

gridded behavior

Iris van Velzen — Research paper

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Graphic Design

INTRODUCTION

The grid is a symbol for a power structure. A power structure which is designed to guide and control people and their surroundings.

During our research, inspired by our site, the blocks inside the ZOHO Raingarden (Figure 1), Rotterdam. Me and Mirte Kort detected that nature is not necessarily font of these power structures. Nature often decides for itself where it wants to go. It cannot be influenced by the grid.

This is a beautiful metaphor for us as people; even though the perfect system has been designed and applied, we always trust our own feelings and instinct over this structure.

This site and subject raised the question; Is it better to follow the grid, or to reject it?



figure 1 — Iris van Velzen in the ZOHO Raingarden, captured by Mirte Kort, August 2022

GRID & CONTROL

As a graphic designer, everyone always taught me to follow the rules. Use a grid when creating a book, use margins, and typography should always have a certain line height, don't stretch it. Use specific programs, because they are the industry standard. Some graphic designers, such as Wim Crouwel¹, dedicate their entire life to the grid, but is it essential to graphic design?

There are a lot of rules embedded into the Graphic Design practice, ones you always need to have in the back of your mind. All these rules have one origin: the grid, which has a rich history emerging from the army (Foucault, 1975²), and bricks. (Higgins, 2009³) Eventually, entire cities got designed based on the grid as well, starting with Chicago, one of the more extreme examples being New York. (Speed Levitch, 1998⁴) The grid also gives us control over our personal lives, think of our agenda, mail, social media, etc. (figure 2)

There has been made a lot of art inspired by the grid, one of the more famous works by Piet Mondriaan, (Figure 3). This work is a clear example of the control the grid has. The painting consists of four yellow lines on a rotated square canvas, it shows that even when you hide parts of the grid, its control is so strong that it is still there.

Another work by Superstudio, an Italian architectural group, and movement, was quite inspiring. They questioned the idea that modern architecture could better the world in the 60s. (kunstbus) Therefore they created this series of dystopian scenarios, which they called, "negative utopias." Eventually publishing a series of works in 1969 known as *Il Monumento Continuo* (or Continuous Monument). (figure 4)

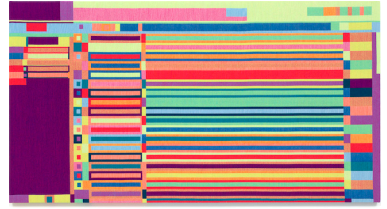


figure 2 — Rafaël Rozendaal, *15 05 02 Gmail*, 2015. Los Angeles. Photo: Don Lewis.

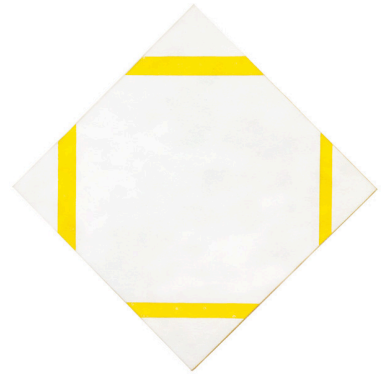


figure 3 — Piet Mondriaan, *Lozenge Composition with Four Yellow Lines*, 1933, Oil on Canvas.



figure 4 — Superstudio, *Il Monumento Continuo* (or Continuous Monument), 1969

1 — Wim Crouwel, Huygen, Frederike, and Harry Lake. *Wim Crouwel Modernist*. Lecturis Publishers, 2015.

2 — Foucault, Michel. "Part Three: Discipline." *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Vintage Books, New York, 1995.

3 — Higgins, Hannah B. *The Grid Book*. MIT Press, 2009.

4 — Speed Levitch, "The Cruise."

GRID & NATURE

In 1979 art historian Rosalind Krauss describes the grid of modernist painting as “flattened, geometrized, ordered ... anti-natural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature.” (Krauss, 1979⁵) She suggests in her theory that the grid is the opposite of nature, that it is not natural for it to be organised in squares.

This raises an interesting question whether nature is ignoring the grid? and why do we try to control nature as well, a thing that cannot be controlled. It is a question Bart Eysink Smeets also asks in his photography project, *Hedge*, 2021. (figure 5) Which is inspired by people cutting their hedge in perfect rectangles.

Within this project this was a very important question we were asking ourselves, what is nature? How do you define nature and why do we try to structure it. When walking through Rotterdam city we also noticed a lot of hedges and plants being cut into squares. However we also found some small anarchy, nature not agreeing with the confines of the grid.

5 — Krauss, Rosalind. *Grids*, vol. 9, 1979, p. 50. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778321>. Accessed 19 Dec. 2022.



figure 5 — Bart Eysink Smeets, *Hedge*, 2021

GRID & OFFGRID

Desire Lines, also known as 'Olifanten paadjes' in Dutch, are paths that form by people trying to cut off a path, be faster, or others just following the path that is already there because of the amount of people using them.⁶ (figure 6) Even though modern cities have been designed using grids and structures thought out so well, yet why do these Desire Lines still occur? (Van der Burg, 2011).

Yet, there are also architects which listen to the instinct of people, such as Rem Coolhaas. Together with a team of students he tracked the walking routes on the campus of McCormick Tribune Campus Centre for two days. Based on this documentation of heavily walked routes, they designed the square on campus. (Figure 7)

This project inspired us that maybe a combination of the grid, and nature going it's own way. Existing together in harmony might be possible as well, perhaps we have been looking at our topic of the grid vs following your instinct in terms defined as black and white. It made us wonder whether the grid as we have been researching it, is as bad after all, structure might not always be bad.

Another very nice example of working with rules, while still providing freedom is The Conditional Design Workbook by Studio Moniker.⁷ In this book they created instructions, easy to follow and still make space for a little anarchy within these boundaries.

Based on the methodology of Rem Coolhaas and studio Moniker we created a couple of animations. Using the grid of our site, the blocks as a base. To still have a 'system' to stick to, while also giving a lot of freedom, to draw whatever we wanted with this grid.

'the grid' can be seen almost as a metaphor for the unwritten rules, norms and values society imposes on us. Simply put: without grids, you could not go off-grid.



figure 6 — Jan-Dirk van der Burg, *Olifantenpaadjes*, 2011

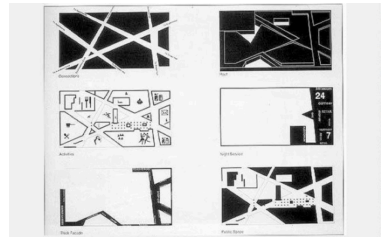


figure 7 — Rem Coolhaas, *McCormick Tribune Campus Centre Circulation Paths*, 1997



figure 8 — Iris van Velzen, *handdrawn animation stills*, 2022

6 — Der, Burg Jan-Dirk van, and Maarten 't Hart. *Olifantenpaadjes = Desire Lines*. Van Der Burg, 2011.

7 — Maurer, Luna, et al. *Conditional Design Workbook*. Valiz, 2013.

CONCLUSION

The blocks in the ZOHO raingarden, shows a very big contrast between the grid and nature trying to grow over it. The positioning of the blocks inspired our research into the grid. Which for us as graphic designers was already very intriguing. Our intuitional idea was to create a video installation around the site, inspired by Rafaël Rozendaal's Tapestries and Piet Mondriaans grid. which would show an animation about the grid.

Animation is a very important aspect in graphic design, it's becoming more and more important to also incorporate motion into our work. We also wanted to tell a story, and seeming as we both wanted to work with animation, it was the perfect medium to work with.

We created a poetic video experience about someone slowly reaching awareness of the power structures of the grid, rejecting them, and in the end; accepting them as being part of this world.

So, would it better to follow the grid, or to reject it?

Our answer would be that you need a bit of both. You can only reject the grid if you know of it's existence. Only when you become aware of something is when you can have an opinion about the matter, and therefore make an active choice of rejecting or accepting the idea.

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