

A black and white photograph of Gerrit Rietveld, a Dutch architect, leaning over a table and working on a model of the Schroeder House. The model is made of light-colored blocks and features a staircase and a dining table. Large, bold, blue text is overlaid on the image, reading "Gerrit Rietveld".

Ida van Zijl

Gerrit Rietveld

PHAIDON

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Gerrit Rietveld



Phaidon Press Limited
Regent's Wharf
All Saints Street
London N1 9PA

Phaidon Press Inc.
180 Varick Street
New York, NY 10014

www.phaidon.com

First published 2010
© 2010 Phaidon Press Limited

ISBN 978 0 7148 5748 0

This book was published with the support of the Dutch Foundation
for Literature.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British
Library.

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Designed by Wim Crouwel, assisted by Remco Crouwel

Printed in China

The author would like to thank the Centraal Museum and Phaidon
Press for their contribution in the making of this book.

Gerrit Rietveld's work is © Gerrit Thomas Rietveld, c/o Pictoright,
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Schröderarchief are listed below by page, and abbreviations are
used throughout: RSA=Centraal Museum, Rietveld Schröderarchief,
NAL=Nederlands Architectuurinstituut, t=top, b=bottom, l=left, r=right,
c=centre. Archief Verriet Instituut: 154b; AVIODROME Luchtfotografie,
Lelystad: 171; Badisches Landesmuseum: 44tr; Bauhaus Archiv:
207t&b; Bildarchiv Österreichische Nationalbibliothek: 95bl; Bureau
Monumenten, Archeologie, photo Han van Gool: 181b, 231tr; CM:
22tl, 23t, 194r; CM and Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, photo Stedelijk
Museum, Amsterdam 2009: 28, 29tl, 222tr; Centraal Museum,
loan Moolenbeek: 58b; CM/loan Nederlands Architectuurinstituut:
134t; CM/loan private collection: 195b; CM/photo Axel Funke:
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c, 228bl&cbl, 230tr&ctr, NAI/photo Ernst Moritz: 197tl; NAI/
photo Eva Besnyö: 81bl&123br; NAI/photo Jan Versnel: 177b; NAI/
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153b; private collection: 182t; Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische
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Foreword

In late 1988 I visited Han Schröder, Truus Schröder-Schröder's youngest daughter, in Richmond, Virginia. I wanted to interview her about the Rietveld Schröder House, its furniture and contents, and the archive amassed by her mother, which had been transferred to the stewardship of the Centraal Museum in Utrecht a year earlier. 'You cannot understand the house unless you're aware of my mother's views and how she actually lived there,' she said as soon as the formal niceties were out of the way.

For two days I peered through a kaleidoscope of memories into a life animated by her mother's idealism. For most of the time we spoke about the house and Truus, and only as I was leaving did Han bring up the subject of Gerrit Rietveld. 'You're doing an awful lot for Rietje,' she said. Until that moment I had not fully realized that the guardianship of Truus Schröder's estate, besides entailing an obligation on the part of the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, was also a personal commitment for me, a debt of honour that I hope has been repaid in part with this book.

Truus Schröder always firmly believed that the house and archive had to be preserved intact in order to guard the legacy of Rietveld's work and ideas and their deserved reputation. Much has been achieved on all fronts in the twenty or so years since the transfer of his legacy. Important milestones were the publications about the Rietveld Schröder House edited by Paul Overy in 1988, the two volumes about De Stijl edited by Carel Blotkamp from 1982 and 1996, and the Rietveld biography by Frits Bless from 1982. In 1992 the Centraal Museum staged a major retrospective exhibition of Rietveld's work, which subsequently toured

to museums around the world. A catalogue raisonné compiled by Marijke Kuper and myself was produced to accompany this exhibition. In the interim there have been several publications about specific aspects of Rietveld's oeuvre. Interest in his work burgeoned. Several houses by Rietveld have been restored and examples of Rietveld's furniture are now to be found in important design collections. A high point in the recognition for Rietveld's oeuvre was the inscription of the Schröder House on the UNESCO World Heritage List in December 2000.

A monograph that presents Rietveld's most important designs and ideas along with relevant facts about his life as a cohesive whole has until now been lacking. Despite the materials at my disposal, filling this lacuna proved to be less straightforward than anticipated. One considerable difficulty was the absence of an extensive personal archive. Thus far I have been unable to find even something as basic as a photograph of the young Rietveld with his parents and siblings. Extensive correspondence, diaries or other documents in which Rietveld recorded his thoughts and ideas are not available. He published articles on a regular basis from the 1930s, but many of these texts are limited to fairly general arguments about the visual arts and his outlook on life. In the literature a great deal of attention has been devoted to the period when Rietveld was involved with the De Stijl circle. His significance for the architecture and design of the inter-war years and the period after World War II, in the Netherlands as well as abroad, has still barely been touched upon. This volume does not claim to be exhaustive either, but it is an attempt to present a more balanced picture, intended as an introduction for those intrigued by the

Red-Blue Chair and the Schröder House who want to discover more about Rietveld and his work. At the same time I hope that it will spur others to undertake research into his oeuvre and its significance in a broader context.

While writing this book I have made grateful use of the findings of earlier research by Bertus Mulder, Marijke Kuper, Paul Overy and Peter Vöge. Besides discussions about Rietveld's work with these authorities, my conversations with Rob Dettingmeijer, who provided a commentary on the initial draft of the manuscript, Jurjen Creman, Gerrit Oorthuys, Marie-Thérèse van Thoor and many others have broadened my insight and understanding. A text does not automatically become a readable book, so I am also grateful to Molly Faries, Willemijn Fock, Felice van Marrewijk and Karlijn Stoffels for their suggestions and editorial comments. My colleagues at the Centraal Museum, including Bauke Aardema, Maarten Brinkman, Renger de Bruin, Cecile Ogink, Dea Rijper and Marije Verduijn, provided huge support in the gathering of material. Andrew May took on the difficult job of translating into concise English a Dutch text on a very Dutch subject in an even more Dutch context. Special thanks are due for his sensitive rendering of the many quotations from Rietveld and his contemporaries that is as faithful to their words as to the spirit of the times. There are two other people whose contribution I wish to mention specifically: Jaap Oosterhoff, who as guardian of the Rietveld Schröder Archive has for many years been a prop and stay in my research into Rietveld, and Nora Schadee, who has helped to style my texts with humour, precision and where necessary her own astute input.

And all of that for Rietje. – *Ida van Zijl*

Rietveld receiving an honorary
doctorate from the Technical
College in Delft on 11 January
1964



1. Conviction and vision

*It's not religion that guides or has guided me.
It's not idealism that compels me. It's pure egoism,
the realization of my own existence.¹*
– Rietveld, 1964

The members of the audience in the auditorium of the Technical College in Delft (Technische Hogeschool te Delft), the predecessor of Delft University of Technology, must have pricked up their ears when Rietveld spoke these words on the acceptance of his honorary doctorate on 11 January 1964. If someone else, such as Le Corbusier (1887–1965), had stated something of similar import, the audience would probably have laughed and thought, we knew that already, but he's daring to say it out loud, all the same. Things sat differently with Rietveld. To those present, he represented the idealist *pur sang*, someone who concentrated on mass production and public housing because he believed that everyone had the right to fine surroundings. He was someone who had persevered, despite setbacks and a lack of recognition, someone whose political leanings were far to the left. So religion was not his mainspring? That was to be expected from a half-baked communist, but to assert that he was not an idealist? That smacked of false modesty, something that people were not accustomed to from Rietveld. Whether the tenor and meaning of these three phrases could have been conveyed to the audience in the limited time-span of a speech of thanks is debatable, but perhaps that was not Rietveld's main concern. He was probably more interested in taking stock for himself.

'It's not religion that guides or has guided me'

It seems so self-evident, but in the secularized Dutch society of today religion is much less a motive for

someone's actions than it was for Rietveld's generation. At the dawn of the twentieth century, a broad spectrum of religiously or ideologically inspired emancipation movements was emerging. In the Netherlands the labour movement and the women's movement have been etched in the collective memory, but the various religious sects were also stirring. Within the Protestant church there was a groundswell of groupings that were pressing for autonomy and, just like the Catholics, were demanding equality in society. This development led to the 'pillarization' of Dutch society, a compartmentalization of the population based on religious or political ideology. Each pillar had its own social institutions, from church and political party to sports club and housing association, even its own particular shops, schools and hospitals.

Religion was also an all-defining factor in Rietveld's parental milieu. At the age of twenty he became a confirmed member of the strictly Calvinist Netherlands Reformed Church, a step that is not taken lightly or without conviction: a member of the congregation thereby declares that he or she subscribes to the doctrine as professed in that church, and can henceforth take part in the celebration of the Last Supper. The Netherlands Reformed Church was one of the main Protestant denominations in the country, though the formation of offshoots within this denomination was also fairly commonplace.² The reasons for such schisms are often difficult to understand for outsiders, but in essence the majority of conflicts revolve around the degree of personal responsibility for one's deeds. Many of these deeds, actually everything in which humankind takes pleasure, were wrong. 'The heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil,' to quote Ecclesiastes. This

sense of sin would colour Rietveld's younger years. The strict Calvinistic milieu in which Rietveld grew up was not, however, hidebound, closed or conservative in every respect. The vehemence of theological disputes went hand in hand with a highly developed sense of personal responsibility, the search for truth could prompt a great thirst for education and schooling, and the engagement with the world was expressed in a missionary urge to convince others. Development of one's talents was a duty, because the talents given by God had to be used for the common good, and ultimately one had to answer for one's deeds as an individual before the almighty Creator. This attitude moulded Rietveld's character and gave him the strength to search for his own path. This is how, as a seventy-year-old, he looked back on his youth:

From very early on I was also ... aware of the relativity of everything, what we observe, appreciate and appraise ... What my mother found most beautiful and best in life was considered bad and sinful by my father ... We were raised with the duty to do the right thing and to shun evil, the material was base and bad whereas the spiritual, which I have never understood, was elevated and good. When this unfulfillable duty to elevate everything to the spiritual plane fell from my shoulders, through the understanding that all our actions are just incidental phenomena in the great scheme of things, then life became lighter for me. Then I understood that (pretence or no pretence) for us nothing can be more important than the delight in the temporal growth and temporal perpetuation of the separation of ourselves and the surroundings!³

He failed to explain how or why this moral obligation was lifted from his shoulders. He never mentioned with whom he talked about such matters. It may have been Rietveld's private tutor in architecture, the architect P. J. C. Klaarhamer (1874–1954), who was responsible for sowing the first seeds of doubt. Klaarhamer had belonged to the same Church as Rietveld, but later renounced it.⁴ Another possible interlocutor was Willem, Rietveld's younger brother by two years, who read classics at Utrecht University and in 1914 attended seminars in Leiden given by the philosopher G. J. P. J. Bolland, a neo-Hegelian whose ideas made a big impression on artists. Rietveld may

also have become acquainted with the work of Spinoza and Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche via his brother.⁵ One of Rietveld's first clients, H. G. J. Schelling (1888–1978), an architect for the Dutch Railways (Nederlandse Spoorwegen), was certainly an important conversation partner. He introduced Rietveld to the work of the Indian sage Rabindranath Tagore, which Rietveld was fond of quoting later on. Rietveld tried to involve his wife, Vrouwgien Rietveld-Hadders (1883–1957), in his personal development and wanted her to distance herself from traditional religion. 'Ger, what will you give me in return?', was her alleged response.⁶ Such a step would, in her eyes, cause nothing but misery. For his part, Rietveld sawed off the ornaments on the harmonium that he and Vrouwgien played when singing psalms and hymns, and once he ejected the minister from the house in a somewhat less than mild-mannered fashion.

It was no empty slogan that he did not allow himself to be guided by religion, even in his work. Over and against international, secular Modernism stood a conservative movement inspired by national traditions. From the 1930s to the mid-1950s, this traditionalism was prevalent in Dutch architecture. The Catholic architects from this school very much wanted to see religious conviction reflected in buildings. Their most outspoken representative was M. J. Granpré Molière (1883–1973), who was appointed professor at the Technical College in Delft in 1924. His work and that of his students was therefore denoted as the 'Delft School', a term later applied to all traditionalist architecture.⁷ Two months after receiving his honorary doctorate at Delft in 1964, Rietveld was to be made an honorary member of the Association of Dutch Architects (Bond van Nederlandse Architecten, or BNA), at the same time as Granpré Molière.⁸ Some of those listening to Rietveld's address in Delft were undoubtedly already aware of this piquant detail.

'It's not idealism that compels me'

That was a deliberate statement. When Rietveld produced his first experimental designs the world was awash with idealists, from advocates of world peace – the League of Nations was established on 25 January 1919 – to the supporters of the Third International,

in which socialists, communists and anarchists were united in the struggle to bring about the socialist world revolution. All were convinced their utopias were within reach. In a similar vein, the founders of *De Stijl* wanted nothing less than to create new art for a new society. 'The new consciousness is prepared to realize the internal life as well as the external life,' reads the fourth precept of the *De Stijl* group's 1918 manifesto that was signed by Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931), Vilmos Huszár (1884–1960), Anthony Kok (1882–1969), Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) and Jan Wils (1891–1972).⁹ It was formulated so generally that the painter Mondrian, whose ideas were inspired by theosophy, as well as the architect Wils, a hardline communist, felt that they could put their signatures to it.¹⁰ From 1919 Rietveld was closely involved with this avant-garde group. For the first time he felt he belonged, and the idea that he was crazy, which he mentioned in an interview many years later, evaporated.¹¹ He threw himself into a world that unremittably propagated the new. With hindsight it is difficult to ascertain the beliefs that Rietveld adhered to at the time. In his furniture designs the focus was already fixed on their spatial character, but whether this had social implications, and if so then what, remains unclear. In later texts his attitude towards *De Stijl* was somewhat detached, portraying *De Stijl* as a necessary phase in the renewal of visual art and architecture.

In the 1920s the circles in which Rietveld moved were expanding thanks to the publication of his work in the *De Stijl* journal. This exposure prompted Bruno Taut (1880–1938), Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948), El Lissitzky (1890–1941) and Mart Stam (1899–1986) to visit him in Utrecht. These avant-garde figures were driven by high-minded ideals. El Lissitzky and Stam were confirmed communists; Rietveld was a 'fellow traveller'. He never became a member of the Communist Party or, for that matter, any other political movement, but he was certainly active in clubs and associations that maintained close ties, officially or otherwise, with the left wing of the political spectrum, such as the Netherlands-New Russia Fellowship (*Genootschap Nederland-Nieuw Rusland*). Many Dutch artists and intellectuals, including the architect H. P. Berlage (1856–1934), were members of this society, which effectively danced to the tune of the

Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In 1928 Rietveld became the architecture editor of the fellowship's journal and designed its vignette and cover.¹² Rietveld also sat on the board of the Utrecht chapter of the Dutch Film League (*Nederlandse Filmliga*), alongside the architect Sybold van Ravesteyn (1889–1983) and *jonkheer* M. R. Radermacher Schorer (1888–1956), a minor aristocrat who was director of an insurance company and a patron of the arts. This association was founded by the author and critic Menno ter Braak and the filmmaker Joris Ivens in 1927 to organize the private viewing of films not screened by the commercial cinemas.¹³ Rietveld also organized lectures and took it upon himself to bring important exhibitions to Utrecht. All of this demonstrates his profound concern about developments in society, especially where these pertained to culture in general or his profession in particular. Rietveld had a close personal relationship with the architect J. J. P. Oud (1890–1963), co-founder of *De Stijl*, particularly in the 1920s and 30s.¹⁴ In their correspondence, Rietveld reveals a side to his character that is much more emotional than his public appearances and published texts might suggest. The opening words of his first postcard to Oud, dated 19 August 1919, read, 'Esteemed Sir, I thank you for your letter and understand very well that you find it rather expensive.' Oud had asked Rietveld to furnish a model home in the blocks of housing he had designed for Rotterdam's new residential district of Spangen. Their correspondence soon became less formal in tone. On 23 January 1920, Rietveld wrote, 'Dear Oud (I will simply omit that Sir, which sounds so strange now) and I will simply write in the familiar form, which I do in my thoughts also – if that is not alright then just put me in my place – I can cope with just about anything.'¹⁵ Rietveld regularly asked Oud for information and his opinion on a diversity of matters, while in return telling him his personal views on these topics and letting him know what he was working on. He often extolled the virtues of Oud's work and at that time Rietveld probably looked up to him as a role model. Oud was already internationally renowned for his public housing projects in Rotterdam and kept up an extensive network of contacts all over the world.

In the period 1920–40 Rietveld took an especially active and vocal interest in all kinds of social and



G. Rietveld

elke ware schepping (of ze in den vorm van uitvinding, gebouw, schilderij, dans of muziek verschijnt) verandert het inzicht, de eischen en de behoeften van den tijd en komt in botsing met nog heerschende eischen en behoeften uit vorige perioden.
een schepping moet dus de plaats **veroveren** in plaats van te beantwoorden aan de geldende eischen en de noodzakelijkheid.

rietveld.



The construction and designing of the Fair was planned under the direction of Holland's most distinguished architect, G. RIETVELD, an internationally famous modernistic and a pioneer of modern architecture in Holland. MR. PAUL LORD, State Planning Director, worked closely with MR. RIETVELD in setting up the Holland Fair. They are shown here with MR. AND MRS. GISPEN, who represented the Dutch Government in the Arts and Crafts section of the Fair.



MR. A. VAN HOLLANDER and MR. ELFRED GROVER, of Store Planning and Display, check plans for the Commercial Section of the Fair with MR. J. H. F. TEN BOSCH, Head of the Display Division of the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs.



It is important that the American people not only have a chance to become acquainted with the people of Holland and their products, but that they understand the role that they, as consumers, play in the economic recovery of Holland . . . and in turn how this recovery is of mutual advantage to both Holland and America. MR. DAVID ARONS, Publicity Director, is shown discussing the plans for keeping the public informed about the Fair, with the Manager of the Holland Fair, MR. HENRY FISHER, of The Netherlands Trade Commission.



In addition to the members of our own store staff who have worked with the people of Holland in setting up the Fair, our Personnel Department has handled the hiring of people for the Netherlands Trade Commission . . . Mrs. J. H. GLASS, Personnel Director, is shown conferring with Mrs. M. W. PRICE, Secretary of the NTC, Holland Fair office, about the selection of personnel to fill the needs of the NTC.



Opposite page: Rietveld as a young man, c.1905 (top left); Rietveld with his wife, Vrouwgien Hadders, shortly after their marriage in 1911 (top right); Rietveld with his three oldest children, c.1920 (bottom left); Rietveld in *De Stijl* 7, 1927 (bottom right)

This page: Rietveld in *The Gimbelite*, May 1950 (top left); Rietveld with Willem Sandberg, c.1955-60 (top right); Rietveld with his great-grandson in the living area of the Schröder House, c.1963 (bottom)

