

1924 Theo van Doesburg: Towards a plastic architecture

In Paris, Theo van Doesburg once again – and not for the last time – formulated his theory of elemental construction. After his stays in Weimar, where in 1922 he gave courses in the immediate proximity of the Bauhaus – ‘from 1921 to 1923 Neo-Plasticism, from the two centres Weimar and Berlin, dominated the whole of modern design’ – he settled in Paris. During November/December 1923 a big De Stijl exhibition was held in the Galerie de l’Effort Moderne, which brought the young Paris architects into contact with the De Stijl movement. A demonstration of the new domestic architecture was organized by van Doesburg in Paris in spring 1924.

1. Form. Elimination of all *concept of form* in the sense of a *fixed type* is essential to the healthy development of architecture and art as a whole. Instead of using earlier styles as models and imitating them, the problem of architecture must be posed entirely afresh.

2. The new architecture is *elemental*; that is to say, it develops out of the elements of building in the widest sense. These elements – such as function, mass, surface, time, space, light, colour, material, etc. – are *plastic*.

3. The new architecture is *economic*; that is to say, it employs its elemental means as effectively and thriftily as possible and squanders neither these means nor the material.

4. The new architecture is *functional*; that is to say, it develops out of the exact determination of the practical demands, which it contains within clear outlines.

5. The new architecture is *formless* and yet exactly defined; that is to say, it is not subject to any fixed aesthetic formal type. It has no mould (such as confectioners use) in which it produces the functional surfaces arising out of practical, living demands.

In contradistinction to all earlier styles the new architectural methods know no closed type, no *basic type*.

The functional space is strictly divided into rectangular surfaces having no individuality of their own. Although each one is fixed on the basis of the others, they may be visualized as extending infinitely. Thus they form a co-ordinated system in which all points correspond to the same number of points in the universe. It follows from this that the surfaces have a direct connexion to infinite space.

6. The new architecture has rendered the concept *monumental* independent of large and small (since the word ‘monumental’ has become hackneyed it is replaced by the word ‘plastic’). It has shown that everything exists on the basis of interrelationships.

7. The new architecture possesses no single *passive factor*. It has overcome the *opening* (in the wall). With its *openness* the window plays an active role in opposition to the *closedness* of the wall surface. Nowhere does an opening or a gap occupy the foreground; everything is strictly determined by contrast. Compare the various counter-constructions in which the elements that architecture consists of (surface, line, and mass) are placed without constraint in a three-dimensional relationship.

8. *The ground-plan*. The new architecture has *opened* the walls and so done away with the separation of *inside* and *outside*. *The walls themselves no longer support*; they merely provide supporting points. The result is a new, open ground-plan entirely different from the classical one, since inside and outside now pass over into one another.

9. The new architecture is *open*. The whole structure consists of a space that is divided in accordance with the various functional demands. This division is carried out by means of *dividing surfaces* (in the interior) or *protective surfaces* (externally). The former, which separate the various functional spaces, may be *movable*; that is to say, the dividing surfaces (formerly the interior walls) may be replaced by movable intermediate surfaces or panels (the same method may be employed for doors). In architecture's next phase of development the ground-plan must disappear completely. The two-dimensional spatial composition *fixed* in a ground-plan will be replaced by an exact *constructional calculation* – a calculation by means of which the supporting capacity is restricted to the simplest but strongest supporting points. For this purpose Euclidean mathematics will be of no further use – but with the aid of calculation that is non-Euclidean and takes into account the four dimensions everything will be very easy.

10. *Space and time*. The new architecture takes account not only of space but also of the magnitude *time*. Through the unity of space and time the architectural exterior will acquire a new and completely plastic aspect. (Four-dimensional space-time aspects.)

11. The new architecture is *anti-cubic*; that is to say, it does not attempt to fit all the functional space cells together into a closed cube, but *projects functional space-cells* (as well as overhanging surfaces, balconies, etc.) centrifugally from the centre of the cube outwards. Thus height, breadth, and depth plus time gain an entirely new plastic expression. In this way architecture achieves a more or less floating aspect (in so far as this is possible from the constructional standpoint – this is a problem for the engineer!) which operates, as it were, in opposition to natural gravity.

12. *Symmetry and repetition*. The new architecture has eliminated both monotonous repetition and the stiff equality of two halves – the mirror image, symmetry. There is no repetition in time, no street front, no standardization.

A block of houses is just as much a whole as the individual house. The laws that apply to the individual house also apply to the block of houses and to the city. In place of symmetry the new architecture offers a *balanced relationship of unequal parts*; that is to say, of parts that differ from each other by virtue of their functional characteristics as regards position, size, proportion and situation. The equality of these parts rests upon the balance of their dissimilarity, not upon their similarity. Furthermore, the new architecture has rendered front, back, right, left, top, and bottom, factors of equal value.

13. In contrast to frontalism, which had its origin in a rigid, static way of life, the new architecture offers the plastic richness of an all-sided development in space and time.

14. *Colour*. The new architecture has done away with painting as a separate and imaginary expression of harmony, secondarily as representation, primarily as coloured surface.

The new architecture permits colour organically as a direct means of expressing its relationships within space and time. Without colour these relationships are not real, but *invisible*. The balance of organic relationships acquires visible reality only by means of colour. The modern painter's task consists in creating with the aid of colour a harmonious whole in the new four-dimensional realm of space-time – not a surface in two dimensions. In a further phase of development colour may also be replaced by a denaturalized material possessing its own specific colour (a problem for the chemist) – but only if practical needs demand this material.

15. The new architecture is *anti-decorative*. Colour (and this is something the colour-shy must try to grasp) is not a decorative part of architecture, but its organic medium of expression.

16. *Architecture as a synthesis of Neo-Plasticism*. Building is a part of the new architecture which, by combining together all the arts in their elemental manifestation, discloses their true nature.

A prerequisite is the ability to think in four dimensions – that is to say: the architects of Plasticism, among whom I also number the painters, must construct within the new realm of space and time.

Since the new architecture permits no images (such as paintings or sculptures as separate elements) its purpose of creating a harmonious whole with all essential means is evident from the *outset*. In this way, every architectural element contributes to the attainment on a practical and logical basis of a maximum of plastic expression, without any disregard of the practical demands.