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Mr. Wilson's House –
Colour, Surface, Room: The Works of
Lothar Götz in Context

I.
In about 1780, the Scottish architect Robert Adam designed a house for a client known to us only as Mr. Wilson. In all its idiosyncrasy, its ground plan is testimony to a decidedly undogmatic concept of Neo-classicism. This plan shows not the orthogonal and precisely balanced configuration such as we find for example in Palladio's villas, but an accumulation of different room-shapes that comes across as almost additive. A circle, an oval, an octagon and a square are enclosed in a surrounding shape which for its part seems emphatically unbalanced and irregular, an octagon stretched sideways, to which a semi-circle is attached. The extremely complex figure, which at first sight might recall the Baroque ground plans of Fischer von Erlach's villas, is, however, more likely to have been inspired by the playful room arrangements in the architecture of Imperial Rome, which Adam had studied intensively during his sojourn in Italy.

The house for Mr. Wilson was never built, so there are no indications regarding the interior decor, which is otherwise an integral component of Adam's residential buildings. As a rule, we see stucco work, reliefs and paintings carefully placed on monochrome walls, as well as tapestries or other ornamentation covering the whole area, which, in total contrast to the white cubes of modernism, lend these interiors a very lively appearance. In the present case, however, the architecture is not developed any further, nor is the precise function of the house defined, and nothing certain is known about the client either. When Lothar Götz made the ground plan of the main storey the starting point for a series of coloured drawings, he had, then, a broad field of possibilities in front of him; the *House for Mr. Wilson* offered scope for the free play of the imagination. Therein presumably lay another particular fascination for an artist whose work is in any case highly architecture-based.

The order of the fourteen drawings is not stipulated, but if one puts them into a linear sequence simply for the sake

of experiment, they can be read as the representation of a process of gradual distancing from the architectural models on which they are based. The starting point would be the sheet that shows, in exact reproduction, in addition to the columns, the four main rooms and how they relate to one another, albeit not the walls but only the space within them, a kind of negative of the architecture in other words. Such a mode of representation moves the drawing visually into a different force field: hovering over neutral ground, the two-dimensional room depictions recall the Suprematist colour forms in El Lissitzky's book *About 2 Squares*. Götz, on whose work the art of classical modernism was to have a lasting influence, seems here to want to set up a dialogue between the ages. Yet this is just one possible reference; the other drawings begin a free game with the given forms, whose interconnection becomes ever looser. The coloration also changes, with occasional echoes of the preferred colours in the Adam interiors giving way to new gradations.

Further drawings point to differently formed but in principle comparable abstraction (or perhaps transformation) processes. The series of *Annunciations* translates a theme of the great classical tradition into a pure colour-and-space relation. The event of the Annunciation is mostly depicted in such a way that the Virgin Mary is addressed by the angel on the transition from an interior to an exterior space; the totally Other comes from outside into her sheltered living space. In the second sheet of this cycle, Götz translates this into a broad stripe, which extends into an anteroom or a hinted-at arcade corresponding to the precedents; all the pictorial elements are meticulously bounded, and yet we see a flow from an outside to an inside. The colour form is not tied to the room boundaries, and, going beyond the biblical context we have here, this is also the theme of further works, such as the cycles *If I had grown up elsewhere* and *Striped Patio*: interiors and ground plans in numerous variations, the slender interior pillar on one sheet possibly referencing classical modernism once more, namely interiors by Mies van der Rohe dating from the years around 1930. But this does not seem to be what is essential; Götz experiments with the interaction of two-

and three-dimensionality, colour and drawing, figure and background.

II.
Seen from the point of view of his actual field of activity – abstract murals that refer to existing architecture – the drawings turn out to be a kind of trial run. But whereas in them possibilities can be sounded out and tested in a broad spectrum of relationships, the realizations in the three-dimensional room face quite different challenges, posing concrete limitations in each situation. The concern is to re-shape situations of quite different kinds and sizes, such as exhibition rooms, halls, corridors or staircases, either permanently or ephemerally. Götz does not paint whole walls, nor does he create the illusionist scenes of traditional wall painting; instead, he operates with coloured areas and stripes which restructure the wall, or else extend around a corner or continue on to the ceiling. Such painting can emphasize the characteristics of a room, but the artist is evidently more interested in a tension or an interaction between the given room and his painting whereby boundaries and definitions can be transcended. A work such as *Raumerhebung* gives the beholder a choice: Are these paintings in a room, or is it a painted room whose original co-ordinates have been changed by the colour?

Abstract murals aimed at transcending given room boundaries solely through the use of larger or smaller, rhythmically bound or freely associated colour fields were originally a theme of the avant-garde of classical modernism in the nineteen-twenties. At this time, the importance of colour for architecture was quite generally rediscovered. Thus Bruno Taut wrote at length in the Expressionist magazine *Frühlicht* about façade painting and at the same time about the relationship of colour and form; however, only existing historical ugliness was to be camouflaged, so to speak, by form-changing paint applications. Taut later used large-scale façade-painting in colour to counter the possible monotony of his large new estates; colour was, in other words, used as a structuring element, and to this end individual items such as doors and windows were set off against the façades by the use of colour. Peter Behrens set out to achieve another

form of structuring: In the large hall of his office building for Farbwerke Höchst he gave the brick formations a coat of paint that grew progressively paler the higher up the walls it went; the cathedral-like room was visually disembodied, while its boundaries were left intact.

This could be called colour-supported architecture, or architecture-supporting colour; the use of colour here differs fundamentally from the autonomous use of colour in architecture. For the latter mode, the De Stijl artists tried out some of the basic possibilities. In this context, it is difficult to overestimate the two 1923 designs by Theo van Doesburg for a private house, which have been reproduced time and again: one sheet shows an axonometric projection of a house composed of an arrangement of cubes with some sections of wall painted in basic colours; the other a composition, now similar to the house, of coloured surfaces which seem to be weightless. The picture can become architecture, the architecture points to the picture, and in both cases the colour determines the spatial impression. In view of this loosening of the solidity of a spatial structure, van Doesburg's colour concept for the Cabaret Aubette in Strasbourg is only logical. Here he countered the conventional orthogonal structure of the architecture with a diagonal wall and ceiling decoration, writing: 'If I were to be asked what I intended with the structuring of this hall, I could only answer: "to oppose the material three-dimensional room with a diagonal, super-material and picturesque room."' This use of the diagonal thus points to the possibility of removing seemingly immutable orientations.

III.
Such utopian excess is alien to most artists of the present day, probably to Lothar Götz too. All the same, there is today, following the 'White Modern' and other waves of neutralization, a new upsurge in the use of colour in the context of architecture. The protagonists are architects, artists and colour-designers in equal measure; the working methods have become highly differentiated. For the external appearance of large buildings we need only point to the Sauerbruch Hutton office: coloured sunblind lamellas structure a high-rise façade (GSW, Berlin); an intricate grid of landscape-

related colours does the same for a high-rack warehouse (Waldshut-Dogern); and a polychrome arrangement of ceramic rods does likewise for a museum façade (Museum Brandhorst, Munich). In addition, the use of colour can be observed in many places on quite pragmatic grounds; deliberate colour-structuring tends to facilitate orientation in buildings without elaborate signage, for example. Colour design of this kind, however, is best subsumed under communication design.

Present-day manifestations of abstract wall painting are highly diverse. In Germany, the design of the new government buildings in Berlin provided opportunities not only on a large scale, but in a prestigious setting. Among the most unconventional solutions is the work by Gerhard Merz (Lothar Götz's teacher) in the foyer of the old part of the Foreign Ministry on Werderscher Markt. He installed not a mural, but a ceiling painting, a large blue area which does not fill the whole ceiling, but is, so to speak, framed by numerous strip lights. Their very bright light lifts the blue of this virtual sky into a space of its own, releasing the large monochrome surface out of the context of the architecture: a distant echo of the great Baroque ceiling frescoes in a secular setting.

Whereas an artist like Gerhard Merz goes the whole hog, however, the murals of Lothar Götz enter into a dialogue with the existing room situation. He is not concerned with the violence of boundary transgression, but with the opening up of new visual access routes, maybe also new modes of utilization. A paradigmatic work in this respect, I think, is *Out of Curiosity*. Here a small square pavilion, delicate in its way, which was placed on a small urban terrace in the early nineteen-seventies as a temporary structure to allow pensioners to be involved in the life of a small town, was in need of renovation after the turn of the millennium. Götz chose a colour scheme appropriate to the Georgian surroundings, but deviated from a purely restorative approach by introducing a large variety of colours for the window-frames and other elements, the individual transitions each following a logic of their own. The same idea was pursued inside, but this time with a modern colour scheme. Thus the spheres both intermesh and are differentiated.

Quite generally, Götz comes across as a decidedly dialectic artist. This applies on the one hand to his free interaction with the past, as in the house for Mr. Wilson, in his interventions into the museum presentation of classical works of art, such as in the exhibition *Wildwuchs* in the Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum (which was also where Alexander Dörner worked, who in his own way sought to combine ancient art with the present) or in the little rest room in a modern style dating from the recent past. And it applies, over and above any other particularity, to the way he deals with architecture generally – mostly in the large variety of interiors that he questions as a painter – and, even though he doesn't change them physically, he allows them to be experienced in a new way in changed relationships.