Between 1919 and 1923, Rietveld made designs for the alterations of several shops in Utrecht and Amsterdam, which were carried out, and he managed the alteration of Truus Schröder’s private room. In 1924, it was Truus Schröder who gave him the opportunity to design something to be newly built. In this design he came up with a new grammar of architecture, which in the course of his live he did adjust to modern developments in science and engineering a number of times, but which he never altered essentially.

After the death of her husband, Truus Schröder had to look for a more modest place to live. She was indeed ready to move because she needed an environment that would better suit the life she envisaged. She tried to find herself and her children a place that would remind her of the room that Rietveld had designed for her in the mansion at the Biltstraat.

Originally she intended to move to Amsterdam to live near her sister, but because of the children, she decided to postpone it until all three would have finished primary school. She then asked Rietveld to help her find a house to rent for the time being. When they failed to find anything suitable, Rietveld suggested he build a small house that she could shell once she would move to Amsterdam. They both went looking for a piece of land and they separately found the same parcel at the end of the Prins Hendrikklaan, at the outskirts of the city.

Truus Schröder knew exactly how she wanted to live with her children. She had given the matter some determined to lead her own life. She sought the greatest possible independence so that she could truly develop her talents. In her view one shouldn’t take others as an example too much, but instead search for one’s own essence and live according to it. Her essence, she knew, was austerity. She wanted a simple life without the interference and the distraction of unnecessary properties. That was her way to freedom.

Trius Schröder looked for an environment that wouldn’t impose any particular lifestyle. She also knew it had to be a place above the ground floor, near the sun, the clouds, the wind and the rain. Against this background she and Rietveld began to draw the layout of small house with a living and a bedroom for all members of the family on the first floor, and a kitchen, a study and a workroom on the ground floor.

When Rietveld started working on the design of the exterior, it was as if he had to pass through a similar development in architecture that he had gone through earlier in furniture making: from the 1908 chair, to the Berlin Chair of 1923. Only now it happened far quicker. What had taken a gradual development of eleven years with the chairs, now only took a few weeks. For that, Truus Schröder pushed him to the limits.

Rietveld initially came up with a model that already looked modern, but in fact showed the same inhibitions as the 1908 chair. It had little of the spaciousness he had mastered in his later chairs.

It didn’t really appeal to Truus Schröder. Rietveld had underestimated her. He took off saying: “Perhaps I can do better than this.” And he could, no doubt because of the challenge he faced. A few weeks later he produced a different design, which, with some mirror alterations, has served to build the house. In those few weeks Rietveld, inspired by Truus Schröder, went through a tremendous development in architecture. He discovered the means to turn architecture into spatial art.
estructura espacial de la Rietveld Schröder house
dibujo BM
Of course, the new design didn’t appear out of the blue. We can safely assume he knew designs for private housing by Cornelis van Eesteren and Theo Van Doesburg, of which he had made models for a Paris exhibition, and the designs by Willem van Leusden, who was a friend of his. However, with Rietveld it didn’t end with design: the design was actually built.

The Rietveld Schröder House as it was realized by Rietveld and Truus Schröder still stands as a manifest of a way of living in which the layouts is optimally subservient to the life style (not the comfort) of the occupant. It is a manifest of an architecture in which space can be optimally experienced as a human reality.

Rietveld created that space by positioning demarcations: four vertical panels and two horizontal plates. This gave a first, rough indication of inner and outer.

The dimensions of the six space-defining elements are such that when one stands amidst them, one gets the sense of being inside, of being sheltered. So the space has already become meaningful for a human being; a part of human reality. This sense becomes even subtler by various smaller elements that have been placed in the openings between the panels and the plates, and thus further define transition between inner and outer. Windows, doors, parapets and railings.

Thus, starting from what was given on the outside and what Truus Schröder wanted to realize inside, every transition between inner and outer was refined. This was done so meticulously, that in the house one can experience space ranging from the greatest possible vastness to the most intimate shelter, with infinite varieties in between. This space is human reality because it appeals to the spectator and makes him go through all various grades of intimacy inside and the openness outside, and a whole range of tensions between two.

For those who enter it for the first time, this is a stunning experience; it is the experience of pure space. It is further enhanced by the immediate elementary means by which the space is defined and which are directly perceivable: planes and lines, white and black, red yellow and blue, and various greys that regulate the reflection of light. When you walk out on the street after this experience, the world no longer looks the same. Awareness has expanded and become clearer, and the boundaries of human existence have made a subtle shift. The sense of joy that it causes is what Rietveld tried to accomplish in his work.

In 1928, Rietveld wrote in the i10 magazine. "The reality that architecture can create is space." In the Rietveld Schröder House he demonstrated what this meant concretely. Truus Schröder’s request for the greatest possible freedom in the use of the space prompted Rietveld to design a system of sliding walls. This enables one to transform the living room floor, which can be used as one big room, into a corridor, a bathroom, and four separate rooms. Besides there are dozens of details that have been carried out with the greatest possible ingenuity, care and imagination. They were conceived for special use by Truus Schröder and they all contribute to the richness of the overall visual impression.

Rietveld could make something special out of just anything. It would carry too far to explore it in depth here, but monographs on the House describe it extensively.

To Rietveld, the realization of the house was a break-through, a getting—even with tradition: Building this house was an attempt to
paredes deslizantes en la Rietveld Schröder House
dibujo BM
get rid to the profuse routines that still 
influenced architecture around 1930, after 
the authentic style of Berlage and others 
innovators. We used primary shapes, spaces 
and colours exclusively, because they are so 
basic and free of any associations.

In those days, mechanically produced 
forms were still considered cold and hard 
and few people appreciated their tautness 
and their purity. Here, steel sections were 
overtly used in the composition to show 
that construction and beauty needn’t be 
opposed.

We didn’t aim at perfection but rather at 
liberating traditional form. The building of 
the Rietveld Schröder House was indeed an 
act of liberation for Rietveld and an exercise 
in the morphology of a new architecture.

Just as he had acquired the freedom to 
produce furniture for every possible material 
and construction after his first attempts 
at abstract furniture, so did the Rietveld 
Schröder House allow him to prepare for an 
arhitecture that was free from tradition, 

convention and grandeur, and that was 

based on the latest insights in space, utility 
and construction techniques.

At the time of his finger exercises Rietveld 

felt closest to members of the Stijl group 

and later he associated more with architects 
of New Realism, whose primary aim in 
design lay in functionality. To Rietveld this 
was a logical development that he described 
as follows:

How to explain the development of a 
movement that arose from purely artistic 
considerations into a realistic, functional 
arhitectural style? For one thing it needs 
to be established that it was a movement 
based on art, not aesthetics. It was a search 
for the essence and the fundamentals of the 
plastic arts and art in general. To explain 
why this primary art movement evolved 
into realism and functionality we have but 
one reason: that an analysis of the arts (as 
primary space, form and colour) is at the 
same time an analysis of sense perception 
and that sense, perception in turn includes 
our elementary needs and desires. So, 
evolution of these elements most 
necessarily lead to an art that welcomes the 
ultimate demands of human existence.

Rietveld, the solitary, made one more 
comment on the notion of “New Realism”. 
He preferred to speak of “New Realism”, for 
only the necessary needed to be built, both 
in use and in spatial experience, no more 
and no less. He always opposed those who 
viewed architecture as mere functionality 
or technique. To him, architecture was 
primarily an art form. He didn’t approve of 
pure functionalism, because the function of 
a building is relative to human needs, and 
needs are never constant.

Rietveld always did as he pleased. He joined 
the Stijl group and the New Realists because 
he felt that one could accomplish more 
together. When both movements ceased 
to exist, however, he simply continued his 
course and let new movements drift by. 
Looking back at the oeuvre one can’t but 
otice the sheer consistency of his style.

When the house was finished, Truus 
Schröder saw that Rietveld had shown 
what he was capable of, both as a furniture 
maker an architect. She encouraged him to 
pursue his career in architecture. Rietveld 

took it to heart even thought he didn’t 
feel ready for it yet. Truus Schröder did 
everything to assist him. She supported 
his family financially and let him use her 
ground floor room as a studio. He worked 
there from 1925 to 1932. Then he moved to 
Oudegracht 55.

extracto del libro

“Gerrit Thomas Rietveld. Life thought work”
Interior Rietveld Schröder House
Foto Emilia Benita, marzo 2015
Foto Emilia Benito, marzo 2015