

# “Inhabiting Art”

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to present a conceptual strategy related to the use of colour in architecture, and its practical application. When we speak about “Inhabiting Art”, we talk about an approach that depicts the passage from the two-dimensionality of the canvas to what Le Corbusier called the “La promenade architecturale”, the experience of space in three dimensions over time.

This journey starts from a new concept of colour that the philosopher Gilles Deleuze (2007) describes as the “Pictorial Diagram”, which emerges on the way to abstraction in art. Theo Van Doesburg, one of the members of the neoplasticist movement, initiates this approach in architecture; from its first steps of the Café Aubette to the “Maison Particulière” models, he develops a true manifesto of “Inhabiting Art”. We create a reading tool to be able to “read the unwritten” and the multitude of factors that intervene in its decoding, which we named the *Neoplasticist Tabulae*. Ultimately we performed an intervention in the ceilings of the halls of the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. Based on the painting “House in Gandansk” by the German expressionist Erich Heckel from the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection, we carried out the intervention “The Expressionist Ceilings at the School of Building Engineering, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. Finally, we define the “Expressionist keyboards”, as a range of beautiful colors extracted from the world of art that can be used in any architectural project.

**Keywords:** *Colour, Architecture, Painting, Colour Tabulae, Colour Keyboards.*

## **Introduction:**

One of the aims of this paper is to shed light on the way in which perception of colour unfolds in architectural spaces, when related to Art. To map out when colour becomes an architectural means, how people can be affected when going from the perception that arises in a two-dimension support, to the fourth dimension of architecture, and thus having a role as a trigger of human experience. Following the enactive tradition started by Merleau-Ponty (1945), perception can be considered as an embodied action and an embodied cognition. Therefore, when we speak of colour in architecture and colour surrounding men, we stop talking about an attribute of things and we start talking about an experience, in which thought, perception and actions are intertwined (Varela at AL, 2011; Noé, 2017).

Our argument starts from a different concept of colour. We have looked in the recent past for the turning point of its meaning, when the traditional role of colour in art lost its role and became an ineffective discourse (Hughes, 2009). This transformation was originated at the end of the 19th century during the so-called Modernity period. As a result, colour stopped being used purely for aesthetic and decorative purposes, abandoning its traditional descriptive and symbolic meanings.

The French philosopher Giles Deleuze (2007) locates this landmark change into the path to abstraction with the appearance of the “Pictorial Diagram”. It’s a moment when both descriptive and narrative aspects are drastically transformed: the faces are not pink any longer, -Matisse, Van Gogh -, the landscapes with defined contours and shapes -Kandinsky, Heckel-, cottony skies -Munch-, and people lose their recognizable features -Kirchner-. Ultimately when what is being said cannot be “read” or “seen”. Thus, a new use of colour in architecture emerges. Regarding the aim and the mode

pursued, colour loses its decorative and symbolic conditions, becoming a constructive tool and giving it a key role in the vanguard movements (Hughes, 2009)

### **From the two-dimensionality of the canvas to the *Promenade Architecturale* in Van Doesburg's work**

In the valley of the Somme, structure of language was broken. World War I changed the life of words and images in art, radically and forever. The central myth of the traditional Vanguard that, by changing the order of language, art could reform the order of experience and thus alter the conditions of social life, was extraordinarily alive for the next 15 years. The home of the utopian impulse is architecture, social art par excellence, being German expressionism, French purism and Dutch neoplasticism by the hand of their architect-painters, those responsible for the landing of painting in architecture, turning color into a constructive tool, playing a key role in the "the house of Utopia" project (Hughes, 2009).

The De Stijl group manipulates painting as an open plastic element and architecture as a closed plastic element and conceives a new use of color, erasing the limits between both disciplines (Rüegg,1994). They articulate a new purpose in the use of color that we call "Inhabiting Art". At first, architecture is used as a canvas, as in Van Doesburg's Aubette café (fig.1) and Rietveld's Schoeder house. Until the step is taken that goes from the two-dimensionality of the canvas to the fourth dimension of architectural space-time that requires a journey that Le Corbusier called "Promenade Architecturale".

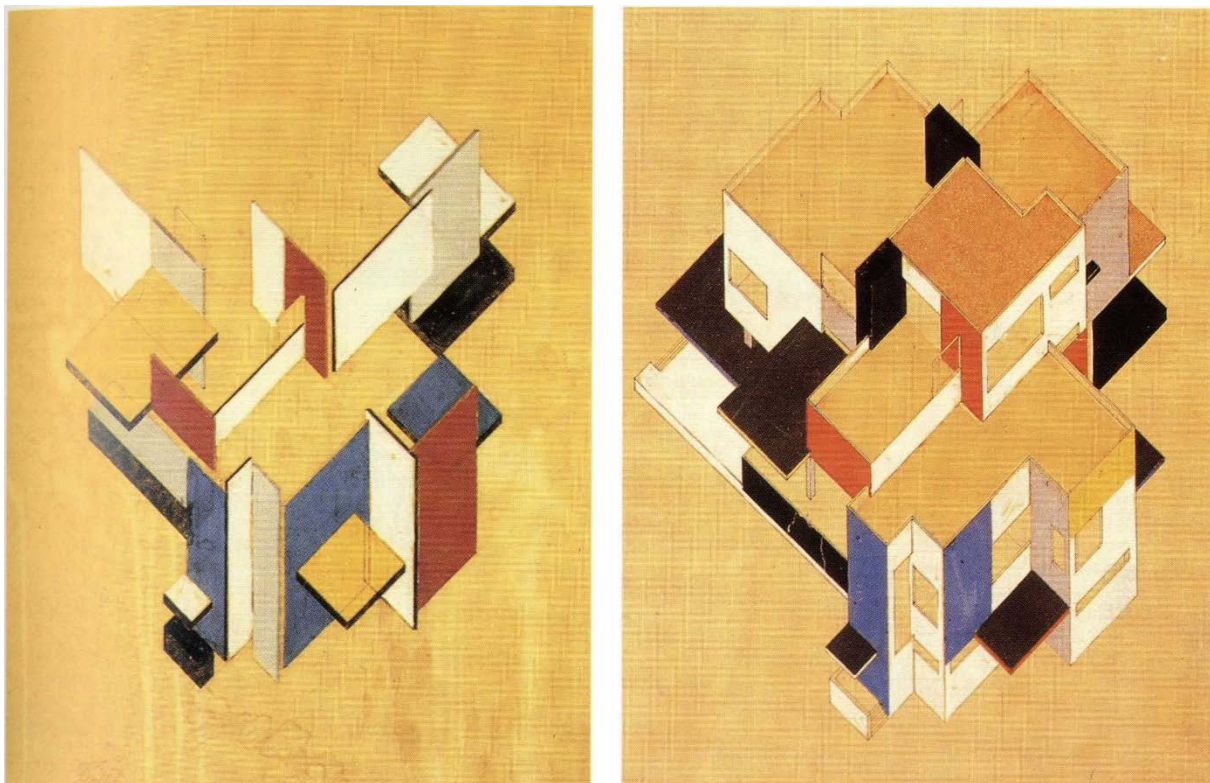


**Figure 1.** Café Aubette in Strasbourg. 1927. Theo Van Doesburg

## The Floating Relationships in Van Doesburg's Architecture

In 1918, Van Doesburg had contrasted the capacity of architecture as a "closed plastic element" with its natural counterpoint, modern painting, which according to its own logic was capable of creating an "open plastic element" of colored planes. "Architecture brings together and unites, gives unity; painting dissolves and disunites. And precisely because each fulfills different functions by their nature, they can unite and link harmoniously. This connection or harmonious link is not reached by their characteristics of similarity, but by their characteristics of difference". In any case, the complementarity between form and color was still not achieved, nor the binding relationship between colors functionally and tectonically, says Rüegg (1994)

In May 1923, the architect and painter Van Doesburg moved to Paris to work on a large exhibition on house and space for Leonce Rosenberg, and to prepare the manifesto for the De Stijl exhibition in his galleries in the fall of 1924. At the center of the exhibition, which opened on October 15 at the galleria L' Effort Moderne, were the models and plans of the three houses made in collaboration with the architect Cornelius Van Esteren. These houses were presented as free plastic entities, creating an abstract effect. The "Maison Particulière" (Fig 2) was an example of the logical collaboration between color and form according to the definition of Neoplasticism, characterized in particular by its orientation towards all sides and the uncompromising union of volumes and space. Color is used with a logic of its own, that of the artist in the form of two dimensional accents, which, however, were carefully related to the form of the house, he points out Rüegg (1994)



**Figure 2.** "La Maison Particulière" models. 1923. Theo Van Doesburg and Cornelius Van Esteren.

On the one hand, the walls are covered with gray, yellow, red and blue, being bordered by a yellow lintel. Only black and white are used to cover structural elements at the corners: the remaining color planes collide with each other at the edges and corners so that the voluminous effect of the structural body is destroyed. The "closed plastic element" that forms the architecture of the piece is visually fragmented, dissolved and hidden by the superimposition of a color system. The colored planes are brought into a floating relationship with each other, as Siegfried Giedion pointed out. The result is a

purely visual work that can be related either to a specific location or to a functional regularity. Form and color are understood as equals. As Arthur Ruëgg argued, in De Stijl's architecture, "It was not opposition but the opposite, co-occurrence of special plasticity and color; it was not construction, but de-construction, that became an example".

Van Doesburg, from his de-constructive operations, manages to make color independent in such a way, with a conceptual support, of the architectural form, that he gives it a protagonism never seen before. He manages, from my point of view, to materialize Deleuze's Pictorial Diagram (2007) in architecture, opening a field in which art and architecture come to relate to each other from a totally new and unexpected place. And this is the core of this article, to present a strategy that, initiated by Van Doesburg in the 1920s, initiates the possibility of a relationship between color from the pictorial and architecture, opening the way to highly complex architectural perceptive experiences of color. The pictorial color acquires an independence from the two-dimensional support, to become a constructive medium in the spatio-temporal dimensions of architecture.

### The Neoplasticist Tabulae: "Inhabiting Art"

In the process of researching the neoplasticist discourse, in order to develop a new color strategy, we are forced to a double reflection: the relationships between the intervening actors make a direct reading of the chromatic landscape of this period of Modernity difficult. On the other hand, we must establish correspondences with the perceptive experience of color that takes place, that structures and explains it (Lopez-Izquierdo, 2012)



Figure 3. The Colour Neoplasticist Tabulae: "Inhabiting the Art". Dr. Lopez-Izquierdo (2012)

As Walter Benjamin said, we are forced to "read the unwritten", to design a tool that allows us to establish reading fields: we turn to images the data, knowledge, thoughts, places that make up the cultural and social environment of the moment. We borrowed the concept of Tabulae from Aby

Warburg, an "operative field of the dissimilar and the mobile" says Georges Didi-Huberman (2010), where everything can always start again and allow a personal reading, as many readings as visitors who look at this device.

We designed the Neoplasticist tabulae (Fig. 3) as a tool for the application of color, based on the purpose of Inhabiting Art. This tabulae or reading device allows us to move from the pictorial experience of the canvas to the perceptive experience in the four dimensions of the "Promenade Architecturale". spatio-temporal relations - of architecture (Rüegg, 1997)

### The Expressionists Ceilings at the School of Building Engineering/Universidad Politécnica de Madrid

Finally, we present a project implemented in the lobbies of the School of Building Engineering/Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, which we have entitled "Inhabiting Art". (Fig. 4 and 5). We selected Heckel's work for several reasons; one of them is the lively, energetic, and dynamic chromaticity of his painting, which allows us to "transform the reality" of the space as the architect Bruno Taut did in his residential buildings in Berlin in the interwar period. As it was necessary to give life and use to some rather dark school halls, we found the work "House in Gandansk" very appropriate. We used opposite and complementary schemes, choosing always very saturated colours. On the other hand, the intention of German expressionism to transform social reality through the language of art, only accentuates and justifies the need to change the environment, to encourage meetings and work groups of students studying at school. Finally, another reason is the relationship that the university has with the Thyssen Museum in Madrid, which makes it ideal to base it on one of the paintings in its collection, reinforcing the ties between the two institutions.



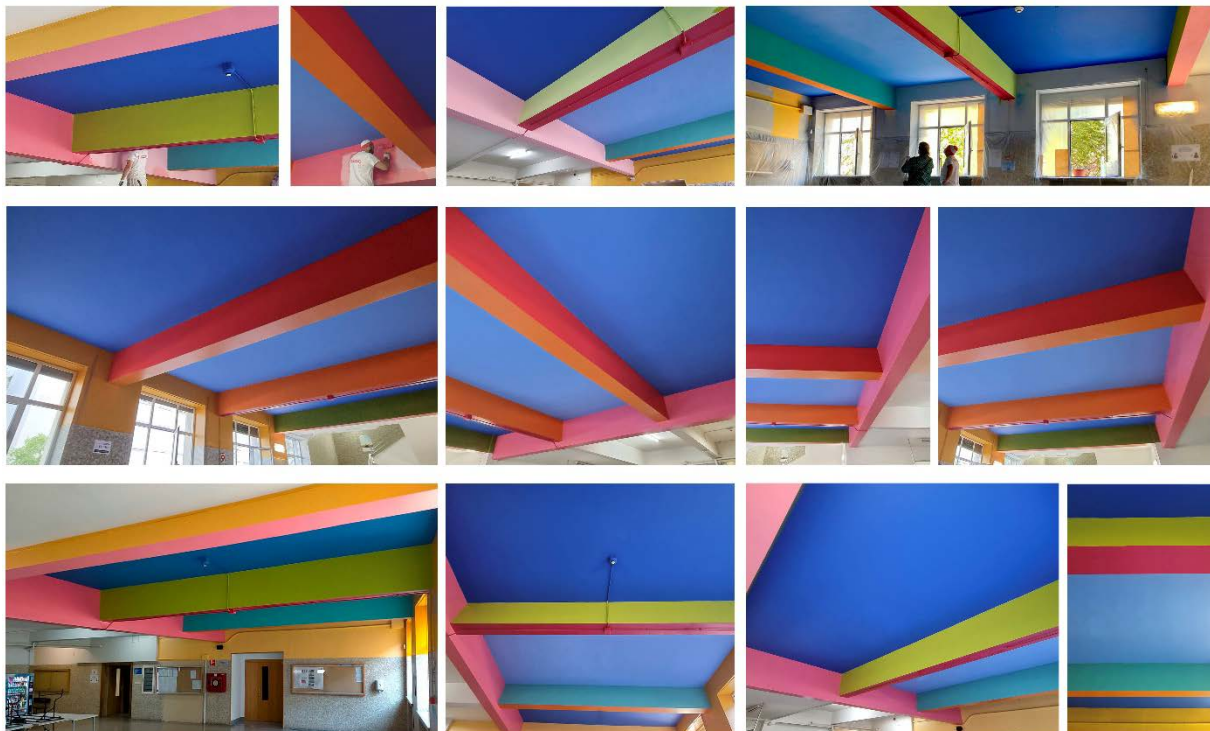
**Figure 4.** The Expressionists Ceilings. Color planes and keyboards. Escuela Superior de Edificación. 2021. Dr Pia Lopez-Izquierdo

Starting with the expressionist painting “House in Gandansk” (1908) by Erich Heckel (Thyssen Museum, Madrid), we began a process of graphic interpretation and volumetric synthesis (fig. 4); we defined the established limits that contain the painting and depicted the central movement and the aerial elements with the blue tones. In short, we made a pictorial experience through color in the lobbies of the School of Building Engineering in Madrid -ETSEM-, moving from the two dimensions of the canvas to an architectural experience in the spatial-temporal relationships of architecture, breaking the usual limits of the canvas as a traditional support for art. (Fig.5)

Finally, we define the Expressionist color keyboards (Rüegg,1997) formed by the beautiful colors extracted from Heckel's palette, as those that can be used in any architectural project; we standardize and classify this palette referring its sensory characteristics to the nomenclature of the Swedish NCS system (Fig.4)

## EXPERIENCIAS DE COLOR. “LA EJECUCIÓN”

GRUPO TECA DEL COLOR\_ETSEM\_UPM. IP: PIA LOPEZ IZQUIERDO BOTIN.



**Figure 5.** The Expressionists Ceilings at the ETSEM/UPM. The project. 2021. Dr Pia Lopez-Izquierdo

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