

GRAY Alexandrina

Painting the Town

Abstract

I am currently studying for my Master of Fine Art in Painting at the University of Newcastle. When people ask me what I am painting, the quick answer is “buildings”. My investigations are still very broad as I am finding my way in and out of a vast topic, that of the many relationships between painting and architecture. From photo portraits I paint to draw attention to the fragility of our built heritage and aim to develop visions of what could happen. My paintings are at times decorative or additive, occasionally seeking integration into the building fabric and sometimes stepping back to view the whole.

Biography

In the 1970s and early '80s I studied Architecture at the University of Sydney, concurrently gaining an alternative art education at the Tin Sheds. In 1981 I graduated and was employed in private architectural and landscape practices before moving to Canberra in 1984 to work in the Architecture Division of the National Capital Development Commission. Upon developing a portfolio through the Open Art program at Canberra School of Art, I was accepted into the Bachelor of Visual Arts in 1997, completing with 1st class honours in 2000. The family moved to Newcastle in 2001 and there I refreshed my experience of commercial architecture, while developing photographic essays of urban Newcastle. In 2002 I was invited to teach painting at the University of Newcastle. The following year I commenced studying for a Master of Fine Art at the University of Newcastle.

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Context

A few years ago I came across unpublicised and unprotected paintings beneath the scalloped overhangs around the base of Uluru. I was told their function was to teach, and they were constantly being renewed to this purpose, informing people of water and seasonal food sources, and patterns of living. I found myself witness to an intimacy between a place and her people, imparted through the act of painting. Paintings, and the way they are integrated with human habitation, tell us much about a people and their belonging to place.

In looking for connections between painting and architecture I am studying the theories and practice of a group originating in Holland, whose collective and sometimes disparate practices, found expression in a small publication called *De Stijl*. Isolated from the international art community by the advent of World War, painters Theo van Doesburg, Piet Mondrian, Bart van der Leek and Vilmos Huszar were kindred spirits in their pursuit of a new language to express the essence of their time. Sculptor Georges Vantongerloo, architects JJP Oud, Robert Van't Hoff, Jan Wils and Cornelis van Eesteren and designer Gerrit Rietveld joined them. Ideas binding the group have been summarised as follows:

- *An insistence on the social role of art, design and architecture.*
- *A belief in a balance between the universal and collective and the specific and individual.*
- *A Utopian faith in the transforming qualities of mechanization and new technology.*
- *A conviction that art and design have the power to change the future (and also the lives and life-styles of individuals).¹*

The *De Stijl* magazine was the forum for the sharing of ideas of this group and a platform for potential collaborations between the arts, towards a seamless art. Its editor Van Doesburg had much to say about the continuum between architecture and art, in particular painting. Van Doesburg wrote that he wanted to develop ‘monumental’ painting in conjunction with architecture where it would be possible “...to place man within painting instead of in front of it and thereby enable him to participate in it.” Within this context the act of painting was to be emptied of all representational reference and distilled to the essence of its constituent parts, namely colour plane and line.

Mondrian was the most well-known of the De Stijl group for his prolific writing and practice of living his convictions, eventually striving to integrate his art practice into every aspect of his life. Convinced of the supremacy of painting, Mondrian held it up as “...a frame of reference for the other arts, each of which is called on to strive for that same degree of purity within the bounds of its own possibilities.”

This was contrary to the current debate that placed architecture at the top of the tree. At first Mondrian was wary of too close an association with architecture, fearing that painting might become the decorative handmaiden. He was highly critical of architecture at the time, convinced that it had not achieved the purity and integrity of recent developments in painting. However through association with Van der Leek and Van Doesburg, Mondrian was persuaded that "...painting could manifest itself better and more forcefully the more intimately it was involved with a specific architectural setting."² He and Van Doesburg agreed that avant-garde painting had to be closely allied to an equally radical modern architecture. He claimed that a painter should paint in the location where the work will be seen: "Only then will the colours and relationships produce the proper effect, bound up as they are with the architecture as a whole. The architecture, in turn must be in complete harmony with the painting."³ He even went so far as to project that painting might some day become superfluous once "the harmony of relationships it expressed was realized in the total environment." This creed manifested itself in his studio, where he applied the principles of Neo-Plasticism espoused in his essays, with coloured planes on the walls, and placement and colour of furniture. His studio became a 3D De Stijl environment, so that the painter was positioned within the painting. He claimed to Van Doesburg that "...it has a favourable influence on my work."⁴

In 1931 Mondrian was commissioned to do a painting for a new town hall in Hilversum. It was a modernist concrete building. He presented *Lozenge Composition with two lines*, a diamond-shaped off-white canvas with two lines, a horizontal and a vertical. These lines established a simple relationship between the architecture and the painting. "There was no frame, the lines extending to the edge and beyond, into mathematically conceived unconfined space."⁵ The painting was unpopular and was sold off to Amsterdam. People could accept the austerity of their building as long as it fulfilled its function, but could not see painting as an extension of that aesthetic.

On the occasion of Mondrian's 60th birthday, architect C van Eesteren collected money from a group of architects to purchase one of Mondrian's works. In 1933 they chose *Lozenge Composition with Four Yellow Lines* as representative of his work and offered the painting to Haags Gemeentemuseum. Mondrian, with the merging colour and line, had reached the limit of his pursuit of the mechanisation of pictorial design.

The fruits of most De Stijl collaborations between artist and architect rarely lasted more than ten years, that being the nature of interiors. Much of the collaborative work of De Stijl has been lost, though some documentation survives in the form of written descriptions, black-and-white photos, drawings, and coloured maquettes. Van der Leek who described himself as a monumental artist, proposed that "...by its very nature, the art of painting was meant to destroy visually the structural and material nature of any building in which it was employed." Architects did not appreciate the dismantling of their designs and it was inevitable that artist and architect should fall out and their practices take divergent paths. Overy goes on to make the point that many clients found it difficult to live with their De Stijl interiors "...and only the most determined, like Mrs Schroder, reconstructed their lives according to the demands of their interiors."⁶ *Schroder House*, designed by Rietveld, exists today as a timepiece museum, and living testament to the integration espoused by De Stijl.

Van Doesburg aimed to have more of an impact on architecture than as mere colourist, his designs seeking to visually deconstruct the building envelope and connect interior and exterior colour planes. *Café Aubette* (1926-1928) is considered to be Van Doesburg's major collaboration, involving the refurbishment and decoration of the interior of a vast architectural complex in Strasbourg. This heritage building was to incorporate a café, restaurant, ballroom and cinema. Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp invited Van Doesburg to work with them on this daunting project, a challenge he met readily, seeing the opportunity to realise cherished ideals. Van Doesburg described this project as *gesamtkunstwerk* (a total work of art), the embodiment of his ideas down to the finest detail.

One of the major components of the *Aubette*, the Cine-dancing or Grande Salle was a space intended for dancing, films and cabaret. In keeping with its active intended use, Van Doesburg made use of diagonal planes of colour on the walls and ceiling. Primary and secondary colours were combined and juxtaposed to create dissonant effects. The diagonal elements were painted on stucco relief panels to create an effect of relief planes of colour, floating over neutral background, which appears as recessed bands. It is a dynamic design where obliques work against the orthogonal architecture in a style of counter-composition that deconstructs the space. The intention of this design was to stimulate, excite and involve the clientele.

The *Aubette* was ignored by the architect and art press in France and disliked by its clients, leaving Van Doesburg "...beggary and intellectually plundered". He had enthused that the *Aubette* would "...signify the beginning of a new era of visual art. Elementarism will be a fact forever."⁷ Now he despaired of changing people's moral and aesthetic behaviour by means of architecture and painting. Though alterations occurred from the beginning, the design survived via photographs and drawings and reconstructions for later exhibitions. Restoration of the Cine-dancing and the Petit Salle were carried out in the early 1990s and now serve as icons of early modernism and De Stijl.

The vision of a new societal structure, shaped by the post-industrial age, was the creed of other manifestos of the time, the Futurists, the Constructivists, die Brucke, the Bauhaus.

Contemporary Influences

It is readily apparent that architecture and art have not always been soul mates in the last century. There have been conscientious attempts to reintroduce the disciplines to each other, to bring the soul back into architecture and to draw artists out of the gallery. Queensland architect Michael Rayner has developed the thesis that art and architecture divorced during the modernist phase of last century and are only now just coming back together in a spirit of true collaboration and mutual respect.

In his review of the Melbourne exhibition of 1985 *Architectura Picta*, Alex Selenitch recommended that "If the whole thing is a demarcation dispute (between Painter and Architect) then perhaps what architects need do is to re-appropriate the gallery as a place of public exchange" for ideas and proposals.⁸ For architects to contract into the gallery seems to miss the point of bringing art and architecture together.

In Melbourne in 1986, a show at the Ewing and George Paton Gallery called *Artists and Architects '86* brought the two disciplines together in what Jenepher Duncan described as "a forced marriage".⁹ Val Austin, the guest curator aimed to bring together architects and artists "in an exploratory discourse with each other"¹⁰ in a gallery setting. The need for such a forum highlighted the lack of such discourse, and the results were, for the most part more like parallel play than collaboration. Duncan concluded that the artists' responses stole the show. Interestingly they were predominantly painters.

In searching for contemporary examples it is not hard to find artists who are responding to architecture through video, photography, and ephemeral disruption of form with lighting. One such example of the latter is *Town Hall Transformed* by projection artist Ian de Gruchy, a Melbourne event-based show in 1999-2000.¹¹ Alan Chawner, a Newcastle-based artist, also illuminates civic buildings to a different purpose. His illuminations enhance the urban townscape of the night, boosting morale by reintroducing people to the beautiful city in which they live.

Torben Geihler, a German-born artist living in New York, engages and challenges the De Stijl rhetoric of verticals, horizontals and pure colour composition, overlaying his work with perspective and the diagonal.¹² He took a cheeky look at Mondrian's painting *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942). This painting documents Mondrian's intense response to city life in New York and is perhaps busier and looser than his former work. In Geihler's own rendition of *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1999) he tilted Mondrian's image then repainted what he saw from an aerial perspective as though flying over within a video game. His other paintings also grapple with planar surface, tilting and buckling to imply speed. Their referents are flight simulators in contrast to the grounded search for compositional stability, which Mondrian sought in his painting. While Mondrian concentrated on giving his paintings the static equilibrium that was characteristic of architecture, Geihler can afford to dispense with this static model as architectural norms have been expanded to include drama and dynamism.

Architect Frank Gehry also provides an antithesis to De Stijl's rejection of curved lines. Yet the plasticity of his built forms, integrating function with new technology to achieve a new aesthetic, echo a De Stijl aspiration with different technology at their disposal. New space-age materials and computer aided drafting and engineering have made possible the description of a new generation of complex planar buildings and non-buildings.

Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is painterly, sculptural and unifies art and architecture. The building hovers and shimmers and could easily take flight. Though Gehry describes the process of its making in very pragmatic terms as "...blocks, with no sculptural form, which join up like pieces of a

puzzle”,¹³ he has also been quoted saying “Painting had an immediacy that I craved for in architecture...I fantasized that I was an artist standing before a white canvas deciding what the first move should be.” Gehry achieves free translation of his inspired sketches into built form. The building is described by Ockman as “...an excessive, impossible, even farcical dream of freedom, imagination, and pleasure.” Unashamedly skin-deep, Gehry’s disruptive visual language forms a continuum from pop consumerism of the art world, an inevitable consequence of that era, that of “...visual chaos and junkspace of the late 20th century as his material stratum”.¹⁴

My Studio Work

Newcastle is a city that is regenerating, and redefining itself. It has an amazing architectural heritage that has somehow survived the urge to redevelop. Its centre seems to have been overlooked by developers in times when so much of Sydney was changed forever. There is a Victorian heart to the city, worn and neglected but still reclaimable. It is also ripe for a ‘Bilbao’ type of project that will celebrate and consolidate its cultural presence. The connections between Newcastle as a post-industrial city and Bilbao, which has benefited so much from Gehry’s new Guggenheim museum are too strong to ignore.

I have been collecting and making photo portraits of some of Newcastle’s buildings with a view to painting them in such a way that draws public attention to their plight, renews interest in their validity, or sometimes just records them before they disappear. One technique I have been using is to photo-collage in multiple shots, to bring an overall building subject into a more intimate viewing frame, then painting from this material.

Recently I exhibited a series of paintings that focus on a particularly beautiful building in the ‘rough end of town’ on Hunter Street. This idiosyncratic building caught my attention from the upper floor of a building across the street. At street level it is barely noticeable having been denatured by glass and aluminium to accommodate a pawnbroker. This building represents a split in cultural identity, two ages in one façade, one spawned of commercial poverty and the other an exuberant expression of the craftsmanship of a more prosperous time. The slash in identity occurs at awning level. Above the forms are very strong in their asymmetrical arrangement of triangle, rectangles, hexagon tower and arch. At first glance the shop, the Pawnbroker Dinny’s specialises in musical instruments. The upper floors accommodate a brothel. The two enterprises are quite separate, reflected eloquently in the external fabric.

In painting this building I aim to recapture the beauty that one now has to look up to see. I have used bright colours to draw attention before she fades away altogether, beneath neon signage, protruding air-conditioners and crass and inappropriate modernisation. It is a building that has occupied heart space at some time in its history. At the opening to my exhibition I invited musicians to play music appropriate to the era of the building. Some of the instruments played: a fiddle and a concertina had actually been procured from the pawnbroker’s. I enjoyed the response as some people recognised the building or identified with its parts. One person did know the building particularly well and could fill me in on some of the history. The designer of this once flamboyant little building created a busy gem. There is still pride in its craftsmanship. Many of Newcastle’s early buildings reflect such pride of ownership by their tradesmen, in the crafting of downpipes, lintels and unique detailing.

A former career in public architecture provided me with a lot of satisfaction where I felt I could make a difference in people’s lives. I feel an affinity with Mondrian in that I am using 3D buildings as source materials for 2D paintings. I hope that my architectural interests and concern for social equity will enhance and inform the content of my painting and further the dialogue between painting and architecture.

¹ Overy, P. (1991). *De Stijl*, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, p 12

² Deicher, S. (1999). *Mondrian 1872 - 1944 Structures in Space*, Taschen, p 46

³ Overy, P. (1991). *De Stijl*, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, p 119

⁴ Overy, P. (1991). *De Stijl*, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, p 168

⁵ Deicher, S. (1999). *Mondrian 1872 - 1944 Structures in Space*, Taschen, p 68

⁶ Overy, P. (1991). *De Stijl*, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, p 103

⁷ Troy, N. J. (1983). *The De Stijl Environment*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, p 173

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- ⁸ Selenitch, A. (1985). "Review: Architectura Picta." *Transition*, 4(2).
- ⁹ Duncan, J. (1986). "A forced marriage." *Studio International*, 199, pp 54-55
- ¹⁰ Austin, V. (1986). *Transition - Artists and Architects*. 4,5.
- ¹¹ Holt, R. (2000). "The appeal of the temporal." *Artlink - Australian Contemporary Art Quarterly* 20(4): pp 59-61.
- ¹² Hunt, D. (2002). "Torben Geihler - Shockwave Xanadu." *Arctect*, (Fall 2002).
- ¹³ Rayner, M. (2002). *Art & Architecture: Collaborative Forces*. Brisbane. P 23
- ¹⁴ Ockman, J. (2001). "Wrap Session - Applause and Effect." *Artforum International*, (Summer 2001): pp 140-149.

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