

## de stijl

De Stijl, one of the longest lived and most influential groups of modern artists, was formed in Holland during the first world war. From the very beginning it was marked by extraordinary collaboration on the part of painters and sculptors on the one hand and architects and practical designers on the other. It included among its leaders two of the finest artists of the period, the painter Piet Mondrian and the architect J. J. P. Oud; but its wide influence was exerted principally through the theory and tireless propaganda of its founder, Theo van Doesburg, painter, sculptor, architect, typographer, poet, novelist, critic and lecturer—a man as versatile as any figure of the renaissance.

### DE STIJL PAINTING, MONDRIAN AND VAN DOESBURG, 1912-1920

Three elements or principles formed the fundamental basis of the work of de Stijl, whether in painting, architecture or sculpture, furniture or typography: in form the rectangle; in color the "primary" hues, red, blue and yellow; in composition the asymmetric balance. These severely simplified elements were not, however, developed in a moment but as the result of years of trial and error on the part of the painters Mondrian, van Doesburg, and van der Leek.

Mondrian first studied with his uncle, a follower of Willem Maris. Then, after three years at the Amsterdam Academy, he passed through a period of naturalistic landscapes to a mannered, mystical style resembling the work of Thorn-Prikker and Toorop. By the beginning of 1912 he was in Paris and there very soon fell under the influence of Picasso. Some of his paintings of 1912, based upon tree forms, were as abstract as any Braque or Picasso of that time.

Back in Holland in 1914, influenced perhaps by synthetic cubism, Mondrian painted several canvases, plate 3, in which colored rectangles are composed in counterpoint to broken black horizontal and vertical lines. In a tentative way these anticipate by several years the collective formal discoveries of the Stijl group. But Mondrian himself almost abandoned color during 1915-16. Indeed he seems almost to have stopped painting at this time though his "plus-and-minus" seascape series in black lines, plate 4, begun in 1914, led him to completely abstract composition in 1917.

By 1917, perhaps a little earlier, all the painters of the Stijl group were experimenting by combining van der Leek's dead-flat planes in primary colors with Mondrian's vertical-horizontal bars and rectangles. Van Doesburg's *Composition (The Cow)*, plate 6, of 1916-17 is a classic example of a Stijl abstract painting derived from a natural form. In *Composition No. 3* of 1917, plate 5, also probably based on some natural image, van der Leek applies bright color to Mondrian's heavy black

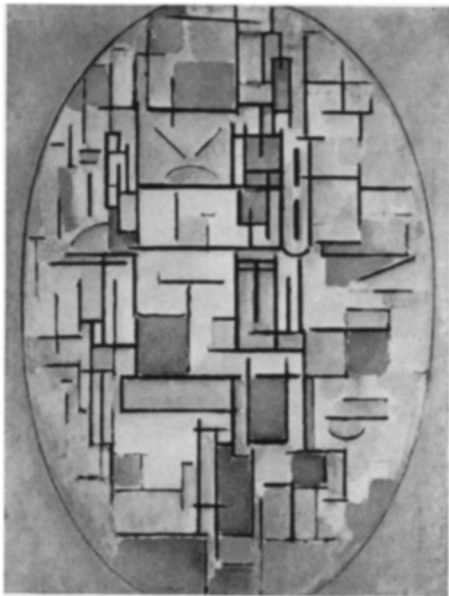
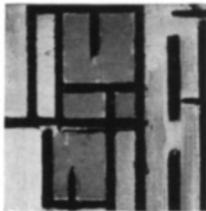


Plate 3 Piet Mondrain: *Color Squares in Oval*. 1914-15. Oil on canvas, 31 x 42 $\frac{3}{8}$ ". The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Purchase Fund

a Mondrian: painting  
(detail)



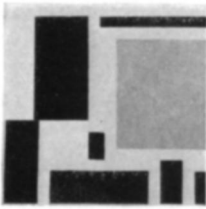
1914

b Mondrian: painting  
(detail)



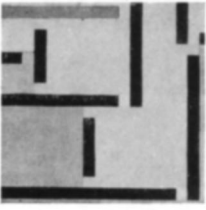
1915

c Van Doesburg: painting  
(detail)

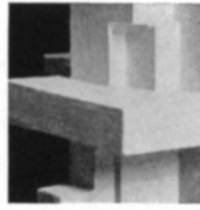


1917

d Van Doesburg: painting  
(detail)

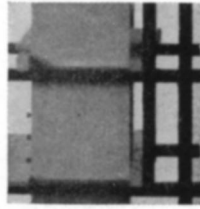


1918



e Vantongerloo: sculpture  
(detail)

1919



f Rietveld: chair  
(detail)

1921



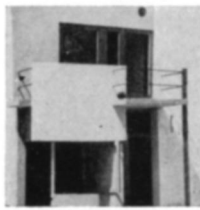
g Van Doesburg: magazine  
cover

1922



h Van Doesburg and van Eesteren:  
project for a house (detail)

1923-24



i Rietveld and Schröder:  
house (detail)

Plate 2

DE STIJL:

THE FUNDAMENTAL FORM

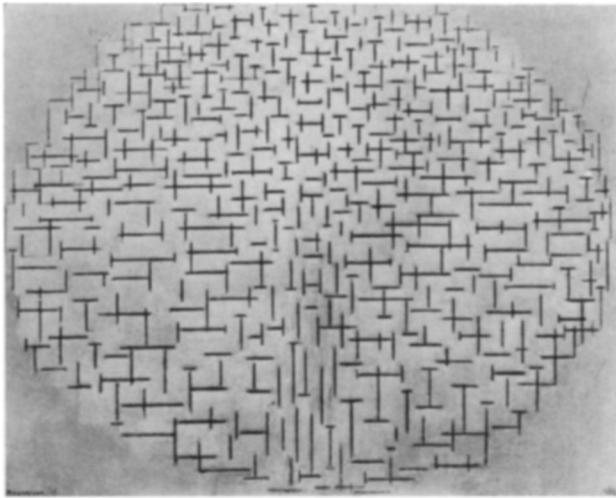


Plate 4 Piet Mondrian: *Composition*. 1915. Oil on canvas, 34 x 42¾".  
Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, Holland

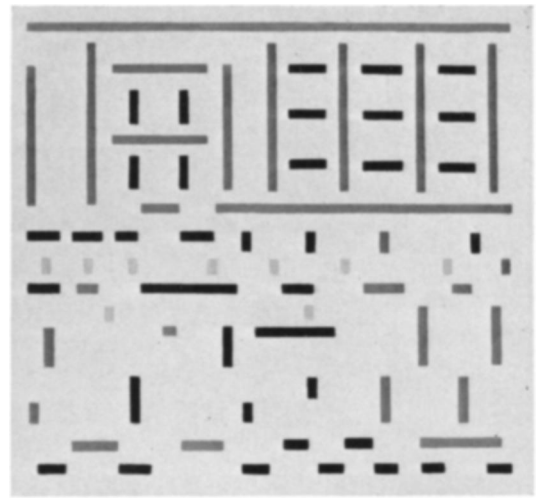


Plate 5 Bart van der Leek: *Composition No. 3*. 1917. Oil on canvas, 37½ x 39¾". Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, Holland

plus-and-minus style of the same year. Van Doesburg's *Rhythm of a Russian Dance* of 1918, plate 8, is perhaps the best demonstration in painting of the Stijl composition of vertical and horizontal lines so arranged that they never touch or overlap each other but instead seem about to slide by each other without collision.

The sculptor Vantongerloo, meanwhile, was applying the Stijl love of rectangles to sculpture. His *Volume-Construction* of 1918, plate 9, was the most significant three-dimensional work by a Stijl artist up to that time.

By 1919 both Mondrian and van Doesburg had abandoned nature even as a starting point for their paintings. It was apparently the latter that now led the way in a brief experiment with simple mathematical devices. He subdivided a perfectly square canvas into smaller squares which he then used as modules for composition. (He had followed a similar system in designing the floor of square tiles at Noordwijkerhout in 1917, plate 10.) Mondrian, too, worked for a time on color variations within a grid. However, by 1920, the year of his *Neo-Plasticist* manifesto, Mondrian turned from this exact geometrical method to a freer style, in which dark lines divide the canvas into asymmetric rectangles of various greys and flat colors, plate 11, a style which he was to refine and simplify during the subsequent decade.

## ARCHITECTURE AND DE STIJL

The typical architecture of de Stijl grew first of all out of cubism by way of Mondrian, plates 3 and 4. To Mondrian's plus-and-minus method of linear composition were added van der Leek's bright flat color planes. Then van Doesburg contributed his synthesis of the two, plates 6 and 8, and Vantongerloo provided the architects with early examples of Stijl

design in three dimensions, plate 9. His "volume-constructions" however gave an effect of dense cubistic masses rather than the weightless rectangular volumes the architects and van Doesburg were working toward. (The open planning and free asymmetries of Frank Lloyd Wright, known in Holland since 1911, also contributed much to de Stijl architecture. There is more Wright than Vantongerloo in Oud's design of 1919 for a factory.)

As early as 1917 van Doesburg began to apply his own and his fellow painters' researches to architectural decoration. The floor in the home for convalescents at Noordwijkerhout is his design, plate 10. The clean rectangular lines of Oud's architecture and the suppression of incidental ornament were essential if negative characteristics of de Stijl esthetics. The moldings around the doors which give an effect of weight and thickness were soon to be abandoned, too. Oud was the greatest but at the same time the most conservative of the Stijl architects.

Others carried Stijl principles of design much further. The design for a house, see cover, by van Doesburg and van Eesteren, 1922, is clearly a three-dimensional projection of Stijl painting. Flat rectangular vertical and horizontal planes define a complex of asymmetric volumes. The fact that the planes are white or painted in bright blue, yellow and red emphasizes the weightless freedom of the composition. Within a few years, painting the walls of the same room different colors was to become a practice all over the world. It began with de Stijl.

This project was never built but a year or so later Rietveld's house in Utrecht was completed, plate 13. Here in an actual building the partition of space into volumes by means of freely abutting and interpenetrating planes is emphasized as never before in Western architecture. Moving partitions further demonstrate the radical and consistent principles of the design.

Rietveld's furniture such as the chair, plate 12, may also be compared with the paintings of van Doesburg and Mondrian, plates 6, 8, 11.

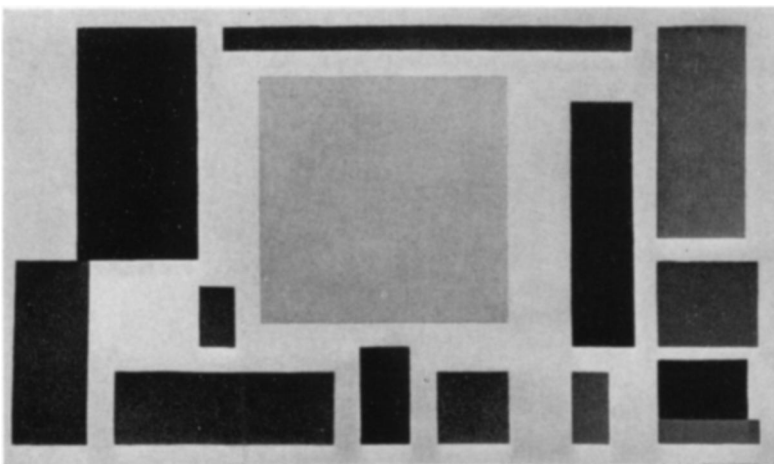


Plate 6 Theo van Doesburg: *Composition (The Cow.)* 1916-17. Oil on canvas, 14 3/4 x 25". The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Purchase Fund

Plate 7 below. Study for van Doesburg *The Cow*. Pencil, 4 5/8 x 6 1/4". The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Purchase Fund



Technically and imaginatively the boldest creation in the Stijl tradition was *The City in Space*, plate 14, designed by Kiesler, an Austrian member of the group, for his country's section at the Paris Exposition of Decorative Arts in 1925. It was a suspended framework constructed on a tension system without foundations or walls and without a static axis. In its radical technique it suggests the experimental designs of the Russian Constructivist architects but in its consistent use of rectangles asymmetrically arranged it is a development of such Stijl designs as Rietveld's house of the year before.

Oud's Café de Unie façade of 1925, plate 15, done between more serious designs for Rotterdam civic housing blocks, is a frank and amusing adaptation of such paintings as Mondrian's *Composition* of 1920, plate 11. The lettering on this façade follows de Stijl principles of typographical layout which are classically represented by the cover of the magazine, *De Stijl*, plate 2g. This asymmetrical arrangement of letters blocked into rectangles was designed by van Doesburg early in 1921.

### INFLUENCE OF DE STIJL ABROAD

As is indicated in the chronology, the years 1920-25 saw an astonishing expansion of the influence of de Stijl, first in Belgium, then in Germany, France, Eastern Europe and even in Russia where it met the earlier but less practicable abstract traditions of Suprematism and Constructivism.

The work of the Stijl group had been known in Paris through its publications well before the exhibition at Léonce Rosenberg's gallery in 1923. Its influence upon French architects is not so obvious as upon German but it may be remarked that in France no building, not even by Le Corbusier, was as advanced in design as Rietveld's model, plate 13; and Le Corbusier's famous device of painting the walls of the same room in different colors had been anticipated by the Stijl designers by several years.

As early as 1919, through the painter Feininger, de Stijl was already beginning to be known at the Bauhaus at Weimar. Two years later van Doesburg himself began to divide his time between Weimar and Berlin. Though the degree of his influence is still controversial, van Doesburg's presence at Weimar seems to have stimulated important changes at the Bauhaus; from a somewhat expressionist mysticism and transcendentalism, the Bauhaus more and more turned toward clarity, discipline and the desire for a uniform and consciously developed style in architecture and the allied arts such as the Dutch movement had already initiated. Doubtless some of this change of direction was self-generated; furthermore, there was surely some French and, after 1922, some Russian influence at the Bauhaus; yet it remains significant that in 1922, for instance, Gropius, who had been engaged in designing a picturesque wooden blockhouse with cubistic decorations and a symmetrical façade, sent to the *Chicago Tribune* competition an austere, asymmetrical skyscraper project, its façade enlivened by a Stijl-like arrangement of balconies and other accents.

The influence of de Stijl upon German architecture may further be seen in Mies van der Rohe's plan for a country house done in 1922, the year after van Doesburg's arrival in Berlin. The resemblance between this

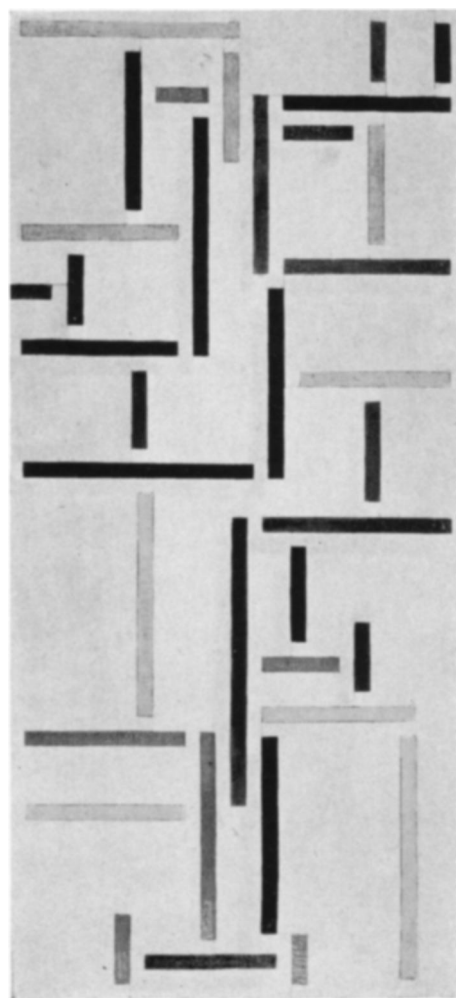


Plate 8 Theo van Doesburg: *Rhythm of a Russian Dance*. 1918. Oil on canvas, 53½ x 24¼". The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Lillie P. Bliss Bequest

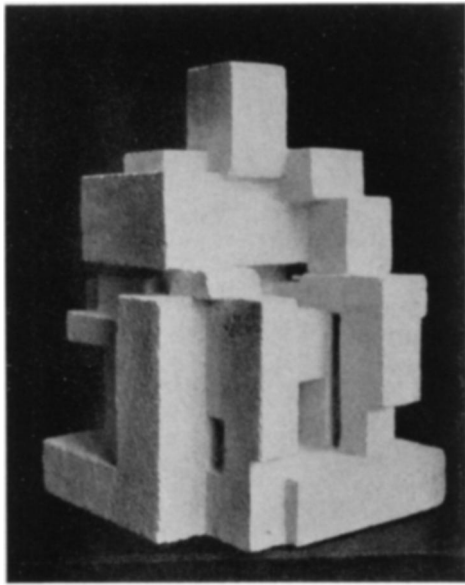


Plate 9 Georges Vantongerloo: *Volume-Construction*.  
1918. Plaster?

plan and the broken orthogonal asymmetrical design of such Stijl paintings as van Doesburg's *Russian Dance*, plate 8, is obvious. As late as 1925 the façade of Gropius' own house at Dessau remarkably resembles van Doesburg's *Composition (The Cow)*, plate 6.

De Stijl influence at the Bauhaus was by no means limited to architecture. Its typography seems directly derived from de Stijl precedents as may be seen by comparing the cover of *De Stijl* of 1921, plate 2g, with the cover of the Bauhaus prospectus of 1923. (Such asymmetrical layout, soon spread throughout Germany and Europe and by 1930 was extensively used in America.) Most of the famous Bauhausbücher were designed by Moholy-Nagy under de Stijl influence, excepting van Doesburg's which was designed by himself. Bauhaus furniture, lighting fixtures, etc., were also affected by de Stijl.

However, it should be emphatically stated that the Bauhaus under Gropius' leadership eventually went far beyond de Stijl by using a primarily functional, rather than an abstract "geometrical," system of design. De Stijl in its use of materials was curiously limited and its insistence on flat, primary colors was thoroughly doctrinaire. Furthermore it was often too much dominated by abstract painting to permit a piece of furniture or a building to take a natural form based upon function, or to be finished with emphasis upon natural surfaces or textures.

#### DISINTEGRATION OF DE STIJL: THE CAREERS OF ITS EX-MEMBERS

In Holland itself the importance of de Stijl tradition dwindled, partly through the removal of the leading artists to Germany or Paris and partly because of the generally conservative attitude of the Dutch public toward its artistic prophets.

Oud continued to work for some time as a city architect in Rotterdam, designing in 1924 one of the masterpieces of modern architecture, the row houses at the Hook of Holland, which however were free from the mannerisms and complex asymmetry of the orthodox de Stijl manner. Indeed Oud's use of curved lines at the Hook caused van Doesburg to call his work "van de Velde architecture," after the great Belgian master of Art Nouveau. Rietveld continued to practice architecture and van Eesteren became a city architect of Amsterdam.

Mondrian, who had left Holland for Paris in 1920, resigned from de Stijl in 1925. During the 1920s, he moved in his paintings toward an ever simpler and purer form, sometimes reducing his composition to three or four black bars and a single primary color, or no color at all. Later, during the 1930s, and even more in New York in the early 1940s, he returned to a more complex style, especially in the boogie-woogie compositions which were his final works before his death in 1944. Well before then he had been recognized as the greatest of all the masters of "geometrical" abstract painting. Katherine S. Dreier, President of the New York Société Anonyme, may have been right as well as courageous when in 1927 she remarked that "Holland has produced three great painters . . . The first was Rembrandt, the second was van Gogh, and the third is Mondrian . . ."—right, at least, in terms of international influence.

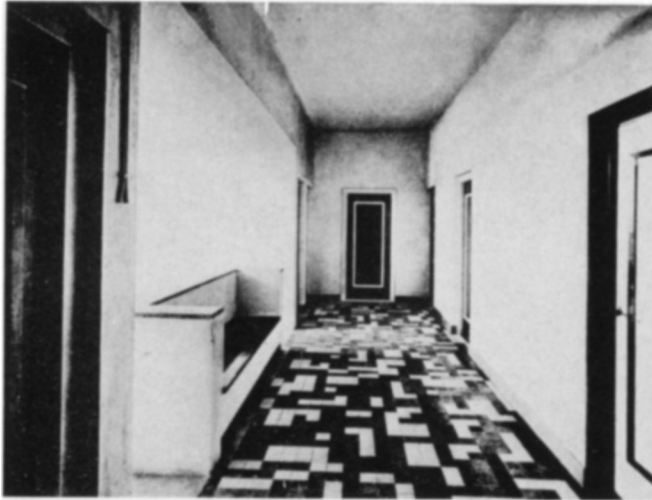


Plate 10 J. J. P. Oud and Theo van Doesburg: Hall of house at Noordwijkerhout, Holland. 1917. Floor by van Doesburg

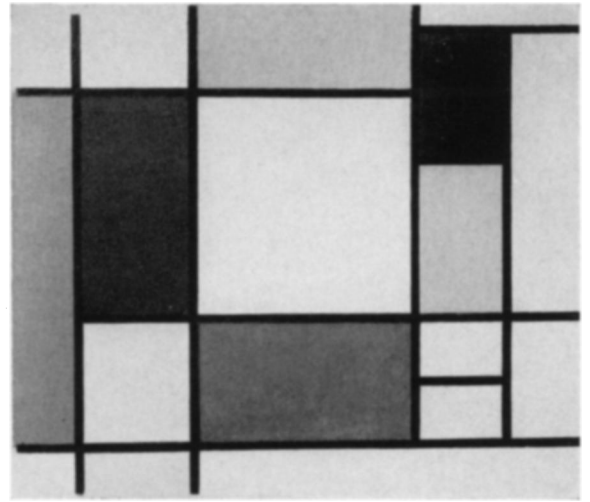


Plate 11 Piet Mondrian: *Composition*. 1920. Oil on canvas, 19 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Van de Muysenberg Collection, Amsterdam, Holland

Vantongerloo also moved to Paris where he remained faithful to de Stijl vertical-horizontal rectilinear design in wood or metal constructions which he described—and sometimes titled—with mathematical formulae. Kiesler came to America in 1926 and there practiced theatre design, architecture and, more recently, sculpture with brilliant originality. Among the younger de Stijl artists, Domela with his relief constructions produced in Paris, Vordemberge-Gildewart with his abstract compositions painted in Germany, continued to win international recognition.

In 1924, van Doesburg also settled in Paris after his years of proselytizing in central Europe. In his "elementarist" paintings he used heavy diagonal lines or bars achieving an effect far more dynamic but less perfect than Mondrian's. In this style he designed the interior of the Aubette Café in Strasbourg, collaborating there with Jean Arp and his wife. In 1927 he got out a tenth-anniversary number of *De Stijl* containing much valuable retrospective material. The last issue of *De Stijl*, No. 90, was published in January 1932 as a memorial to Theo van Doesburg, its founder, who had died in March of the previous year.

Alfred H. Barr, Jr.  
Director of Museum Collections

(Adapted from *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 1936)

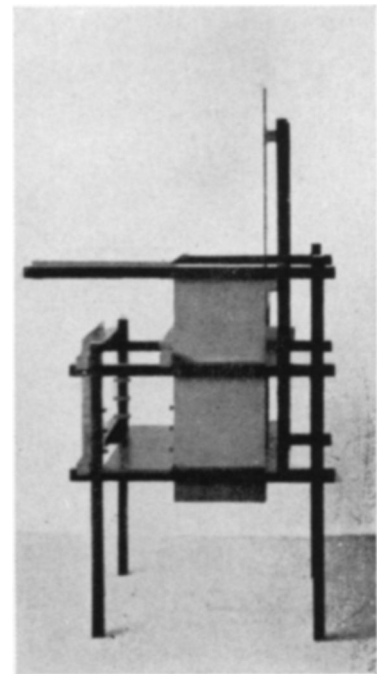


Plate 12 G. Rietveld: Child's chair. 1919

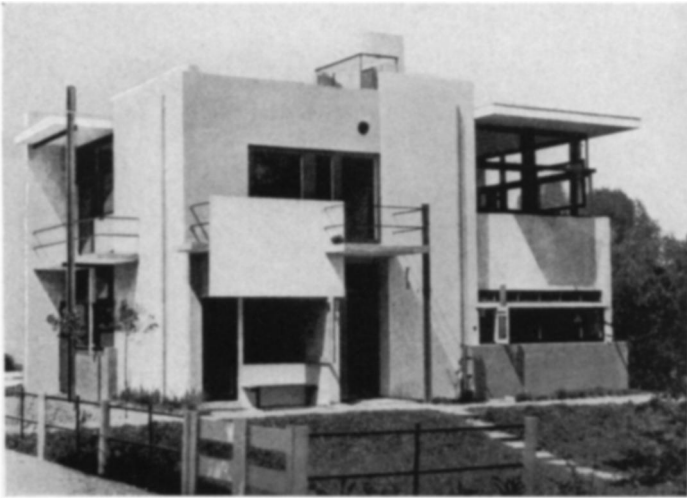


Plate 13 G. Rietveld and T. Schröder: Schröder House at Utrecht. 1924

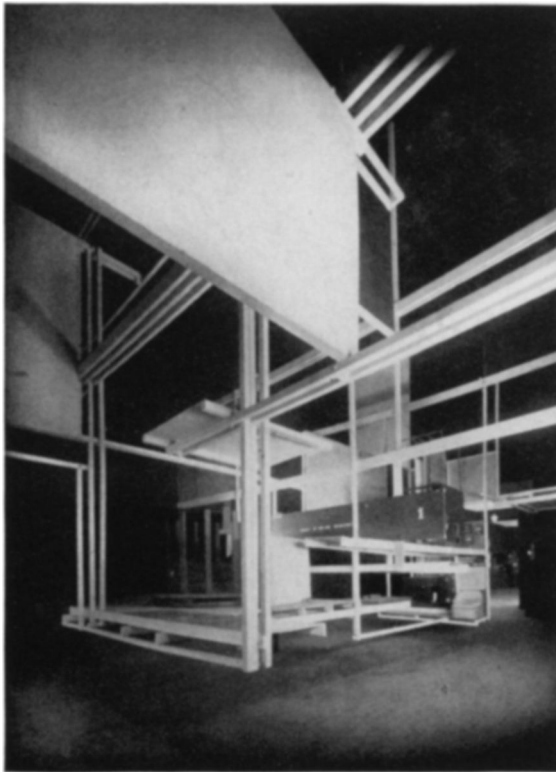


Plate 14 Frederick Kiesler: *The City in Space*, model in Austrian section, International Exposition, Paris, 1925



Plate 15 J. J. P. Oud: Café de Unie, Rotterdam. 1925