

CROSSING LINES AND DIFFERENT COLORS; PAINTED PATTERNS OF URBAN GENES

Petri Leijdekkers

In 1811, a committee of three men from New York (Governor Morris, John Rutherford and Simeon de Witt) presented the concept of the Manhattan 'grid'. The modular system they had designed in the preceding three years created sufficient space to accommodate the masses of immigrants that, from that time onward, would arrive in the city. At the time, New York was already a large town, but not as large as it would eventually become. From the 17th century fortress of 'Nieuw Amsterdam' it had developed into a European-style town, with streets and squares, stretching from Battery Park in the south to Washington Square which, at the time, was still marshland.

Taking that situation as a starting point, the three drew their plan for 12 broad avenues running from north to south over the entire length of the island, and 155 streets running breadthways from east to west. The result was a perfectly regular grid of 2028 blocks, which provided the city with a system that would ensure its further growth and dynamics.

Dutch world architect Rem Koolhaas wrote about the concept: 'In fact, it is the most courageous act of prediction in Western civilization: the land it divides, unoccupied; the population it describes, conjectural; the buildings it locates, phantoms; the activities it frames, nonexistent.'^[1] With its right angles, which proved extremely functional and economic in contrast with the situation in European major cities such as London and Paris, the 'Manhattan grid' broke with the tradition of urban development; this was the first time that a city was planned in such a rational, businesslike manner and yet would spread it swings so freely. With the introduction of the grid, Manhattan became an urban concept that made nature completely subordinate.

Images are the basic form of interpretation. The aboriginals in Australia planned their lives by making decorations in the desert sands; great magical compositions of stylized animals or abstract figures in straight and circling lines of different colours of sand. The Etruscans planned their cities by drawing a cross, from north to south and from east to west, in the spot where the city was to be built. These lines would become the main roads of the future city, around which a pattern of other lines was projected, all of them parallel and at straight angles with the first two, and which would not bend into curves, circles and oval shapes until much later. This is how Rome, the eternal city, was developed. All these cities grew naturally by genetic means. All the parts came apart.

Of old, writers and painters have been fascinated by the appearance of cities, with their towers, great avenues and medieval areas. Some artists made a living of

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1 Rem Koolhaas, Delirious New York, a Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan, New York 1994, p.18.

minutely charting the monuments and buildings, the streets, squares and parks of a city. These drawings and paintings were proudly displayed in Royal palaces, in mayor's residences and town halls, in the homes of the rich or as illustrations in travel accounts. Thus, on his grand tour of Italy at the end of the 1870s, the German poet and painter Goethe made a series of well-organized watercolours of cities such as Rome and Naples, the Pompeii ruins at the foot of the Vesuvius volcano, and of Taormina near the Etna.

But not all artists represented existing cities, there is also an imaginary town. In the book *The Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino (1923-1985) the Venetian explorer Marco Polo tells the Chinese Emperor Kublai Khan about Ottavia, a city that was built hanging between two mountain walls.^[2] His description was very vivid: 'Below it, there is nothing for hundreds and hundreds of yards, except for the occasional cloud; deep down, the bottom of the canyon is just visible. The basis of the city is a net, stretching from one side of the canyon to the other, which serves as a support. But the city is not built on the net, but hangs under it: hammocks, houses shaped like bags, terraces hang from hallstands like little boats, water bags, gas burners, baskets made of cables, service elevators, showers, trapezes and rings, cable lifts, lamps, and pots with hanging plants. Hanging above a deep abyss, life in Ottavia is less insecure than in other cities: the inhabitants know that the weight the net can hold is limited.'

Around 1840, the art and technique of painting were complemented by photography. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the possibilities of this new medium enabled photographers to capture the manifestations of daily life in the city, with its people, horses and carriages, its markets, its buildings and its Sunday afternoons in the park. It did not take long before a desire arose to see the city from the air.

The first aerial photographs of the city of Paris, made by Felix Nadar (1820-1910) from a hot air balloon in around 1860, caused a permanent change of perspective. Space was no longer a Euclidean construction, but appeared to be as personal and variable as the light in a street or the steam escaping from shunting trains. Turner was the first artist to capture the visual force and speed of that energy in his paintings. Monet was inspired by the cinematic effects of light. But the artists Braque and Picasso were the ones who created the visual ingredients for this new perception of space with their particular style of Cubism. And in 1917 the Italian Futurists Carla, Marinetti and Boccioni managed to apply this style in a language of images to portray the new metropolis.

When the Dutch painting artist Piet Mondriaan (1872-1944) settled in Paris in 1911,

2 Italo Calvino, Le città invisibili, Turin 1972



he was deeply impressed by the façades of the high, sandy-coloured 19th-century houses there. He followed the horizontal and vertical patterns of straight, slanting and curved lines and, in the Cubistic idiom of his French friends, reproduced the structural order of these house fronts in rhythmical black lines and pink, light blue, ochre and occasionally white planes. A few years later, when he had returned to the Netherlands because of World War I, he drew many images of the rolling sea, intensifying the linear rhythm of the waves in a fascinating pattern of short, upright and lying black lines, on grey or yellow paper with – again – touches of white paint. It is in these small, intersecting straight lines that form small crosses that Mondriaan discovered the idiom for the universal language of images of the Neo-plasticistic style that he applied in his later work, in which he sought after purification and harmony, the balance of body and soul, nature and universe in his typical patterns of tight, black lines on a white background around planes in the primary colours of red, yellow and blue. It formed the pre-eminent location for the origin of a new artistic awareness, called De Stijl.

To Mondrian, a metropolis was the embodiment of abstract life, as it expressed beauty in a mathematical way. Therefore it was not surprising that his work, which became increasingly austere towards the end of the 1930s, was instantly revived when the artist arrived in New York in 1940. There, the lines were given colour and, with their bright pattern, fitted in with the city's grid of streets, the rhythm of Boogie Woogie Jazz Music and the constantly moving lights on Times Square. Instantly, Mondriaan's work formed a rhythmical dance of many coloured squares. His last two works, the square painting *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43) and the diamond-shaped *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1943-44), each 127 x 127 cm, the latter being unfinished, form an impressive testimony to this encounter. To me, these paintings are the ultimate, most touching expressions of how a city may be perceived by an artist.

Xinjian Lu literally distances himself from the urban dynamics by tracing its tracks via the computer. He seized upon the opportunities offered by this sensational facility of the well-known search engine of Google, in which the entire world is visible from above to everyone. He was thus able to translate the urban structures of the various metropolises into new images by using the internet 'air space', paper, felt-tip pens, plotter, plastic foil, canvas and acrylic paint, creating abstract works in which movement has been stilled.

Xinjian is a versatile artist. As an illustrator and graphic designer, he developed a rich visual language of colours, lines and dots that he applied in posters and stories. He is playful in his representation, deals with his topics loosely, and makes virtuoso use of both the visual traces from his Chinese back yard and the modernistic figures with which he had become acquainted during his Master's degree study in the Netherlands (2004-2006). Then he became familiar with the work of modern masters of Western art in museums and books and impressed by the unbridled imagination and deformation (Picasso), the expressive gesture (Pollock), dream pictures (Miro) and by the new representation (Mondriaan) that he was seeking.

In 2006, back in Shanghai, he decided to start painting. He produced *Bleeding Rose*, a series of 18 large paintings (140 x 170 cm) about an ominous love story with himself as the tragic main character. The series formed a picture story in the same

style as his illustrations. Initially fresh and charming, the series ended in a sinister inferno with demons that doom up as red contours out of the black background, with the 'dark angel of melancholy' as a terrifying creature. It was his own demonic stalker when he couldn't sleep at night.

When he had completed the series at the end of 2007, he stayed two years, until February 2010, in the South Korean city of Daegu where he taught Design and Illustration at the College of Art and Design of Yeungnam University. Here he lived in a neighbourhood a little outside of town, surrounded by churches. Alone, and having to rely upon his own impulses, he stared, until deep in the night, from his balcony at the dreariness of the houses, and was carried away on his dreams along the lines of crosses on the churches, with their strange red neon-light. In his thoughts he meandered through his visual vocabulary from Pollock to Mondrian, who had been, in his opinion, the creators of the visual language to which he felt most attracted at that moment. And he read about the art theories of the Dutch De Stijl group (1917-1931) to which Mondriaan belonged. The consistent quest of this painter for the refinement and purification of nature and his step-by-step drawings in order to arrive at the depiction of a universal harmony particularly appealed to him at that moment, all the more so because it was a choice of image for something that belonged to the essence of Chinese culture.

While sketching, he devoted effort to finding an answer to this issue in his own visual language. The experimental series entitled *Chaos*, on which he worked to liberate himself from his old form language in the winter of 2008, made way in the following spring for a group of works on paper and canvas consisted of small linear compositions of white lines on a red or blue background and entitled *Harmony*.

This was followed by the *City DNA* series, represented in this book: paintings in which Xinjian translated the infrastructure of cities into an abstract pattern of lines that carry the viewer along in the movement of the city. To do so, he took Google Earth as his hot-air balloon and zoomed in on all the cities he had chosen. Beijing, Amsterdam, Groningen, New York, Shanghai No.1, Hong Kong and Paris formed the first group, some time later by including Barcelona, Berlin, Tokyo and Brussels. With a felt-tip pen he processed the prints of these cities. He traced the system of the city, its rhythm, he processed the lines of the streets and the parks, he followed the lines of growth and, with the graphic representation that was the result of this, he brought the city 'into an image of harmony under the magic crystal of the ancient Yin & Yang dialectics', as he says. The result is a convincing series of large canvases with a monochrome background over which an overall composition of stripes, curves, blocks and zigzag was laid, as the outcome of his felt-tip accents on the Google prints. The result resembles a written text, a picture system in which the city displays its essential genes, wherein history, culture and form of each city apart meet one another.

The blue painting entitled *City DNA / New York No.1*, which he made in the summer of 2009 at his studio of his parents' house in Taiping, is robust and lucid village located in the Province of Jiangsu. The large canvas (140 x 190 cm), with austere white lines upon the monochrome dark blue background, displays Xinjian's representation of the grid of the city which he visited in 2005. The work *City DNA / New York No.2* is based upon a cut-out of the bird's-eye view of the city around

the Empire State Building where the modular system of this metropolis reaches its climax. The tight white lines, blocks, rectangles, zigzag lines and circles form the image of a monumental print plate upon which the state is powered by its irresistible energy. Six months later he produced a slightly smaller variant in colour called *The Triumph of New York* (120 x 150 cm). The title reminds us of Irving Sandler's book *The Triumph of American Painting*, which is about the heroes of abstract expressionism such as Pollock, De Kooning, Rothko and Newman who, with their explosive brushstrokes and monumental colour planes suddenly made New York the hub of the international art world in the 1940s and 50s.[3] Xinjian's *Triumph* acquires its cultural value through its colour. While the blue variant demonstrates the modular strictness of the urban system and simultaneously compares painting to language, the second painting transports us into urban life, energy and the dynamic light of Times Square, for example, just as Mondriaan did in his *Victory* painting.

3 Irving Sandler, The Triumph of American Painting. A History of Abstract Expressionism, New York/Toronto, 1970

Although in the same form of lines and blocks, the paintings he made of the city of Shanghai, where he now lives and works, provide a completely different picture. Especially the first work that he made in his studio in Taiping in the winter of 2010 shows the instinctive drift of this Chinese trading city whose urban plan was not drawn in modules far in advance, as Manhattan was, but grew alongside the water of the river, the sea or the shape of the mountains, just as most cities do. In comparison to the pictures of Manhattan, both paintings of Shanghai appear in their diagonal and circular speed as worlds full of expression. Their allure is that of action painting, whose scintillating lines seem to have been drawn free hand. Due to their diagonal direction and movement, they appear to be rapid and painterly. The baroque look of these paintings contrasts with the classic order of both of the works of New York. With these works, the painter demonstrates that the traces of growth kept abreast with the spirit of its inhabitants. As such, his paintings form not only an intensive source for the historical image of various metropolises of but also for that of the realm of painting.

In the cities of Xinjian Lu, we imagine, we see the image of globalization in which 'the characteristic' is under threat. In a rhythm of lines and stripes, each city initially resembles all the others. It is only on closer inspection that we see the differences, and we discover the physical features of each city. In the graphic ordering that dominates the surface, Xinjian aims to depict the city as, in his own words, 'a crystallization of wisdom of human being, culture, nature, history, and geography'. In doing so, he seems to blend the image of the firmament that he absorbed from his balcony in Daegu with the system of evolution, thus creating a single philosophical pact. The visual results of this are presented in his paintings.