

## Spatial Colorism

(with remarks by Gerrit Rietveld), 1953

In 1953 Constant published, with the architect Aldo van Eyck, the portfolio *Voor een spatiaal colorisme* (For a Spatial Colorism). In this publication they looked back on their collaboration on a *space in colour*, an environment for the home exhibition 'Man and Home' at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. In the text Constant points out the relationship between colour and space, each inconceivable without the other. He pleads for an integrated approach through which a more highly organized plastic reality emerges. In order to achieve this, painters and architects work together as a team towards a common objective.

Constant sent a copy of the portfolio to De Stijl architect Gerrit Rietveld, who annotated his manifesto with comments. These hitherto unpublished comments are included here in the form of footnotes.

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In a reaction to the 'building' of the nineteenth century, where form was often buried under decoration to such an extent as to render the content unrecognizable, the modern architect has ended up concentrating primarily on spatial form, regarding colour as secondary and making it subordinate to form.<sup>R01</sup>

The architect sees size, proportion and structure as the basic elements of 'pure' spatial form.<sup>R02</sup> It is chiefly these elements that underpin an architectural design in which space is conceived as colourless.<sup>R03</sup>

The execution of a design based primarily on form begins with a conflict: the conflict between idea and matter, between form and colour.<sup>R04</sup>

The architect is inclined to keep colour passive: he minimizes the number of colours and avoids intense colours. But colour is unavoidably introduced by way of material, finishing and furnishings.<sup>R05</sup> Colour, added at a later stage, constitutes a random element as far as the design is concerned, and thus loses its constituent, constructive value for the spatial plasticity.

As a consequence, colour's enormous space-creating potential is reduced to a matter of chance and because of this the spatial effect itself is always deficient.<sup>R06</sup>

Eliminating colour, which is just as important a determinant of space as architectural form, precludes unity of form and colour.

**The realistic spatial conception is the conception of space in colour.**<sup>R07</sup>

It goes without saying that the spatial use of colour has nothing to do with the use of colour for decorative or 'functional' purposes.

Nor can the use of colour as a means of correcting an impure size or form by means of optical illusion be counted as a plastic use of colour because in this instance form remains passive with respect to

colour. Nonetheless, the use of colour as a corrective carries an implicit recognition of its three-dimensional qualities.<sup>R08</sup>

Spatial form and spatial colour can only form an indissoluble unity if they develop at the same time and in relation to one another.<sup>R09</sup>

What holds for painting on a flat surface also holds for the spatial conception of colour:

**Colour is nothing but the colour of the form and form is nothing but the form of the colour.**<sup>R10</sup>

So a spatial conception of colour entails more than the use of colour in the creation of architectural spatial effects. The absolute unity of form and colour, in other words the purely plastic use of colour, takes the architect into the domain of painting.<sup>R11</sup>

The result, however, is an architecture based on a visual reality in which form and colour are one, rather than on abstracted formal elements;<sup>R12</sup> and painting in which the colour is not used for personal expression but is systematically used for immediate plastic effect.

‘Spatial colorism’ is therefore<sup>R13</sup> a totally new plastic art with its own independent laws, and with a potential far outstripping that of both architecture and painting.<sup>R14</sup> ‘Spatial colorism’ elevates the schematic form to physical form and is for this reason an indispensable expressive factor in making human space in the broadest sense of universal human settlement.<sup>R15+16</sup>

Even the concept of colour plasticity familiar in painting acquires new meaning in space. The spatial conception of colour not only puts an end to centralized composition but also to the ‘simultaneity’ of colour effects:<sup>R17</sup> the experience of colour plastic will take place in time.<sup>R18</sup>

Moreover, the ‘scale’, the ratio of colour quantity to human dimensions, becomes crucially important when the closed character of the painting is replaced by the surrounding space.<sup>R19</sup>

The development of ‘spatial colorism’ as a spatial conception and the realization of space in colour, demands close contact between painters and architects.

Furthermore, it is important that, rather than remaining specialists in their own carefully circumscribed field, they should work together as a ‘team’ in pursuit of a common goal.<sup>R20</sup>

This goal is not the amalgamation of architecture and painting,<sup>R21</sup> as in the baroque, but a higher order of three-dimensional plastic reality that surpasses both and in which colour and spatiality are inconceivable one without the other.

**‘Spatial colorism’ is not a theory but a practice.**<sup>R22</sup>

#### Remarks on ‘spatial colorism’ by Gerrit Rietveld

R01: ? De Stijl!

R02: and material, at least if you regard it as equally distinct visually

R03: at any rate light and dark, or rather: lighter and less light

R04: colour and matter is a conflict too

R05: yes

R06 the architect must immediately determine light and less light in his design. the painter can if necessary turn this light and dark into colour contrasts

R07: yes, I think this is correct, although it's not a logical consequence of the above

R08: yes

R09: in terms of differences in lightness

R10: has a nice ring to it, but is meaningless

R11: this is completely wrong. nor should the painter encroach on the architect's domain, even when there are only two parties, let alone more

R12: read: space R

R13: why

R14: I don't begrudge the painter this illusion

R15: don't go too far – because what's being claimed here applies at best to the art of painting and to colour-space as art for art's sake (preferably uninhabited). When space is required to be a shelter and boundary and a backdrop for living, colour should not be seen as the be-all and end-all. The space must remain receptive

R16: The poorer the architecture the more colour is needed. if the balance between light and dark is good, it's best to leave the experience to the resident – I abandon the abstract view here because the final word is (not by chance) 'practice'

R17: it depends on how much you can absorb at once

R18: this too

R19: so why does the demonstration in the Stedelijk Museum include a centralized composition? The painter appears to derive great pleasure from it, and so do I

R20: nonsense and impossible. Besides, an architect would be overstepping the mark if [he] tried to impose his will on a painting

R21: aha

R22: agreed R

'Spatiaal colorisme', published in: Constant and Aldo van Eyck, *Voor een spatiaal colorisme*, Amsterdam, 1953, 6-8.