

– THE AESTHETICS OF GENTRIFICATION: Modern Art, Settler Colonialism, and Anti-Colonialism in Washington, DC

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Abstract

In 1988 a local homeowner in Washington, DC, commissioned a 30-foot mural of an artwork by modernist painter Piet Mondrian on the side of a public housing building, along with several other similar murals across the street. Three months later all the residents of the public housing development were moved out. Later, the buildings were destroyed. Here I explore how these murals enabled the residents' permanent displacement. Explaining this displacement and destruction by pointing to the federal Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE) VI policy is completely insufficient. I argue for looking beyond the conventional actors in policy history to other actors, such as, but not limited to, aesthetics, art, artists and art purveyors. I examine Mondrian's years in Paris, during which he developed his abstract art and philosophy of spiritual evolution, white supremacy and total urban renewal. The homeowner brought Mondrian's art and philosophy to Washington, DC, at a time of an ideological shift towards global revanchism and gentrification. These specific murals reveal the settler colonial nature of gentrification in confrontation with anti-colonial art and geographies. This study provides new insight into gentrification by illuminating the battles of multiple globalizations in cities and even on individual blocks.

Introduction

During the summer of 1988, a local homeowner in Washington, DC, commissioned a 30-foot mural—a copy of a modernist artwork of Piet Mondrian, on the side of a public housing building on Capitol Hill. This mural faced a freeway and was joined by two smaller Mondrian murals in a freeway underpass across the street. Within four years, he had commissioned a total of 14 Mondrian murals: 13 in the underpass and the 30-foot mural, which he called the Mondrian Gate (see Figures 1 and 2).¹

In November 1988, just months after the first three murals appeared, the DC Housing Authority temporarily moved all the residents out of the public housing development, ostensibly to renovate the buildings. But instead of renovating the buildings, the DC Housing Authority kept the buildings vacant and later demolished them, leaving the former residents permanently displaced from this community. Did the Mondrian Gate play a role in the permanent displacement of the public housing residents?

It would be easy but completely insufficient to explain this displacement as the result of the federal Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE) VI policy. In 1993, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) awarded

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1 Smithsonian Institution Archives (SIA), Warren M. Robbins Papers, 11-001, Box 36, Folder: Mondrian mural—Images, 1988 (referred to as SIA, Robbins Papers in further footnotes).

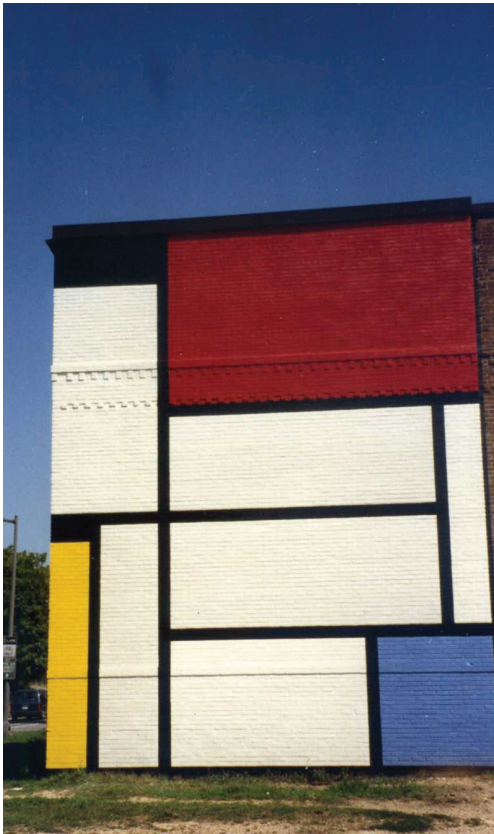


FIGURE 1 The 30-foot mural on the Ellen Wilson Dwelling Building (source: SIA, Robbins Papers)

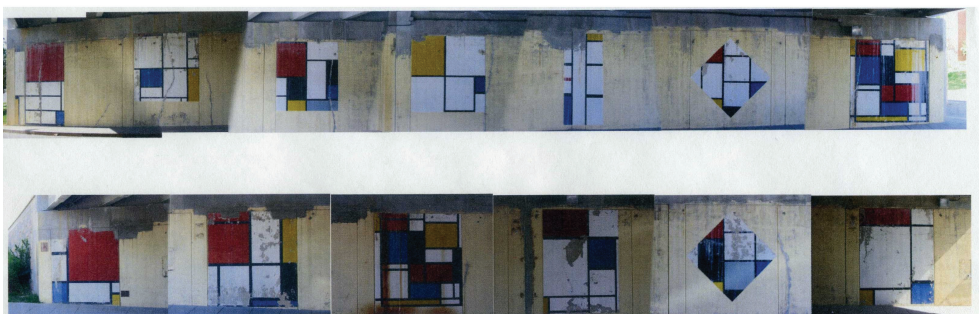


FIGURE 2 The murals underneath the Southeast Freeway (source: SIA, Robbins Papers)

the first HOPE VI funds to public housing authorities to redevelop a total of 13 sites, including this one, the Ellen Wilson Dwellings (HUD, 1998). Pointing to HOPE VI does not answer fundamental questions: Why choose a site like the Ellen Wilson Dwellings that was in a thriving neighborhood and not in great disrepair? What explains the great diversity across HOPE VI sites, such as the fact that the redeveloped Ellen Wilson

Dwellings had only homeownership and no rentals? Instead of the HOPE VI policy shaping these early sites, might the causality be the other way around? Did these first experiments change the HOPE VI policy? To understand public housing destruction and gentrification, I argue that we look beyond the conventional actors in policy history—policymakers, planners and developers—to other actors, such as, but not limited to, aesthetics, art, artists and art purveyors.

These murals embodied the aesthetics of gentrification at the time. In the late 1980s, geographer Neil Smith noted a new attitude among urban officials and professionals moving to cities. They felt a ‘revanchist’ attitude against those whom they perceived were destroying the city: African Americans, the working class, the poor, recent immigrants, and so on (Smith, 1996: 44–45). Using gentrification as a global urban strategy, city planners displaced these groups and created new spaces for capital accumulation and racial capitalism (Smith, 1996; Lees *et al.*, 2016). At the very moment of this ideological and material shift, the homeowner who commissioned the murals, Warren M. Robbins, placed the Mondrian murals on and around a public housing project and on a historical racial line—a color-line. These aesthetics enabled the displacement of all but seven of the 134 households living at the Ellen Wilson Dwellings and their replacement by higher-income households.²

The literature on art and urban redevelopment focuses on the ways that artists and developers have worked together, either intentionally or unintentionally, to create new forms of gentrification.³ While recognizing the general process of the ‘artistic mode of production’ as part of global urbanization, I argue instead that these specific murals reveal the settler colonial nature of gentrification in confrontation with its anti-colonial opponents. Robbins deeply understood Mondrian’s message and sought to realize it in a specific location near his house in Washington, DC. The content of the murals themselves communicated to viewers a settler colonial map of the future and, in Katherine McKittrick’s (2006) words, a ‘geography of domination’ in battle with geographies forged by African American women and their anti-colonial art. This art connected past, present and future, including W.E.B. Du Bois and interwar Pan-Africanism. I use the terms ‘settler colonial’ and ‘anti-colonial’ not in an abstract or metaphorical way, but rather to label their actual presence in and usefulness for the late-1980s wave of gentrification. Other waves of gentrification have their own aesthetics, also emerging within settler colonialism and against its opponents.⁴

This study reveals the battles of multiple globalizations, with their specific historical contents, in cities and even on individual blocks. To explore these globalizations, I use the writings and artwork of Mondrian, the personal papers of Robbins, and archival documents of organizations near the Mondrian murals. Methodologically, I integrate sociology, geography and art history. Art historical approaches allow us to understand a specific work of art and its specific origin in history and, with geographical insight, in a physical location. By using sociology, we can connect broader political-economic structures with visual and archival sources to reveal unexpected connections and battles

2 The designers of the new development planned this gentrification by adding 20 market-rate units to the 134 affordable units, of which only 33 units now were set aside for households at or below 25% AMI (Bockman, 2021). The removal of the public housing project also likely led to further gentrification on the surrounding blocks.

3 According to this literature, in the 1970s and 1980s artists created galleries and studio spaces in low-rent parts of New York City, which, as a result of the valorization of cultural capital and spaces created by artists, lured new residents who were able to pay higher rents and so displaced many of the current residents (Zukin, 1982; Deutsche and Ryan, 1984; Ley, 2003; Lloyd, 2010; Mathews, 2014; Shkuda, 2016). Real-estate developers and agents, as well as some artists themselves, honed these strategies, mobilizing the art, design and heritage industries to attract capital and high-income professionals. Through these means, developers and their artistic allies created, in the words of Sharon Zukin (1982), the ‘artistic mode of production’. Artists and activists have also mobilized the arts in solidarity with those threatened with displacement because of urban renewal and gentrification (Avila, 2014).

4 The Capitol Hill neighborhood is a well-known example of early and continuing gentrification (Asch and Musgrove, 2016). Earlier, the aesthetics of gentrification were aristocratic and colonial. More recently, across Washington, DC, ‘black branding’ and blackness have become ‘an aesthetic infrastructure of gentrification’, along with exclusionary white-space-claiming practices (Hyra, 2017; Helmuth, 2019; Summers, 2019).

across time and space. I first examine Mondrian's philosophy and art. Then I explore how the commissioner of the murals knew about Mondrian's philosophy and why this homeowner chose to place a series of Mondrians in the late 1980s at this location. I finish by examining other murals and art there, exploring the confrontations between settler colonial and anti-colonial globalizations.

Mondrian's settler colonial maps

Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) is best known for his highly abstract paintings. He had grown up in the Netherlands and moved to Paris in 1911, both places with overseas empires. Until the last year of his life, Mondrian held conventional colonial views. The literature on Mondrian has not confronted his colonial theories, language and imagery, focusing instead on his abstract art, love of jazz music and transformation of painting style in the last years of his life (see e.g. Seuphor, 1957; Cooper, 1998; Moten, 2008).⁵ Based on his essays, letters and paintings, I argue that Mondrian's paintings portrayed settler colonial maps of or plans for a future white supremacist city.⁶

While Mondrian rejected representational art, his supposedly non-representational art, in fact, emerged from, and represented, the city of Paris (Blotkamp, 1995; Bois, 1995; Joosten, 1998). Upon arriving in Paris in 1911, he moved into a new building of artists' studios in an area of Montparnasse partly destroyed to make way for the expansion of the nearby train station (Postma *et al.*, 1995). The remaining buildings on his block bore traces of the walls and staircases of the recently demolished buildings. Mondrian viewed this landscape from his studio window and while walking around, capturing these ghostly images in his sketches and paintings of this time. Through 1917, his work portrayed planes, lines and crosses floating abstractly and amorphously in space, seemingly like Kazimir Malevich's floating colored planes, painted in an exciting revolutionary age (Wiegand, 1943).

Then, suddenly, in 1918, Mondrian solidified these planes and tied them down into symmetrical and then asymmetrical grids.⁷ The city remained central to his work, but in a new way. In contrast to his earlier landscape view, these new works marked a shift in perspective—the Olympian view or aerial view—and a new way of painting. As Sibyl Moholy-Nagy remembered, Mondrian would lay out a white sheet on the floor and move around black strips and a red rectangle of paper. Then Mondrian and, on this particular day, her husband László Moholy-Nagy stood on chairs 'like seers, regulating the harmony of the universe' (Troy, 2013: 24). From 1921 until 1939 Mondrian also increasingly filled his works with white pigment, painting panels of white at the center of his paintings and placing panels of color further and further to the edges of the paintings.⁸ For example, in *Composition—Blanc et Rouge: B* (1936), 16 white panels fill the painting, while three red panels barely appear at the far-left edge. All the panels are separated by stark black lines. This aerial perspective—the viewpoint of urban planners, colonial officials and military planes—and expanding whiteness reflected several influences.

5 Avant-garde art and jazz appreciation should not be seen as necessarily anti-racist. For example, Mondrian, like other avant-garde artists living in Paris during this time, enjoyed attending the performances of Josephine Baker. As Boittin (2010: 1–4) shows, Baker worked within French imperial culture and, in her 'Savage's Dance', 'played an urban, sophisticated African American, before "degenerating" into a wild, African woman'; she supported Mussolini's war on Ethiopia and, in 1931, was elected Queen of the Colonial Exhibition.

6 While he also argues that these paintings are architectural, Mondrian scholar Yve-Alain Bois (1987; 1995) briefly mentions that Mondrian 'compares his painting to the future map of the world' (Bois, 1995: 327).

7 To view these changes, compare *Blue Façade* (1914) with the floating squares in *Composition with Color Planes* (1917) with the grid of *Composition with Color Planes and Grey Lines* (1918).

8 Mondrian was known for the whiteness of his paintings. In response to Mondrian's transformed painting style—see, for example, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1943)—just before his death, painter Robert Motherwell (1944: 96) wrote, 'Mondrian has left his white paradise, and entered the world'. In 1947, Charlon von Wiegand created a major exhibit of abstract art titled 'The White Plane', which, according to Troy (1979), focused on pure abstract art exemplified by Mondrian. Seuphor (1957: 152) argued that Mondrian fundamentally changed his painting in 1921: 'The black lines, which are much more clearly drawn now, divide the surface into rectangles of varied sizes, and isolate the color planes, which tend to become rarer. At the same time, color is more pronounced'.

Mondrian was a life-long follower of theosophy, an occult religious movement with a profoundly racist worldview. In a 1922 letter, Mondrian affirmed that his abstract art, which he called Neo-Plasticism, was ‘purely a theosophical art (in the true sense)’ (quoted in Blotkamp, 1986: 104). Theosophy remained important throughout his life.⁹ In her 1888 *The Secret Doctrine*, Helena P. Blavatsky, the main founder of theosophy, described a spiraling evolution of humanity that included a race of giants, a race with third eyes, the current ‘Aryan race’ and a new race to come from California (Santucci, 2008). In a 1918 letter, Mondrian wrote, ‘I got everything from the Secret Doctrine (Blavatsky)’ (quoted in Blotkamp, 1986: 103, original emphasis). While Blavatsky (and others) publicly rejected any hierarchy of contemporary races and promised a future universal brotherhood, she argued that the current decimation of ‘senile representatives’ of non-Aryan racial groups was not due so much to colonial abuses as to ‘Karmic necessity’ (Blavatsky, 1888, Volume 2: 780). Whether or not he agreed with these ideas, Mondrian remained connected to theosophy and was well aware of its social Darwinism and racial hierarchies.

As a follower of theosophy, Mondrian understood himself as an elite guide leading others to higher levels of spirituality and consciousness. In 1919, the year of the first Pan-African Congress and the Paris Peace Conference, where Japan put forward a racial equality proposal (Onishi, 2007), Mondrian rejected ‘equality’ and called for ‘equivalence’. He clarified that ‘Equivalence does not mean uniformity or sameness, any more than it means quantitative equality’ (Mondrian, [1919–1920] 1986: 97). A few years later, he wrote, ‘I applaud [Italian futurist and fascist Filippo Tommaso] Marinetti when he said: “Long live inequality! Let us increase inequalities among men! Everywhere let us unleash and arouse the individual’s originality”’ (*ibid.*, [1926] 1950: 44).¹⁰ In Mondrian’s view, abstract artists like himself were associated ‘with the most advanced progress and the most cultured minds’ because they could sense beneath the chaos of visible reality the fundamental universal order or, in his words, ‘universal equilibrium’ (*ibid.*, [1937] 1943: 53). Their ‘pure art’ could then guide others’ spiritual purification and evolution along the ‘one path, the true way’ (*ibid.*: 51, 53). To Mondrian (*ibid.*: 61–62), equality and ‘the progress of the mass’ are ‘against the progress of the elite, thus against the logical march of human evolution’. At the moment that the Japanese government and Pan-African leaders demanded equality, Mondrian overtly rejected it and called for equivalence, evolution and hierarchy.

Mondrian’s language resonated with the colonial ideas of his time. Through the 1920s and 1930s, he developed ideas about ‘universal art’ and ‘primitive art’ as two separate entities. In 1943, a year before his death, he suggested that different races might necessarily follow different and unequal spiritual paths. He argued that ‘primitive’ people have an instinctive ‘animal nature’ and lack consciousness (*ibid.*, [1943] 1945: 17–19). Their ‘culture’ encourages both instinctive and intuitive faculties, which allows them to create abstract forms, though unconsciously and in a limited way, similar to ‘children’s art’ (*ibid.*: 18).¹¹ ‘Human culture’, in contrast, reduces instincts and develops intuitive capacities, which allows people to develop advanced consciousness, gain a universal perspective, and create ‘Abstract Art’. To Mondrian (*ibid.*: 17), exposure to the ‘culture’ of ‘primitives’ might lead to ‘degeneration’: ‘A cultivation of instinctive faculties produces human degeneration; a cultivation of intuitive capacities creates human

9 In his few belongings at his death, there was a 1939 letter from the Société Théosophique de France with his membership card, as well as several theosophical books (Piet Mondrian Papers, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/archival_objects/184689, accessed 17 February 2021).

10 In his 1922 ‘Manifesto on inequality’ Marinetti argued, according to lalongo (2013: 395), that ‘Workers, in effect, had to learn to accept their role as laborers in society, and leave the governing to the political and intellectual elite’.

11 According to Chandler (1972: 29), ‘Mondrian was aware that a good deal of primitive art manifested a strong proclivity for abstraction. He was convinced, however, that this proto-abstractionism was qualitatively different from its modern counterpart’.

progress'.¹² In contrast to animalistic 'primitives' and abstract artists like Pablo Picasso who drew inspiration from African art, Mondrian understood himself as working towards a pure 'universal art'.

Mondrian developed his whitest paintings in Paris. His work was fundamentally shaped by life in the colonial metropole, a 'space in which the specter of "empire" guided the self-identification of its residents as well as their social and political interactions' (Boittin, 2010: xiv). After the first world war, 10,000 to 15,000 Antilleans and Africans lived in Paris and some began organizing politically (*ibid.*: 74). At this time, liberal and conservative Europeans shared widespread concerns about what they called 'moral degeneration', which seemed particularly grave in metropolitan areas. In response to the supposed 'degeneracy' of Paris, architects and planners looked to new urban designs in the colonial cities abroad as a kind of laboratory for urban renewal in Paris (Wright, 1991). Mondrian's maps are not of his current-day Paris, but rather of some future, extremely white city.

Mondrian was close to and shared the concerns of architects and urban planners. He knew Le Corbusier and members of the Dutch design collective De Stijl, who worked with other urban planners in the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM). Le Corbusier and other colleagues began planning urban renewal in the colonial cities, such as Algiers. In the 1930s, colonial policy had shifted from destroying the indigenous city of the colonies to creating a dual city, keeping the indigenous city and building, or implanting a separate, new, modern, white European city (Wright, 1991; Nightingale, 2012). Mondrian's artwork channeled these cartographical fantasies of a vast, segregated, white European city pushing colonial subjects to marginalized areas, and the destruction this would necessitate.

Evolution towards 'cosmic equilibrium', in Mondrian's view, required vast urban destruction and renewal. In his 1926 article 'Neo-Plasticism: the home—the street—the city', Mondrian argued that all homes, streets and cities should be destroyed and reconstructed completely. According to him, 'man' must create a new totality, in which the universal would be reflected at the microlevel of the home, the mesolevel of the street and the macrolevel of the city, as well as in painting and the arts. Thus, urban planners must destroy older forms, buildings, habits, ways of seeing and essentially the entire material world to create 'a new society'. This new society would have '*pure relationships of pure lines and colors*', no rustic colors or nature (Mondrian, [1926] 1950: 45; original emphasis). For Mondrian, 'Home and Street must be viewed as the City, as a *unity formed by planes composed in a neutralizing opposition that destroys all exclusiveness*' (*ibid.*: 47; original emphasis). This vision of total urban renewal and total imperialism integrates all space—'destroys all exclusiveness'—as a unity.

This unity has order, separation, hierarchy and inequality. As Mondrian wrote, '*We therefore need a new aesthetic based on the pure relationships of pure lines and colors, for only pure relationships of pure constructive elements can result in pure beauty*' (*ibid.*: 45, original emphasis). To Mondrian, the planes express pure color, not mixed colors or natural colors, and clear lines. In place of roughness, rustic or natural appearance and natural color, Mondrian approved of 'hygiene, which demands smooth, easily cleaned surfaces' (*ibid.*: 46). If the total environment at all levels is 'pure in its beauty', it is also 'healthy and practical' and the 'the true and pure manifestation of cosmic equilibrium' (*ibid.*: 44, 46). Mondrian, similar to colonial urban planners, wished for purity, hygiene and total control over the built environment and over the population, physically and spiritually. The complete reconstruction of cities with clean modern buildings and the segregation of people is a central element of Mondrian's philosophy.

12 Veder (2015) discusses artists who sought to use advanced rhythms in their art to stimulate kinesthetically the formation of a new, unified race, lead a spiritual evolution and avoid what they perceived as wrong, degenerating rhythms.

Through order and purity within the home, along the streets, throughout the city and around the world, a new city, a new human society, man's 'true self'—as the 'universal' self and 'part of the whole'—would develop in harmonious equilibrium with the universal (*ibid.*: 44, 47). In the context of the 1920s and 1930s, the universal order presented in Mondrian's art should be understood as a map of white racial order emerging in new forms worldwide. Mondrian painted an expanding white, imperial city of the future.

Revanchist Warren M. Robbins

The commissioner of the Mondrian Gate, Warren M. Robbins (1923–2008), brought these maps to Washington, DC. He worked for the US Department of State and the US Information Agency in Europe soon after the second world war. In 1960, Robbins moved to Washington, DC, and lived on Capitol Hill. He founded the National Museum of African Art, now part of the Smithsonian Institution. In 1988, in his mid-sixties, Robbins began his Mondrian Gate project on the block just south of his house.

Robbins personally identified with Mondrian and his philosophy. At around 26 years old, in 1949, Robbins met the artist Harry Holtzman, who became, in Robbins' words, 'one of the principal mentors of my life'.¹³ Holtzman was Mondrian's sole heir and legatee, and spent much of his life promoting, and living from, Mondrian's legacy.¹⁴ Robbins understood the Mondrian Gate as the continuation of Holtzman's life work and Mondrian's urban vision.¹⁵

From 1950 to 1952, Robbins helped run Holtzman's new, short-lived journal called *trans/formation: arts, communication, environment*. The journal brought together leading artists, architects, philosophers, anthropologists and scientists, including Le Corbusier, Buckminster Fuller and Marcel Duchamp, and engaged in various universalist, modernist projects. Holtzman and the others involved in the journal brought together art, literature and science to stimulate a transformation in people towards a new consciousness of the 'universal' or fundamental order beneath or above the chaotic surface reality (Vallye, 2009). *trans/formation* also reported on experiments in perceptual psychology and various perceptual games involving, for example, trompe-l'oeil that would trigger this promised 'trans/formation'. Similarly, non-representational, abstract art, like that of Mondrian, could do so as well.

trans/formation provided aesthetic and intellectual support for worldwide urban destruction and renewal. In the first issue, Le Corbusier (1950: 40) offered readers the 'tools of universality', 'which should help to pacify and universalize, to remove some annoying and dangerous obstacles and to make smooth the road'. Barbara Hooper, exploring his extensive writings, has argued that Le Corbusier understood the 'modern as masculine, white, European, and advanced' (Hooper, 2002: 62). To Le Corbusier, women and especially the 'primitive female body' threatened the pure, rational, modern city and must be expelled or destroyed to realize this modern city. Known for his plans of entirely newly constructed cities, including colonial cities, Le Corbusier offered 'tools'—in the words of Hooper, tools of 'murderous irrationality'—to eradicate opposition and other geographies and make way for 'universal' order.

Le Corbusier's short article was followed by a reprint of Mondrian's 1926 article 'Neo-Plasticism: the home—the street—the city' (Mondrian, [1926] 1950). The proximity of these two articles suggests that universalization and pacification are connected to Mondrian's vision of a completely renewed city. The editors replaced the earlier

13 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 35. Folder: Mondrian mural, 1988–2000 (Folder 1 of 3), letter from Robbins to Betsy Holtzman, 13 September 1988.

14 Troy (2013) discusses Holtzman's relationship with Mondrian. SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 35: letter from Robbins to Betsy Holtzman.

15 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 30. Folder: Mondrian, Piet—'Mondrian at Slusser', remarks by Robbins, 'Mondrian and Holtzman: a direct line of dedication', 22 April 1995, page 1.

article images—a Mondrian painting from 1925 and a photograph of his studio—with Mondrian's *Composition No. 10* (1939–1942), one of Mondrian's 1919 grid compositions, and the 'Cover of [Marinetti's] Futurist Manifesto 1919'. Even though the cover image was, in fact, from another book by Marinetti—*Les Mots en Liberté Futurists (Futurist Words in Freedom)*—US intellectuals in the early cold war would have recognized Marinetti as a fascist ally of Mussolini and an avid supporter of imperial expansion and colonial war in Africa (Ialongo, 2013). The reference to Marinetti would signal the piece's anti-communism. White supremacist elements also appeared. In contrast to the 1925 painting with five panels, *Composition No. 10* has over twenty white panels separated by numerous stark black lines from color panels barely visible at the edges of the canvas, envisioning the renewed city of the future as an expanse of white with an extremely marginalized and segregated indigenous community.

Holtzman and his colleagues placed an image between the articles by Le Corbusier and Mondrian, a photograph labeled 'Washington, D.C.'. In this photograph, three African American girls in an alley on Capitol Hill look warily at the photographer, Marion Palfi (see Figure 3).

This photograph presented the world that universality, pacification and the white panels and black lines of the new city would destroy: African American girls, their neighbors, their houses, the wood of the fences, and the water and soil on the street. Robbins and Holtzman understood that Le Corbusier and Mondrian spoke directly to urban renewal and 'slum clearance' as a racial project. They chose an image of Capitol Hill, mere blocks from where the Mondrian murals would, in fact, be placed.

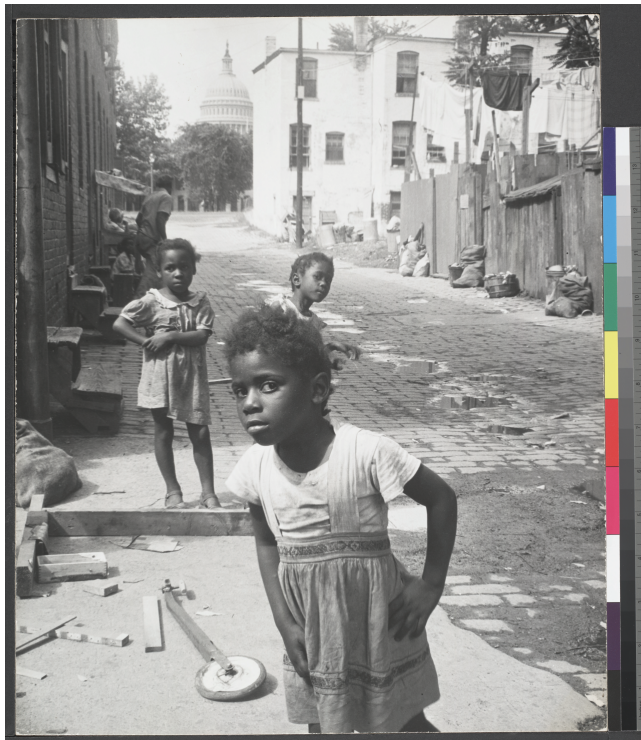


FIGURE 3 'In the Shadow of the Capitol' (photo by Marion Palfi, 1948, Collection Center for Creative Photography © Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents)

African art played a major role in the social world of *trans/formation* and especially in Robbins' life. Those involved in the journal shared an interest in 'general semantics', which Holtzman, Robbins and Robbins' other mentor S.I. Hayakawa actively practiced and taught. According to Maeda (2009: 42), general semantics is a 'theory of language' that 'emphasized the distinction between signs and their referents, arguing that much human misunderstanding stemmed from mistaking words themselves for reality'. Those practicing general semantics argued that rational discussion, the formation of a universal language and the complete integration of the world could resolve conflict, especially that between races and/or ethnicities. Universality in language, literature, visual art, architecture and science could initiate and realize a fundamental transformation in individuals and societies.

Under the influence of Hayakawa, Robbins began collecting African art. Hayakawa advocated racial assimilation and integration through rational discussion and art. Hayakawa believed that slavery had severed African Americans' connection with Africa and thus African Americans had lost their foundation for self-esteem. Exposure to African art would help rebuild this self-esteem and allow them to assimilate and integrate into American (white) society (see Maeda, 2009). At the same time, according to Robbins ([1966] 2005a: 14), Hayakawa understood that exposure to African art would make white people recognize African art's 'captive energy' and abstraction, leading them to radically re-evaluate 'the African personality' and become open to integration. While Hayakawa and Robbins may have considered themselves progressives because they, in contrast to overt, biological racists, appreciated African art and advocated racial integration, the political terrain was shifting dramatically. As Maeda (2009) showed in the case of Hayakawa, followers of general semantics soon found themselves allied with white conservatives.

To give concrete form to general semantics and its call for racial integration, in 1964 Robbins established the Museum of African Art in the former home of Frederick Douglass, which he owned. Robbins had laid out his reasoning for such a museum a year earlier:

When the legal questions of Civil Rights are finally resolved and social precedent established for the integration of the Negro and white communities in metropolitan areas such as the District of Columbia, there will remain for several generations to come the task of nurturing a psychological and social capacity for the maturing of the Negro people as an integral part of American society.

As a requisite for the overcoming of psychological and social barriers to group maturity—beyond the sheer mechanics of building an adequate education apparatus—it will be necessary, first of all, to instill in the alienated Negro an underlying feeling of self-esteem which will generate incentive for self-development (Robbins, 2005b: 176).

Robbins thus created the Museum of African Art to 'instill' self-esteem in African Americans, which would provide them with the 'psychological and social capacity' for 'self-development', 'maturing' and then 'integration'. Exposure to African art would cause this *trans/formation*, as the name of the earlier journal promised. Exposure to African art would also make whites respect African Americans and thus lead them to accept African Americans into American society. Thus, African art is 'the foundation for a new bridge of mutual understanding and respect among the peoples of the world' (*ibid.*, [1966] 2005a: 36). According to Robbins, in 1963, African Americans had no connection with African art or Africa more generally.¹⁶ As a white man, Robbins took on

16 By the 1930s, African American scholars were quite familiar with African art (Wofford, 2011). I discuss this further later.

the role of reconnecting African Americans with their roots and providing self-esteem to guide them to integration. African Americans, he suggested, had to change—become ‘mature’—for white-controlled mainstream society to accept them. Robbins understood that public art would provide this public education and spiritual evolution.

At the same time, similar to Mondrian, Robbins did not believe that racial integration was possible. Robbins understood the necessary separation, maybe temporary or endlessly deferred, of authentic, ‘primitive’ African art from both pure modernist art such as Mondrian’s and hybrid forms such as contemporary African art or African American art. For Robbins, ‘traditional African art’ and Mondrian’s art were complementary. Both were abstract, expressed universal elements, and had aesthetic value. In the Museum of African Art, Robbins permanently juxtaposed Mondrian’s paintings and African sculpture in his Comparative Gallery to demonstrate their similarities and enable transformation. Robbins often lectured on the influence of ‘traditional African art’ on modernist art or on ‘art’ more generally. While he understood African art as influencing Picasso and the Cubists, Robbins maintained that African art did not influence Mondrian.¹⁷ From Robbins’ perspective, Mondrian had created a pure universal art, which was more advanced and ‘more universal’ than African art (Robbins and Nooter, 1989: 3). According to Robbins (1962: 20), ‘The difference [between African and Western abstraction] is that the tribal artist does not verbalize ... he is not self-conscious about what he is creating’ and is conforming, while the modern artist verbalizes and is a non-conforming individual; ‘we can speak of traditional African art most accurately as pre-literate art’ (*ibid.*, [1966] 2005a: 22). While they shared elements, to Robbins, these two different races had two different arts. Moreover, Robbins perceived contemporary African art as merely following Western artistic conventions and thus losing its ‘dynamism’, ‘captive energy’ and ‘immanent energy’ (*ibid.*: 2). At some point in the indeterminate future, both arts may eventually merge ‘into the totality of world culture’ (*ibid.*: 26). Robbins very much understood and conveyed Mondrian’s philosophy.

This philosophy and its settler colonial perspective caused Robbins to clash with museum staff and led to his demotion and termination. In 1969, *The Washington Post* noted: ‘Somehow a troublesome spirit has crept into the museum and is lurking there—among the Yoruba madonnas, the Basonge drinking cups and magnificent Benin bronzes’ (Stanford, 1969). Black Power leaders such as Gaston Neal criticized that ‘Robbins is a classic story of a white man handling black culture ... He has a colonial mentality ... He makes money off his shop just like the white promoters of black music’. During his first trip to Africa in 1973, Robbins returned a stolen statue to Cameroon with an entourage of predominately white corporate leaders, which brought further public criticism (see Stanford, 1969; Manns, 1973).

In 1979, with Robbins’ support, the Smithsonian Institution acquired the museum, which became the National Museum of African Art. By 1982, several women at the museum brought sexual harassment charges against Robbins. In 1983, the Smithsonian replaced him with a new director, Sylvia Williams, and Robbins became Founding Director Emeritus and Smithsonian Senior Scholar. He refused to support the work of the new director and deemed her unqualified: ‘An obscure Assistant Curator from a different Museum was then selected, although there were numerous white candidates who were *far* more qualified than she happened to be’.¹⁸ Williams and Robbins had very different approaches to the museum. She appreciated contemporary and traditional African art academically and aesthetically and understood the art as emerging from different regions and within history. Robbins understood African art as traditional, timelessly primitive and homogeneously African. He sought to demonstrate

17 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 35. Folder: Mondrian mural, 1988–2000 (Folder 3 of 3), Announcement about Mondrian Gate with letter dated 6 June 1995, page 2.

18 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 62. Folder: Notice of termination to WMR, 1994–1995.



FIGURE 4 Map of the area (produced by the author)

the ‘dynamism’, ‘captive energy’ and ‘immanent energy’ of this African art by organizing drumming circles and recreating ‘the Bush’. In 1995, the Smithsonian terminated him from his positions. Robbins filed a lawsuit charging ‘racialist’ discrimination and asserting that the Smithsonian promised him a lifetime job in the museum in gratitude for his donation of artworks and real estate.¹⁹ Sylvia Williams died an early death from a brain aneurysm the following year (*The New York Times*, 1996).

The late 1980s brought not only a global revanchism, but also Robbins’ personal revanchism against what he saw as a betrayal at the museum. In 1988, in his mid-sixties, Robbins began the Mondrian Gate project on the block just south of his house (see Figure 4). With his marginalization, Robbins turned to the Mondrian Gate to continue his work with a vengeance.

The settlers’ Mondrian Gate

Robbins called his project the Mondrian Gate to Capitol Hill²⁰ and placed this ‘gate’ on a racially contested block. For residents on Capitol Hill, this block caused great concern because it was on a contested de facto racial line—a color-line. White homeowners in the neighborhood and elsewhere in the city had attempted many times to take over this block, displace the residents and move the color-line southwards. For example, after destroying Navy Place alley in the center of the block and displacing its African American residents, the Alley Dwelling Authority in 1941 opened the Ellen Wilson Dwellings, a white segregated public housing project. After the 1953

19 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 62. Folder: WMR response to termination, 1994-1995, letter from Robbins to Hoffman, 10 March 1995.

20 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 35: letter from Robbins to Betsy Holtzman, 13 September 1988.

desegregation of the project, the District Highway Department decided to destroy part of the project to build the Southeast Freeway.²¹ As with many freeways, the Southeast Freeway was built through a racially contested area, displacing, isolating and containing African Americans at the margins or outside of areas considered white (Avila, 2014). Robbins placed the murals on and across the street from this racially contentious block.

The residents of the public housing block were made to believe they were being temporarily moved so that the buildings could be renovated. Robbins saw them as the main audience for the transformative nature of 'traditional' African art. He had originally proposed to put a South African Ndebele mural on the public housing building,²² and understood Ndebele murals as traditional African art under threat from contamination by the modern (European) world (see Robbins, 1977). Peffer (2009) has shown, however, that the South African apartheid government set up Ndebele tourist villages to take advantage of both the popularity of the art seen as generic African art and as proof of the need to protect the races by separating them through apartheid. Given this historical context, placing a Ndebele mural, as apartheid tourist art, on the Ellen Wilson Dwellings would have signaled a segregated village with its own culture quite separate from the rest of the area. However, Robbins soon took up a plan to create the Mondrian Gate with a new audience in mind.

Robbins viewed the freeway as a wall separating Capitol Hill from the area to the south. While he saw the murals as beautifying the area, Robbins clearly stated that this was 'no mere "art project"'.²³ This 'gate' met those exiting the freeway at Sixth Street. Drivers turning left would briefly view the 13 murals in the underpass, and then at the stoplight observe the large mural across the street. Robbins said that he sought 'to open the gates of "the wall" that the freeway constituted, dividing people to the North from those to the South of it'.²⁴ In his mind, the communities north and south of the freeway did not meet or communicate. For him, the freeway acted like a fortress wall and the 'gate' resembled city gates 'from English and European history'.²⁵ Even though the freeway underpass had always existed, Robbins offered 'an opening' in the wall in the form of an art gallery.²⁶

Robbins called this a gate 'to Capitol Hill', the area to the north. 'Capitol Hill' has been a cultural landscape, or racial imaginary, with shifting borders. Homeowners, real-estate agents and other businesspeople imagined it as a space primarily of homeowners returning their houses and social world through restoration and historic preservation to the colonial or Victorian eras. In 1974, a report by the local historic preservation organization stated: 'The area today known as "Capitol Hill" is largely a construct based as much on the scope of restoration activity and potential restoration possibilities as upon historical reality'.²⁷ Within this spatial imaginary, 'Capitol Hill' had a 'heartland' of long-renovated houses and expanding edges, which could come under threat and retract, possibly as a result of crime or other perceived chaos.²⁸ The Capitol Hill Historic District ended at the freeway. Presumably, those living 'inside' the 'gate', on Capitol Hill, controlled its opening and closing.

21 The path of the freeway along Virginia Avenue on the south end of the block was determined by 1955 and then finalized in 1959. "'Inner Belt" to cut swath through built-up blocks', 27 April 1955, *Evening Star*, A1; 'NCHA to let freeway doom Wilson Dwellings', 11 June 1959, *Evening Star*, C13.

22 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 30. Folder: Murals—Public Art, 1987–1988, letter from Robbins to Alex Simpson, DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, 6 July 1987.

23 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 30. Folder: Mondrian, Piet—'Mondrian at Slusser'—University of Michigan—Remarks, 1995, 'The Mondrian Gate to Capitol Hill: a rationale'.

24 *Ibid.*

25 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 35. Folder: Mondrian mural, 1988–2000 (Folder 1 of 3), letter from Robbins to Ulysses Garner, DC Art Works, 31 May 1989.

26 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 35: letter from Robbins to Betsy Holtzman, 13 September 1988.

27 GWU Special Collections, Capitol Hill Restoration Society Records, MS 2009, Box 1. Folder 11: Historic District: Background Capitol Hill Social History by Michael S. Franch, 1974, page 4.

28 GWU Special Collections, Capitol Hill Restoration Society Records, MS 2009, Box 1. Folder 11: Historic District: Background Capitol Hill Social History by Michael S. Franch, 1974, pages 17 and 39.

However, the Ellen Wilson Dwellings stood inside the 'gate', in a liminal space at the margins or a space somehow separate from Capitol Hill. The housing project had a precarious existence within the 'gate', seeming to float around in people's minds. For example, Robbins (2005b: 8) wrote, 'My hope was that the murals, though in an underpass, might serve nevertheless as a bridge between the public housing area south of the Freeway and the upscale Capitol Hill area directly to its north'.²⁹ Even though the Ellen Wilson Dwellings were within the Capitol Hill Historic District, they could also suddenly appear on the south side of the freeway. From this perspective, the existence of the Ellen Wilson Dwellings made impossible a clear, orderly, pure space of restoration and home ownership. By placing one of the Mondrian murals on an Ellen Wilson Dwellings building, Robbins made a declaration about the future of this racially contested area.

The DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities accepted and funded his plan with a strange, unclear statement that 'things have changed'.³⁰ In the late 1980s, 'revanchist' city officials opened up new development possibilities. Robbins shifted to the Mondrian Gate plan first with the public housing residents as the primary audience for the murals' transformational education. Robbins wrote in his own notes that the Mondrian work offered, among other benefits, 'Discipline'.³¹ In his report to the DC Commission, Robbins stated that the Mondrian Gate aimed to beautify the area 'with strong abstract paintings of blocks of color' and 'to help, thereby, to encourage greater neighborhood pride' among the public housing residents'.³² Then he stated more clearly that he aimed to 'enhance the social rehabilitation of people living in depressed areas'.³³ This social rehabilitation meant the disciplining and maturation of the public housing residents to ready them for true integration.

Robbins had originally planned to hire African American portrait artist Simmie Knox to paint the murals, but then decided instead on white muralist G. Byron Peck. The choice of Peck suggests a shift in the object of social rehabilitation. Peck was known for his popular murals, especially in gentrifying areas, 'expanding the horizons of Washington commuters-on-the-go' with such images as stilettos, brandy snifters and trompe-l'oeil.³⁴ Peck's abilities in trompe-l'oeil particularly intrigued Robbins because, along with abstract art, it could trigger a spiritual transformation. The new muralist suggested that the murals no longer aimed to socially rehabilitate the now-displaced public housing residents but instead the residents who remained.

Robbins selected the artwork for the murals from various published books on Mondrian.³⁵ The large mural was a re-creation of Mondrian's *Tableau I* (1921). Instead of the original gray panels at the center of the painting, Robbins placed six white panels at the center with, as in the original, red, yellow and blue panels at the margins, clearly contained by black lines (see Figure 1). The mural appears to represent the predominately white populated areas of Capitol Hill with predominately African

29 In the plan for an event commemorating murals in Washington, DC, American Dreams & Associates similarly wrote that the murals 'underneath the Southwest Freeway link Capital Hill [sic] to the Ellen Wilson Public Housing complex in Southeast'. SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 36. Folder: Mondrian murals—clippings, 1988–2002; faxed 'Washington murals "on the map"', sent 2 June 1999 by American Dreams & Associates.

30 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 30. Folder: Murals—Public Art, 1987–1988, letter from Lynne Zamil to Robbins, 6 May 1988. To pay for the murals, Robbins won grants from the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities and DC Summer Youth Program, which allowed him to commission the murals. The local business association, Capitol Hill Association of Merchants and Professionals (CHAMPS), and a local businessman also provided funds (Robbins, 2005b).

31 This was part of a list of items titled 'Influence on Design, pure form, basic colors, Discipline, interest in urban problems'. SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 35. Folder: Mondrian mural, 1988–2000 (Folder 1 of 3), handwritten notes on memo about a 5 July 1988 event.

32 SIA Robbins Papers, Box 35. Folder: Mondrian mural, 1988–2000 (Folder 1 of 3), 'Report on Mondrian mural project', 18 August 1988, page 1.

33 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 35. Folder: Mondrian mural, 1988–2000 (Folder 1 of 3), 'Report on Mondrian mural project', 18 August 1988, page 2.

34 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 30. Folder: Murals—Public Art, 1987–1988, 'Winners, fine art: G. Byron Peck, second place', *Airbrush Action*, November/December 1987, page 44.

35 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 35: letter from Robbins to Betsy Holtzman.

American areas south of the freeway, to the northeast and in the southwest. Robbins had envisioned another large mural on an apartment house across 6th Street, SE. The diamond-shaped *Tableau No. IV; Lozenge Composition with Red, Gray, Blue, Yellow, and Black* (1924/1925) has six white panels at the center and other non-white panels at the very edges of the painting. Given their location and the ideas of Mondrian and Robbins, these two large murals should be viewed as a powerful sign of a future segregated and racially purified Capitol Hill. But, while supportive of the endeavor, the owner of the apartment building rejected Robbins' offer of the mural.³⁶

Robbins placed 13 murals in the freeway underpass, 'simulating, as it were, paintings hanging on a gallery wall'.³⁷ The 13 Mondrian murals are from images with more centrally located colored panels. To Robbins, the murals in the underpass represent 'a bridge'—with a 'gate' at the north end—between two racially segregated areas. As in the case of the Museum of African Art, this gallery would bring together two communities, which Robbins believed had never been in contact before. The Mondrian Gate offered a gallery for transformation, except that this gallery was now without African art.

Robbins came to understand the murals as primarily educating the white residents. With the removal of the residents from the Ellen Wilson Dwellings, the gallery as a gate would now expose white residents to the settler colonial perspective of 'universal art' and transform them. It is important to recognize that Robbins was considered, in the words of one journalist, 'brave' for creating the murals.³⁸ Why was he considered brave? In the newsletter of the local Capitol Hill business association, one writer saw the function of the murals specifically in relation to the Ellen Wilson Dwellings:

'The disciplined lines and forms that bring clarity and order to the luxuriant chaos of the world around us ...' is an apt description of the Art of Piet Mondrian, and a reason why it fits so well as a mural at the Ellen Wilson Project. As the District government begins to bring order to the chaos of a dilapidated housing project, the Mondrian murals help to focus that effort. At the same time it gives a segment of our community an opportunity to participate in the rehabilitation.³⁹

By November 1988, when these lines were printed, the DC government had moved residents out of the Ellen Wilson Dwellings with the promise to renovate the buildings. Thus, the government brought 'order' and 'clarity' by moving everyone out. Local elites understood that, by installing the Mondrian Gate, Robbins proved that they could do even more. In September 1989, Robbins wrote, 'We hope that the pride that people in our community take in these murals will be one small step towards a more socially stable integrated neighborhood that we are all striving for'.⁴⁰ For Robbins, 'more socially stable' integration required permanently removing the allegedly unstable African American renters and expanding the number of allegedly stable, predominately white homeowners. Members of a local business association had developed plans advocating private redevelopment of the area with public and private units, which they soon changed to completely private ownership.⁴¹ Robbins was part of a neighborhood association that called for the destruction of the Ellen Wilson Dwellings and rejected any redevelopment at all (Spencer, 1995a). He argued that the murals provided a visual

36 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 35. Folder: Mondrian mural, 1988-2000 (Folder 1 of 3), letters between Meda Nalley of JC Associates and Robbins, 18 August and 15 September 1988.

37 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 35. Folder: Mondrian mural, 1988-2000 (Folder 1 of 3), Memorandum, 'Report on Mondrian mural project', 18 August 1988.

38 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 36. Folder: Mondrian murals—clippings, 1988-2002; see also Spencer (1995b).

39 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 35. Folder: Mondrian mural, 1988-2000 (Folder 1 of 3); see also Parsons (1988).

40 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 35. Folder: Mondrian mural, 2001-2003, letter to DC Fire Department, 4 September 1989.

41 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 34. Folder: Sousa Neighborhood Association, *Sousa Trumpet*, October 1989.

aesthetic for the neighborhood.⁴² The visual aesthetic of the murals, which built on Mondrian's thought, were meant to instill pride and maturation through spiritual and racial evolution, which would integrate these advanced beings into a racial brotherhood and harmonious universal equilibrium. Using the 'disciplined lines and forms' of 1920s and 1930s settler colonial globalization, Robbins helped focus and encourage his neighbors' aspirations for racial discipline, order and purity.

Black globalizations across time and space

Robbins installed these murals on a racially contested block during the late 1980s global gentrification wave. At this time, Washington, DC, was 'a city dotted with freshly dug 50-foot-deep foundations and 20-story cranes' for new construction. Murals of stilettos, brandy snifters and trompe-l'oeil 'merrily' spread along construction fences and temporarily available walls in the city.⁴³ By this time, African American residents in the area had dealt with the destruction of the freeway, at least 15 years of gentrification (Brown, 1988), and the continual attack on Black Power. They had art of their own.

Robbins placed the murals within a black geography that was aware of African art and societies long before Robbins was. Three blocks away, in 1929, African American women associated with Pan-Africanism and the Negritude movement opened a settlement house called Southeast House. Ida Gibbs Hunt, a member of the organization Washington Welfare Association, which established the house, had organized the Pan-African Congresses with W.E.B. Du Bois after the first world war (Alexander, 2010). Watercolorist Lois Mailou Jones taught children's art classes at the Southeast House, while she worked as a new professor at Howard University in 1930 (Hill, 1991) and incorporated African design elements in her own paintings, such as in *The Ascent of Ethiopia* (1932). She brought these students into contact with African art and the ideas of Alain Locke and other scholars at Howard University (Snyder, 2018). As director, from 1937, Mae C. Hawes also connected the Southeast House to Du Bois through her earlier experience teaching social work at Atlanta University (Merriweather, 2015). The freeway that destroyed part of the Ellen Wilson Dwellings displaced the Southeast House across the Anacostia River.

Soon after this destruction, as if to maintain these globalizations, a Pan-African mural appeared on the Ellen Wilson Dwellings. Robbins with his—in Katherine McKittrick's words—'geography of domination' (McKittrick, 2006) confronted already existing geographies of African American women that connected past, present and future, including W.E.B. Du Bois and interwar Pan-Africanism. Just one building away from the 30-foot Mondrian mural there was another mural, put up around 1970 (see Figures 5 and 6).

Avila (2014) argues that the different experiences with mid-twentieth-century freeway construction and urban renewal led to different racialized perspectives and thus different forms of art. Here, this mural advertised a new community center. The mural's abstract image of a black person on a red, black and green background looking into the light with a raised fist signified Black Power, black nationalism and Pan-Africanism. One might imagine the figure expanding to include more people, a chromatic saturation coloring in the white space (Moten, 2008) of Capitol Hill. This community center did not exist within Robbins' dichotomy of segregation/integration, but rather, as Tyner (2007: 227, 230) argues, 'Black liberation was not based on integration ... To integrate into a white supremacist society was to negate the spaces of African Americans'. In this basement community center, residents could use the day care center and take a variety of classes, including African drumming and dancing. In the early 1970s, youth living in the Ellen Wilson Dwelling traveled around the region as the Ujamaa Dancers and

42 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 35. Folder: Mondrian mural, 1988-2000 (Folder 1 of 3), Sousa Board Meeting Minutes for January 1990.

43 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 30. Folder: Murals—Public Art, 1987-1988; see also Cannizzaro (1987).



FIGURE 5 The building in the background is the Ellen Wilson Community Center; the building in the foreground is where the 30-foot mural would soon be placed (source: GWU Special Collections)

Drummers. In contrast to Capitol Hill's temporality of the Victorian era and colonialism, this mural represented a long-standing Pan-African globalization and an anti-colonial or de-colonizing temporality.

Robbins placed the Mondrian Gate where he could view it as he drove from the freeway to his house. In contrast, the community center mural was at human level for pedestrians. The image faced the freeway with a defiant pose, though it is not clear whether it was visible from the freeway. Residents walking around the project or those at the public housing projects south of the freeway would walk to the local grocery store past this image when taking the pedestrian short cut.⁴⁴ Thus pedestrians, and those parking in front of the center, could be reminded of globalizations and temporalities that included them as actors.

While he did not discuss the community center mural, Robbins and others understood the Mondrian murals as in battle with graffiti. In an article about the Mondrian murals, journalist Duncan Spencer asked, 'Can Hill artwork beat the graffiti?'.⁴⁵ Robbins and others were obsessed with graffiti; Robbins believed that the African American residents south of the freeway liked the Mondrian murals because they did not, at first, paint over them with graffiti, and had a 'racial memory' of the importance

44 I learned this from talking with former residents of a public housing development south of the freeway.

45 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 36. Folder: Mondrian murals—clippings, 1988-2002; see also Spencer (1995b).



FIGURE 6 The Ellen Wilson Community Center in the 1970s (source: GWU Special Collections)

of art in African everyday life.⁴⁶ However, a photo of one of the murals in the underpass shows that someone spray-painted a list of names next to the mural: Tiny Tim, Alvin, John, Ruth Ann, Muffy, and what looks like ‘Fuck Mondrian’ cut off at the edge of the photograph, leaving only ‘Fuck Mon’.⁴⁷ This photograph suggests that at least one graffiti artist may have rejected Mondrian and Robbins for covering over graffiti, communication and art likely made by local residents. The large Mondrian mural itself can be seen as revanchist graffiti, a sign of white power.⁴⁸

In 1996, using HOPE VI funds, federal and city housing officials destroyed the public housing buildings, the 30-foot mural and the community center mural to build a new development without any rentals. They sought to create a *terra nullius* that would allow for the taking of the land. In contrast to Mondrian’s renewal city of planes, the developers extended the Victorian-era neighborhood and ‘integrated’ the space, but not the residents or the buildings of the Ellen Wilson Dwellings, into the time of Capitol Hill. This integration into ‘universal’ European time and ‘universal’ equilibrium made permanent the displacement of the Ellen Wilson Dwelling residents and empowered the further imperial expansion of Capitol Hill south beyond the freeway.⁴⁹

Conclusion

In contrast to conventional policy histories, HOPE VI arrived at the end of this story as a late, secondary actor in the permanent displacement of the residents of the Ellen Wilson Dwellings. A wide range of potential actors must be examined beyond the

46 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 36. Folder: Mondrian murals—clippings, 1988-2002; see also McKelway (1995).

47 SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 30. Folder: Murals—Public Art, 1987-1988.

48 A local journalist rejected other graffiti, declaring that the Mondrian murals were ‘graffiti at its best’. SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 36. Folder: Mondrian murals—clippings, 1988-2002; see also McKelway (1995).

49 In 1999, a group proposed to expand and create a continuous neighborhood to the Anacostia River, ‘a united, integral place to live, work, play, and do business’; SIA, Robbins Papers, Box 35. Folder: Mondrian mural, 2001-2003, ‘SouthEast ReUnited!’

conventional policy ones. In this article I examined the role of aesthetics, art, artists and art purveyors to reveal the multiple globalizations and the active presence of settler colonialism and anti-colonialism in the late 1980s gentrification wave.

A return to the imperial Paris of the 1920s and 1930s made the meaning of the murals clear. Mondrian's artworks were cartographical fantasies of a vast, segregated, white European city pushing colonial subjects to marginalized areas, and the destruction this would necessitate. The late 1980s and 1990s opened up possibilities for new forms of displacement and revanchism on a global scale. Robbins brought Mondrian's maps of a future segregated, imperial world to 1980s Washington, DC. Within this revanchist context, Robbins used the Mondrian images as a fortress gate, a racial map of the future, and as a gallery for public education to enable the spiritual and racial transformation of first African American public housing residents and then white homeowners. Robbins took an active role in the revanchism of the late 1980s and 1990s, which enabled the violence of permanent displacement enacted on this community. The Mondrian Gate signaled both the defense of Capitol Hill and its purification as a space of pure white, pure black lines and distant pure colors, and also motivated a white empowerment to take new land—a settler colonial globalization.

I argue that these specific murals reveal the settler colonial nature of gentrification, which always confronts anti-colonial opponents with their own art. A pre-existing geography in the neighborhood organized and led by African American women had long connected with African art and societies as part of a liberatory globalization. The Black Power movement had integrated new art, including the Ellen Wilson Community Center mural, into this geography. The new wave of gentrification in the late 1980s brought about another phase of these continuing battles with the arts of other globalizations such as that of global imperialism. From this perspective, the Mondrian murals as maps of the implanting and expansion of a white city resonated with long-standing fears in Washington, DC, that white elites were realizing 'The Plan' to reassert white control over the city, spread gentrification and displace African Americans (Asch and Musgrove, 2017). The more recent wave of gentrification has continued to mobilize settler colonialism with aestheticized Black Power while displacing black bodies (Summers, 2019). The aesthetics of gentrification of each wave illuminate the battles of multiple globalizations in cities and even on individual blocks.

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