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Reference:

Geerinckx Selin, De Vos Els.- (Un)folding the modernist interior of abstract painter Jozef Peeters : the architectural vision beyond the studio flat (re)presented
Modern Design: Social Commitment & Quality of Life, proceedings 17th International Docomomo Conference, 6-9 September 2022, Valencia, Spain- 2022, p.
86-93

To cite this reference: <https://hdl.handle.net/10067/1902460151162165141>

(Un)folding the modernist interior of Belgian abstract painter Jozef Peeters.
The architectural vision beyond the studio flat (re)presented

Selin Geerinckx
UNIVERSITY OF ANTWERP

Els De VOS
UNIVERSITY OF ANTWERP

Abstract. Jozef Peeters (1895-1960), a pioneer of abstract painting in Belgium, designed a remarkable interior of his flat in the social housing estate built by city architect Van Averbek. It served both as a studio and a family home for his two children and his sick wife, and was a place where Peeters experimented with the spatial use of colour from the mid-twenties. Peeters was very familiar with the modern movement and De Stijl as he was the founder of the “Moderne Kunst” circle, which promoted the new developments in the arts of modern cultural life. The interior design resulted in a total work of art where walls merge into one another, including the furniture. Today, the studio preserves a physical legacy of Peeters’ theoretical wandering. But since the location is closed to the public, ways of conveying the spatial experience of the flat and its underlying concepts were sought.

This paper explains the process of unfolding the interiors of Peeters’ apartment with architecture master students by means of a literature study, site visits, analyses of the interior spaces and corresponding colours, the creation of a scenography for an exhibition and finally the construction of various models. On the one hand, we did this by a painted model on large scale at eye level and in which the visitor can look additionally from the bottom up into the different interior spaces. On the other hand, we created an ensemble of painted wooden volumes envisioning the inverted rooms of the flat to be assembled like a children’s puzzle box to visualize the painter’s theory. The exhibited composition offered the visitors a two-fold embodied experience of the flat. New insights not yet existing in literature became visible through the act of (un)folding Peeters’ interior by space, object and body.

1. INTRODUCTION

Jozef Peeters (1895-1960) is now considered one of the greatest advocates of abstract painting in Belgium. Peeters was a versatile artist mainly active from the Great War until the mid-twenties. He was a painter, (graphic) designer, writer, editor of several magazines and also an organiser of exhibitions and international conferences. Modernist Belgian architects Huib Hoste and Eduard Van Steenberg were members of the “Moderne Kunst” circle, and foreign speakers were invited such as the Dutch architect J.J.P. Oud. At that time, Peeters was an ardent advocate of community art [1] in line with his social concerns. About 1927, he visualised his theories in his

family apartment, which also served as his studio, by means of the murals and furniture design. This place is now still intact thanks to Godelieve Peeters (1925-2009), who donated the apartment to the city of Antwerp for preservation. Since 1995 it is a protected monument in Flanders because of its unique total work of art and listed as heritage building [2]. Because of its preservation, the studio was recently closed to the public.

An alternative to bring the wider public in contact with this unique apartment interior was the initiative to organize a scenographic design as part of the exhibition '*LIVING IN COLOUR. Common ground between visual arts and interior architecture*' (5-19 December 2019), a collaboration between the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and the Department of Interior Architecture of the University of Antwerp [3].

According to Beatriz Colomina, designers often use their own home to try out their ideas because it is a free place where they have *carte blanche* [4]. Peeters could not physically remodel the construction of his apartment. However, he asked the social housing company to remove all visible technical elements in order to prepare a white canvas. Consequently, he applied his drawing methodology on the interior walls, thus visually reconfiguring the physical boundaries present. Colomina also states that the exposition, as a medium, provides a public platform for designers to experiment with innovative forms of living [4]. Moreover, the succession of different voices from architects makes the experimental exhibition ultimately collective [4]. Illustrative is Mies van de Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion that was rebuilt according to OMA's reinterpretation as Casa Palestra (aka the Body Buildings House) at the Milan Triennale in 1986. It echoed the modernist principles on body culture at home through contemporary means (e.g. materiality). Also Thea Brejzek, scholar in spatial theory, discusses one of Mies' (re)productions. The Golf Club Project (2013) in Krefeld was presented as a temporary exhibition and event space by Flemish architects Robbrecht en Daem. Their 1:1 model demonstrates how multiple design statements from different periods can be simultaneously experienced in body and mind [5].

If experimental exhibition techniques lead to experimental dwellings [4], the question arises whether the reverse proposition can provide a framework for transposing the architectural qualities of Peeters' unique studio flat into an experimental scenography. Subsequent to this main question, we wonder in what way visitors can enjoy the unique colour experience as intended by the artist in his oeuvre? And how can we introduce the public to Peeters' underlying concepts and theories? Finally, can such exhibition design serve to spark debate among designers and other related disciplines?

In order to prepare a spatial experience of colour, we consulted the original documentation. Consequently, we did a literature study and on-site research for drawing the plans and model building. Finally, we looked for similar cases to compare Peeters' design methodology. The result is a scenographic

design for which master students in architecture experimented with the display of the studio flat's coloured features in order to become part of a larger narrative at our exhibition on the colour use in interiors and in art during the period 1925-1970.

2. THE DAILY LIFE IN PEETERS' MODERNIST STUDIO FLAT

Peeters and his wife Pelagia Pruym who taught at a public school, rented a corner apartment of a modern social housing block designed by city architect Emiel Van Averbek in 1921 [6]. This comfortable 4-bedroom apartment is located on the third floor and consists of a pleasant corner room overlooking the Scheldt river. In this flat, daughter Godelieve and son Maarten grew up under Peeters' strict supervision and education. The home education would, the artist believed, enable his children to develop their personalities. In the corner room was his studio where he received his colleagues and friends. Between 1927 and 1937, he steadily transformed the apartment by designing the furniture and painting the walls with large geometrical surfaces in specific colour palettes.



Figure 1. (left) Jozef Peeters, *Compositie-Stemming*, 1956, @ private collection. (right) Jozef Peeters, *Compositie-Stemming*, 1956, @ private collection.

In two artistic representations, named *Compositie-Stemming* [Composition-Mood], made in 1955, Peeters painted his daily life [7]. These two emotional syntheses [6] show the apartment's interior by a composition in and with

perspectives. While the bright coloured painting (**Fig 1 left**) focuses on the relation between inside (private) and outside (public) space, the sepia coloured painting (**Fig. 2 right**) guides our gaze along the hall towards the illuminated studio with textile loom and the artist's work and the portrait of his wife on the painter's easel. The dark area on the left refers to the bedrooms and the daily act/tasks of 'making/folding beds'. The triptych in the bright coloured painting displays the view of the Scheldt river (left), the adjacent building with the curious neighbours peeking in (centre) and the naked woman Pelagia was jealous of (right) [8]. But in the middle Peeters is caught in the reflection of the black vase - a symbol of being bound to the apartment [6].

3. ANALYSIS OF THE STUDIO FLAT

Studies in art history and heritage preservation highlight the coloured layout of the apartment and conclude that the spatial colour composition leads to perception of living in a painting (Buyle, Manderyck 1998, Verdonck, 2008). The colour palettes on the walls and ceiling indeed create different atmospheres, interacting with the furniture and light. Only the floor consists of a greenish grey linoleum. We also notice that the grey colour is everywhere in the flat's murals, albeit in different variations. Art historian Rik Sauwen notices a diagonal line visually suggesting a mounting of grey surfaces [8]. This use refers to the water of the Scheldt river.

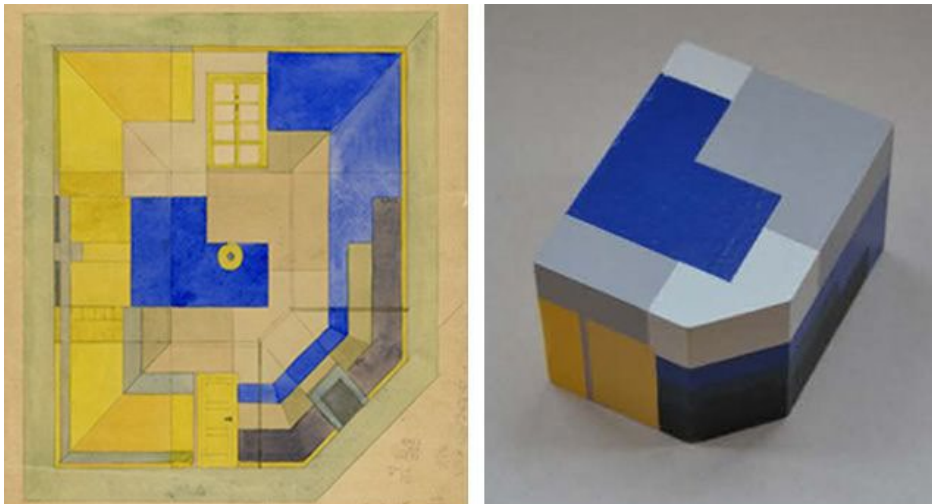


Figure 2. (*left*) Colour plan Jozef Peeters, no date. Collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis. (*right*) Detail of puzzle blocks representing Peeters' parental bedroom. @ University of Antwerp, Selin Geerinckx, 2019.

In the children's bedroom a soft pink and complementarian blueish grey are used. In the parental bedroom, the dark blue strings weaving with grey surface on the walls play with the golden yellow of the Finnish birch wooden furniture. In this composition, the sun daily enchants the room by casting its light on the wooden parts, reflecting the day and night cycle (**Fig. 3**). The atmosphere changes again because of the green and (golden) yellow shades in the drawing room. Bearing in mind the concept of living in a painting, we wanted to understand more about the conception of the surfaces. The parental bedroom colour plan in the apartment (**Fig. 2 left**) served as a key to understand how the murals were designed from an architectural point of view.

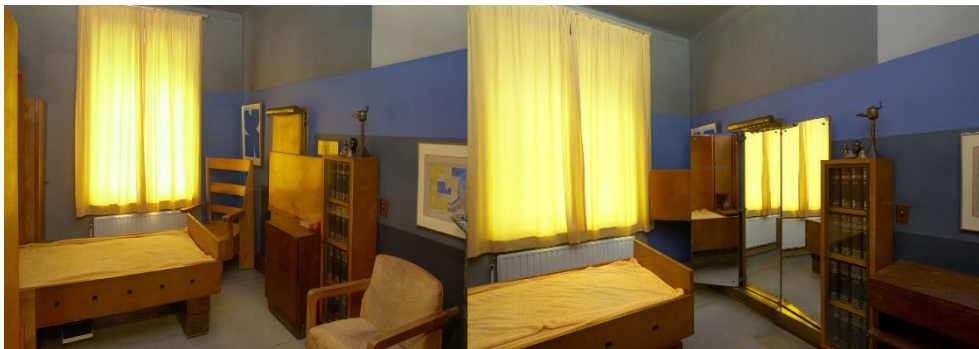


Figure 3. Parental bedroom with play of light. Collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis.

4. UNDERSTANDING THE SPATIAL DESIGN AS AN OBJECT

In preparation of the exhibition, four architecture master students (UA) studied the spatial experience of the apartment on site. By comparing the student's technical plan with the Peeters' colour scheme, it became clear that Peeters' plan does not correspond with the drawing conventions in architecture. His method, known in descriptive geometry as a 'development surface' [9], consists of a representation of the ceiling and adjacent walls. The position of the door in relation to the mantelpiece and the window prescribes how to fold the plan - as these room features would be mirrored otherwise due a turn around its axis. This method creates a box showing the coloured surfaces on the outside of the volume (**Fig. 2 right**), instead of its print on the inside of the box which reflects the architectural practice of making a model. The result is the volume as an object, not a space. A similar drawing method was used by Theo van Doesburg in *Chambre des Fleur* in the Villa Noailles (1925), and later in his *Cine dancing* (1928) at L'Aubette [9]. This drawing technique reveals an interesting scenographic concept: the bodily perception of space as an object.

We argue that Peeters deployed a graphical projection method to prepare his paintings and everyday objects to eventually apply it in his three-

dimensional domestic space. During the 1920s, Peeters abundantly applied geometry and the two-point perspective in his drawings, which corresponds with his theosophical belief, his admiration for Kandinsky's work and interest in Futurism. Our study of the design for a cupboard in the drawing room, revealed that Peeters started from the perspective drawing to compose the dimension of the object and front panel design. Although the perspective line is dominant in the vertical direction to create depth and distance, orchestrating the patterns between the bottom and the top of the object, the horizontal and the vertical axe balances the drawing. Yet, only the vertical axe mirrors the pattern and dimension of the object. We mark the use of the primary orthographic projections in first angle, (detailed) sections, patterns that clearly run over multiple surfaces, a use of orthogonal and diagonal lines, the use of mirroring and the play of contrasts dark/light. The outcome is a drawing that radiates an air of (dis)harmony.

In a next step, the architecture students designed a model at scale 1:10 (**Fig. 4**) to allow the bodily encounter with the reconstructed colour patterns. Spectators could observe from two perspectives, one in a seated position where the visitor looks up into the model above his head, and another in a standing position around the model through the windows. In line with Peeters' domestic environment, the presentation model is also a piece of furniture that invited to sit and stand around it. Based on the findings of the relation between space and object, students additionally crafted a coloured children puzzle-box (**Fig. 2 right**). This toy for the mind, in memory of the children's play and the home schooling, allows visitors to compose the rooms with its murals into the right sequence. This provides a different perspective: perceiving the room as an object.



Figure 4. Detail of 1:10 scale model. @ University of Antwerp, Selin Geerinckx, 2019.

5. (RE)PRESENTATION OF THE APARTMENT

Our exhibit allowed to display specific architectural qualities that Peeters created in his studio flat. Therefore we defined the elements that are essential in his design. The architectural analysis demonstrated that he clearly chose to experiment in his home to reconcile space and object in relation to the outside landscape and public life. It seemed to have been a way to create a parallel universe in connection with its environment.

Peeters did so by means of the linear perspective to configure a composition of interweaving two-dimensional surfaces in specific range of colours turning into a three-dimensional space. On the one hand, Peeters was interested in the abstract expression of his universe? which he visualised in a set of coloured geometrical surfaces and furniture pieces, balancing between art and the applied arts (*arts décoratifs*). On the other hand, the artist was also trained in the *Beaux-Arts* tradition which valued the use of perspectival methods and (physical) composition.

For our (re)presentation of the apartment, the scale model was used as a vehicle to think about the spatial experience. Because of the insights we gained from studying Peeters' drawing methods, we found the model for the exhibition an appropriate answer as it is based on perspective views. The exploration of the perspective method during the Italian Renaissance was a catalyst for the development of the model [5]. This way of representation communicates and even materializes a concept, which eventually became common practice in the architectural discipline. Our choice to provide models at different scales is to make use of their dual character, as material object and as immaterial idea (theory).

When making the model, we gave priority to the perspective views in the apartment, above the reconstruction on the real scale. The scale is less relevant than the dimensional relationship [5]. A logic thought is that the larger the scale the more the experience with a full body can take place. However, in the use of the perspective method, which is applied by Peeters, the dimension of the model is less important as this method maintains the relationship between the body and mind through the eyes the spectator. Yet, heritage specialist Norbert Poulain once rightly stated that a sterile reconstruction of the apartment presented in a museum setting would lack the essential view on the Scheldt river [10]. Indeed, a scenography that includes the surrounding environment, contributes to experience the interior as intended. But even though a site visit is the most complete bodily experience, a location visit does not provide a materialization of the theory. Making all the models available on the site, for example, could be an added value. Conversely, a sensorial projection that illustrates nature and the public life would be an addition to the scale models.

6. THE (UN)FOLDING OF SPACE, OBJECT AND BODY

Our architectural study for the preparation of a scenography started from the analysis of Jozef Peeters' colour plan which revealed that our hands must fold the plan differently than current architectural conventions suggest. The result is a volume as an object instead of a (model) space. This unique folding finally led to a more in-depth research on the artist's oeuvre. We discovered that Peeters attached importance to a well-thought drawing method from the Italian renaissance and unusual model-making for a spatial design that establishes the relation between the human body and the painting. Peeters' plastic expression was abstract, but he applied principles of the decorative arts for the creation of domestic objects. He preferred the two-point perspective that he mirrored, copied and scaled creatively to establish a *trompe l'oeil*.

This two-dimensional drawing method enabled him to convert his art work into the third dimension. The interior walls and domestic furniture offered the artist a construction in stone and wood on which he painted the murals, thus bridging (applied) arts and architecture, for the daily switching between reality and personal imagination through body, object and space. The result is an auxiliary space/world which can be seen as a cosmopoiesis by visually dissolving the apartment's frame and turning it into an open *décor*.

The (re)presentation of the studio flat equally encompassed in its scenography the concept of the integration of space, object and body. The furniture model, a material object for the bodily experience of space, invites visitors besides standing looking in, to sit, to raise the head and to have a perspective look into the modelled interior. The puzzle blocks, as an immaterial object for the mind, consists of blocks of the inverted rooms. These objects can be manipulated by the visitors and give additional abstract insight in the design.

In sum, the three-dimensionality of the rooms serves as a performing model evoking an enlightening experience through colour and the perspective effect. Nowadays, our furniture model, puzzle blocks and images of the flat are displayed at the entrance hall of the Letterenhuis, the literary archive of Flanders which manages Peeters' apartment. As such, not only a wider public can get acquainted with the studio flat, but also researchers and designers can get inspired to unravel underlying layers of the apartment.

7. ENDNOTES

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