Architecture: The Revolution Was Real
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Architecture

The Revolution Was Real

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A REVOLUTION in retrospect takes on curious connotations. The insurgent becomes *déjà vu*. De Stijl, the Dutch movement that announced itself as a "radical renewal of art" in 1917, is now an indelible part of the world it set out to change. It is common currency. And like all such currency, shiny and rare when it was new, it managed to get debased to Mondrian knock-offs in the 1940's in ad agency formulas and linoleum patterns at the most popular and visible levels.

Far less obvious, and far more revolutionary, is the vision and practice of architecture today that can be traced directly back to De Stijl. The line goes from Theo van Doesberg in Holland to the Bauhaus and Walter Gropius in Germany, from Gropius to the Harvard Graduate School of Design in the United States. Without chauvinism, you might even say that it has come full circle. It began with the Dutch architect Hendrik Berlage's admiration of H. H. Richardson, Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, consolidated by his 1911 American tour, and with the 1914 Wasmuths publication of Wright's work in Germany, that portfolio that became a kind of bible for De Stijl. Small world.

But a world notably in the De Stijl image. That meticulously exploded geometry of flat, thin surfaces and intersecting planes, those disassembled and reassembled volumes and cubes that broke down and built up spatial and surface relationships with analytical clarity and connotations of ordered space and time, are essential to the way we think about building now. The De Stijl definition of architecture that grew out of the early 20th-century isms—cubism, constructivism, neo-plasticism — reshaped more than the esthetic world.

The drawings of Theo van Doesberg, painter, sculptor, writer, polemicist, colorist and architect to the De Stijl group, prefigure the taste and technology that make the thin, flat plane the basic building element today. Forty of these drawings and color studies are on display in a new special exhibition room of the Philip L. Goodwin galleries of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art. The new room promises many small shows of equal interest. This one, called "Theo van Doesberg: The Development of an Architect," is the work of Ludwig Glaeser, Curator of Architecture, and will run to June 7.

With Piet Mondrian, J.J.P. Oud, Antonie Kok and Vilmos Huszar, Van Doesberg founded De Stijl and started the influential magazine of the same name in 1917. The group was joined by the arctects Robert van't Hoff and Gerritt Rietveld and the sculptor and painter Georges Vantongerloo. Surprisingly, that was all more than 50 years ago. A half century. Fifty years ago De Stijl architects plastered over brick and wood to get the proper "look." Slim, prefab panels and dry sandwich walls came later to give the image substance. De Stijl was an esthetic and intellectual idea whose time came, and conquered; technology followed. Unrecognized by the silent majority, the revolution was real.

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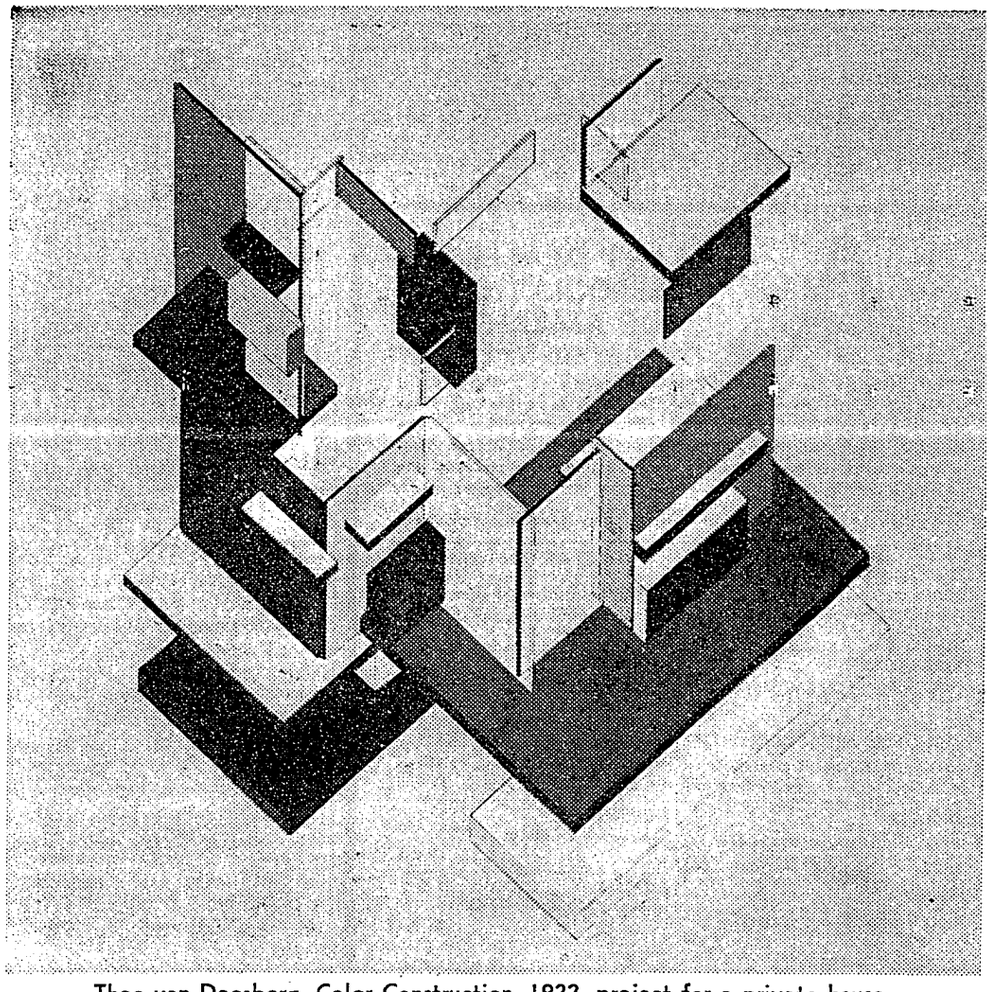
Turning left at the museum's enshrined "useful objects" on the second floor, one enters the world of the '20's, and it is curiously up-to-date. There is, in van Doesberg's strange marriage of abstraction and isometrics, a sense of time past, and of timelessness. These pencil, ink and guache renderings on paper tinged with age even have, forgive us, an extraordinary chic. But more of that later.

Studies for a "private house" and "the house of an artist," done with Cor van Eesteren, later the city architect of Amsterdam, are the historically familiar perspective explosions of line and color. Planes ricochet past each other with controlled and elegant precision. His "counter-constructions" hang in uncluttered air, in reds, blues and yellows, the only colors considered properly "pure," tempered by black, white and gray. (Architects of three generations have been almost universally blind to anything but red, blue or yellow.)



Theo van Doesberg, Color Construction, 1922, project for a private house.
All of the elements of architecture; technology came later

These are the drawings that helped the 20th century redefine structure and space. They were reinforced by van Doesberg's book on basic art principles published first in Amsterdam in 1919, and reissued as "Grundbegriffe der bildenden Kunst," the sixth Bauhaus Book, in 1924.

But the surprise and delight of the show are the 1927 designs for the cafe "L'Aubette" in Strasbourg, van Doesberg's largest executed project. Any really smart restaurant entrepreneur could rebuild it today for instant success.

Elevations of "dancing hall" and "ballroom" walls, ceiling and floor plans, show a skilled and wilful control of architectural space through color and line. One wall of supersized canted rectangles sends diagonals of flat color boldly across windows and doors. At the top of a window, off center, is a blue triangle that nonchalantly completes the blue rectangle below; another wall opening cuts into a red V with equal abandon.

There is more varied color here, light and dark red, yellow and gold, a stunning poison green as well as blue. In the "dancing hall," light bulb-studded enamel panels, this time on the square, stagger the color fields. It is Stella and Supermannerism—a magic only recently rediscovered.

Since the present generation disclaims historicism, one assumes that a sense or knowledge of the past must be carried in the genes. Today's young architects have discarded the formal esthetics of the half century of De Stijl-Bauhaus tradition. How, then, does one explain the parallels between modish Supermannerism and the cafe 'L'Aubette"? Supermannerism, of course, has a wider and more sophisticated palette and runs curves as well as straight lines across those windows and doors.

And how does one explain, for another instance, since this generation can barely read and doesn't much believe in it, Supergraphics and Fortunato Depero's Futurist pavilion at Monza in 1927, illustrated in Bruno Zevi's "Storia dell'Architettura Moderna"? Can they have seen it? Or is it something circulating in the blood?

If revolution was the art style of the beginning of the century, revivalism is its style at the end. It is the ineluctable stream of history, at a time when history is rejected, the fertilization of the present by the past, when the past is called irrelevant. But it is not reproductive historicism of any kind. It is very, very much alive, almost conscientiously not "correct," and it is something of which we are going to see a great deal more. That is considerable comfort to those who believe in creativity and continuity and the particular genius of the 20th century.