

Summary

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Summary

Theodore M. Brown, Louisville, Kentucky

Rietveld and his importance in Modern Architecture

(Pages 419-420)

During his lifetime, popular and official interest in Rietveld's work ranged from icy indifference to heated enthusiasm, while evaluation of the Utrecht architect varied considerably. Some critics viewed him as a seminal artist, but others saw him as a provincial tinkerer. He was scorned for cavalier treatment of technics and lauded for ingenious planning. At times dismissed as a pictorial stuntman, at other times Rietveld was applauded as Holland's pioneer Functionalist. An understanding of the role of this controversial architect in the history of 20th century design is a step toward a sounder grasp of the entire period. But where does one place Rietveld's unobtrusive works within the heroic context of the Larkin Building, Weissenhofstraße, Van Nelle, and Bauhaus? How should we view his microscopic compositions in relation to the immense G. M. Technical Center, Värlingby, Chandigarh, and Brasília? Although specific knowledge of contemporary architecture is enormous, we have not yet grasped the key issues of our period. Indeed, we understand far more of the essentials—motivation, assumptions, meaning—of Ancient, Medieval and Renaissance architecture than of 20th century American and European work.

Has the architecture of the past fifty years been motivated primarily by technological or by aesthetic considerations? Did Functionalism exert the enormous influence that the practitioners of the period professed? Was the "new" architecture as uncontaminated by historical and iconographical associations as was believed? Or were there elements of historicism, and perhaps even symbolism, in the work of this period? Did modern architectural forms develop from a social base, or were they mainly an expression of personalities? Was the European episode of the 1920's simply an elaboration of Wrightian principles and motives; or did European architecture spring from different soil? Fact must be separated from myth and threadbare legends scrutinized sceptically in order to plot a tenable historical chart.

The dominant view has been Germanic, although not expressed exclusively by Germans. Gropius, Behrendt, Hilberseimer, Oud, Sartoris and others, assuming an economic-social-technical base, have projected a persuasive materialistic image of the genesis of modern architecture. Sigfried Giedion's *Bauen in Frankreich* (1928) and *apocalyptic Space, Time and Architecture* (1941) brilliantly consolidate the prejudices of the time; the latter, an architectural Who's Who, has become a social register of thoroughbred architects of impeccable technological pedigree.

What, then, is the place of Rietveld's intimate, and often materially mongrel works within the modern galaxy of strident artist-architects and technical wizards? Some critics accepted him reluctantly, apologizing for his structural bad manners. Others allowed him into the fraternity on the basis of false technical credentials, assuming that Rietveld's plastered brick walls must really be reinforced concrete. While still others passed judgement by simply ignoring him: Diedion, for example, omitted his work from *Space, Time and Architecture*, thus sentencing Rietveld to historical oblivion.

Indisputably, economic, social and technical elements are major components of architecture; nevertheless, architectural forms are not created by them. Architecture is composed by people who choose and assemble architectonic elements from a varied source of formal possibilities. As we all know, reinforced concrete did not create cantilevers, nor does a low budget produce undecorated surfaces, and shifting social conditions do not spawn new physical patterns. Forms are not produced by functions; instead, "forms in design," as Philip Johnson remarked, "beget more forms." Social and material forces generate architecture, but architects make architectural forms.

Recently a critic, reviewing Rietveld's work, wrote that the Red-Blue chair "signalled the most radical change in the language of architecture for five hundred years", and argued that "Open-minded study of both house [Schröder] and chair reveal how obviously and purely spatial the conjugation of elements is. Nothing could be more essentially architectonic". Another writer castigated the designer of the chair, and scolded Rietveld, "who should have known better . . . for designing uncomfortable chairs of "pure geometric abstractions . . . [which] had no merit except in terms of the Dutch art movement that was known as De Stijl". The Red-Blue chair was specifically censured, because in it "the aesthetic motive predominated. . . ." The critic implies that the design of the chair is largely in the realm of decoration; thus its influence on architecture was superficial.

These extremes in present-day evaluation of Rietveld's work manifest our contemporary historical confusion. Both writers are perceptive; both are knowledgeable; neither is "right" or "wrong". Yet they "see" differently; because each is applying a fundamentally different historical standard. And this is the crux of the historiographical problem. What historical (and by extension, critical) standards are to be used as a basis of selection and evaluation of contemporary architecture?

Of the many relevant factors, the key architectural issue of the early 1920's was the creation of a method, a system, a syntax of architectural composition appropriate to what was believed to be the cultural underpinnings of the time. And it is in the sphere of "language-building" that Rietveld's work must be seen and where his contribution to 20th century design lies.

When the Red-Blue chair appeared around the end of World War I, still dominant were ideals of academic composition: massive elements, stacked with respect to gravity, grouped symmetrically about central voids, strung along the spine of principal and subordinate axes.

Peter Smithson, London

Rietveld, builder and furniture designer

(Page 421)

Thinking carefully about my personal relation to Rietveld and the Schröder House, my first thought was that there should not be too much talk, for what I most admired about Rietveld, and sought to emulate, was his quietness. His seemed to me to be the only pattern of behaviour for a true architect.

Never the assessor, the consultant, the maker of introductory remarks or the expert witness on government commissions. Just a builder and furniture maker.

Just a builder and furniture maker? Then one sees why the words accumulate.

For it is inescapable that the Red-Blue chair and the Schröder house are magical objects, and it is this that drew me to Rietveld in the first place.

The work of the members of the de Stijl group is usually wonderful, and some few de Stijl things are magical things. Theo van Doesburg's never are. Mondriaan's often, Van der Lek's very often—but it in child magic, not grown-up magic.

It is not for me to try to explain how the magic got there. I cannot believe one can be magical by intent, but the mysticism of the early de Stijl movement—the Theosophy (even le Corbusier quotes Krishna Murti in "La Ville Radieuse")—can have absolutely nothing to do with it.

There is, however, no doubt that de Stijl magic renewed the "life-forces" of architecture and painting then, and we can still feel it now, as indeed one can still feel the magic of an earlier time at Segesta—this sort of magic lasts a long time. The magic is in the objects themselves and is not there in photographs of them.

De Stijl things after the First War did what Pollock and Eames did for my generation after the Second War—they enabled art-life to start again.

My saying that the magic is not there in the things of Theo van Doesburg will be hard for Ollo van Eyck to bear. But I have again and again re-

assessed my feelings in the Prins Hendriklaan and at Meudon-val-Fleury, but I can only accept the fact that at the former place I feel "in the presence", at the latter place I am deeply impressed but retain my objectivity (such as it is).

Rietveld always the maker of things, sometimes the maker of magical things. The ordinariness of his life is what I would like to achieve. The magic is for the fates to decide.

J. B. Bakema, Rotterdam

In memory of Rietveld

(Page 422)

Rietveld made me understand that space is something continuous and fluid and that a building is a tangible part of space.

The Schröder house in Utrecht is a proof of this.

This house can be considered an element in an over-all urban planning concept, for it sets up a magnetic field between an architectural centre of gravity and other centres of gravity in the vicinity. Last year there was built an elevated express highway near the house, and the house has not suffered therefrom. On the contrary, it is the only house whose architecture remains valid from the new standpoint.

Thus the spatial continuity is not jeopardized even if it is limited by the line of the highway.

The development of architecture is continual: now then, the Schröder house is a proclamation of this idea, because, by its expressive clarity, it identifies the given space; it does not clutter it up as do buildings in general. Every element, whether it be a support, a panel, a frame element, assumes a specific significance in relation to the other elements composing the complex.

It could be said that the relation among the different elements of the Schröder house increases the significance of each single element per se.

This architecture, then, can be compared to a certain social order, which is not valid except when it stimulates the individuality of each element constituting this society.

The movable partitions of this house are adapted to multiple uses; they are sliding elements and are pivoted. Rietveld, then, as early as 1923, was aware of this need for constant adaptation.

To honour the work of Rietveld, there has been reconstructed the exhibition pavilion that Rietveld had built in the garden of the Kröller-Müller Museum in 1954 for an exhibition of paintings. This was a sort of synthesis of all his architectural experiments:

The subdivision into functional spaces is rigorously determined by surfaces with right angles, which basically lack all individual shape, because they can be prolonged theoretically to infinity. Thus there results a system of coordinates where the different loci that are selected correspond to an equal number of points located in universal public space.

In this way the surface is located in a magnetic field directly related to public space.

A drawing by Van Doesburg illustrates the fact that the Schröder house is a standing proclamation of a permanent architectural development.

Rietveld has constructed other objects subsequently which do not attain again the intensity of the Schröder house. However, all through his work, he developed an architecture which he defined before his students in the following terms in 1942:

"The sole cultural chance for architecture is to develop a sense of space and so to contribute to the growth of life itself and not a substitute for life (ownership and power), unless power means the power of the sensibility and of the consciousness.

The Red-Blue Chair

Ca. 1918

(Pages 423-424)

This red-blue chair is a point of departure in the architectural idiom of Western Europe. One of the first applications of the ideas of the "stijl" group, its colours and its construction issued from a process of dematerialization. Its specific arrangement forms

a continuity with the surrounding space.

This project is the result of economic, sociological and aesthetic considerations, for Rietveld wanted to design furniture which could be fabricated on a mass basis in factories in order to have prices within reach of the general public. It was to be accessible to all, "even those who make it". Thus, the elements and the assemblies are standardized and very simple. Sociologically, Rietveld found it inconceivable that the artisans making such things could go on producing one and the same model without the slightest creativity being involved. As an artisan, he knew the satisfaction of constructing ever new models; by making use of machinery, he thought he could remedy this state of affairs.

The aesthetic motives impelling him to this conception are found in a letter addressed to van Doesburg: For this chair, it has been sought to utilize each element in its elementary shape in accord with its function and the material with a view to an over-all harmony of effect. The construction is conceived in such a way that no element predominates or is subordinated. Thus, the whole rests freely in space, and the design springs from the material. This construction of wood permits the realization of such a large chair with sections measuring 2.5 cm./2.6 cm.

The red-blue chair is made up of two visible and one invisible element; nearly square cross-bars constitute the supports and the transverse struts; rectangular bars make up the arms. These wooden bars form the skeleton of the chair.

Two laminated panels compose the seat and the back-rest.

The third element is made up of cylindrical plugs (invisible on the finished chair) serving as connection elements. The back-rest is painted red and the seat blue. The skeleton framework is painted black and the ends yellow.

Up to that time, a seat or a building had been considered as an entity forming a compact space, by means of an almost monolithic close connection of elements.

The spatial concept of Rietveld is entirely different.

He decomposes the whole into its fundamental elements; he then re-arranges them freely in a framework structure, reimparting to each element its original shape, which can be immediately recognized, even in the final stage when the chair is finished. The elements do not confront one another; on the contrary, they intersect, which, renders them even more independent of one another. Thus, the right-angles and the planes are combined in a balanced composition of horizontals and verticals. However, the exterior space can penetrate the space determined by the constructed object.

Thus, the exterior space is not rebuffed at any point; it is simply modelled by functionally conditioned elements.

The colour scheme again emphasizes this process of dematerialization. The lively colours not only give life to the chair, but they mark the independence of each structural and planar element, even if only a partial element (e.g.: ends of black bars, painted yellow). The module is constituted by black lines within which the surfaces are red, blue and yellow, freely arranged.

The airiness and simplicity of this chair are due to the employment of a module. The unit is 10 cm. The width of the chair is 6 modules on the outside, and 4 modules on the inside.

Gerrit Thomas Rietveld

Schröder House in Utrecht

Built in 1924

(Pages 425-430)

For the first time the ideas conceived by the "stijl" group could be applied directly in architecture when this house was realized. After many model studies, Rietveld arrived at a conception that was uncompromising, making use of elements that were purified and rational. The owner, Mme Truus Schröder-Schröder, seconded the architect with her great open-mindedness, and she contributed her own ideas to the work. She is responsible for the flexibility of the upper floor. To evade the outmoded building code, she declared that the upper floor was storage space.

The significance of the Schröder house will change over the years. At the present time, it represents a light and transparent style of architecture which was opposed to the monumentality customary at the time. This type of architecture is dictated by reason and seconded by sensibility. It aims to be right and balanced. It expresses this need for objectivity which becomes imperative after the nationalist sentimentality that prevailed during the wars.

Architecture was considered at that time to be a spatial composition taking into account its integration in a given exterior quantum of space. The site in the Dutch countryside is considered a prolongation of the interior spaces, which are dictated solely by considerations of function.

This architecture is made up of elementary structural elements, their free disposition in space and primary colours, which emphasize the architectural will embodied here or which have a life of their own, by imparting a specific atmosphere by being employed in their pure state, red, yellow and blue.

The Schröder house was reported on everywhere; it was criticized and well and badly interpreted. Gropius, for example, in his first Bauhaus book, which appeared in 1925, calls it "a residence in Utrecht built of concrete, glass and steel". In point of fact, however, it was a traditional-style brick house with a timber roof. It is clear that nowadays such a house would be done with concrete slabs. But this interchangeability shows that a new structural conception does not perforce stem from a new building material, but the former often heralds the latter.

The Schröder house has influenced the work of a number of architects. It aroused great interest especially after the Second World War. The fact that it has stood up over 30 years allows the conclusion that its conception contains the key to a new realization of ourselves and of the age in which we are living.

Row-houses on Erasmuslaan, Utrecht

Execution: 1930/31

(Pages 431-432)

Rietveld was a founding member of the CIAM in 1928 at La Sarraz, and he sought to draw up a manifesto to illustrate the principles denounced as "standardization and industrialization of construction methods".

As early as 1927, in association with Mme Schröder, Rietveld had concerned himself with mass housing. His first realizations are therefore situated opposite Mme Schröder's house, she also having participated in the execution of this project.

The supporting walls are of brick and steel I-sections. All the doors and windows are likewise of steel, the exterior walls being rendered and whitewashed. The washrooms and the kitchens are rationally grouped and stacked.

The living room takes up nearly the whole of the ground floor and is subdivided in three parts by folding partitions. In the Schröder house Rietveld had employed sliding doors. The recessed upper level leaves room for a roof-garden.

Sonsbeek Pavilion in Arnhem

Built in 1934, rebuilt by the Rijk Museum, Kröller-Möller

(Pages 433-435)

In the immediate proximity of the centre of Arnhem is the Sonsbeek Park, where there was held an international sculpture exhibition. In 1954 Rietveld there constructed a provisional pavilion almost without any financial support and employing the bare minimum of execution plans. -This very graphic spatial composition is built up of surfaces formed by the vertical planes (roofs) and the horizontal planes (walls) as well as of the linear elements of the structure.

This highly abstract spatial expression permitted the sculpture on exhibit to emerge clearly as autonomous works of art against the architectural background.

The concrete blocks were deliberately employed in a way that is statically false, the intention being to create an

effect of depth to set off the sculpture placed there. Some of these blocks are perforated, which also tends to animate the interior. The roof elements are composed of compressed agglomerated reeds.

In honour of Rietveld this pavilion was built in the sculpture garden of the Rijk Museum Kröller-Möller on Hoge Veluwe.

The photos show the original pavilion.

Zonnehof Exhibition Pavilion in Amersfoort

(Pages 436-438)

With very limited resources at his disposal, Rietveld built this exhibition pavilion which turned out to be one of his most interesting achievements. Its simplicity and the balanced interplay between the solid planes and the apertures invest it with a severity that is well nigh monumental. The module of one meter dictates this composition of squares, the exterior appearance of which gives no hint of the rich spatial articulation on the inside.

As in all his exhibition structures, Rietveld combines overhead illumination and lateral lighting.

This is a mixed construction type employing both brick and steel. Supporting walls alternate with a linear steel structure. All the windows have wooden framing. The interior walls are of raw limestone, the exterior walls of untreated clinker. The flooring is of poured plastic. The building has a hot-air heating system.

Surgeon's Villa at IJpendam

Execution: 1958

(Pages 439-442)

Outside the village of IJpendam 20 km from Amsterdam, on an island between an old highway and a canal, on the south, this home commands a broad view of the Dutch countryside.

A clearly conceived plan yields a very complex volumetric composition based on a module of 1.00 meter.

Wooden piling rammed into the ground supports a framework of concrete sleepers. The house above is built in a traditional fashion with supporting walls of untreated clinker. The floors and the wall surfaces are covered with pink mosaics, the ceilings and the other walls are rendered and painted. The floors are of hardwood.

The glazed clinker of the exterior walls is black for the living tract, turquoise green for the bedrooms, the hall and the garage and white for the small low-silhouette structure on the north side. The garage door is painted orange.

From a central hall there is access to all tracts. The large living room, which serves as a bedroom as well is situated on the north, the study and a children's room on the east, the other bedroom and the bathroom on the north, and the kitchen and the dining room on the west.

The elevations are extremely simple, and they clearly reveal the interior functions. This generously conceived house is attractive owing to its rigorous conception, which is evident in all the detailing.

School of Arts and Crafts in Arnhem

Architects: Rietveld, Van Dillen and Van Tricht

Plan: Gerrit Rietveld 1957

Execution: 1961

(Pages 443-446)

This building resembles greatly, in its design, the factory (Van Nelle de Brinkmann and Van der Vlugt) which Rietveld considered one of the best examples of Dutch functional architecture in the Thirties, for this factory does not concentrate all functions beneath one single roof span, but it distributes them in line with considerations of rational production flow in specific areas.

Thus, the school of arts and crafts is a complex made up of a cluster of volumes all enveloped in glass. The total visual effect is that produced by the phantastic glass constructions by Scheerbarth.

The glass is detached from the principal structure by means of a second-

ary structure of steel T-beams. The recessed parapets leave an intermediate space for the sunbreaks. The partitions between the corridors and the classrooms are prefab and comprise lockers and display cases.

Heating is effected via radiators. The ventilation system is in part natural, in part assured by blowers located in the windows. The interior is painted a cool pale grey. The flooring is yellow linoleum, and a few splashes of bright colour are all the more striking against such a background.

The central volume of two and three levels comprises the studios; the auditorium connecting projects towards the south and the studio wing towards the east. In back there is an outdoor studio for sculptors.

The auditorium tract and the classrooms have a reinforced concrete skeleton, the studios are of steel. Aside from one solid concrete wall in the auditorium, the entire complex is glazed, producing bright reflections.

Villa of a mining executive at Heerlen, Limburg

Architects: Rietveld, Van Dillen and Van Tricht

Plan: Rietveld

Execution: 1961

(Pages 447-450)

This villa is situated in a magnificently wooded park on the outskirts of an industrial town in the southern part of Holland.

The skeleton of concrete and steel is fitted with glass panels and glazed brick. Supporting walls cross the house from east to west, and this appears as sharp accents on the other elevations. The house is, in effect, a dynamic spatial interpenetration which seems to emerge directly from the hill.

The house is occupied by 6 people. There was required entertainment space as well as a study, where the owner can receive his clients.

This late work by Rietveld resumes principles applied in the "Stijl" movement. In 1924 Théo van Doesburg summed up these principles of modern architecture in the form of the theorems published in "Stijl" under the title "Toward a Plastic (Beeldende) Architecture".

Protestant Centre, Hoeksteen, at Uithoorn

Plan: Rietveld and Van Tricht, 1960

Completed in summer 1965

(Pages 451-452)

Uithoorn, situated 15 km from Amsterdam, a progressive community, commissioned a town-planner, who worked together with the architects to determine the over-all plan of the centre.

The complex is made up of a polyvalent volume on a square base. Immediately on the edge of the water, this building extends in the direction of the highway, the projecting part comprising the caretaker's flat and the study. Without assigning any symbolic value to these constructed forms, it is interesting to compare this work with one of Le Corbusier's last creations, his church at Firminy, which is also conceived on a square plan and whose religious symbolism is furnished by a very small belfry attached at one end.

This church is very discreet with its concrete skeleton and its light artificial stonework without any brilliant colours. Only the lower face by the entrance is painted a lively blue to provide a transition between the outdoors and the interior.

The church with an asymmetrical plan is conceived for 450 worshippers, some of whom are seated in the gallery. The seats are grouped around the chancel made up of an iron cross, a pulpit, and an altar of natural wood like the seats and baptismal fonts of red granite. The walls are rendered bluish-grey. The warm grey of the floor harmonizes well with the rest. The floor of the theatre is inclined. The foyer, which is situated below and which is used for special events and meetings thus has an inclined ceiling. The other rooms as well as the caretaker's flat have a very simple architecture adapted to the general plan.

Home for the Aged at Wageningen

Architects: Rietveld, Van Dillen and Van Tricht

Plan: Van Tricht

Execution: 1964/65

(Pages 453-454)

This building designed to accommodate 127 aged people is made up of a low-silhouette wing with 12 independent flats, a central tract on five levels with individual rooms and with two beds, and of another wing on four levels with bedrooms, utility rooms, the dining room with the kitchens, lounges and sick-rooms. The vertical communications are grouped in the centre of the building. All the bedrooms are equipped with bells, a house phone and outlets for radio, TV, etc.

The principal structure is composed of concrete decks without sleepers, which, in the large lounges, are supported by round steel columns.

These decks characterize the elevations by their horizontal structuring. The interspaces are filled out with blue and white ceramic bricks. The window framing is of wood painted white.

The materials as well as the simple colour scheme assist in creating an agreeable effect, which no longer has anything in common with the usual melancholy homes for the aged.

Extension of the Central Museum of Utrecht

Architects: Rietveld, Van Dillen, Van Tricht

Plan: Rietveld and Van Dillen 1961

(Pages 455-456)

The Central Museum, situated in the old town of Utrecht, where works of art of all periods are on display in permanent exhibitions including Rietveld's furniture, was no longer sufficient from the standpoint of modern exhibition technique and it was rather disorganized, all of it not being easily accessible to the public.

Thus, the Rietveld office was given the assignment of planning an extension which could be complemented later on by an open-air exhibition in gardens constituting a link with the neighbouring episcopal museum. The plan is a subtle realization of an integration program in a given historic setting with its museums and churches. Large brick surfaces form the backdrop for displayed works of art. The building is supported by a reinforced concrete skeleton. Galleries and spatial interpenetrations create a spacious atmosphere on the inside. Special attention was devoted to the lighting. Skylights along the faces receive the daylight falling on adjustable slats, which assure either diffuse or focused light inside depending on the objects displayed. The ceilings are slightly pitched. The light enters the rooms laterally via large windows, which look into the gardens and the park which forms a neutral background.

Church Centre in Rotterdam

Architects: Rietveld, Van Dillen, Van Tricht

Plan: Van Dillen 1961

Currently under construction

(Pages 457-458)

This inter-faith centre is intended to favour contacts among the different denominations. It is the work of a German group which is seeking to compensate the countries that have particularly suffered from German occupation during the last war.

The centre is situated right on the bank of the Maas.

The location and the special significance of the work induced the architects to select this low-silhouette design which contrasts with the city skyline. The canopy structure contains the large halls; it is a relatively light construction. The vertical communications, the utility tracts and the annexes are grouped in 4 vertical blocks which constitute reinforcement against the stress of the winds.

The skeleton is of reinforced concrete, the skin is of prefab panels of white artificial stone. The 4 vertical blocks are of solid untreated concrete. Doors and window-frames are of steel.