

Van doesburgh's
open plan
house:analysis of
elementarist
architecture



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De Stijl -
Van
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A study
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Title: De Stijl - Van Doesburg's open-plan house

To begin this essay about 'Elementarist' architecture, there should be a clear understanding about where it began. It is a movement pioneered by Theo Van Doesburg who was also the founder of De Stijl during 1917. De Stijl which bring the meaning of "The Style" was a Dutch artistic movement during 1917-1931. It promoted a purist form of abstract art invented by Piet

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Mondrian called Neo-Plasticism. Loos explained in his book about Neo-Plasticism, " Drawn to the purity and precision of geometric shapes and committed to the synthesis of art, architecture and design" Loos Fichner-Rathus (2014, p. 1). The abstract art was an evolution from the previous century art. Perhaps because of the presence of camera that can capture a good photograph. Thus, rather than make a painting that replicate an object, the new language of art wanted to do it in a different way. De Stijl avoided realism and emotional content and It favoured abstract art. The work of art for them is to reduce to a geometric arrangement of horizontals and verticals. They also work with primary colours or red, blue and yellow besides black and white. Examples can be found on painting as well as furniture which they applied the principles. They wanted the disciplines of art to be grasped at the fundamental stages and spread the ideology through publication of magazines for general public. They did merge into architecture, sculpture and painting tying them into a relationship bonded with their fundamental principles.

Elementarism is simply an alteration of that fundamental principles which was too strict for Van Doesburg. He transformed the geometric art in flat plane to 3D space for architecture. There was an essay about Elementarism on the final publication of De Stijl. Instead of abstraction of geometry, he was into mathematical series and geometrical construction. The judgement is that the abstract arts lean towards intuitive, depend on the artist and its character. The abstract composition was no longer his thought, he wanted proportion and ratio which was defined in his late painting ' Universal Form

II' (Fig. 1). The study of mathematics and proportion made the De Stijl go further in architecture over that period.

Open-plan House

The open-plan house project or La Maison Particulière (The Private House) was created in conjunction with Cor van Eesteren. This project was illustrated in detail through several variants to transfer the ideas from canvas into architecture. There were numerous illustration and axonometric projections that were used not only to exhibit the house but to develop its spatial principles and logic as a model of 'Elementarist' architecture. The evolution of De Stijl from flat plane to 3D space in architecture also embrace the time dimension that involved four-dimensionality. This new concept called space-time. This spatial dynamic dimension seems valid to architecture as human explore it by moving through spaces at different time, unlike painting which is still.

Open-plan house follow the fundamental rule of De Stijl which has spatial continuity or dissolution of boundaries. The idea was to form a flowing space between the inside, outside and between internal spaces without enclosed spaces. Instead of a house as a building that closed in itself, they perceived it as an open space that incorporates inside and out. Colours that were used also represented as a dynamic impetus for the house rather than decorative. Colour scheme of white, grey and black combined with primaries colours red, yellow and blue make the planes floating freely as shown in the axonometric projection (Fig. 1). "coloured planes suspended in space, and they bear little resemblance to the architectural structure." Troy, N. (1983, p. 110). They are

known as counter-construction, made without distinction between front, back, top and bottom, it is all merges together. The break down of the axonometric diagram (Fig. 2) consist of three different part which are horizontal planes, vertical planes and cubic volumes. Padovan described about the diagram that “ the solid volume were dissolved into floating, interpenetrating coloured planes” Padovan, R. (2002, p. 89).

They also eliminated windows, door, as well as roof which is directly eliminate the functional architecture. Troy mentioned in his writing, “ Through a process of abstraction, van Doesburg stripped the architecture of all references to function and instead emphasized the surfaces as independent planar forms suspended in space. These remarkable, highly original drawing constituted the basis for his ‘ counter-construction’ “ Troy, N. (1983, p. 108). For them, it rather an exploratory search to make a non-hierarchical architecture without ornamentation. As Troy wrote in his book “ counter-construction, coloured axonometric projection in which van Doesburg demonstrated how red, blue, yellow, black, and gray might be applied to the white model” Troy, N. (1983, p. 110).

Since they have no orientational cues, the diagram make it look like a floating structure. Maybe the new concept and approach only logical on a canvas, not as a practical architecture, dealing with gravity and other common-sense factors in architecture that was ignored by van Doesburg. The photograph of him (Fig. 1) with the model do not look as impressive as it is in the axonometric drawing. Probably because it is too literal or the black and white photo (Fig. 2) that make is less imposing. The contra-construction project axonometric diagram (Fig. 3) has a high viewing point that make the <https://assignbuster.com/van-doesburghs-open-plan-houseanalysis-of-elementarist-architecture/>

sides of geometrical planes visible at once. We can notice there is such a central or core defined because of the horizontal and vertical planes (Fig. 4). It really looks complex in the complete composition of asymmetrical volume. The colour scheme applied to different plane is actually a constructive element, it defines the width, height and length of the projection. However, it is also helping to create an illusion as Padovan wrote in his book, “Externally, colour is used to create an illusion, which Van Doesburg’s analytical axonometrics tend to exaggerate, of planes floating independently in space.” Padovan, R. (2002, p. 97). It is also an ambiguous perspective drawing as there is no supporting structure, planes hovering in the air. The volumes of the projection seem to explode from an inner core, as though erupting into the third dimension and straining for that elusive fourth.

The interior of this project consists of three different levels. As show in the plans (Fig. 4), the staircase at the centre act as a core which spread out connecting each level. Troy wrote in his book, “ground plans seem to show the development of space from the centre, the stairwell, outward to the periphery of the building. Therefore, the corners of the building block disappear” Troy, N. (1983, p. 110). This is the concept of the asymmetrical projection rotated about central voids, projecting flat planes resemble as walls, floors and ceilings in a building. The projection on the external will eventually reflect what is inside. Padovan describe that, “because of the complex ‘openness’ of the exterior form, each interiors space is imprisoned within its own projecting volume.” Padovan, R. (2002, p. 98). It means that the plan of the house sort of contained within a different block, independent unit but interlocking with one another. So that the central staircases acted as

connection at different levels. Is this really means open plan house, because generally It seems lost the spatial continuity of the plan. " The whole plan contained within a perfect square. Within this, the external envelope is broken up into a complex assemblage of overlapping and intersecting volumes; but these, too, are found to contain an equal number of closed, squarish boxes." Padovan, R. (2002, p. 98). The external envelope shows that it tries to get out of basic configuration of architecture as there is no flat or predominant façade. The house represents an example of construction that has not grown from the outside to the inside, but on the contrary it has been occupying its surroundings from the interior.

The project had been exhibited in Paris at the Effort Moderne Gallery in October 1923 together with another design, La Maison d'Artiste (The House of an Artist). The counter-construction however is not a project for a single building but a manifesto of a new kind of architectural style. The key to understand the idea is mainly through the composition of the axonometric diagram. Unfortunately, this conceptual piece of work never been realised into an actual building until Gerrit Thomas Rietveld become the first to apply the concept on Schroder house. As overall, after ignoring the structure, functional, space and time, the goal is to free humanity from material things achieving a new form of modernism.

Schroder House

De Stijl was influential during that time and later followed by Le Corbusier and Mies van de Rohe. Schroder House in Utrecht which was designed by architect Gerrit Thomas Rietveld also practice the architectural theme of De

Stijl. As Curtis said in his writing, " Van Doesburg's remarkable spatial diagrams and model of 1923 have been mentioned already, but these were never realized directly as architecture. Probably the first actual building to embody the full range of De Stijl formula, spatial, and iconographic intentions was therefore the Schroder House of 1923-4" Curtis, W. (1996, p. 157). The house was built in 1924 with the idea of geometry and abstraction. Gerrit Thomas Rietveld brings his design to become one of the icons of the Modern Movement in architecture.

The main goal of this project is to incorporate art into living environment. Rietveld thought about the complete openness as in the van Doesburg's diagram is intolerable to real architecture. As Padovan explained in his book, " he recognized that complete openness was an impossibility. An entire unbounded space it is not enough just to do away with walls, or to produce an endless grid of modular coordinates. The space must be given scansion; it must be punctuated in some way if its relative openness is to be perceived. Some degree of delimitation is a necessity, therefore, but it need not consist of enclosing walls." Padovan, R. (2002, p. 15). Throughout the project, Rietveld laid the interior as an asymmetrical composition of rectangles or geometric style and arranged the volume into partitioned spaces rather than cubistic masses. It doesn't want to contain a functional space in a closed cube. The house consists two levels where the private rooms are situated on the lower level and the public rooms are on the upper level which is all of the sliding partitions and moveable walls. The partitions or moveable that allow to divide the volume in vertical and horizontal planes. The partitions or sliding screens can be using to split or unite the space at different times.

This is to emphasize the idea of open plan architecture, built without walls to make a changeable zone which is more dynamic. After all, it is to suite the particular need of the family to have that openness to have a flexible spatial arrangement to accommodate their children. In term of colour, different walls painted with different colour in a single room which are red, yellow, blue, grey or white. The colour scheme of De Stijl not only applied to the walls, but it also used for the furniture like the Red and Blue chair.

On the exterior, it shows the right angle and straight-line geometry.

According to Curtis, " The building is formed from intersecting planar walls detailed in such a way that some of them appear to hover in space, while others extend horizontally, and still others join to define thin volumes. There is no single axis or simple symmetry: rather one part is held in tenuous, dynamic and asymmetrical relationship to the other." Curtis, W. (1996, p. 157). The balconies not positioned in the corner but appears to be floating independently. It also expresses the effect of a breaking cubic units like the axonometric projection by Theo Van Doesburg. The railing and free-floating wall appears to be a shifting quality. On the upper floor, the corner window large window and the small one perpendicular to it swing open, dissolving the corner to make it feel like one is outside.

Schroder house truly wanted to experiment with the public about the openness the new style. The social response about the house become the moral demonstration to educate a freer life and breaking down the barriers.

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Fig. 1:

Maison Particuliere: Axonometric Drawing (1923) (p. 79). Grigg, J., & Glasgow School of Art. (1987). Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Glasgow, Richard Drew Publishing.

Fig. 2:

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