The View from Above Through Mondrian Universal Abstraction

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Who has not felt the evocation of an architecture or a territory seen from above when looking at a painting by Piet Mondrian? Who has not even seen this reflection written in the many essays that have been developed around his work? It seems to be a biunivocal relationship, in which the observer does not necessarily have to be a skilled architect, or even have any knowledge of architecture. Something in Mondrian's work leads us to interpret his production as if the author's intention had been to convey a message related to architectural design. However, his paintings are abstract compositions of great simplicity accentuated by the use of flat colors, as opposed to the complexity of an architectural work [1].

The application of the term 'abstract' to art arises from the claim to represent an emotional expression. It is a thought process aimed at conveying a message that evokes a feeling, a meaning. Its evolution in painting has led to what is known as "pure abstraction" [Mondrian 1961, p. 40], where the basic elements of plastic expression are synthesized. Geometry and geometric proportion become the narrative, being the vehicle and guiding thread of a rational and sensitive message at the same time. "The tool that makes it possible to handle this language in a universal way, its grammar and its elements, is Mathematics, and specifically, its application to art is produced through Geometric Proportion" [Jiménez Sequeiros 2016, p. 11].

Mondrian's abstraction is also an emotional process in which topography takes centre stage in the work. However, Mondrian does not make use of the entire

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formal repertoire offered by geometry. Perpendicularity, the square and the rectangle seem to be the only elements Mondrian chose to convey his messages in his desire to achieve an abstract ideal of universal harmony.
"The square, with its absolute regularity, is the basis for countless formal operations" [Fonatti 1988, p. 76] which Mondrian did not hesitate to try out. The use of color is added to these combinations, constituting an inexhaustible repertoire of creations. Mondrian plays with perception and the visual transformation that each of them will produce in the observer, thus giving rise to an induced perception based on the viewer's previous experiences [Jencks 1975, p. 12]. It is precisely this induced perception that leads to the establishment of cognitive values directly related to the artistic work and implicitly connected to architecture. The observation of Mondrian's work produces an architectural evocation because it seems to represent diagrams of architectural and landscape concepts in which the building or nature are reduced to their essence, turning complex spatial structures into clean lines containing two-dimensional spaces. The plasticity of geometry is the point at which the abstract and the architecture, both built and represented, converge: in this way, only the most significant concepts remain, creating two-dimensional abstract spaces through a subdivision into modular fields [Moneo 1980, p. 73]. Mondrian provides a repertoire of formal combinations that can be perceived as a prelude to architectural forms.
When the architect proposes a projective drawing, he reifies his thought from basic elements such as line, plane or mass, just as abstract art does, "relating them freely in space by means of equally abstract laws, such as rhythm, harmony, or proportion" [Jiménez Sequeiros, p. 9]. Therefore, when geometry is the basic and essential element of plastic representation, it is easy to establish an approach to the architectural project since the basic principles of geometric drawing constitute the soul of architecture: "it is capable of supplying a suggestive formal repertoire of geometric figures with a strong symbolic charge" [Cabezas 2001, p. 15].
In both painting and architecture, geometry is the catalyst of the plastic or projective process, becoming the instrument to control space. The infinite space takes shape in a structure of extreme delicacy, where lines substantiate the contours and articulations of the subspaces. All this converges in a poetics of primary values where line, plane and color are the pillars on which it is based. It is this poetry that makes it possible to communicate images in a new way, to the extent that the image appears as an intentional message, even if the meaning is not immediately clear. Mondrian's poetics transmits and evokes architectural poetics through geometry and color. The geometrical composition, linear, elementary, composition of lines and planes with fundamental colors presented by Mondrian does not lose the poetic capacity, both of the work of art and in the architectural perception derived from it.
Mondrian made magnificent use of the contrasts between full and empty as compositional counterpoints, as César Domela Nieuwenhuis had previously tried out as the introducer of the concept of space in the De Stijl group. Mondrian seeks exclusive representation in two dimensions and avoids creating the illusion of depth by eliminating curved or diagonal lines. The same process takes place as when observing the interior of a building or a landscape from the point of view from above: three-dimensional spaces are represented in two dimensions through an operation of abstraction similar to that which leads Mondrian to represent his work.
It is therefore not difficult to abstract Mondrian's painting from the preconceived image of an architecture when the point of view is situated above, identifying his works with maps of structure and spatial organization. Although the systems of representation have a complex explanation in which different factors converge [Montes Serrano 2017, p. 56], we can simplify the diversity of the images and consider that the plans are still essentially abstract drawings. Their visualization is only possible through the mind given the impossibility, in most cases, of accessing the direct vision of the aerial point of view. When these two-dimensional aerial representations omit details and become schematic representations or morphological stylization [Leupen 1999, p. 206] they considerably resemble Mondrian representations. Through them, it is possible to explain the spatial structure, for which a distinction is usually made between the constructed (mass) and the unconstructed (void). In

Mondrian's work the lines resemble the walls (built) and the colored squares can be attributed to the unbuilt (empty). Paradoxically, in the case of the representation of urban or rural environments, the lines represent roads and the spaces become built-up masses or vegetation. The color codes in Mondrian's work have an aesthetic purpose in balancing weights and intensities, while taking into account the dimensions of each of the modules. Mondrian paints the intimate tension produced by each of these subspaces, so that the composition of the painting becomes an equation of balance between forms and colors. This is what Mondrian himself calls "dynamic balance" [Mondrian 1961, p. 44]. "Perfect proportion is achieved when all the values of the system are balanced, forming a geometrical plane and no longer a homogeneous surface" [Argan 1970, p. 496]. The result is a perfectly balanced picture, where color, form and arrangement are perfectly studied according to a perfect mental order, referring to the theoretical premises set out in two of his essays: *Art and Life* (1930) and *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art* (1937). In the architectural work, these color codes transgress the purely aesthetic by seeking a new meaning through a play of relations between form and color (content and meaning): functionality. Thus, in the views from above, a new representative dimension is incorporated, which Bernard Leupen calls "addiction" [Leupen 1999], in which signs are included about the functions and uses of the different parts that make up the building. Thus, the lines represent the spatial divisions, while the colored spots represent the uses: they are the signs that contribute to the transmission of architectural graphic messages.
Through these schematic representations of the point of view from above, it is possible to analyze graphically and schematically the spatial, structural, compositional, geometric, functional and relational organization of a building and its parts. It is only in the graphic space that the operations of configuration of form have a common purpose, both in Mondrian pictorial work and in architectural work: the differentiated articulation of the spatial [Fonatti 1988, p. 40].
The impact of Mondrian geometric aesthetics through its influence on the "world of forms", as defined by Carlos Montes Serrano [Montes Serrano 1992, p. 240], is therefore not surprising. This repercussion was of such magnitude that it is still present in the imaginary of contemporary architectural creations.

Note

[1] This paper moves from a reading of the image presented in the previous page: Piet Mondrian, Composition A: Composition with Black, Red, Gray, Yellow, and Blue (1923). Galleria Nazionale di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Roma.

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