

Mimesis and abstraction – the paradigmatic principles and traditions of fine art representation in the training of architects

Gábor Üveges

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Abstract

The notion of mimesis and abstraction. Mimesis and abstraction in the training of architects.

Art in the training of architects. The analogy that exists in conceptual, intellectual and compositional areas between fine art and architecture offers tremendous new opportunities to make the work carried out in the spirit of geometrical abstraction and other closely related movements to be the (modern) school of architectonic thinking, organization of structure and space and visual and spatial order.

Keywords

geometrical abstraction · architectonic thinking · training of architects

1 Mimesis - The representation of the created world

Throughout thousands of years beginning with the creation of the earliest cave drawings, artistic expression manifested in painting and sculpture has always been of a representative nature. Having said that, it was the masterpieces of classical Greek and Renaissance art that we came to regard as the paradigmatic manifestations of mimesis, and they were also the artworks that have continued to define European culture. Mimetic representation is the artistic method that wants to reflect the visible world; the mimetic principle in the creation of two- or three-dimensional artworks stands for the idea of representing the visible world, to varying degrees of accuracy, in a recognizable manner, essentially duplicating the created world.

The depiction of the visible world, in other words, the artistic representation of visual reality, poses a tremendous challenge to the human intellect, partly as a possibility to capture most directly the incredible sensuality of the optically perceptible world-view and the wealth of forms and colours of the entire created world, and partly as a way to form an understanding, to stop the time passing, to capture the faces of people and the imagery of the cities and to record important events: in other words, to freeze-frame the ever-changing present. One of the secrets in the success of mimetic artworks lies precisely in its ability to stop and freeze-frame the fleeting moment of the ever-changing present, capturing the likeness of mortal people and the changing world alike by arresting time itself with the help of sculptures and the pictures.

In the language of visual expression, the mimetic artworks exist in the present continuous until eternity. For 2000 years, the discus has not left the hand of Myron's *Discobolos*; St. George, sculpted by the Kolozsváry brothers, has been stabbing the dragon for more than 600 years; and the period's famous poet, Pietro Bembo, in Raphael's painting looks just as youthful today as he did 500 years ago. Mimesis may be an instrument in the artists' hands to defy death.

Thirdly, a conviction or belief persisted throughout the classical ages that every object and every element in the visible world meant something in the realm of the supernatural, implying that the secret signs of nature actually functioned as some kind of

Gábor Üveges

Department of Design, BME, H-1111 Budapest Műegyetem rkp. 3., Hungary
e-mail: uveges-g@freemail.hu

hieroglyphs, with their meanings promising to point us to the spiritual world once we had been able to decipher them [1]. For people living in the classical ages, this conviction meant that the visible features of the world were not superficial illusions or apparitions. Quite the contrary: every element of the visible world was “transparent”, through which some sacred phenomenon manifested itself. In accordance with this, the mimetic artworks approached the world lying beyond perception through the world actually perceived; they promised the possibility of getting a glimpse of divine beauty as reflected by earthy beauties and of discovering truth lying beyond the realm of physical perception. In spite of, or together with, all their alluring attractions and the sensual experience deriving from the presentation of bodies, objects and natural beauties, mimetic artworks in their most sublime forms were mainly hierophantic representations; in other words they visually represented the manifestations of the sacred through the visible world.

2 Abstraction - The creation of a new world

The notion that, rather than representing the visible world, an artwork can abstract from the natural likeness of things and still remain powerfully expressive – an idea originally conceived by the Russian Wassily Kandinsky and the Czech Frantisek Kupka – initiated one of the greatest paradigmatic changes in the history of modern art. The appearance of non-representative paintings or sculptures marked the final victory for fine art in its long war of liberation, which thus obtained full autonomy at last. After having liberated themselves from the dominion of Idea, Moral and Beauty, the Abstract artists’ art no longer wanted to imitate the visible Reality [2] either. As a preliminary to this development, it was a momentous event, when fine art finally quitted from being the visual illustrator of stories related verbally after Fiedler’s discoveries relating to visual thinking, visual language and the visual sovereignty; after this, similarly to the spoken languages and the language of music, visual language was considered as a independent means of communication and was used accordingly in a sovereign manner. From that moment on, without actually representing anything, Abstract painting was able to be expressive in its sovereign visual language, using colours, lines and patches and communicating without words. Later on this movement, which was created by Kandinsky and Kupka, came to be known alternately as Abstract, Non-figural and Concrete. Abstract and concrete have directly opposite meanings, which sheds light on the two fundamental aspects of this par excellence modern art movement; the two diametrically opposite terms in fact describe the same characteristic from two opposite viewpoints.

In line with its original meaning, the adjective in the term “Abstract art” emphasises the fundamental importance of the fact that this kind of art abstracts from the natural sight and no longer represents the visible world, thus defining this new art in contrast with representational art as a whole. The adjective “abstract” implicitly suggests that an abstract artwork is struc-

ured from its own constituent elements, in accordance with its inherent properties. This world, which exists parallel with nature, is an entity and a concrete object created by the artist. This concept considers the dramatic break-away from the principles of mimetic artworks, i.e. realistic representations previously enjoying hegemony in art history, as the most fundamental development and, on the basis of this, it describes the art tendency as abstract.

However, if we take a different approach and refuse to accept the validity of the absolute precondition – one that the classical periods took for granted in connection with this genre – whereby painting should depict the visible world, simply for the lack of any other alternative; if, therefore, we refuse to see this either as a starting point or as a point of reference, then we shall find that the main characteristic of the new art tendency lies precisely in its victory over that old concept.

The designation “concrete art”¹ lays the emphasis on the fact that the artwork is actually very concrete in its objectivity. In other words, it defines its object not negatively, i.e. not on the basis of what it denies, but positively. Although it does not question the point that art is abstract in relation to the actual sight, it focuses not on this aspect, but on the fact that an artwork can be a very concrete, sovereign entity (and, therefore, the requirement that it should represent something that exists independently of it does not even come into the equation); it simply exists as any other existent thing and, therefore, in its objectiveness it is very concrete as any other object existing in the world.

In comparison with the mimetic artworks, the primary characteristic of concrete art lies precisely in its concrete objecthood. To some extent, concrete artworks suspend their concrete objecthoods by becoming transparent, [3] when they open windows on themselves and point to other objects in that way. Therefore, the adjectives “abstract” and “concrete” are both justified, as they describe this art by referring to the same fundamental characteristic, although approaching it from opposite directions.

In the following I shall use the adjective “abstract”, honouring Kandinsky who also used this word to describe the art he himself had founded.

In the public discourse, the inconceivable nature of the abstract artworks’ sovereign existence derives from the fact that the majority of the public continues to cherish the axiomatic principle, a certitude never justified and never questioned, that a picture or a sculpture should represent something.

The American monochrome painter, Ad Reinhardt, has a caricature that paraphrases this problem. Studying an abstract painting, a confused viewer poses the usual question: “What does this represent?” To this, the painting responds with the angry question: “Why, what do you represent?”

¹The Concrete School of Zurich (Josef Albers, Max Bill, Richard Paul Lohse) placed the concrete idea, and its consistent implementation, along with the strict, systematic and rational form and visual structuring, and the research of modular systems, serial arrangements and the objective laws of systems of forms and colours at the centre of their aesthetic program.

The caricature exposes the nonsensical nature of the question, which makes no sense from the viewpoint of the abstract composition, by turning around the question and forcing the viewer to find an answer to the absurd question about what he himself represents.

If we disregard the theological interpretation, then it is obvious that the question cannot be answered. The caricature is meant to demonstrate that an abstract work of art is just as independently existing, sovereign entity as a person, neither of them representing anything. Existing in its own right, it simply is, similarly to the viewer, whose existence needs no further justification, obviously. Ad Reinhardt's caricature focuses on one of the most important issues of the conflict between modern art and the audience, pointing to the "seemingly irreconcilable clash and the conceptual difference between the expectations of art and the public – in an ironic form" [4].

In today's culture, the several-thousand-year-long tradition of mimetic art of a representative nature, the compositional principles and practice of which can be described as familiar, co-exists with a much less well-established and recognized, non-representative and abstract tradition based on constructionist principles and established by the first generation of early modernism less than a hundred years ago.

Naturally, the two dramatically different systems reflect two different worldviews, although admittedly the original confrontation between the two modes of thinking has much abated with the passing of the years.

The mimetic principle is the artistic language of the classical/humanist tradition of Greco-Roman culture, while abstraction based on constructive principles has remained to this day the effective tradition of classical Avant-garde; the latter was born out of the determination to reject and to transcend the mimetic tradition of picture composition. In abstract art the artists of early modernism gave evidence of their worldview (and also their visual sensibilities), in so far as abstraction wanted to create a new world, rather than represent the existing one.

Despite the fact that in many respects mimesis and abstraction are direct opposites, they share a number of elements.

Paradoxically, mimesis is not entirely without traces of abstraction, while it is also meaningful to talk about "realism" in connection with abstract artworks.

3 The autonomous and abstract elements in mimetic art

On the one hand, visible reality and the picture representing it are often, and quite unjustifiably, mixed up in public thinking, when in fact they are far from being the same thing. It is very frequently observed, especially in public thinking, that this relationship narrows down to the dichotomy of a thing and its image, which is reinforced by the vulgar theory of reflection and has at its root the unproblematic comparison and identification of image and reality. [5]

In painting, even in the case of the most accurate representation allowed by the medium, the resulting work will be somewhat abstract; no matter how illusionistic a picture turns out to be, no people, no nature, no materials, no sky and no earth will actually be present in it. There will only be colour patches: the visible, tangible three-dimensional world will be spread out as a pattern in two dimensions. Whatever we may think of the real world, we would never agree to conceive it as a pattern formed by coloured patches of oil paint. In a painting representing the real world, it is not the objective reality that is present, but an optical image strongly transformed by the intrinsic nature of the medium, which is further modified by the – conscious or unconscious but inevitable – interpretation, which stems from the creator's conceptual system. In other words, the picture is not identical with reality.

Similarly to any abstract works of art, a mimetic artwork is autonomous, even if lay persons are unable to recognize this, because the theme of the painting completely absorbs their attentions, leading them to believe that the picture is organized according to the logic of the visible world, when in fact precisely the opposite is true. A work of art organizes the visible world into an image according to its autonomous visual logic.

Both the abstract and the mimetic artworks use a visual language for communication and in this sense is totally indifferent that the building blocks of the picture are human bodies or abstract geometrical forms. What really matters is that the visual quality is determined in each case by the same thing: how these building blocs can be organized into an autonomous pictorial order and an aesthetic unit.

4 The "realism" of abstraction

By contrast, the "realism" of abstraction means that in many cases abstraction only rejects the sight, not Nature itself. Abstraction can be naturalistic even when it fails to represent the visible world; in the footsteps of Kandinsky, it takes the position that "Art can only aspire to greatness, when it directly relates to the cosmic laws and pays fealty to them. . . when it approaches Nature not from without, but from within." [6]

Abstraction based on realistic principles does not sever all connections with reality: it only refuses to represent the world visible from the outside, precisely for the reason that it tries to get to the heart of Nature from the inside, in the hope of being able to make the invisible natural laws visible.

Of course, non-realistic abstraction flatly rejects any such brands of "realisms". In other words, it is opposed to having even the most indirect relations with the natural world.

Kassák consistently takes the idea of the absolutely autonomous artwork to its logical conclusion, demanding a complete break with any psychological content, including emotions and feelings.

"The image, as a creature living in two dimensions, cannot resemble any foreign body (i.e. to any body not present in the picture) and neither can it relate any story" [7].

This categorical statement reflects on the opposition between the two intellectual positions within abstract art, as well as on the difference between the possible concepts.

5 Mimesis and Abstraction in the Training of Architects

Mimesis is the traditional language of fine art. Through the drawing of objects, it has always played a major part in the training of architects.

Drawing objects offers a good practice based on observation of proportions, tones and formal relationships. It is extremely useful in developing one's powers of observation, and composition and also offers an introduction to the wealth of aesthetical questions related to image creation and the creative process.

There are also some positive side effects that accompany proper education in drawing: drawing classes provide visual education, improve visual perception and affect traditional visual sensitivity.

Primarily through mastering traditional drawing techniques, architecture students develop a tool that enables them to express their ideas about forms in a visual language, thus escaping the problems of ambiguity and long-windedness that are associated with verbal communication: in a direct and simple way, they can draw pictures to show what they have in mind regarding all visually perceivable aspects of structures, proportions, rhythms and forms. This is made possible by the fact that in the course of practicing drawing by sight they master a drawing technique, which beyond a level allows them to depict not only the actual sight but also those ideas about forms that exist only in their minds at the time.

Having sufficient drawing skills, one is allowed to exploit one of the most exciting possibilities hidden in the nature of mimetic drawing: one can represent an idea only existing in the mind, i.e. a building to be constructed later or even an unreal object, using the powers of imagination and with the help of drawing skills acquired previously.

Paradoxically, in this case a traditional drawing "makes things visible, rather than rendering things that are visible." [8]

In the course of forming the artwork, a classical drawing becomes a mediator between the visible and the invisible, between imagination and visual reality depicted in drawing. In this way, structures constructed in virtual space with the help of imagination assume physical form. Ideas and concepts can objectify, giving rise to the imaginary creatures of mythologies, such as sphinxes, centaurs and dragons, but also such conceptual formations and the point, the line, the plane and the cube [9].

In the process of artistic creation the mediation between imagination and "reality" becomes some kind of a shuttle service: as soon as an idea becomes visible on paper, it will lead to further ideas, which, when represented in drawing, will result in further corrections, thus forming some kind of a shuttle service between the realms of reality and imagination – visual thinking makes progress with the mediation of classical drawing skills. With the help of traditional drawing skills we can make visual

presentation of any architectural ideas, while drawing skills are not sufficient to realize the idea itself. The basic idea should be there in our heads, and the detailed presentation is possible not through mimetic principles but by thinking along constructivist principles.

Just as it is possible to visualize a good idea very poorly, it is also possible to present a bad idea in a spectacular fashion.

But that already leads on to another, earlier mentioned issue, the manipulative nature of representation. It leads to the point that representation has, in both senses of the word, a two-faced aspect, in that instead of reality it shows a subjective or arbitrary picture, which we tend to identify with objective reality, despite the fact that picture and reality are fundamentally different.

Although classical drawing technique is an excellent mediator between imagination and (visual) reality, it cannot construct the substance it mediates.

Mimesis can represent a (real or imaginary) world; it can never create one.

Mimesis, which translates imitation in Greek, is unthinkable without having some kind of a model, as imitation is not possible without an original. The original is the world, created either by God or by man, which is manifested in the sight of either Nature, or "second Nature", or a structure of forms constructed in our heads on the basis of another principle, which mimesis can then turn into a picture by translation, stylization, reduction or visual enrichment, in order to make it more expressive and more meaningful, but in any case to represent somehow. Mimesis cannot serve as an instrument for the concrete formation of "pure architecture carrying the justification of its own existence within", because such an architecture does not represent or imitate anything – in other words, it does not organize itself into an order based on mimetic principles: although one can represent a structure organised on the basis of constructivist principles, one cannot create such a structure according to mimetic principles.

The construction of a powerfully expressive, autonomous world that represents nothing is only possible according to another conceptual system, the constructivist principle.

With the appearance of abstract painting and sculpture on the scene, fine art became a suitable tool in the training of architects, as the main principal difference in the respective creative processes of fine art and architecture ended. This difference consisted of the fact that previously fine art was based exclusively on mimetic principles, while the architectural practice was based on constructivist principles. From this viewpoint, throughout the classical ages, architecture had closer ties to music than to painting. The abstract tendencies in fine art, by contrast, also produced works in the spirit of constructivist principles. In other words, a new conceptual approach to the creation of a new world of vision and forms and a new practice of autonomous and self-governing artworks replaced representation. With this, both fine art and architecture were placed on a shared aesthetic platform as far as the basic compositional principles were concerned. Furthermore, architecture became a model for the constructivist

and activist tendencies, the same way that music had become the model of the new artistic trends earlier on.

The Activists announced the program of taking construction from two dimensions to three dimensions, while Kassák described his own style of painting as picture architecture. In the art of Mondrian and Malevich pure geometrical order was manifested in self-governing architectonic compositions, and the Suprematists referred to their sculptural works resembling architectural models as “architectons”.

The stylistic trend of geometric abstraction, which started out with early modernism and went through numerous changes and varieties, can still be traced in fine art. It has to this day organized itself according to architectural principles in geometrical space; its conceptual resemblance to architectural design work is quite unequivocal.

Geometrical abstraction of architectonic conception is still alive in fine art. As well as concentrating on the organization of reductive, Apollonian, objective and rational structures intricately linked to architecture, it also relies heavily on the material. Instead of representing the real world, it creates a new world in two and three dimensions, just as architecture does.

In geometrical abstraction, artworks are conceived as buildings, and the creative process is interpreted as a construction even in two dimensions, with the materials and forms considered as building blocks. Similarly to architecture, this art movement creates geometrical structures using (basic) geometrical forms and makes the issues of visual language and form, which are emerging in the course of organizing geometrical structure and space, the main topic of its art and research, along with the questions concerning the relationship between the constituent elements of the artwork.

This poses the same conceptual problems of form and structure – sometimes on a small, i.e. manageable, scale – that are also present in architecture on a monumental scale, exerting tremendous influence on architectural design.

It is precisely the analogy that exists in conceptual, intellectual and compositional areas between fine art and architecture, that offers tremendous new opportunities to make the work carried out in the spirit of geometrical abstraction and other closely related movements to be the (modern) school of architectonic thinking, organization of structure and space and visual and spatial order.

Our point of departure is that the logic of the language of geometrical forms is universal; that the rules of visibility apply to all geometrically structured areas; and that the objective guiding principles work the same way in both fine art and architecture. Better still, the principles of architectural design also work for fine art composition, except that we do not call them design principles and they do not yield building of useful function. The resulting artwork is an abstract structure of forms, free of all functions and justifying its existence by itself. This affords us the opportunity to study and to research the possibilities of architectonic thinking and composition in the context of fine art.

In the course of their study, our students construct small-scale architectural formations in the spirit of geometrical abstraction and using easily manageable materials. Initially they work in two dimensions using lines and tones, textures, colours and geometrical forms; then they turn to constructions of lines and planes, volumes and threads in a three-dimensional orthogonal system. Next they take the principle of folding and make it the agent of form and order creation, leaving behind the orthogonal system and essentially producing a “quasi architecture” placed in a fine art context in search of a functionless, autonomous order of forms.

Constructing autonomous artworks in the inter-genre space along the boundaries of architecture and sculpture, the students discover, study and research the possibilities of building and organizing structures in the world of geometrical forms; in this geometrized space they experience the logic of the functioning of the visual language, along with both the rigour and the refinement of forms in “pure geometrical structuring”. In a fine art milieu, they can realize all their ideas regarding forming and organizing structures without any outside pressure to conform, being able to test their abilities to create forms.

Over and above this, the creative work conducted in the spirit of geometrical abstraction teaches the students to use the visual language as a separate means of communication, so in the final analysis it basically improves their ability to see. This creative work not only instructs students in architectonic thinking and composition, but also teaches them visual sensitivity that is in tune with the requirements of our age. In our practice, architectonic thinking is interpreted in the fine-art context of “pure geometric structuring”, with geometric abstraction taking their activities into the realm of fine art. This opens up the possibility that, with fine arts having been incorporated in the training of architects, we acquire an extra driving force and spiritual content, through which the stakes will be raised in our work and the creative process will mean to our students not just the design of objects but also self-building and self-creation.

6 Art in the training of architects

“Art is a worldview. . . Art transforms us and we become capable of transforming our environment” (Kassák).

While we are internalizing the values system embodied in art, we, too, are going through changes, as the works we create also shape us in return. In the course of the creative process, we are gradually developing an intellectual and visual sensitivity, which, after a certain point, takes us to a higher conceptual level, enabling us to invest our artworks with a higher quality.

By introducing contemporary art into the visual education of architecture students, we open up the possibility for presenting art partly as the opportunity to bring to the surface the talents hidden in people, and partly as the main inspiration in the process of human self-creation, which intellectually challenges young people to create, to explore and to discover. It is a calling for them to choose a path, on the completion of which they can

become the persons that they are predestined by their individual capacities, talents and human qualities.

On the other hand, art is an expression as well as a mediator of both the “Zeitgeist” and the condition of the intellectual world. It powerfully reveals to the young people the intellectual/cultural condition of our age, the current state, into which culture and art have been guided by the logic of history and the self-governed processes.

Thirdly, art creates an opportunity for people to get their orientation on the intellectual maps of Europe and the World: to learn about the cross-border discussions on art and culture and, in consequence, to put forward universal, regional and individual answers.

Finally, the fact that we try to profit from a tendency, which has existed ever since the early modernism and has been regenerated in a thousand forms and shapes at the hands of successive generations, is the guarantee that the training will retain its freshness and vitality, just as the artistic milieu that provides the inspiration has done in the past.

Being linked to a still existent art movement, we are less likely to fade into an inflexible, repetitious and outmoded system; on the contrary, by responding to the actual challenges of an extant art movement, as well as by absorbing new experiences and knowledge and by retaining a critical eye, we shall be able to create a new educational system, which is open to new values and is full of vitality and therefore can automatically renew itself over and over again. Hopefully, also being able to gain inspiration from contemporary art, we stand a good chance of continuing to work creatively in the spirit of the truth, which Heidegger described as follows:

“The only way we can keep up the standard is that we continue to surpass it in creative fashion” [10].

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