive and universal to everyone while others lay in the body of learned associations that are dependent both on realities known to everyone and to meanings learned within a particular society in a particular time and place”

(Pile, cited in Helvacioğlu 2011: 69).

Supporting the theories of colour connotations and connections to the brain, which is what Albers studied in depth to teach that reactions are personal through our memories. Similarly, aligning with Burnett's take on “emotions” and how they are primarily formed through “our hormones and neuropathways” (Burnett 2025), which links to neuroaesthetics.

Neuroaesthetics is the study of the psychology that recognises the “brain's response” when processing visual experiences, examining physical and “mental behaviour” relating to neuroscience (Magsamen 2019). “Aesthetic experiences, and their impact on the mind and body, are much more than the sum of individual brain regions or activities” (Magsamen 2019). The exploration of neuroaesthetics is a form of “brain activity” that happens when inhabiting a space. When associating neuroaesthetics with colour, “You can’t realise your intentions for a space if you haven’t worked your way towards determining the appropriate colour in relation to the context in which it will appear” (Magsamen 2019). This is because, when analysing neuroaesthetics and the “visual stimuli” (Burnett 2025) neuroscientists use to measure these reactions, such as art and colour, colour takes precedence (Cinzia and Vittorio 2009). This further supports that “the physical influences of colour on human beings provoke psychological reactions and psychological manners towards colour impress bodily responses” (Birren, cited in Helvacioğlu 2011: 68). Confirming that reactions are influenced by colour, which controls our bodily responses. Meliksetyan also contributes to support this study by expressing that in design, “colour psychology moves beyond mere aesthetics to investigate the measurable impacts of colour choices on user or consumer responses” (Meliksetyan 2025: 7). To reiterate, anyone can apply colour to a space, but to wield its psychological power is rare. Karen Haller, a colour psychologist and the author of ‘The Little Book of Colour’ (2019), reinforces my argument, stating “We can design aesthetically pretty spaces, but they may not be performing the right function or eliciting the right behaviours and responses” (Haller 2025).

“Colour isn’t just a visual feast; it’s a vibrant language” of emotions that assists in “orchestrating moods” by “weaving influence into our everyday lives” (Lisa 2024). Colour psychology, as previously mentioned, stems from the ideation of philosophers Goethe and Munsell. Theorising the possibilities between colour and emotion that we recognise in everyday life, from every culture and background to age differences, “from birth to death, our life scenario covers colour notionally and perceptibly” (Helvacioğlu 2011: 43). A universal childhood experience is letting everyone around you aware of your current favourite colour. If you were to ask my parents, they would most definitely tell you that my answer changed each week because colours are exciting and shape who we become. Meliksetyan makes a similar point when stating, “colour is an inescapable dimension of human visual experience, fundamentally shaping how individuals perceive and interact with their environment” (Meliksetyan 2025: 6).

This demonstrates and supports how an individual's perception of colours stems from early-life experiences and upbringings, aligning with Albers beliefs suggesting that preference shifts “forth and back” creating prejudices as we move through life. This links back to the previous example of my “experience” with the colour yellow, where I encountered a “shift” in preference which formed into a prejudice shaping a part of who I am. In perception “individuals form judgements about products or people within as little as ninety seconds” (Meliksetyan 2025: 7) and due to the fact that colour “is one of the most dominant elements that affects every part of our lives” (Helvacioğlu 2011: 66). Alone, “it can account for up to ninety per cent of this assessment” (Meliksetyan 2025: 7). Meaning that when perceiving someone who wears colours associated with negative personal associations, our perspective of them changes, supporting Meliksetyan’s assessment of the impact colour has not just on our vision but on our whole being. This justifies my previous theory that colour preferences, shaped by our life experiences, alter how we view the world.

“Day starts with the sunrise colour and ends with the sunset colour” in every part of the world, and “in between we also witness various colours with different tones and shades in the natural environment” (Helvacioğlu 2011: 43). Yet, colour is never as it seems. The perception of colour is subjective and culturally specific. Albers supports this, acknowledging that in daily vocabulary, there are only about thirty colour names, but there are “innumerable colours, shades and tones” (Albers 1975: 3). These “shades and tones” that we are exposed to contribute towards many personal and universal associations caused by multiple different attributes. Albers' theories mainly focus on hue and brightness, as a shade is only a shade due to differentiation in light, which is the premise of Newton's "crucial experiment” (Klus 2017). Newton's discovery led to the “composition of white light” to explain how colour shades appear. Which later “laid the foundation for modern physical optics” (Westfall 2024). Helvacioğlu supports Newton’s colour theories when explaining that “black, white and grey are the achromatics or neutral colours, constituting only of brightness and saturation without having the hue dimension” (Helvacioğlu 2011: 74). Shades of this kind need light to breathe and come to the surface else they are hard to find and wouldn’t have the vast impact on our lives if we didn't experience them in true form. Albers supports the idea that shades are caused by these factors, but primarily when “hue and light” (Albers 1975: 20) come together, creating the slightest change in how we perceive that shade. Albers repeatedly discusses the hues of colours in his writing and experimental theories, emphasising their importance in practising colour psychology, especially in design, which is why we need to apply these theories when selecting shades for spaces.

# 05

## COLOUR AND DESIGN



Individuals see beauty in many different elements of life. This relates back to how personal “preferences” are formed, and although it is subjective what it takes for a building to practice good colour psychology, I can suggest and elaborate on examples that demonstrate interesting uses of colour, specifically chosen for the building's purpose and the people who inhabit it.

This introduces my case studies: Kim Kardashian's LA residence (2022) and a contrasting good example of this theory, architect Luis Barragán's Casa Luis Barragán (1948). These homes are almost 74 years apart, and a good image study that supports my opinion and illustrates my case studies is the comparison between the two designs, as you'll see in figures 9 and 10, which show two hallways providing stairs to an additional floor. Figure 9, as shown, is the landing of the Kardashian residence, with shades of white and grey concrete tones trailing up the stairway, allowing the viewer to immediately recognise the personal style of the space and to gain insight into the style and colour choices the rest of the home will resemble.

Contrastingly, shown in Figure 10 is the stairwell of Luis Barragán's Casa Luis Barragán, which brightly opens our eyes to a single shade of yellow that appears different on each wall due to light intensity, and the pop of the pink door draws the viewer's attention. This case study supports Newton's theory that we don't perceive a single shade because of differences in light intensity. Most importantly, there is no wrong design of the two, which makes them comparable, because colour has no limits, and saying it does would contradict my previous research. Both spaces create very different atmospheres and show the differences between excessive and minimal uses of colour, as there are no rules that dictate what it takes to create a beautiful space; it's what humans decide that makes one.

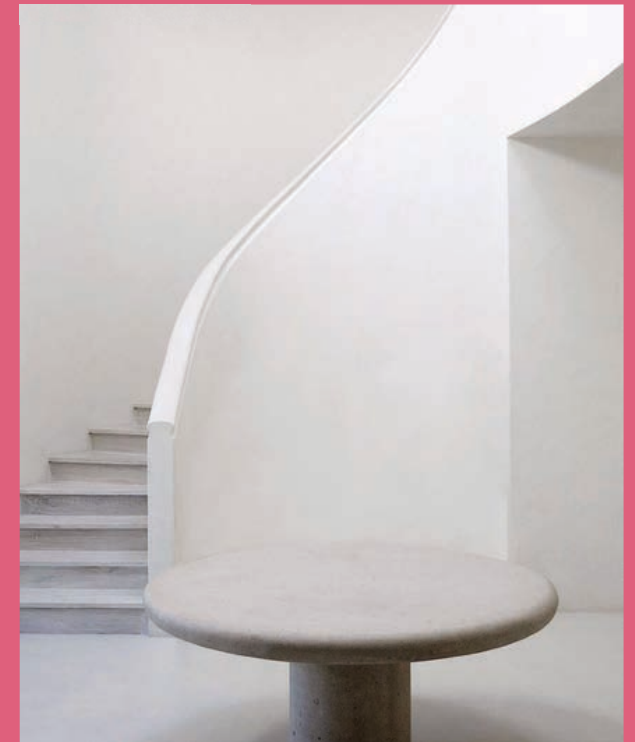


Fig. 9: Nickerson. n.d. The Kardashian stairwell



Fig. 10: Cortesía de Casa Luis Barragán. n.d. Entrance hall, Casa Luis Barragán

Kim's home, shown in figure 11, balances personal preference with a minimalist design, which many people consider distasteful, according to Grace Flynn's writing for 'Homes to Love' ahead of 2025 (Flynn 2024). This image (figure 11) shows a large hallway in her home with bold arches that shape the corridor, mirroring the windows and creating a cohesive design in a monotone shade of white. As shown in a house walkthrough Kardashian did with Vogue in 2022, the hallway leads from the kitchen to the entrance of her bedroom, creating a sense of calm and neutrality as you wayfind through the home.



Fig. 11: Nickerson 2022. Corridor of Kims home

Many described her house as 'Depressing', 'Morgue-like' and 'cold' according to The Sun (Bussey 2022). When looking at the home, the question arises: why is she afraid of colour? But according to Interior designer Michele Pelafas, the home acts as an escape, blocking out noise from her busy lifestyle; "Kim's home is a great example of a calming home, and while minimalism isn't for everyone, it does create a sense of order and efficiency to strengthen and purify" (Pelafas, cited in Bussey 2022). Minimalism isn't for everyone, but a space doesn't have to be presently bright or bold to manipulate emotional responses. This aligns with Albers's beliefs when he suggests that the quantity of colour teaches us that "any colour 'goes' or 'works' with any other colour" (Albers 1975: 44). From this report, we already know how light manipulates colour and colour manipulates emotions. In alignment with these theories, there is no wrong way to use colour; it's how you apply it effectively in design to create a tailored emotional response for the user.

In Figure 12, the family kitchen is shown. At first glance, it's clear that a perfect balance exists between calming, cohesive, minimal shades and natural materials such as wood, yet it still creates a different feeling. The room brings the outside in with the views of green, where the flora and fauna of Calabasas, the house's location, grow. Many designers use tones and hues to differentiate colours with light at its core, which is the most important part when designing and practising the psychological effects of colour, due to the impact such outdoor environments can have on shades and tones, leading to evoking reactions. Albers supports this theme, teaching that "The fact that one and the same colour can perform many different roles is well known and is consciously applied" (Albers 1975: 20). In her online interview with Vogue, Kim described wanting the space to 'feel calming' (Vogue 2022) and said that when she comes home, she yearns for a quiet environment, which this home represents. The various shades of white and cream work for her lifestyle, tailoring how her emotions are provoked when in her own home.



Fig. 12: Nickerson 2022. Family Kitchen

Conversely, many designers will cover a wall with green paint, and whilst a designer's personal style and use of colour should be praised, it's a remote possibility that the designer, stylist, or homeowner put these suggested colour theories aimed at fostering emotional responses into practice when painting that wall green. So what you might see as a painted green wall nurturing earthy tones holding "Strong associations with nature, growth, health... and environmentalism" (Insights Psychology, cited in Meliksetyan 2025: 12). It could be the shade of green that when in certain lighting it changes stimulates a negative emotional response in line with Albers theory that "hue and light" work together to change perception. Supporting my point that we should tailor colour choices to a user's emotional needs, as this case study illustrates well.



Fig. 14: Eusebio 2006. Andrea with crayon

## TAILORING EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

A place has the power to connect us to who we are, and colour helps us create environments we need and depend on, reflecting our life experiences and personal attributes. Colour holds symbolic meaning to multiple cultures, religions, ages and abilities “Colour may be an efficient tool in interior spaces to cause impressions for various emotions”. (Helvacioğlu 2011: 84). What's usually described in relation to colour psychology is how not everyone sees colour the same, and how a unified reaction is almost never formed, which has been an overarching theme of this report. But what is overlooked is the study of why that is and the deeper-rooted causes behind it, rather than just personal connotations. Helvacioğlu suggests that “Each colour has its own meaning. Thus, each of them evokes different feelings” (Helvacioğlu 2011: 43). Truly, we will never know the extent of these meanings, but we do know what can cause them.

In interiors, colour is often used to symbolise the behaviours designers want to see in a space, which is why it's chosen, but in a community space, no designer will consider an individual's experience with colour; you can't. “We are able to hear a single tone. But almost never... see a single colour” (Albers 1975: 5). However, what we can consider are the overarching themes of colour relations when designing spaces for a broad range of users and not just individuals, which Helvacioğlu and Meliksetyan practice well in their writing.

To be inclusive designers, practising colour theory means immersing ourselves in, and educating ourselves on how colour relates to culture, rather than simply associating colours with our own upbringings and personal preferences.

A key example is the use of monochromatic shades and what they represent in most Western upbringings, as well as the colour stereotypes of wearing white to a wedding and black to a funeral. Although those norms have been challenged over time, they still hold significance for many people. Because of this, many individuals associate the colour black with periods of mourning and solitude, and when presented in a space, it can sometimes provoke a negative reaction.

To support this study, I looked into *Tatreez*, a Palestinian practice of hand embroidery, as seen in figure 13, which reflects life stories and cultural meaning sewn onto garments, creating a language through coloured thread (V&A 2025). The use of blue in this design symbolises grief, shaping the woman's story through her clothing with natural dyeing techniques. This not only influenced a smaller available colour palette but also contributed to the symbolic meanings associated with each colour thread (Zeina Al-Khaznachi 2024). As shown in Figure 13, at odds with Western ideals, in *Tatreez* and Palestinian culture, blue represents grief (Bramley 2025), and when implemented into interiors, it tends to foster a much different response and association to the colour. Helvacioğlu raises a similar point that helps validate this research: “The symbolism of colour has been a longstanding subject of study. It is highly intermixed with physiological and psychological responses” (Helvacioğlu 2011: 69).

Suggesting that we are continuously studying the meanings of colours as designers to gather a better, and more appropriate understanding, of how we can design for the greater good, creating more inclusive spaces by using colour theory to do so. Someone I believe tailored their designs well to the culture to elicit emotional responses was Luis Barragán.

Barragán was an influential pioneer for colourful architectural designs throughout the 20th century, and his significance to the themes of this report will be recognised. His upbringing and lifestyle in Mexico exposed him to Mexican cultural design, which he blended with his masterful use of colour, light, and space (Winner 2025). Capturing his architectural approach, deeply rooted in both modernist principles and the traditional aesthetics of Mexico, creating a unique style (Winner 2025).



Fig. 13: Anderson 2025. Widow's dress, Bir al-Saba', 1960-1970

## CASA LUIS BARRAGÁN

Built and designed by himself, Barragán's fascination with light, colour, and nature is noticed throughout the space, continuously demonstrating how natural light interacts with and manipulates his choice of coloured interiors, describing his pallets of pinks and yellows as 'Canvases for tricks of the light' (Colterjohn 2023). This is evident in Figure 10, where the blend of natural and artificial lighting hits each wall differently, creating various shades of yellow throughout the space, caused by "hue and light" (Albers 1975: 20) coming together, which exemplifies Newton's experiments of light. Captivated by 'the daily tug-of-war between light and shadow' (Colterjohn 2023), Barragán's preference for colours is acknowledged in his designs. This further consolidated his distinct design approach, making him one of the most influential Mexican architects of his time.

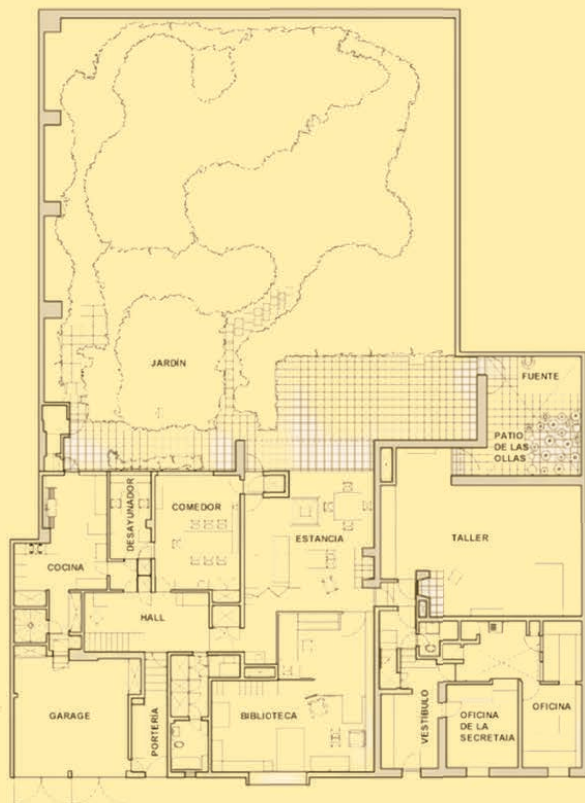


Fig. 15: Barragán. n.d. Casa Luis Barragán Ground Floorplan

The structure is modernist and stood out for its time, blending brutalist design with vibrant colours such as pink, orange and yellow, as seen in Figure 16, which shows the patio area from the home's floor plan (Figure 15). The colours divide the space as the light hits it, creating a division between the house and the patio, leading into the garden. His personal style flows well through this and gives the viewer an insight into the interior. Inviting every individual to immerse themselves in his world through colour, giving the design character and dividing its layout by breaking rooms apart into highly diverse spaces (Duque 2023). He uses solid colours of yellow and purple while incorporating vernacular and cultural elements to tell a story through the rooms as they are travelled through, integrating traditional Mexican architecture with modern international architecture. It remains one of the most visited places in Mexico City (Duque 2023).



Casa Luis Barragán exemplifies the balance between personal preference and harmonious cultural design, with its use of light and colour, which supports his status as a renowned architect. Figure 17 continues to support my theory of light bouncing off the colours used. He demonstrates the importance of creating a personal design to evoke certain emotional experiences in the spaces that we inhabit. Experimenting with different correlations of materiality and the effects it may have on us to create a timeless space for himself and the people inhabiting it when visiting. Helvacioğlu raises a similar point suggesting "By integrating the concept of colour and the person-environment, more sensitive and relevant design may be achieved." (Helvacioğlu 2011: 85) relating to my study on how society will never inhabit one space where the emotional response is uniform but when creating a space for personal occupancy it is important to design for a sensitive response relevant to the individuals experiences and that's what is evident in this case study.



## CONCLUSION

Throughout this report, I have discussed and argued themes from colour theories and psychology in interior design, and how colour neuroscientifically manipulates our emotions. I have explored how I believe it can be applied to stimulate reactions in different spaces, using contrasting industry examples of the architectural creation of Luis Barragán's Casa Luis Barragán and modern public figure Kim Kardashian's family home, alongside cultural implementations of colour, including Tatreez, the Palestinian practice of hand embroidery. This has been supported by the combined theories of Albers, Helvacıoğlu and Meliksetyan, which stem from the early theories of Goethe, Munsell and Newton.

This is because I continue to believe that with old and new theories of colour psychology, blended with correct use of preference and individuality, whilst also embracing culture and diversity to create more inclusive designs. We can design meaningful spaces that elicit emotional responses from the next generation of creatives who will inhabit them. I will continue challenging normalities to build spaces laced with colour where forgetful design is no longer present, reflecting who I am as a designer and building a society where everyone can feel a sense of belonging in spaces that reflect the themes and theories of my report, which support my outlook. In reality, there are never enough words to cover every element of colour psychology, and never enough time in any lifetime, because in interiors, we have to accept that design will not benefit everyone, but to recognise the importance of creating emotional spaces, using colour theories and psychology is what I wish to practise in my career.



Fig. 18: Garcia 2009. Jowan with crayon



“In visual perception colour is almost never seen as it really is” (Albers 1975: 1), which I believe to be true, but is anything? Colour is ever-changing in light and can manipulate our vision, which is why I believe it is important to study the correct colour theories before practising. After all, anyone can paint a wall red, but we never see a green wall in isolation. It's how we establish the behaviours we want green to produce, based on how each person sees the world through their own eyes and life experiences.

WE CAN'T ESCAPE COLOUR, SO LET'S  
CHOOSE TO EMBRACE IT.

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