DE STIJL

The Evolution and Dissolution of Neoplasticism : 1917–31

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> 'Art is only a substitute while the beauty of life is still deficient. It will disappear in proportion, as life gains in equilibrium.'
>
> Piet Mondrian

The De Stijl or Neoplastic movement which lasted as an active force for barely fourteen years, from 1917 to 1931, may be essentially characterized in the work of three men, the painters Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg and the architect Gerrit Rietveld. The other seven members of the original, rather nebulous group of nine formed under Van Doesburg's leadership in 1917 and 1918, that is the artists, Van der Leck, Vantongerloo and Huszar and the architects, Oud, Wils and Van't Hoff, and the poet Kok are all to be seen in retrospect as catalytic but relatively marginal figures, who although they played essential roles, did not in fact produce works, either actual or theoretical, which were eventually to become central to the mature style of the movement. It was, in any event, initially a loose union which was bonded together formally by the mutual appearance of most of these artists as signatories of the first De Stijl manifesto published under Van Doesburg's editorship, in the first issue (of the second year) of the De Stijl magazine that appeared in November 1918. This group was in a constant state of flux and at least one foundation member Bart van der Leck[1] was to disassociate himself from it within a year of its foundation and others such as Rietveld were recruited in the subsequent years as replacements.

The De Stijl movement came into being as the conflation of two related modes of thought. These were, firstly the Neo-Platonic philosophy of the mathematician Dr Schoenmaekers who published in Bussum, in 1915 and 1916 respectively, his influential works entitled *The New Image of the World* (*Het neiuwe Wereldbeeld*) and *The Principles of Plastie Mathematics* (*Beeldende Wiskunde*) and

secondly the 'received' architectural concepts of Hendrik Petrus Berlage[2] and Frank Lloyd Wright.

As the Dutch art historian H. L. C. Jaffé has stated, it must be acknowledged that it was Schoenmaekers who virtually formulated the plastic and philosophical principles of the De Stijl movement when, in his book *The New Image of the World*, he referred to the cosmic pre-eminence of the orthogonal as follows: 'the two fundamental complete contraries which shape our earth are: the horizontal line of power, that is the course of the earth around the sun and the vertical, profoundly spatial movement of rays that originates in the centre of the sun' . . .[3] and again later in the same work he wrote of the De Stijl primary colour system: 'The three principal colours are essentially, yellow, blue and red. They are the only colours existing . . . Yellow is the movement of the ray . . . Blue is the contrasting colour to yellow . . . As a colour, blue is the firmament, it is line, horizontality. Red is the mating of yellow and blue . . . Yellow radiates, blue "recedes", and red floats.'

This is very different from the *Weltanschauung* of Frank Lloyd Wright who pragmatically emphasized the horizontal as the 'line of domesticity', the contrasting line of the prairie against which 'inches in height gain tremendous force'. Nonetheless Wright also evoked a totally homogenous man-made world when in his introductory text to the first Wasmuth volume on his work he wrote: '. . . it is quite impossible to consider the building one thing and its furnishings another . . . Heating apparatus, lighting fixtures, the very chairs and tables, cabinets and musical instruments, where practical are of the building itself'; and later of the role of art in relation to architecture, 'to thus make of a dwelling place a complete work of art in itself, as expressive and beautiful and more intimately related to life than anything of sculpture or painting . . . this is the modern American opportunity.'[4]

Wright's idea of such an architecture had already been disseminated throughout Europe by the publication in German of the two famous Wasmuth volumes on his work in the years 1910 and 1911. Thus these two related but independent poles of thought, as epitomized in the writings of Schoenmaekers and Wright, were publicly available by 1915. The appearance of Mondrian's first strictly

De Stijl02.jpg

post-cubist compositions, consisting almost exclusively of broken horizontal and vertical lines [illustration 70], virtually coincided with the artist's return from Paris to Holland in July 1914 and with a time that he subsequently spent in Laren in almost daily contact with Schoenmaekers. For the direct in-put of the other 'pole' we have the architect Robert Van't Hoff, who after a pre-war sojourn in the States, realized in his Huis-ter-Heide in 1916, a remarkable early reinforced concrete villa, built to his own designs in a derivative Wrightian style[5] [illustration 72]. Paradoxically neither Schoenmaekers nor Van't Hoff were to play significant roles in the movement after 1917. They had, by then, as it were, already served their purposes. The ideas that they had respectively engendered and demonstrated were promptly absorbed and transformed after the war by the central figures of the movement, that is by Mondrian, Van Doesburg and Rietveld.

Two other peripheral figures were to play catalytic but short-lived roles during this immediate post-war period. One was the Belgian artist, George Vantongerloo and the other was the irascible Dutch pioneer Abstractionist, Bart van der Leck. Their respective contributions now seem to have been crucial, for, without them, one seriously questions whether the main line De Stijl artists would have been able to develop their characteristic aesthetic with such immediate conviction; that is to pass from their early gropings of 1917 to their mature style of 1923 in a period of only six years. It is obvious for example that Van Doesburg's famous abstraction of a cow of 1916–17 owes much to Van der Leck, while Vantongerloo's sculpture, *Interrelation of Masses* of 1919 [illustration 69], clearly anticipates in general forms the aesthetic of mass which is to be utilized by Van Doesburg and Van Esteren in their Artist House and Rosenberg House projects of 1923.

The aesthetic and programmatic development of the De Stijl movement may be broken down into three phases. The first phase from 1916 to 1921 is formative and essentially centred upon Holland with some outside participation; the second phase from 1921 to 1925, is to be regarded as a period of maturity and of international dissemination; while the third phase from 1925 to 1931 must be seen as a period of transformation and of ultimate disintegration.

De Stijl03.jpg

Mondrian's own position with regard to De Stijl's development is an important touchstone in determining the characters of each of these phases. As a consequence of his stoic and singularly serious attitude Mondrian was always able to maintain a certain detachment from the immediacy of the world around him. It was the already theosophically inclined Mondrian[6] who forged in Laren, in 1914, the initial link between the 'movement to be' and the ideas of Schoenmaekers.[7] Similarly it was again Mondrian who established the fruitful connection with Bart van der Leck in Leyden, in 1916; an artist by whom both he and Van Doesburg were immediately influenced. Once again it was Mondrian who finally broke both with De Stijl and Van Doesburg in 1925, over the latter's 'arbitrary' modification of the orthogonal format pre-ordained by Schoenmaekers.

1916–21

Apart from Robert Van't Hoff's villa Huis-ter-Heide completed in 1916, it is painting, sculpture and cultural polemic that largely determines and informs De Stijl activity during its first phase, that is up until 1921. In spite of his early collaboration[8] with Van Doesburg, J. J. P. Oud, who became Rotterdam's City Architect in 1918 at the precocious age of 28, was never, it must now be recognized, wholeheartedly affiliated with the movement – neither formally by virtue of his abstention from the first manifesto, nor intellectually, as an architect, in his own subsequent work. A strong predilection for symmetry or repeated symmetrical systems is evident in Oud's work certainly up until 1921, when he severs all public ties with the movement. The frequently cited exception to this is his Purmersand Factory project of 1919, where a plethora of asymmetrical elements are awkwardly placed against an otherwise symmetrical façade. Jan Wils, for his part, the third architect member of the 1917 group and a manifesto signatory, continued to work in an equally lugubrious Wrightian style, until he left the movement late in 1921. Thus there was no De Stijl architecture strictly speaking before 1920, when it made its first tentative appearance in the interior designs of Gerrit Rietveld. Indeed it was primarily Rietveld, under

the influence of Van Doesburg and (indirectly) Mondrian, who first developed the architectural aesthetic of the movement as a whole.

The years 1915 and 1916 saw Mondrian in Laren, in frequent contact with Schoenmaekers. During this period he produced virtually no painting at all but wrote instead his basic theoretical essay, entitled *Neoplasticism in Painting*, which first appeared as '*De Nieuwe Beelding in de Schilderkunst*' in 1917–18 in the first twelve numbers of the De Stijl magazine and which was afterwards reworked twice, in both French and English. First as *Le Néo-Plasticisme* published in 1920 and then as *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art* published in 1937.[9] By 1917 Mondrian is at an intellectually new point of departure in which his work comprises a series of compositions consisting of floating, rectangular coloured planes [illustration 73]. He has at this juncture abandoned for good, both the painterly palette and technique of his 1912 to 1913 post-cubist period and also the nervous staccato linearity and elliptical format of his 'plus-minus' or 'oceanic'[10] style of 1913 to 1914 [illustration 70]. In 1917, both Mondrian and Bart van der Leck arrive at separate formulations of what they each consider to be a totally new and 'pure plastic'[9] order, with Van Doesburg tentatively following in their wake. However, Mondrian at this date is still preoccupied with the generation of shallow spatial displacements, through the literal and phenomenal overlapping of his coloured planes[11] (blue, pink and black), whereas his two colleagues Van der Leck and Van Doesburg are more concerned with the structuring of the picture plane itself. This they achieve through a hidden geometrical ordering of narrow bars of colour (pink, yellow, blue and black) set within a dominant white field. Van Doesburg's 'cow' abstract dates from this period as does his *Rhythm of a Russian Dance* [illustration 75] of one year later, i.e. 1918; both works being influenced by Van der Leck. This is in contrast to Van der Leck's own *Geometrical Composition No. 1* [illustration 74] and Mondrian's *Composition in Blue, A* [illustration 73] which are parallel definitive neoplastic works of the previous year.

Nineteen-seventeen is also the year of the famous red-blue chair[12] designed by Gerrit Rietveld [illustration 76]. This simple piece of furniture, obviously derived, as a type, from the Victorian folding

attend Van Doesburg's courses. Van Doesburg wrote to the poet Anthony Kok,

> I have radically turned everything upside down in Weimar. That is the most famous Academy, which now has the most modern teachers! Every evening I spoke to pupils there and everywhere I scattered the poison of the new spirit. The 'style' shortly will appear again, more radical. I have any amount of energy and I now know that our ideas will triumph: above all and everything.[17]

Despite Gropius's sanction the struggle continued unabated throughout 1922 and into 1923, when after staging a major exhibition at the Landes Museum in Weimar, Van Doesburg left with Cor van Esteren to establish a new work centre in Paris.[18] In spite of this, the impact of Van Doesburg's ideas upon the Bauhaus, student body and faculty alike, was both immediate and very marked. One Bauhaus design after another, subsequent to Van Doesburg's visit, testifies to his influence and even Gropius who under the circumstances had cause to be apprehensive of such charisma, designed in 1923, a suspended light [illustration 77] for his own study, which has undeniable affinity with the Rietveld fitting designed for Dr Hartog [illustration 78]. More important, however, for the development of De Stijl was Van Doesburg's meeting (once again no doubt through Richter) with his Eastern European counterpart, the Russian graphist, painter, and architect, Eliezar Lissitzky.

1921–5

As a result of this meeting the second phase of De Stijl development from 1921 to 1925 is increasingly subject to the pervasive influence of Lissitzky's elementarist outlook. Although Jaffé is more inclined to attribute this change in orientation to Van Esteren's entry into De Stijl at this time, all the evidence suggests that both Van Doesburg and Van Esteren fell under Lissitzky's influence, for on his own Cor van Esteren appears at this date to have been a rather conservative designer. By 1920 Lissitzky had already developed, in Vitebsk, with his suprematist mentor, Malevich, his own notion of an elementarist[19] architecture. This conjunction of two

very similar but not identical, architectonic concepts *suprematist-elementarism* and *neoplastic-elementarism*, each evolved independently of the other, is certainly a neglected incident of crucial import to the history of twentieth-century applied art. Van Doesburg's work, in any case, was never the same after his initial encounter with Lissitzky in 1921. No further evidence is needed than the drawings that he and Van Esteren began to produce in the following year – axonometrics or hypothetical architectural constructs in which major planar elements engender a shoal of secondary planes which nebulously appear to float in space about their respective centres of gravity [illustration 83]. These works can surely only be seen as a direct De Stijl response to the challenge of the spatially evocative Proun[19] style invented by El Lissitzky in 1920. Van Doesburg was so captivated by this style that he sought at once to incorporate it into the De Stijl spectrum of thought. Thus Lissitzky became a member of De Stijl in 1922, and Van Doesburg republished on this occasion in *De Stijl 6–7* Lissitzky's famous typographic children's tale of 1920 *The Story of Two Squares*. Furthermore Van Doesburg's 'constructivist'[20] cover design for the De Stijl magazine after 1920 [illustration 71] is in marked contrast to the Huszar covers of the period 1917 to 1920 [illustration 68]. This change represents a conscious shift from a black woodcut logotype and a classical layout to an 'elemental' aesthetic more suitable to over-printing and standard modern type-setting technique.

In 1923 Van Doesburg and his most recent collaborator, the Dutch architect Cor van Esteren, managed to publicly crystallize the architectural style of Neoplasticism through an exhibition of their joint work which was displayed at Léonce Rosenberg's Galerie de l'Effort Moderne in Paris. This show was an immediate success and in consequence was re-staged elsewhere in Paris and later in Nancy. It comprised, apart from the axonometric studies previously mentioned, their Rosenberg House project (model and plans) and, in addition, two other seminal works, their study for the interior of a university hall [illustration 84] and their project for an Artist's House.

At the same time in Holland, Huszar and Rietveld collaborated on the design for a small room to be built as part of the Grosse-Berliner

Kunstausstellung of 1923 – Huszar designing the environment and Rietveld the furniture, including the important Berlin Chair. Simultaneously of course Rietveld was working with Madame Schröder on the design and detailing of the Schröder House [illustrations 79 and 81]. It must be emphasized that this house was a collaborative effort – the client Mrs Trus Schröder-Schräder afterwards becoming a member of De Stijl.

With this sudden output of work, almost exclusively architectural, the neoplastic-architectonic style became crystallized. Its broad principles were at once recognizable. A dynamic asymmetrical arrangement of articulated elements throughout; the spatial explosion of all internal corners as far as possible; the use of low relief coloured rectangular areas to structure and modulate internal spaces, and of course finally the adoption of primary colour for the purposes of effecting accentuation, articulation, recession, etc. The 1924 Schröder House, built on the end of a late nineteenth-century suburban terrace, was in most respects a direct building out of Van Doesburg's *16 Points of a Plastic* (*Beeldende*) *Architecture* published at the time of its completion.[21]

The top floor and the main living level of this two-storey house, with its 'open-transformable' plan [illustration 79], intrinsically exemplifies Van Doesburg's main points (nos. 7–16) where he declares the new architecture to be first and foremost a dynamic architecture of *open skeletal* construction – free from encumbering walls which carry loads and from oppressive openings in such walls which appear as unnecessarily constricted apertures. His prime point no. 11 reads as follows:

> The new architecture is *anti-cubic*, that is to say, it does not try to freeze the different functional space cells in one closed cube. Rather it throws the functional space cells (as well as overhanging planes, balcony volumes, etc.) centrifugally from the core of the cube. And through this means, *height*, *width*, *depth and time* (i.e. an imaginary four dimensional entity) approaches a totally new plastic expression in open spaces. In this way architecture acquires a more or less floating aspect that, so to speak, works against the gravitational forces of nature.

In all evident respects the Schröder House fulfilled Van Doesburg's sixteen-point specification; it was in turn *elementary*,

De Stijl08.jpg

economic, functional and *without precedent*. Equally it could be seen as *unmonumental* and *dynamic*; as *anti-cubic* in its form and *anti-decorative* in its colour. Yet however ingeniously it contrived to appear otherwise it was, in fact, both for technical and financial reasons, finally executed as a traditional brick and timber structure and not as the ideal technical-skeletal system postulated by Van Doesburg.

1925–31

The third phase of De Stijl activity from 1925 onwards is one of post-neoplastic development accompanied by disintegration. At the outset there is the dramatic rift between Mondrian and Van Doesburg over the latter's introduction of the diagonal into his works of 1924. This conflict caused Mondrian's resignation from the group[22] and Van Doesburg's subsequent nomination of Brancusi to replace Mondrian, as the elder of the 'cause'. But clearly the initial unity of the group has now been totally vitiated; in spite of and perhaps even because of Van Doesburg's polemical activity. For it is Van Doesburg himself who has been affected by left wing anti-art constructivist concepts, in which social forces and the means of technical production are seen as spontaneously determining form, independent of any concern for the 'ideal' forms of a universal harmony, that is for the formal world of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, to which all other secondary forms must subscribe. Van Doesburg was prescient enough, in any case, to realize that such a *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideal could only result in an arbitrary, artificially delimited culture – hermetically sealed off from the 'banal' production objects of everyday life. Such a culture would in any case eventually become inherently antipathetic to the programmatic De Stijl concerns (subscribed to even by Mondrian) for the unification of art and life.

Van Doesburg appears to have accepted in his own work at least, a Lissitzkian solution to this dilemma.[23] This was to separate out, one from the other, the various modes of operation and the consequent forms technically and artistically engendered at the various scales of the built environment. Thus furniture, fittings, instruments and utensils, 'spontaneously' engineered by the society at large

could be accepted as the ready-made type objects of the culture – whereas at the macro level, the space containing such objects still required to be modulated and ordered by a conscious aesthetic act. This view Van Doesburg formulated, in extreme (and for him), somewhat inconsistent anti-art terms, in his essay (written with Van Esteren) entitled *Towards a Collective Construction* published in 1924, in which the authors speak of achieving a more objective, technical and industrial solution to the problem of architectural synthesis. Here one reads under the seventh point of the manifesto statement accompanying the text, the following: 'We have established the true place of colour in architecture and we declare that painting, without architectural construction (that is, easel painting) has no further reason for existence.'[24] This was the polemic that was to inform Van Doesburg's last major work, the powerful interior that he was to design and realize for the Café L'Aubette in Strasbourg in 1928.

Rietveld had little direct professional association with Van Doesburg after 1925. Nonetheless, his work developed in a very comparable direction, that is gradually away from the 'elementarism' of the Schröder house and of his ladder back chair sequence designed between 1917 and 1925, to more objective solutions arising out of new techniques. Whereas the cause for Van Doesburg's departure from the canons of Neoplasticism was intellectual, Rietveld's was primarily technical. Rietveld started in this direction by redesigning the seats and backs of his later ladder back chair models as curved planes, not only because such surfaces were more comfortable, but also because they possessed greater inherent structural strength. This departure led naturally to the technique of wood lamination and from there it was but a step, once the inhibiting neoplastic orthogonal aesthetic had been relinquished, to making a chair out of a single sheet of moulded plywood, and this he achieved in two versions in 1927, one with and one without a tubular metal sub-frame.

Rietveld's architecture after 1925 undergoes a parallel development. The Schröder House, with the exception of a totally misconceived attempt built at Wassenaar in 1927, was not to be repeated. In that year however, he also realized a small two-storey chauffeur's

house in Utrecht of about the same size [illustration 82]. This house is the product of the self-same technological determinism as his bent plywood chair. Certain points of Van Doesburg's plastic architecture may be counted as still being present, but most of them are absent. In spite of its pronounced asymmetry it is far from being anti-cubic. It is a definitive closed box. Its structure is indeed skeletal but none of its planes appear to float in space. It makes no use of primary colours. Its painted black surface is stencilled instead with a gridded pattern of small white squares. This finish imparts an homogenous neutral surface of 'technique' to the concrete planks from which the exterior skin is fabricated. Apart from the vertical and horizontal steel bands set at modular intervals to hold these concrete modules in position, there is no other differentiation to the simple cubic mass. However well proportioned, it is an architecture of objective technique, rather than a demonstration of neoplastic universal equilibrium.

The Strasbourg Café L'Aubette [illustration 87] (now destroyed) comprised a sequence of two large public rooms, plus ancillary spaces located within an existing eighteenth-century shell. These rooms were designed and realized by Theo van Doesburg in association with Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp, during the years 1928 and 1929. Van Doesburg seems to have decided on the overall theme, of wall surfaces modulated by low relief, while each artist in turn designed a room. With the exception of Arp's two-dimensional mural in the '*caveau-dancing*', low-relief panels were used in all instances to divide the given internal wall areas. In each room, colour, lighting and equipment were integrated into the total composition. Van Doesburg's scheme was in effect a reworking of his project for a university hall, which had been conceived as a suprematist anti-perspectival 'distribution' of the traditional De Stijl elements. Van Doesburg's Aubette room was similarly overwhelmed by the diverging lines of a diagonal relief, passing directly from the walls across the ceiling. Of crucial importance, however, was its furnishings, for in it, there were no 'elementarist' pieces at all. The chairs were *à la Thonet* bentwood products made to Van Doesburg's design. The detailing throughout was straightforward and simple. The metal tubular railing connections, for example, were not arti-

culated, but simply welded in one plane while the main lighting consisted of bare bulbs mounted off a single metal tube suspended from the ceiling. Of this design Van Doesburg was to write: 'The track of man in space (from left to right, from front to back, from above to below) has become of fundamental importance for painting in architecture . . . In this painting the idea is not to lead man along a painted surface of a wall, in order to let him observe the pictorial development of the space from one wall to the other but the problem is to evoke the simultaneous effect of painting and architecture.'[25] This was the Lissitzkian Proun-Raum[22] approach *par excellence*, in which the whole complex achieves integration through a differentiated aesthetic treatment being accorded to objects at different scales; one law applying to gross space and another to equipment.

Café L'Aubette, finished in 1928, is the last Neoplastic architectural work of true significance. Thereafter most artists who were still affiliated with the De Stijl idea, including even Van Doesburg, came increasingly under the influence of the anti-art 'new objectivity' which deriving ultimately from the preoccupations of international socialism, was primarily concerned with the technical achievement of a new social order. Hence Van Doesburg's own house built in Meudon [illustrations 85 and 86] during the years 1929 and 1930 barely fulfils any of his polemical sixteen points of a plastic architecture. It is primarily a utilitarian atelier-house, of rendered, reinforced concrete frame and block construction, superficially resembling the type of artisan dwelling that Le Corbusier projected in the early twenties. For windows Van Doesburg chose to use standard French industrial sash and for the interior to design his own purpose-made furniture in tubular steel [illustration 86].[26]

By 1930 the neoplastic ideal of a world of universal harmony had been eroded, firstly by internal polemical inconsistency and controversy, and then later by the impact of external cultural pressure. As an ideal it was now once more reduced to its point of departure, to its origins in the domain of abstract painting, to its confinement as a realm, within the frames of Van Doesburg's own *art concret*, hung on the walls of his studio at Meudon. Yet Van Doesburg's conscious concern for a universal order remained unmodified for in

his last polemic entitled, *Manifeste sur l'Art Concret* of 1930 he wrote: 'If the means of expression are liberated from all particularity, they are in harmony with the ultimate end of art, which is to realise a universal language.'[27] However, how such means of expression were to become liberated in the case of applied art, such as furniture, equipment, etc., was not made clear.

Theo van Doesburg died in a sanatorium in Davos, Switzerland in 1931 at the age of 48 and with him, died the moving spirit of Neoplasticism.[28] From the original Dutch De Stijl group only Mondrian remained active, to go on and to demonstrate alone, in the domain of painting, the tense equilibrium of his singular, austere and yet rich vision.

1968

Notes

1. In spite of an initial concern with the architectonics of stained glass, Bart van der Leck was opposed to the premature union of architecture and painting and on this issue soon disassociated himself from the movement. In the first annual issue of the De Stijl magazine he wrote: 'To each art, separately and by itself, its own means of expression are sufficient. Only when these means of expression of each art have been reduced to purity . . . so that each art has found its essence as an independent entity, only then, a mutual comprehension, a relationship will be possible, in which the unity of the different arts will manifest itself.' See H. L. C. Jaffé. *De Stijl 1917–1931*, Amsterdam, 1956, p. 170.

2. Berlage had himself been under the influence of Wright since the publication of the second Wasmuth volume in 1911. According to Reyner Banham in *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, New York, 1960, p. 143, it was from Gottfried Semper, via de Groot and his pupil Berlage that the Neoplastic artists appropriated the term 'De Stijl', – the Style. For their part the De Stijl artists were, as one would expect, very conscious of evoking 'style' as an almost metaphysical concept when they wrote in their magazine in 1919, 'The object of nature is man. The object of man is style . . . The style idea as abolition of all styles thus creating an elementary plasticity, is sensible, spiritual and ahead of its time.' For full text in English see *De Stijl Catalogue 81* Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 1951, pp. 7 and 8.

3. See H. L. C. Jaffé, op. cit., pp. 58 and 60.

4. See *Frank Lloyd Wright on Architecture*. Selected writings edited by Frederick Gutheim, New York, 1941, pp. 59–76. Texts taken from *Ausgefuhrte Bauten und Entwurfe*, Berlin, 1910.

5. Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple of 1906 was obviously a formal model for the Huis-ter-Heide. Theodore M. Brown in his study, *The Work of G. Rietveld Architect*, Utrecht, 1958, quotes Rietveld as stating that in 1918 the owners of the Huis-ter-Heide asked him to make imitation 'Wrightian' furniture for its interior. On the other hand plastic studies by Van't Hoff of this date closely resemble Malevich's architectonic studies of the early 1920s.

6. Michel Seuphor, in his *Piet Mondrian Life and Work*, New York, 1956, quotes Albert van den Briel to the effect that Mondrian had been definitely attracted to the Dutch theosophical movement by 1905, when he returned from his stay in the Dutch Brabant to Amsterdam.

7. See Joost Baljeu's essay *The Problem of Reality with Suprematism, Proun, Constructivism and Elementarism*, The Lugano Review 1965/1, pp. 105–24. According to Baljeu, Schoenmaekers had in his turn been influenced by the mathematician L. E. J. Brouwer who wrote in 1905 a book entitled *Life, Art and Mysticism*.

8. This collaboration occurred on Oud's Noordwijkerhout Sanitorium realized in 1917. Van Doesburg was responsible for the floor tiling amongst other interior details.

9. The word Neoplasticism comes from the Dutch *nieuwe beelding* first coined by Schoenmaekers in his book *The New Image of the World* (*Het nieuwe Wereldbeeld*, Bussum, 1915). *Beelding* translates with somewhat wider connotations into German as *Gestaltung*. 'Le Néo-Plasticisme' was first published in 1920 by the Gallery Léonce Rosenberg, Paris. 'Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art' was first published in 1937 in *Circle* (an international survey of constructive art), London, edited by J. L. Martin and N. Gabo. This essay was subtitled by Mondrian as 'Figurative Art and Non-Figurative Art'. What Mondrian intended by a new pure plastic art is best expressed in his own words:

Gradually art is purifying its plastic means and thus bringing out the relationships between them (i.e. between figurative and non-figurative). Thus in our day two main tendencies appear: the one maintains figuration, the other eliminates it. While the former employs more or less complicated and particular forms, the latter uses simple and neutral forms, or ultimately, the free line and pure colour . . . Non-figurative art brings to an end the ancient culture of art . . . the culture of particular

form is approaching its end. The culture of determined relations has begun.

10. The term 'oceanic style' seems doubly appropriate. Firstly because of the titles given to these works: 'The Sea', 'Pier and Ocean', etc., and secondly because of Mondrian's propensity for an 'oceanic feeling' in the Freudian sense. As Jaffé points out the inspiration for these oceanic works was 'the sea and the pier at Scheveningen'. op. cit., p. 43.

11. In the works of this period, some spatial displacement occurs through the colours advancing and receding – in others this movement is reinforced through coloured planes literally overlapping.

12. H. L. C. Jaffé dates the chair unequivocally as 1917; T. M. Brown as 1918 give or take one year. It seems psychologically unlikely that Rietveld would have made the 'Wrightian' pieces after designing this work; in which case 1918 would be the more probable date.

13. This is the colour scale which Van Doesburg was eventually to classify into parallel contrary sets, into the 'positive' set, red, blue and yellow and into the 'negative' set, black, grey and white. For full text (dated 1 November 1930) see the last number of the De Stijl magazine, January 1932, dedicated to Theo van Doesburg, pp. 27 and 28.

14. Van de Velde was the main theoretician of a synthetic and symbolic *Jugendstijl* aesthetic, in which complex plastic forms were regarded as the expressive vehicles of inner forces. Hence his famous aphorism: 'A line is force . . . it derives its force from the energy of the man who drew it.' See 'Henry van de Velde: A Re-evaluation' by Libby Tannebaum, *Art News Annual XXXIV – The Avant-Garde*, edited by T. B. Hess and J. Ashberry, New York, 1968, pp. 135–47.

15. Elementarism as an aesthetic of dematerialized forms in space gained currency as an idea in the early twenties due no doubt in part to the polemical and creative (Proun) activity of Lissitzky. The German manifesto *Aufruf zur Elementaren Kunst* which declared elementary art to be simply one, 'built out of its own proper elements alone' and free, unlike Suprematism of philosophical connotations, appeared in the October 1921 issue of De Stijl above the signatures of Hausmann, Arp, Puni and Moholy-Nagy. It was Frederick Kiesler who first demonstrated this aesthetic, in its most 'dematerialized' form, in his *Cité dans L'Espace* exhibit of 1925. Van Doesburg first discussed elementarism in the De Stijl VII issue of 1926, in an article entitled 'Painting and Plastic', in which he developed the notion of elementarism as an anti-statical system of counter composition; a system which he was to demonstrate in his designs for the Café L'Aubette.

16. See T. M. Brown, op. cit., p. 42.

17. *De Stijl Catalogue 81.* Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 1951, p. 45.

18. For one fairly complete account of this episode see *Poetica dell'architettura neoplastica* by Bruno Zevi, Milan, 1953, chapter 1.

19. Kasimir Malevich renamed the school that took over from Chagall in 1919, in Vitebsk *UNOVIS* – an abbreviation of 'Affirmation of the New in Art'. This of course became under Malevich a suprematist school and from this Lissitzky derived the name *PROUN* for his synthetic suprematist-elementarist art work; thus *PRO* + *UNOVIS* i.e. for the New Art. He later characterized this synthetic work in the book *Die Kunstismen*, which he edited with Hans Arp in 1925, as the 'interchange station between painting and architecture'.

20. 'Constructivist' here refers to graphics of magazines such as the Russian periodical *LEF* designed by Rodchenko in 1923. See *The Great Experiment – Russian Art 1863–1922*, London, 1962 by Camilla Gray; pp. 231–3.

21. See T. M. Brown, op. cit., pp. 66–9. Point no. 11 anticipates the aspirations which both Kiesler and Lissitzky were soon to publicly express, for an elementarist architecture free from the tyranny of gravity and the constrictions of foundations and massive masonry structure. See Frederick Kiesler's statement *L'Architecture Elémentarisée* in *De Stijl VII 79/84*, 1927, p. 101 and El Lissitzky's *Russland. Die Rekonstruktion der Architektur in der Sowjetunion*, Wien, 1930.

22. See H. L. C. Jaffé, op. cit., p. 27. Mondrian wrote to Van Doesburg on leaving: 'After your high handed improvement (?) of neo-plasticism any cooperation is quite impossible for me . . . For the rest *sans rancune*.'

23. See *El Lissitzky* (Life, Letters, Texts) by Sophie Lissitzky-Kuppers, Thames & Hudson, 1968, p. 361, for El Lissitzky's description of his own Proun-Raum designed for the 1923 Grosse-Berliner Kunstausstellung as first published in the magazine *G*. 'The new room neither needs nor desires pictures—it is not in fact a picture, it is transposed into flat surfaces . . . I hang a sheet of glass on the wall; it has no painting behind it, but a periscopic device which shows me what is actually happening at any given moment, in true colour and with real movement. The equilibrium which I seek to attain in the room must be elementary and capable of change, so that it cannot be disturbed by a telephone or a piece of standard office furniture.'

24. For full text see *De Stijl VI*, 6 July 1924, pp. 89–92.

25. See H. L. C. Jaffé, op. cit., p. 174.

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26. See catalogue: *Theo Van Doesburg 1883–1931.* Stedelijk van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, December 1968, plate, B69.

27. See H. L. C. Jaffé, op. cit., p. 175.

28. As T. M. Brown has written: 'A close study of the Dutch 1920s forces the question of whether in fact a "Stijl" point of view actually existed outside Van Doesburg's fertile imagination.' *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 19 (1968), p. 214.