

# PERFORMING THE FLAT OF ABSTRACT PAINTER JOZEF PEETERS. AN EXHIBITION DESIGN AS A DESIGN-BASED RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

Jozef Peeters (1895–1960), a pioneer of abstract painting in Belgium, designed a remarkable flat interior in a social housing estate designed by Antwerp city architect Emiel van Averbek. From the mid 1920s, it served as both a studio and family home for himself, his ailing wife and their two children. While living, working and educating his children there, the avant-garde painter experimented in his home with the spatial use of colour. The interior design resulted in a modernist Gesamtkunstwerk where walls merge both into one another and with the furniture. Today, the studio preserves the legacy of Peeters' theoretical development and his practice. Since the site is closed to the public, ways of conveying the spatial experiences of the flat and its underlying concepts were sought. This paper discusses the process of unfolding this flat interior through literature study, site visits, architectural analyses of the interior spaces and corresponding colours, a scenography design for an exhibition and finally, the model construction. The exhibition offered visitors a twofold embodied experience of the flat, albeit one that differs from the original experience. New insights became visible through the act of (un)folded Peeters' interior through space, object and body.

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## KEY WORDS

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Jozef Peeters (1895–1960) is now considered one of the great advocates of abstract painting in Belgium. Peeters was a versatile artist who was mainly active from the First World War until the mid 1920s. He was active as a painter, (graphic) designer, writer, magazine editor and organiser of exhibitions and international conferences. He founded the ‘Moderne Kunst’ [Modern Art] Group, which included modernist architects such as Huib Hoste and Eduard Van Steenberghe and where foreign guests were invited to speak, like Dutch architect J.J.P. Oud. At the time and in line with his social concerns, Peeters was a staunch advocate of community art.<sup>1</sup> Around 1927, he visualised his theories through murals and furniture design in his family apartment, which also served as his studio and the school for his children. Because he spent a lot of time in this interior, as an inhabitant, he was able to assess daily how the space needed to be adapted to meet his own and his family’s needs. For the design, he cleverly applied the drawing methodology he used for his paintings, thus visually reconfiguring the physical boundaries present and turning it from a moderate art deco apartment into a personal modernist interior.

According to architectural theorist Beatriz Colomina in her article ‘The Exhibitionist House’, designers often use their own homes to try out their ideas because it is a free place where they have carte blanche.<sup>2</sup> That is exactly what happened here and what makes the apartment so unique. The interior is still intact thanks to Godelieve Peeters (1925–2009), who returned to her parental home after her father’s death. She lived in the flat and donated it almost intact to the city of Antwerp. The flat has been a listed monument in Flanders since 1995, although the renovation of this specific housing block, especially its façade, was highly unfortunate. But it is Peeters’ unique Gesamtkunstwerk that made the difference in getting it listed.<sup>3</sup>

For preservation purposes, the apartment was recently closed to the public. In order to bring the wider public in contact with this unique interior, a scenographic design was developed for the exhibition ‘Living in Colour. A common ground between visual arts and interior architecture’ (Antwerp, 5–19 December 2019).<sup>4</sup> The scenographic design aimed to transpose the architectural qualities of Peeters’ unique studio flat into an experimental scenography, not an exact copy of the original but something evocative of certain bodily experiences. In this case, visitors were offered the enjoyment of the unique colour experience as intended by the artist in his oeuvre. To prepare this kind of spatial experience of colour, we consulted, together with master students in architecture, the original data available. A literature and archival study was then carried out, along with on-site research to draw the plans and model building. Finally, we looked for similar

cases to compare Peeters' design methodology. Master students in architecture experimented with the display of the studio flat's coloured features. The result, a scenographic design, formed part of the larger narrative at the exhibition 'Living in Colour' that dealt with the use of colour in interiors and art between 1925 and 1970. This paper will shed light on the development of the interior in which the artist himself lived, on the one hand, and its transition to the scenographic design of the flat, on the other. What does this design evoke among visitors? Do they experience a sense of recognition or, rather, alienation?

## 2. MASS HOUSING AS A PRELUDE TO URBAN MODERNISM

The economic depression in Belgium and the first Slum Clearance Act in 1931 paved the way for apartment buildings. However, prior to this type of modern housing that would represent CIAM's Existenzminimum as a new rational response for social housing, the urban apartment building, as an innovative and progressive concept, came into existence through social housing to enable affordable housing on expensive urban land. The first mass housing projects, consisting of five to eight-storey flats, were realised soon after the introduction of the Social Housing Act in 1919 and with the establishment of the Nationale Maatschappij voor Goedkope Woningen [National Society for Cheap Housing]. They had to anticipate the acute housing shortage in the city caused by World War I. Among the different initiatives was a range of social housing blocks designed in series and influenced by two voices.

City architect Emiel Van Averbeké designed five social housing units. After his art nouveau period, Van Averbeké followed in his designs the rational views of his Dutch colleague Hendrik Berlage as of 1910. A decade later, he succeeded Antwerp city architect Alexis Van Mechelen. To properly integrate a housing block into the urban fabric, each of the five projects was consistently executed as a large building volume, including street corners, and the main architecture consisted of brick architecture. A standard layout emerged in 1929, as the National Society for Cheap Housing and Living Arrangements released standard plans for apartments. The Antwerp social housing companies, for their part, preferred housing units arranged around spacious courtyards. This morphology was indebted to Viennese courtyards that extended the living and meeting spaces of the residents. Antwerp architects, including Jos Smolderen, Jan Vanhoenacker and John Van Beurden, realised a new suburb between 1923 and 1940 that included Viennese courtyards with resting benches, plunge pools, ornamental greenery, interior gardens and façades with strong vertical accents. The circulation circuits, transitions between semi-private and public outdoor

spaces, greenery and water features have great heritage value.<sup>5</sup> These are the elements that characterise modernist architecture. Moreover, the morphology of this type of social housing points to the aim of creating a sense of community (and social control). Residents could use collective laundry spaces and rubbish bins. Interwar flats were usually of high quality and equipped in an art deco style with modern conveniences. They included a kitchen, running water, and, in some cases, central heating.

### 3. DAILY LIFE IN PEETERS' ART DECO FLAT

From 1924 onward, Peeters and his wife Pelagia Pruym rented, at a low price, a corner flat on the fourth floor of the Gerlachekaai, the former Statiekaai.<sup>6</sup> It was the second of five social housing blocks built by city architect Van Averbek and rented to the city's civil servants (Fig. 1). Their comfortable five-room flat (including a washroom with toilet) includes a pleasant corner room overlooking the Scheldt river as the flat is situated in a chamfered corner complex. Its façades are designed with a strip of red brick masonry, emphasising the vertical rhythm corresponding to the entrance and stairwells of the linked porch houses. The complete housing block forms an elongated, L-shaped building volume on a plot with limited open space that is fully enclosed. The corner building with a convenience store on the ground floor has only one flat per floor, albeit a wider flat. As the plan layout illustrates (Fig. 2), the central corridor gives access to the largest and most important rooms (living room, bedrooms and work studio) on the right. To the left is a small room consisting of a kitchen and a separate toilet, accessible only from the living room.

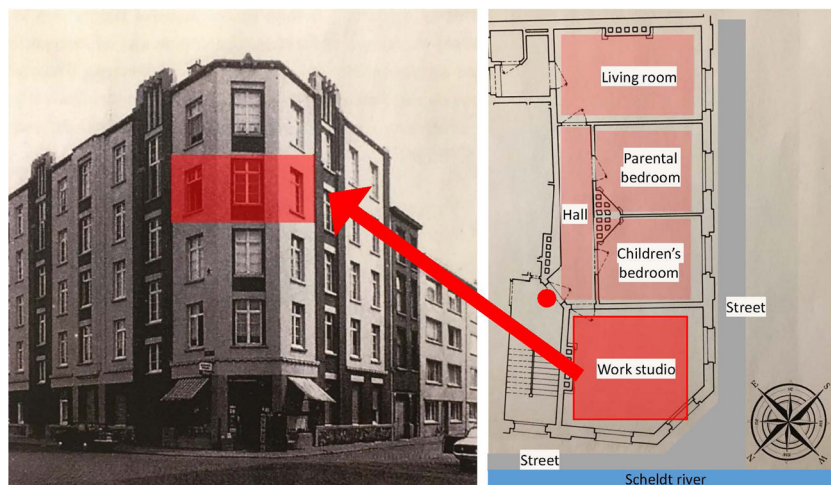


FIGURE 1 (left): edited photograph of apartment building Gerlachekaai 8 taken by Filip Tas, collection of International Cultural Center Antwerp.

FIGURE 2 (right): edited plan layout of apartment at Gerlachekaai 8 made by Rufin De Meeler (source: Buyle, Manderyck, 1998:7)

The couple chose this specific apartment to enjoy the view over the hangars on the quay to the meanders of the Scheldt as far as the Dutch municipality of Vlissingen. They did not choose the upper flat to avoid possible leaks in the roof of the block. But above all, the three façade surfaces maximise natural light.<sup>7</sup> Although the bright front room was intended to serve as a salon or drawing room, Peeters appropriated it as a work studio where he hosted his colleagues and other artist friends. His daughter Godelieve (b. 1925) and son Maarten (b. 1926) grew up under Peeters' strict supervision in this flat. He gradually assumed the role of 'house father'<sup>8</sup> while his wife taught at a public school to guarantee the family an income. The artist believed homeschooling would allow his children to develop their personalities freely. He bought several encyclopedias and education books and even made toys for them (Fig. 3). According to Godelieve, 'everything had to reflect reality, not untruths such as the St Nicholas legend. Fantasy was fed by adventure, reading and experiences'.<sup>9</sup> In a letter to a friend, Peeters wrote that he no longer left the home and that he felt like Robinson Crusoe.<sup>10</sup> Peeters' wife, Pelagia had been struggling for some time with health issues. In 1937 the family received bad news as she was diagnosed with an incurable paralysis that affected her body. Over time, she would no longer be able to move around independently. This led Peeters to care for his wife until her death.



FIGURE 3: (left) the children's bedroom in educational set up, photo by Filip Tas, no date (source: Buyle & Manderyck, 1998:6). (right) Little Godelieve and Maarten at play with the toys their father made for them, photo by Jozef Peeters (source: Buyle & Manderyck, 1998:21).

In 1927, the year Peeters decided to cease his public activities<sup>11</sup>, he steadily transformed the apartment by designing the furniture and painting the walls with large geometrical surfaces in specific colour palettes for each room – a project that would take more than ten years to complete. Only the small room with a kitchen and a separate toilet remained white. White is the colour that is often used in kitchens and bathrooms for hygienic purposes, as it makes dust and dirty surfaces visible. As backstage spaces, they are essential to the functioning of the flat as a home, but they are never published or opened to the public. However, in Peeters' social housing apartment, cooking and body hygiene had to take place in the same room – something that was out of the question for modernists.<sup>12</sup>

During the 1920s, kitchen design came under intense international attention, with the iconic Frankfurter Küche of Grete Schütte-Lihotzky. In Belgium, architect Louis Herman De Koninck introduced a successful rational kitchen design at the CIAM Conference in 1930, the Cubex kitchen. Modernists also gave the kitchen a more prominent place in the home and moved it from the back to the front stage. For example, Belgian architect Gaston Eysselinck placed the kitchen near the street.<sup>13</sup> For example, Peeters did not try to bring the kitchen/laundry space more frontstage by colouring its walls. He left it as a backstage space. Such practices set boundaries that regulated the private (intimate) and the public functions in relation to the body.<sup>14</sup> An ideological separation was feasible because of the physical inaccessibility via the central corridor. However, in contrast to Peeters' division by colour, the greenish-grey linoleum floor finish connects all the rooms to a certain extent.

#### 4. THE DESIGN OF A MODERNIST APARTMENT SUPPORTING AN ALTERNATIVE VISION OF LIVING

Peeters did not leave any explanation as to how he transformed his flat. Studies so far have not revealed much. Art historians mainly focus on describing and reconstructing Peeters' professional life. Some offer an overview of his professional life and introduce his network with similar artworks along with an exhibition and catalogue.<sup>15</sup> Heritage and preservation specialists mainly address the restoration and conservation of the studio flat, not least the murals.<sup>16</sup> The conclusion they draw is that the spatial colour composition leads to the perception of living in a painting.<sup>17</sup> Only the master's thesis in the field of architecture took a first step by describing the apartment design and other furniture.<sup>18</sup> But why Peeters chose this particular coloured geometry and atmosphere in his family studio flat and in what sequence coloured surfaces in the different rooms were applied is still unknown.



To understand how the design came about, we will try to empathise with Peeters' life, using his daughter's description of the flat and our own study of both the flat and Peeters' drawings and paintings. The fact that Peeters redesigned and repainted the flat while living there is important. It is not unusual for designers and architects to wait until the rooms are finished before choosing interior colours. For example, Le Corbusier did not select colours for *Maison Guiette* in Antwerp (built in 1927) before the spaces could be inspected in reality. The selection of colours happened after the execution phase because, by then, the lighting and volumes could be examined at full scale. Because the spaces were already finished to a certain extent with plaster and primer, Le Corbusier could more easily determine the colours based on the actual space and its surroundings. For this, he did not work with drawings or sketches, but placed himself in the building with the owner, painter René Guiette, who followed Le Corbusier closely when he walked through the interior. Guiette made sketches of the different positions in the house that reveal the path they took.<sup>19</sup> The use of polychromies allowed the space to be modelled like an 'architectural camouflage', to enhance or weaken volumes. In this way, the architect had control over the spaces, like a painter has over his canvas. By viewing the space live, design flaws become visible and can be corrected through the use of polychromy.<sup>20</sup> These colourful compositions are limited to what we can see at a glance, like looking at a painting and, in our opinion, performing Le Corbusier's *promenade architecturale* strings together all the single painted scenes (*tableaux vivants*) into one total experience. For Le Corbusier, who had long been close friends with the architect and scenographer Adolphe Appia and composer Emile Jaques Dalcroze, player and spectator coincide. On the one hand, he saw architecture as a means of orchestrating human movement and (gymnastic) gestures. On the other, aesthetics addressed the eye.<sup>21</sup>

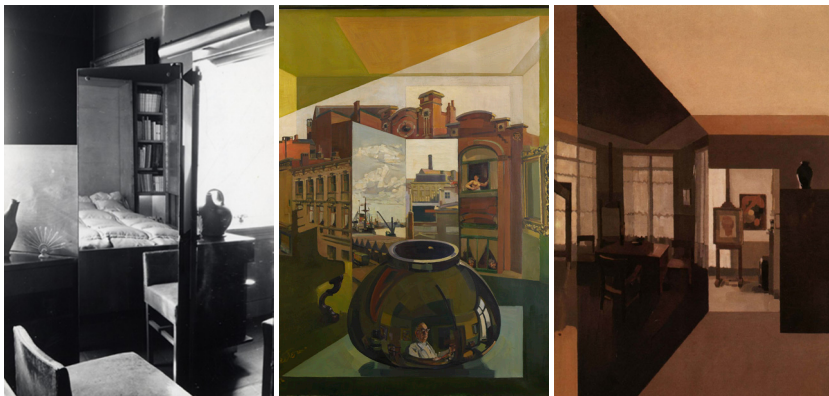


FIGURE 4: (left) anonymous, ca. 1960, collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis. (middle) Jozef Peeters, *Compositie-Stemming*, 1956, private collection. (right) Jozef Peeters, *Compositie-Stemming*, 1956, private collection.

In Peeters' case, the apartment was intertwined with his life and work, and vice versa (Fig. 4). This becomes obvious through the two paintings he made around 1956 in his flat, paintings on living in that flat, both titled *Compositie-Stemming* [Composition-Mood]. They display everyday scenes and activities performed in and around the flat.<sup>22</sup> These two emotional syntheses show how Peeters saw the apartment's interior, namely, as a layered composition with several perspectives. While the brightly coloured painting (Fig. 4 middle) focuses on the relation between the inside (private) and outside (public) space, the sepia painting (Fig. 4 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 at the left refers to the bedrooms and the ritual act of 'making/folding beds'. It is as if he were showing or reminiscing about two aspects of his life: his domestic life on the left and his professional life on the right. But even in his professional life, his wife, who had died a year earlier, takes centre stage metaphorically. The corridor seems to be broadened by adding the reflection of the main bedroom.

The brightly coloured painting (Fig. 4 middle), a triptych presenting three living room scenes, is oriented towards the other side of the apartment. In the middle of this canvas, Peeters displays the outside world seen through the windows, namely the view of the Scheldt (left), the adjacent building with the curious neighbours peeking in (centre), and the naked neighbour that Pelagia was jealous of (right).<sup>23</sup> The work also shows a factory that produced tow ropes and used pitch for the tugs docked on the quay, illustrating the ever-present pungent smell in the neighbourhood.<sup>24</sup> Second, Peeters painted the interior of the dining room that frames the outside scenes. Thirdly, Peeters depicted himself in the living room, at the front of the painting, caught in the reflection of the black vase – for some, a symbol of being bound to the flat.<sup>25</sup> We suggest here that the latter may refer to the life of the family and Jozef Peeters, significantly altered when Pelagia was diagnosed.

Peeters knew the ins and outs of the flat, so he could take decisions based on how he observed and experienced the interiors while using the spaces. The fact that this was a rented flat from the city of Antwerp did not hold Peeters back from making large-scale interventions that affected the interior walls. He asked the social housing company to remove the existing wall mouldings and technical elements to obtain a clean surface, like a white canvas, and to avoid obstacles when placing the furniture. He also had the electricity network removed and incorporated into the walls. Peeters designed special light switches..<sup>26</sup>



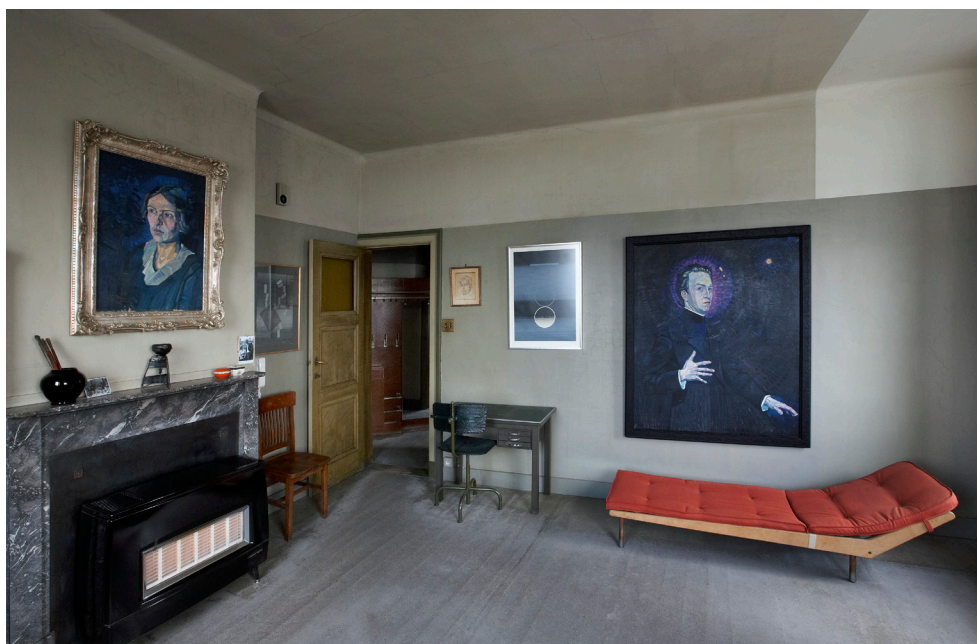


FIGURE 5: Work studio of Jozef Peeters, collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis.

For the design of the self-made furniture, he departed from daily needs to manufacture tailored furniture. In his studio (Fig. 5), Peeters selected grey tones to create, in the words of Godelieve Peeters, a ‘cool, soothing, non-emotional, neutral’ atmosphere that would enhance the work and would be clear of light distortions caused by reflections on the coloured walls. Art historian Rik Sauwen also noticed a diagonal line visually suggesting an inclination of grey surfaces.<sup>27</sup> This use refers to the water of the Scheldt.

In the opposite room of the flat, the drawing room (of the coloured painting) (Fig. 6 top), the walls completely change the atmosphere with green and (golden) yellow shades or, as Godelieve writes: ‘The living room, bright and sunny, with a warm homely atmosphere: the piano, the round table, the record cabinet in acajou and its phonograph: ‘His Master’s Voice’. In this large family room, the use of green and yellow makes the space bright and cheery, as if you were out in a forest on a sunny day. Yellow dominates the deepest part of the room and, as such, illuminates the more obscure corners of the flat. Peeters is correcting the light of the room here to draw the bright atmosphere everywhere. The room is furnished with traditional furniture and has textiles with modern paintings.<sup>28</sup> Connecting the drawing room with the work studio, the hallway (Fig. 6 bottom) served as a binder: a perspective where the door panels painted with a wood pattern acted as décor (backdrop) in the corridor.

In the children’s bedroom (Fig. 7), Peeters used a soft pink and complementary blueish grey. He also made mobile furniture for that room: seats that could be stored at night and beds that could be folded during the day. As such, the room could be maximised for the necessary use. The parental bedroom, which was designed in 1930, was, to a certain extent, Peeters’ masterpiece, as Godelieve explained: ‘[Our] parents’ room, intensely creative, with bold colouring, and the warm woods in combination with patinated copper. He loved the reflections, whether in metallic surfaces or in mirrors. The furniture was shiny, polished. Ceiling lights, all sorts of light, everything played its part in the rooms. The beds had to disappear. It was a magic room, a golden room’.<sup>29</sup>

The alternation between dark blue and grey strips on the walls in the room plays with the golden yellow of the Finnish birchwood furniture. In this composition, the sun enchants the room daily by casting its light on the wooden parts, reflecting the day and night cycle (Fig. 8).

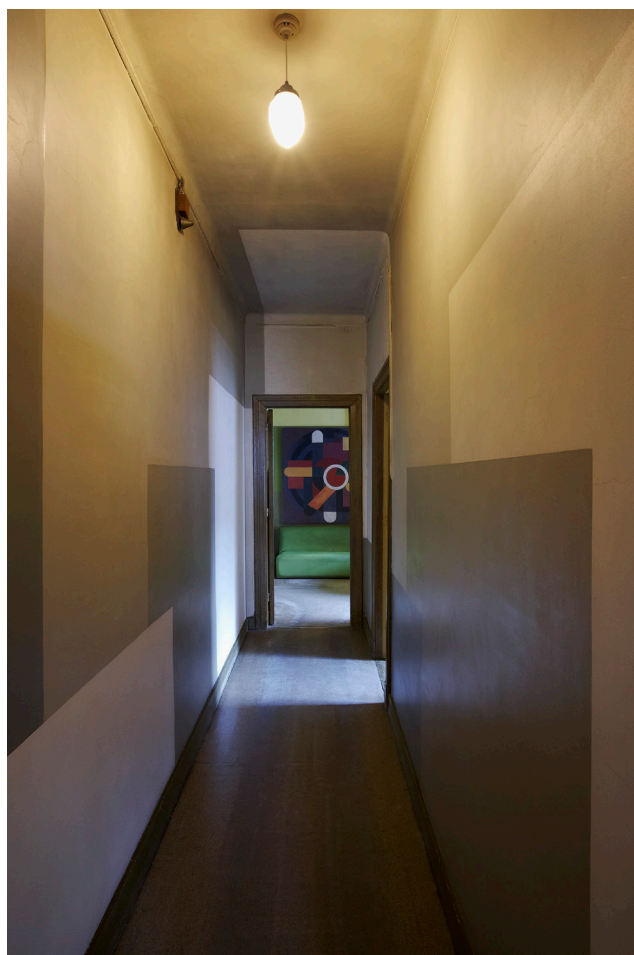


FIGURE 6: (top) The drawing room, collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis. (bottom) The corridor, collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis.





FIGURE 7: The children's bedroom with (un)folded bed, collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis.

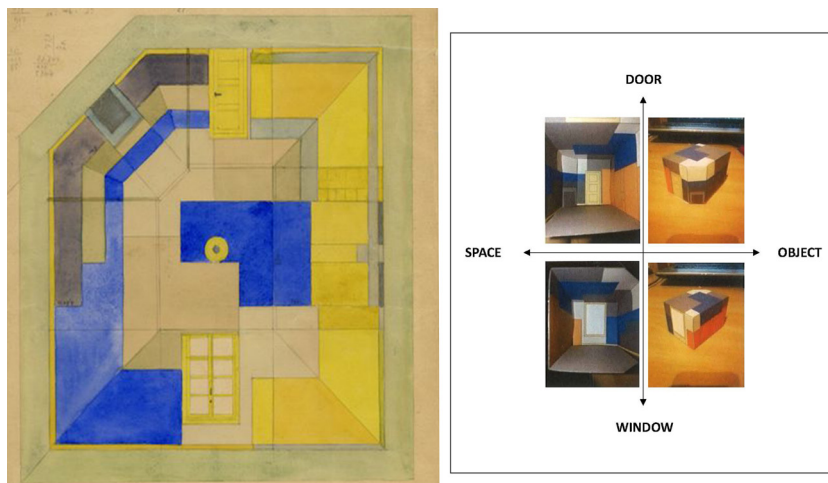


FIGURE 8: The master bedroom, collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis.

FIGURE 9: (left) Colour plan Jozef Peeters, no date. Collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis. (right) Diagram explaining the colour scheme as a space and as an object, Selin Geerinckx, collection of the University of Antwerp.

## 5. (RE)PRESENTATION OF THE APARTMENT

To develop the exhibition design and scenography based on colour and the theory of Peeters, a threefold preliminary study was done by a team of four architecture master students of the University of Antwerp. The students first examined the bodily experience of one room through their eyes, ears, hands and feet. The result was a phenomenological study of the flat that was discussed further during class. Being present in the apartment to feel, touch and sketch the flat and its environment was an essential experience to understand the colour and furniture design in their surroundings as part of real life. The students also applied Peeters' methodology of his colour plan for the parental bedroom (Fig. 9 left) as a blueprint, with the aim of redrawing the technical elevations of each room. Unexpectedly, this task revealed that Peeters' colour scheme served as a key to understanding how the murals were designed from an architectural point of view as a theoretical and philosophical concept. More precisely, a comparison of the ceiling plans of the interiors that the students redrew based on Peeters' scheme showed that Peeters' plan does not correspond with drawing conventions in architecture. His method, known in descriptive geometry as a 'development surface'<sup>30</sup>, 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 to a turn on its axis. This practice created a box showing the coloured surfaces on the outside of the volume (Fig. 9 right), instead of its print on the inside of the box, which reflects the architectural practice of making a model. The result is a volume as an object instead of space. A similar drawing method was used by Theo van Doesburg for his design of the *Chambre des fleurs* (1924) at Villa Noailles and later in his *Ciné dancing* (1928) at L'Aubette.<sup>31</sup> Such a drawing technique revealed an interesting scenographic concept: the bodily perception of space starting from the object (furniture).





We here 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. In the 1920s, Peeters abundantly applied geometry and the two-point perspective in his drawings. This concurred with his theosophical belief, his admiration for Kandinsky's work and his interest in Futurism. In his design for a cupboard in the drawing room, Peeters started from the perspective drawing to compose the dimension of the object and front panel design. The façade of the furniture object shows a dominant perspective line to create depth and distance in the vertical axis. At the same time, a clear separation between the lower and upper parts of the furniture is orchestrated by a difference in the patterns. Thus, the horizontal and vertical axes are balanced throughout the drawing. However, only the vertical axis mirrors the pattern and dimension of the object. We observed the use of the primary orthographic projections in first angle (detailed) sections, patterns that clearly run over multiple surfaces, orthogonal and diagonal lines, mirroring, and the play on dark/light contrasts. The outcome is a drawing that radiates (dis)harmony. What is important to notice here is that the two-dimensional perspective drawing, as a method, enabled Peeters to design the three-dimensional spatial colour patterns from the body positioned in the middle of the room floor, with the eye looking up towards the ceiling without losing a connection with the door and window.

As the next step in the methodological process, a way was sought to (re)present the interior in the exhibition 'Living with Colour' to a broader public. Close attention was paid to how the findings of the preliminary study could be given a physical, formal expression. Instead of an explanatory text detailing Peeters' *modus operandi*, visitors were offered a physical experience incorporating Peeters' theoretical or philosophical concept. Architectural theorist Beatriz Colomina postulates that an exhibition can act as a medium to provide a public platform for designers to experiment with innovative forms of living.<sup>32</sup> For example, Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion was rebuilt according to OMA's reinterpretation as Casa Palestra (aka the Body Buildings House) at the Milan Triennale in 1986. The 'house', in the form of an exhibition stand, was situated in the curved interior behind the theatre of the original Palazzo Dell'Arte where the Triennale took place. As an indictment of historiography that described modern architecture as puritanical or lifeless, the sensorial installation (Fig. 10) that included the works of Walter Gropius and Erwin Piscator showed the possible 'hidden dimension' of modern architecture.<sup>33</sup> Also, Thea Brejzek, a scholar in spatial theory, discusses a Mies' (re)production. 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 design statements from different periods can be simultaneously experienced, bodily and

mentally, by visitors, even though they always remain a kind of replica and are never the original space.<sup>34</sup> Using Colomina's statement as a starting point, we wanted to explore whether the opposite is possible: the innovative, alternative form of living as a medium to experiment with an exhibition scenography.

The exhibition made it possible to display the 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 experimented in his home to reconcile 'space' and 'object' in relation to the outside landscape and public life. It seems this was a way to create a parallel universe connected with its surroundings and daily life. Peeters did so by using the linear perspective to configure a composition of interweaving two-dimensional surfaces in a specific range of colours turning into a three-dimensional space. On the one hand, Peeters was interested in the abstract expression of his own 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.

The architecture students chose to design two pieces for the exhibition: a 1:10 scale model and a puzzle box. The model of the apartment on a 1:10 scale (Fig. 11) allowed a bodily encounter with the reconstructed colour patterns, a focus of the exhibition. In line with Peeters' furniture creations and the relation between space and object, the presentation model was designed as a piece of furniture that visitors could sit and stand around. The model is smaller than a 1:1 (re-) enactment but big enough to allow visitors to have two kinds of perspective views: in and of the flat. First, spectators could observe the rooms from the inside in a seated position. Seated on a bench, visitors look up into the model above their heads and see the refined patchwork of coloured geometry of all the rooms,

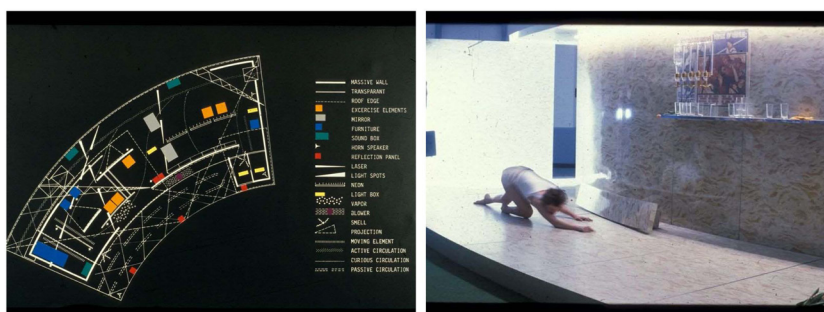


FIGURE 10: (left) Floor plan explaining the sensorial events of 'Casa Palestra' by Office for Metropolitan Architecture, 1985-1986, @ OMA, source: <https://www.oma.com/projects/casa-palestra> ; (right) Use of the installation, 1985-1986, @ OMA, source: <https://www.oma.com/projects/casa-palestra>.

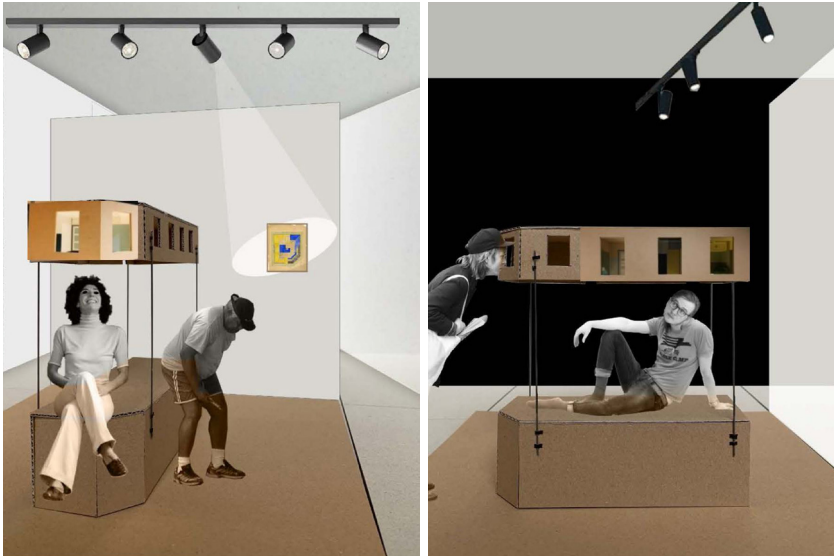


FIGURE 11: Composition explaining the exhibition scenography. Collage by Selin Geerinckx, collection of the University of Antwerp.

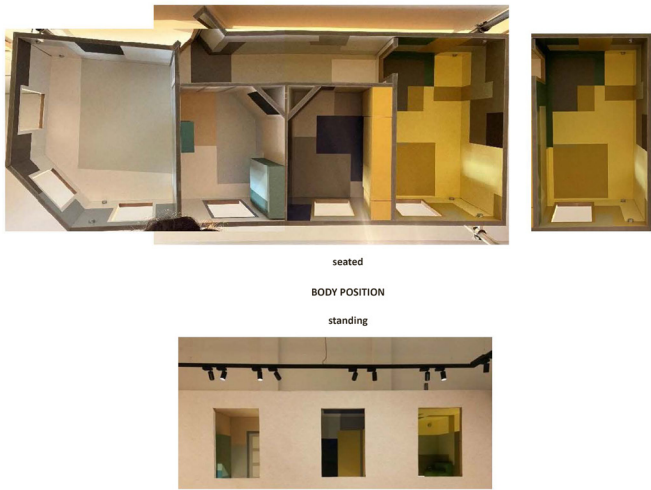


FIGURE 12: Two perspectives into the 1:10 scale model: (top) view from seated position, (bottom) view from standing position into the model, (right) detailed view of the drawing room. Pictures by Selin Geerinckx, collection of the University of Antwerp.

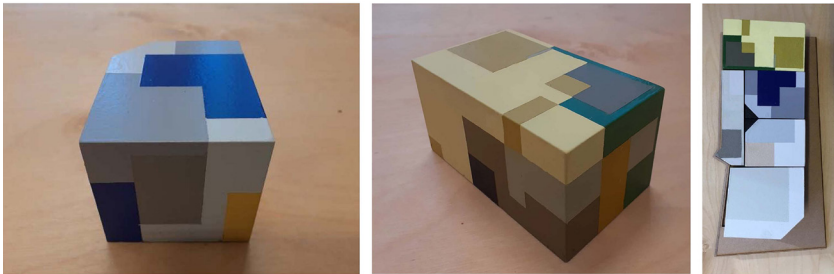


FIGURE 13: (left) detail of the object representing the parental bedroom, (middle) detail of the object representing the family room, (right) all puzzle blocks correctly composed. Wooden set built and painted by architecture students (UA - Elective MA1, 2019). Pictures by Els De Vos, collection University of Antwerp.

like the painted ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome (Fig. 12). Second, visitors could observe each room through the windows in a standing position. Peeters' drawing methods led us towards the model as it gives the viewer two perspective views. By the way, the exploration of the perspective method during the Italian Renaissance was a catalyst for the development of the model.<sup>35</sup> This way of representation communicates and even materialises a concept, which eventually became common practice in the architectural discipline. The visitor becomes both a player and a spectator.

The second contribution by the students is a crafted children's puzzle box with coloured blocks (Fig. 13). A nod to children's play and homeschooling, this toy for the mind lets visitors assemble the rooms with their murals in the proper order. The puzzle box provides a different perspective: the room as an object. In short, the scale model was used as a vehicle to evoke the spatial experience (notwithstanding the different scales) and to experience the space. At the same time, the puzzle box mainly showed the spatial concept of the designer. The decision to provide models on different scales reflected their dual character as material objects and immaterial ideas or theories.

When making the model, the students prioritised the perspective views in the apartment rather than the real-scale reconstruction. The larger the scale, the more a full-body experience can take place. Nevertheless, the scale is less relevant than the dimensional relationship between the body (through the visitor's eyes) and the rooms.<sup>36</sup> However, the model brings a kind of alienation as the model space differs in scale, materiality and lighting compared to the original space. Also, the physical environment is absent. Heritage specialist Norbert Poulain once rightly stated that a sterile reconstruction of the apartment presented in a museum setting would lack the essential view of the Scheldt river.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, a scenography that includes the surrounding environment contributes to experiencing the interior as intended. But even though a site visit is the most complete bodily experience, a location visit does not provide a materialisation of the theory. For example, making all the models available on the site could be an added value. Conversely, a sensorial projection that illustrates nature and public life would be an addition to the scale models. However, what this architectural research process shows is that in-depth-architectural research of an apartment aspires to develop representational models that are innovative and that succeed in bringing to life the real-life experience and the designer's approach.

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

In this paper, we focused on the process of representing the flat inhabited and adapted by Jozef Peeters in an exhibition design for the exhibition 'Living in Colour'. In this 1920s social housing flat, the painter created a new world by means of a Gesamtkunstwerk rooted in his theosophical beliefs and in modernism, which he discussed and promoted with his 'Moderne Kunst' [Modern Art] Group. Moreover, his experiences as an inhabitant, worker and educator enabled him to consciously transform the art deco apartment into a tempered modernist one. He stripped the apartment of its art deco elements like *moulures* and created by means of his murals and self-designed furniture visually open spaces whose boundaries had dissolved. It resulted in a kind of personalised cosmopoiesis, a world-making, for the transition from everyday life in an average social housing flat towards a new world that fit the alternative life vision of the Peeters family.

In order to come to a deeper understanding of Peeters' studio flat design, a tailored series of research methods were applied and put in relation to each other. An architectural analysis with an anthropological and ethnographic approach was needed to comprehend Peeters' point of view completely. After all, both domestic and professional functions are intertwined in the flat, which necessitated the use of various methods and consultation with a larger number of sources. These sources encompassed literature on the artist's professional life and oeuvre, archival documents containing private family and professional images. This data were supplemented by conversations with some of Peeters' relatives and acquaintances, such as those who have known Peeters' daughter. In addition to the historical material, sketches were made and photographs of the flat were taken during several guided visits. Also, Peeters' drawings and paintings were studied. This research method carried out over a longer period of time, is called multi-media mapping or 'deep mapping'.<sup>38</sup> It led us to the idea of a new way of representation, one that centralises the human body. Indeed, by studying the paintings of Peeters, it became obvious how the apartment was a source of inspiration and a laboratory to create a stage of experiences as both player and spectator. The analysis of the colour scheme used for the master bedroom inspired us to create similar plans for the other rooms, providing new information on Peeters' design method and his thoughts on the sensorial experience in the apartment. First, our study revealed that Peeters designed the colour scheme while considering the rooms as objects that can be viewed from outside or as painted objects. Second, we discovered that Peeters applied a well-thought-out perspective drawing method from the Italian Renaissance, an unusual model-making for domestic objects and spatial design. But the technique made it possible to maintain the

connection between the human body and space, starting from the human eye. By doing so, he could determine the position of the body in space (in relation to an object) for applying corrections that fit his wishes. Third, Peeters used colour to illuminate darker corners of the room. Fourth, he took the presence of the water and the position of the incoming sunlight into account, as confirmed during the visits, something he could do so well because he lived there and experienced the spaces every minute of the day. From these findings, we conclude that Peeters' plastic expression was abstract, but he applied principles of the decorative arts to the creation of domestic objects. The furniture was custom-made because he knew from his own experiences what was needed concerning practical use and materiality. But he also applied techniques practised in the Beaux-Arts tradition. He frequently applied the two-point perspective that he mirrored, copied and scaled creatively to establish a *trompe l'oeil*.

The scenographic design of the studio flat for an exhibition on colour made it possible to explore a methodological process that focuses on the architectural and ethnographical in order to generate an alternative form of (re)presentation. Instead of reconstructing the space based on a physical description or a narrative, the site could be displayed through the externalisation or formal expression of the designer's theory in the form of a concept as well as through the sensorial experiences of visiting and sketching the rooms. Reconstructing the interiors by means of a model or puzzle blocks also showed that the kitchen-laundry space was kept white and out of sight of visitors, in contrast with the development of the rational kitchen by the Modern Movement. In this way, the undocumented room gained attention and stressed the fact that the apartment had backstage spaces that served the front stage, as was the case in bourgeois homes. A step further would have been to document that 'hidden space' also explicitly in the exhibition. However, as the exhibition focused specifically on colour, we did not include the kitchen/bathroom/laundry.

This paper shows that a designerly way of investigating a building or its interior reveals other aspects than a purely art-historical analysis. Researchers can gain from approaching built heritage from an architectural perspective and even from a design-oriented perspective. Of course, in terms of externalising a relevant concept and physical experience for the visitors, the challenge lies with the designer, who has to deal with certain limitations regarding location, time, budget and technology. For example, we considered finishing the seating surface of the large-scale model with a custom-made mirror. As many visitors were reluctant to sit in the model/furniture, this would allow them to observe the interior of the model from a perspective angle while standing. As such, we played with a mirror, just as Peeters had in his paintings. However, this material and production



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did not fit within the budget at hand. Moreover, it could have raised the threshold to sit on the model.

Today, the furniture model, puzzle blocks and images of the flat are on show in the entrance hall of the Letterenhuis, the literary archive of Flanders, which manages Peeters' apartment. As such, not only can a wider public get acquainted with the studio flat, but researchers and designers can also get inspired to reflect on alternative forms of (re)presentation.

## NOTES

- 1 Peeters, "Over plastiek [Plastic arts]," 277.
- 2 Colomina, "The Exhibitionist House," 128.
- 3 Flemish Heritage Agency, "Sociaal woonblok met atelierflat Jozef Peeters [Social housing block with Jozef Peeters studio flat]."
- 4 This exhibition, curated by Eva Storgaard, Els De Vos, Filip Maes and Stephan Peleman, was a joint effort between the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and the Department of Interior Architecture of the University of Antwerp. Storgaard, "Living in colour: a common ground between visual arts and interior architecture," <https://www.uantwerpen.be/nl/overuantwerpen/faculteiten/ontwerpwetenschappen/nieuws-en-activiteiten/archief/living-in-colour/>.
- 5 Flemish Heritage Agency, Sociaal woonblok met atelierflat Jozef Peeters [Social housing block with Jozef Peeters studio flat]."
- 6 De Schepper, "Jozef Peeters 1895–1960: De inrichting van een appartement en andere Reprezentatieve meubelontwerpen [Jozef Peeters 1895-1960: The furnishing of an apartment and other representative furniture designs]," 19.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 The concept of 'house father' was a new phenomenon at the time. See documentary video of Vermeire, "In De Schaduw Van Jozef Peeters [In the Shadow of Jozef Peeters]."
- 9 Buyle and Manderyck, "Wonen in En Schilderij" [Living in a Painting], 21.
- 10 Peeters, "Waar de muren nog zijn handtekening dragen [Where the walls still bear his signature]," 12.
- 11 Van den Bussche, *Retrospectieve Jozef Peeters: 1895-1960*, 102.
- 12 De Caigny, *Bouwen aan een nieuwe thuis* [Building a new home], 72.
- 13 Dubois, Gaston Eysselinck (1907-1953), 180.
- 14 De Caigny, *Bouwen aan een nieuwe thuis* [Building a new home], 72.
- 15 E.g. following authors have published on the oeuvre or apartment of Jozef Peeters: Bex (1978), Bob Melders (1978), Rik Sauwen (1978), Anne Adriaens-Pannier (1986), Norbert Poulain (1989), Willy Van den Bussche (1995), Peter Pauwels (2019).
- 16 E.g. see the publications of Marjan Buyle and Madeleine Manderyck (1998), Ann Verdonck (2008) and Katlijn Imschoot (2010).
- 17 Buyle and Manderyck, "Wonen in een Schilderij" [Living in a Painting], (1998), 4-22.
- 18 See De Schepper, 1990.
- 19 De heer et al., *De architectonische kleur: de polychromie in de puristische architectuur van Le Corbusier* [The architectonic colour: polychromy in the purist architecture of Le Corbusier], 119.
- 20 Ibid., 106.
- 21 Ibid., 114-115.

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## RAZVIJANJE STANA APSTRAKTNOG SLIKARA JOŽEFA PETERSA. DIZAJN IZLOŽBE KAO ISTRAŽIVANJE ZASNOVANO NA DIZAJNU

**Selin Geerinckx, Els De Vos**

Jozef Peeters (1895–1960), pionir apstraktnog slikarstva u Belgiji, dizajnirao je izvanredan stan u društvenom stambenom naselju koje je dizajnirao gradski arhitekta iz Antverpena Emiel van Averbekke. Od sredine 1920-ih služio je kao studio i porodična kuća za njega, njegovu bolesnu ženu i njihovo dvoje dece. Dok je tamo živio, radio i obrazovao svoju decu, avangardni slikar je u svom domu eksperimentisao sa prostornom upotrebom boja. Dizajn enterijera je rezultirao modernističkim Gesamtkunstwerk-om, gde se zidovi spajaju međusobno, ali i sa nameštajem. Danas studio čuva nasleđe Pitersovog teorijskog razvoja i njegove prakse. Pošto je lokacija zatvorena za javnost, tražili su se načini prenošenja prostornih doživljaja stana i njegovih osnovnih koncepata. U ovom radu se razmatra proces razvijanja ovog plošnog enterijera kroz proučavanje literature, kao i posete stana, arhitektonske analize unutrašnjih prostora i odgovarajućih boja, scenografski dizajn izložbe i na kraju konstrukcija makete. Izložba je posetiocima ponudila dvostruko otelotvoreno iskustvo stana, iako drugačije od prvobitnog doživljaja. Novi uvidi postali su vidljivi kroz čin (raz)vijanja Pitersovog enterijera kroz sam prostor, predmet i telo.

KLJUČNE REČI: GESAMTKUNSTWERK, MODERNISTIČKI ENTERIJER, DIZAJN IZLOŽBE, SCENOGRAFIJA

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