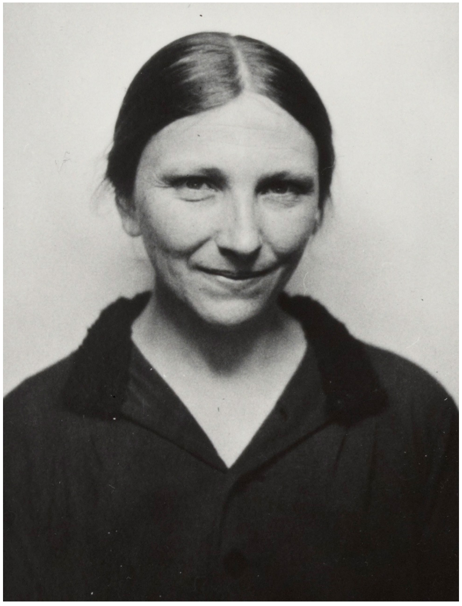

TRUUS SCHRÖDER

AND THE RIETVELD SCHRÖDER HOUSE

A critical investigation of the 'woman' in architecture

Simone Hermans

Truus Schröder and the Rietveld Schröder House
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AR2A011 Architectural History Thesis
April 20, 2023

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

There have never been as many women studying architecture as there are today. Yet, women are underrepresented in the curriculum. Women are not or hardly mentioned in the history of architecture. As a female architecture student at TU Delft, I have often felt agitated at how few women are represented in the educational program. In the history of architecture, white men predominate. Consider architects like Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright. This phenomenon raises the following question: What role do women play in the history of architecture?

Recently, there has been an increasing focus on “women” in architecture. The awareness that women have played a more significant role in human history than thought is increasing. Thus, I want to investigate the woman behind the Rietveld-Schröder house. The Rietveld-Schröder House was built in 1924 and is located in Utrecht. The house, designed by architect Gerrit Rietveld, was commissioned by a female client. Her name, less well-known than Rietveld’s, is Truus Schröder-Schräder. What role did Truus Schröder play in designing this monument? How does she represent the role of a particular kind of woman at that time? The consensus is that Rietveld is the sole designer of the Rietveld Schröder House. Is it right to mention Gerrit Rietveld as the only architect behind this iconic building? Or, as the Dutch saying goes, is there a strong woman behind every man?

I. INTRODUCTION

In architectural history, women are underrepresented. You could argue that this is symptomatic of architectural history and that the voice and views of women are left out. There are several examples of male architects who worked in close collaboration with a female during one of their projects or even during their entire career. Many women are overshadowed by their mentors or companions, while they have acted as historical designers in the twentieth century, such as Lily Reich (partner of Mies van der Rohe), Charlotte Perriand (partner of Le Corbusier, among others), Aline Barnsall (partner of Frank Lloyd Wright), and Truus Schröder (partner of Gerrit Rietveld) (Espegel, 2018).

The Rietveld Schröder House is an exceptional piece of architecture in Dutch building history. It was designed by architect Gerrit Rietveld and commissioned by the woman Truus Schröder. It is placed on UNESCO's list, declaring this house of "exceptional and universal significance" and of "value to human history, which must be preserved for future generations' (Zijl & Mulder, 2009).

Acclaimed for his visionary view of architecture and furniture, Gerrit Rietveld is considered one of the main founders of the modern movement (Dettingmeijer & Van Thoor, 2010). There is a great deal of literature about Gerrit Rietveld available. He has a significant role in Dutch architectural history. In contrast, there is hardly any literature available about Truus Schröder. Truus is barely mentioned in the literature about Gerrit Rietveld and the Rietveld-Schröder House. She gets very little recognition for her role in this design. This female designer is forgotten. The history of the architecture of the Rietveld-Schröder House has been misinterpreted. Thus, the Rietveld Schröder House is an appropriate case study when examining the role of women in architectural history.

It can be established that women, whether as clients, partners, designers, or users, have generally been omitted from architectural history. Yet, they seemed to have an influence on modern architecture in the twentieth century. To investigate this hypothesis, the following research question is examined, using the Rietveld Schröder House as a case study:

> *"What influence did Truus Schröder have on the design of the Rietveld-Schröder House, and how can we understand the way women shaped the modern house?"*

The first chapter describes the history of Truus Schöder and her motivation to design and build a house for herself. The history of Truus Schröder does not stand alone; it is a part of a parallel history of women from the time. By examining its history, we learn the role of women in the family and the role of the house itself. To understand why she wanted to design a home for herself, we need to understand her background. For this, secondary literature about Truus Schröder is used, mainly from Nagtegaal (1987) and Van Geel (2018).

The next chapter reflects on Truus Schröder's relationship with Gerrit Rietveld during the design process of the Rietveld Schröder House. It is interesting to note that neither were architects at the time of the design process. The collaboration is thus rather unique. Rietveld was a furniture maker who had never designed a house before. Truus was, against her will, a housewife and mother of three children who were not allowed to work. Several books have been published about the design process by various authors. Ida van Zijl has worked as an art historian and applied art and design curator at the Centraal Museum for almost 30 years. Van Zijl is in charge of the museum's Rietveld collection (Utrecht University, 2020). Bertus Mulder is an Utrecht-based freelance architect and Rietveld specialist. Between 1960 and 1963, he worked as a freelance architect for Gerrit Rietveld (Bertus Mulder, 2023). Paul Overy, a British art historian and critic, was a De Stijl expert

(Packer, 2008). Their names often appear in books and research on De Stijl, Rietveld, and the Rietveld Schröder House.

The last chapter interprets the findings of the previous two chapters. It examines the question of what ideas, norms, and values underlie the Rietveld-Schröder House. How do these relate to the male and/or female ideas of the time? By examining the primary sources themselves, the house is reinterpreted. The house is not neutral; it was built for a reason. The house itself is examined based on the knowledge gained. This is done based on other research, such as that of Friedman (1998) and Espegel and Alonso (2018), but also on my own work. Historiography is about interpretation. Through this research, the story of the Rietveld Schröder House and thus the history of architecture can be rewritten.

2. TRUUS SCHRÖDER-SCHRÄDER

This chapter presents Truus Schröder's historical background, using the question: "Who was Truus Schröder, and what moved her to design and build her own house?" This is done using the secondary literature on Truus Schröder, her life, and her work. Yet, only two books have been written about her, confirming that she is forgotten in the history of the Rietveld-Schröder House. The book 'Truus Schröder-Schräder, an occupant of the Rietveld-Schröder House' by Corrie Nagtegaal (1987) is of interest to this study. It sketches a biographical portrait of this remarkable woman. Nagtegaal herself lived in Truus' house for many years and knew her well. The more recent book 'I Love You, Rietveld' by Jessica van Geel (2018) is also fundamental in this chapter. Despite being a novel about Truus and Rietveld's (love) lives, the entire book is based on facts. These two books together provide a foundation for the woman Truus Schröder-Schräder was. By examining her background, we can understand what moved her to design her own house.

Figure 1. *Truus Schräder in her early twenties (Rietveld Schröderarchief, n.d.)*

On August 23, 1889, Geertruide Antonia Schräder (Figure 1) was born in Deventer. She was the daughter of Bernardus Schräder and Johanna Mentzen and the younger sister of An Schräder (Figure 2). Her mother died when Truus was only four years old. Her father, a manager of a large textile store, remarried after two years in 1896 with Aletta Grundemann. After a short period in Leiden, the family settled in Arnhem (Nagtegaal, 1987; Van Geel, 2018). "I had a happy childhood. My father was a wonderful man, who kind of fulfilled a father-mother role to me. My stepmother was strict but fair and a strong woman" (Schröder, 1982, as cited in Nagtegaal, 1987, p. 5). Truus grew up in a strict Catholic environment. According to Nagtegaal (1987), Truus felt oppressed by her strict upbringing.

Figure 2.
Truus and An Schräder, (Rietveld Schröderarchief, 1910)

Truus moved many times in her childhood. Her parents sent An to a boarding school for two years, and Truus followed her two years later. She moved to the Pensionnat des Soeurs de Notre Dame in Amersfoort. When she returned to Arnhem, she studied to become a pharmacy assistant. Truus moved to England for two years to study English, which was common for wealthier girls. There she met open-minded people for the first time, and she experienced a liberating period (Nagtegaal, 1987; Van Geel, 2018). After London, Truus wanted to go abroad again, and she moved to Hannover for a few months to study the history of art at the Technische Hochschule (Figure 3) (Overy et al., 1992). Later, she admitted that she partied a lot during this period and broke away from her parents (Zijl & Mulder, 2009). This part of her background is an important insight for the thesis. Moving a lot may have hindered her from feeling grounded. She longed for her place, knowing from her experiences abroad that things could be different.

Figure 3.
Truus in Hannover (Rietveld Schröderarchief, 1909).

When Truus returned to the Netherlands, she soon met Frits Schröder (Figure 4). Frits was an 11-year-older lawyer and the son of a textile manufacturer from Brabant. Truus was beneath this warm-hearted and imposing man. Frits was Catholic as well, which was her father's preference. Frits seemed to be a progressive man; he had promised her freedom upon their marriage. She would be allowed to study and work, and Frits said he did not want children. They got engaged and married on August 29, 1911 (Van Geel, 2018). Within her capabilities as a woman in the twentieth century, Frits struck her as the best possibility. She probably couldn't get out of marriage, but by marrying a modern man, she thought she could find a way to shape her own life.

Figure 4.
Frits Schröder and Truus Schräder during their engagement (Eilers, 1911).

After they married, Truus and Frits moved to Utrecht, to the Biltstraat (Figure 5). In this house, Frits started a lawyer's office on the ground floor of their home. None of his promises turned out to be true. After two years, their son Binnert was born, and their daughters Marianne and Han followed soon after. The arrival of her children made it impossible for Truus to study and work (Nagtegaal, 1987). Later, she looks back on this, disillusioned. "He had promised me all kinds of things, but has not fulfilled anything. He actually tricked me" (Schröder, 1982, as cited in Van Geel, 2018, p. 44). According to Van Geel (2018), his promises were precisely the decisive reasons for her to marry this man.

Truus experienced the first years of her marriage as a depressed period. Her environment as a lawyer's housewife oppressed her. In the early years, she had given in to her husband's conservative wishes, thinking she could still change him. This turned out to be a vain hope. She had expected them to become more modern. Truus herself became interested in modernism. She read books and magazines on architecture, interior design, and art.

Yet, Frits became more and more conservative. Truus and Frits grew further and further apart as they could not understand each other. Truus and Frits also differed about the upbringing of the children. Truus wanted to educate them based on her own beliefs, in which freedom and independence play a major role, while Frits wanted to teach them Catholic values (Nagtegaal, 1987; Van Geel, 2018). In 1914, Frits wrote her a letter, in which he expressed the difference between his wife and himself.

Figure 5.
Truus and Frits' house on the Biltstraat 153, Utrecht (Het Utrechts Archief, n.d.).

> I begin to say that your character and all its expressions are beautiful and lofty, surpassing mine. (...) For one thing or another I love you, I love you sincerely. (...) I take life as it practically appears and try to bend it in the direction of my own sense of justice. You, on the other hand, put your sense of justice first and try to arrange life accordingly. (...) You do not see society as it appears; you see society in its essence as it ought to be (Schröder, 1914, as cited in Nagtegaal, 1987, p. 8).

Figure 6.
Truus and An (Rietveld Schröderarchief, 1925)

This last sentence in particular gives insight into Truus Schröder's thinking; she sees the world as it "ought to be". This letter shows that she had a vision. The designer was already inside her. The only person she could discuss her doubts and ideas with was her sister, An (Figure 6), who lived in Amsterdam. An had definitively broken with Catholicism and gathered around her a circle of artists. She introduced Truus to them, including artists such as Jacob Bendien, Theo van Doesburg, and Bruno Taut, as well as other members of de Stijl. Truus experiences An's life as liberating, but at that moment she does not yet dare escape from her own life. Their life was a world apart from her own life at the Biltstraat (Nagtegaal, 1987).

In 1918, Truus' father died, whom she loved dearly. He was the last member of her family whose judgement prevented her from breaking free. This was a turning point in her life, and she actively stood up for her values for the first time. Truus finally broke up with Catholicism and removed her children from Catholic school. Her family did not appreciate this and broke off contact with her. Truus was hardly understood in her environment. "Certainly as a woman, you couldn't really think like that" (Schröder, 1982, as cited in Nagtegaal, 1987, p. 9).

Truus started resenting the house on the Biltstraat. She does not like the architecture—the high windows, the large rooms, and the heavy furniture. Right after their marriage, when picking out the furniture, she gave in to her husband's taste: expensive, solid, and dark (Figures 7 & 8). The house also symbolises her unhappy life as a housewife and mother of three. The only exception at the time was the bedroom. For this, Truus designed a piece of furniture herself, which, despite the dark mahogany wood, still conveys her ideas of sobriety and clean lines.

Figure 7.
Interior of the sitting area downstairs in the Biltstraat (Rietveld Schröderarchief, 1923)

Truus cannot land in her own home, because of the architectural elements. The 'vertical' resists her. According to Nagtegaal (1987), Truus is looking for the 'horizontal', the earthy, grounded feeling. A feeling she may have been longing for since her childhood. Nothing had come of the plan to study during her marriage, but Truus continued to educate herself. She became more and more attracted to the modern, influenced by her sister An. As a result, she became increasingly distant from the antique house on Biltstraat (Nagtegaal, 1987; Van Geel, 2018).

Figure 8.
Daughter Han in the classically furnished living room of the Biltstraat (Rietveld Schröderarchief, 1923).

Frits Schröder saw the misfortune in his wife. He suggested that she could remodel one room to her liking so that she would feel completely at home. And thus Truus Schröder-Schräder came into contact with Gerrit Rietveld (Figure 9). She had met Gerrit already early in her marriage. When his father, Rietveld Senior, delivered a desk for Frits Schröder's office, she met him for the first time. Truus spoke her truth when she said that she did not like the antique desk. Although Rietveld senior wanted nothing to do with the 'modern', she already recognized a like-minded person in Gerrit Rietveld. In her marriage thereafter, they kept in touch. She regularly came across furniture designed by Rietveld, which touched her with its simplicity and dimensions (Nagtegaal, 1987; Van Geel, 2018).

Figure 9.
Gerrit Rietveld in his twenties (Rietveld Schröderarchief, 1911).

As a result, 'The Room with-the-lovely-greys' (Figure 10) was completed in 1921. Yet, the first design of this room by Rietveld did not meet Truus' needs. Rietveld did not want to violate the neoclassical style of the house, which was exactly what Truus wanted to abandon. Truus explained her aversion to the 'vertical' and her penchant for the modern, and they created a new design together (Nagtegaal, 1987). "He visually lowered the room by

Figure 10.
The room-with-the-lovely-greys (Rietveld Schröderarchief, 1921).

partially covering the windows and letting the light fall in low," Truus (1982) explained. "He used light and colours to make the room lower" (as cited in Nagtegaal, 1987, p. 12). The room shows that she sought a way to free herself from 'the furniture' of her husband, through which she actually wanted to escape her own reality. The room was not an architectural intervention, it was an escape. It was the beginning of the transformation of Truus Schröder herself into a new form of being a woman. According to Friedman (1998), it was also the beginning of the love affair between Truus Schröder and Gerrit Rietveld. The room was a place where they could talk and discuss new ways of living, modern art, and their relationship with each other:

> When I first got to know Rietveld, he, like myself, had been through a lot of unpleasantness. At that time, Rietveld really had to break free from the strict Protestant beliefs with which he had been brought up. And because I had just broken free from religious conventions myself... I think I encouraged him (Schröder, 1982, as cited in Friedman, 1998, p. 73).

After this project, Rietveld asked Truus if she wanted to keep up with developments in his work. According to Van Geel (2018), she eagerly accepted this opportunity. In Rietveld, Truus Schröder found someone who could give form to her ideas. 'The Room-with-the-lovely-greys' was her idea, her vision. Rietveld was the executor, as Truus could not do this herself as a housewife. This insight is relevant to this thesis. It shows that Truus was looking for another way to become an architect within her means.

We can put this in a broader context, as there is more literature about this subject. Carmen Espegel's (2018) 'Women Architects in the Modern Movement' rewrites the history of modern architecture to highlight the often overlooked women architects who helped develop the movement, such as Truus Schröder. Espegel examines the world from a point of view in which the feminine and the masculine merge rather than remain bound by gender. Women who could not become architects themselves but had ideas about architecture sought alternative ways to still practise their profession.

In 1923, Frits Schröder died after a long illness. The house on Biltstraat was too large for Truus and her three children. For her children, she continued to live in Utrecht, despite her desire to move to Amsterdam to be with her sister. She was looking for a smaller house and asked Rietveld if he knew of a flat. He advised her to buy a piece of land and build a house together. Truus was immediately excited, and they started looking for an available piece of land. Independently, they both chose the same vacant lot on the Prins Hendriklaan (Van Geel, 2018).

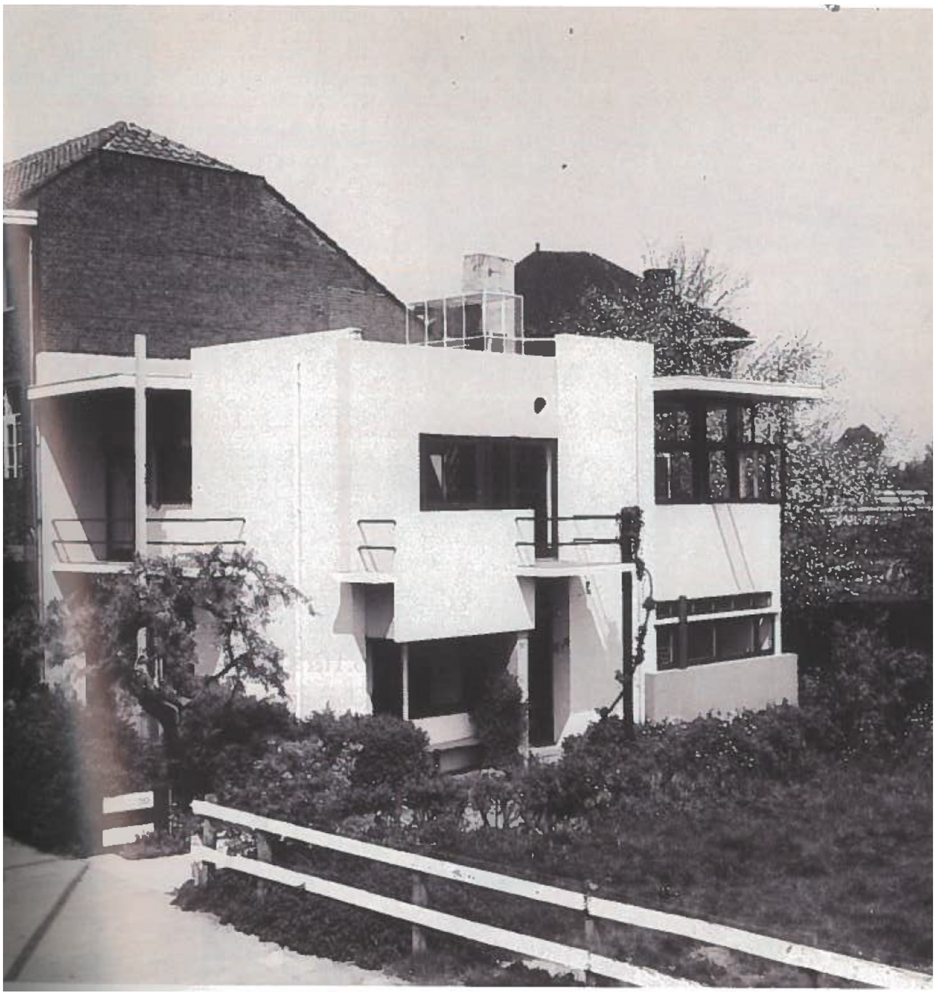


Figure 11.
The Rietveld-Schröder House (Rietveld Schröder-archief, 1925).

Truus Schröder's motivation to build her own house seems clear. She was looking for a way out of her own milieu. She had already taken small steps, such as first designing the 'Room-with-the-gorgeous-greys'. Then she broke with Catholicism and sent her children to a public school. Because her husband died, Truus regained her freedom. She had the chance to arrange her entire life and that of her children, according to her own preferences. Truus sought a new way of being a woman. Building her own house was the final phase of becoming who she wanted to be. The Rietveld Schröder House (Figure 11) will be built, a home where Truus Schröder will live for more than 60 years (Nagtegaal, 1987).

3. THE DESIGN PROCESS

The previous chapter examined Truus Schröder's history and her motivation to build. The following chapter reflects on Truus Schröder's collaboration with Gerrit Rietveld during the design process of the Rietveld-Schröder House. This will be investigated using the following secondary question: "How did the collaboration between Truus Schröder and Gerrit Rietveld fare during the design process of the Rietveld Schröder House?" Neither Truus Schröder nor Gerrit Rietveld were architects when they started designing the Rietveld Schröder House. The distinction between the client and the architect was blurred, creating a rare circumstance. It is relevant for the thesis to examine the design process to understand the collaboration between Truus and Gerrit and see how one may have influenced the other.

Figure 12.
The Pensionnat des Soeurs de Notre-Dame (SNDdeN Heritage Centre Museum, n.d.).

To understand where Truus Schröder's design ideas came from, her frame of reference is examined. Truus had lived in several houses during her life, which influenced the design of her own house. According to Nagtegaal (1987), there were three important houses while growing up. The house in Arnhem where Truus grew up was a large, square patrician house.

When Truus went to boarding school (Figure 12), the architecture was something she enjoyed during this unhappy period of her life. "Spacious, with blue on the outside and purple windows. Inside was a large, white marble hall that connected to a white marble garden room, and there were large clear-sanded oak staircases" (Schröder, 1982, as cited in Nagtegaal, 1987, p. 6). Truus' bedroom was on the first floor and looked out over the treetops.

Truus Schröder was less pleased with the house on the Biltstraat (Figure 5). The house was a large, white-plastered mansion in neoclassical style. On top of the house sat a bell gable with an ornamental vase on either side. Behind each ornamental window was a room—three at the front of the building and three at the back. The rooms were interconnected without crossing the corridor, meaning you could be in the house with several people without running into each other. As a result, the family lived quite isolated. The upstairs ceilings and windows were too high; the house did not have the 'right' dimensions, according to Truus. On top of that, the house was next to the busy Biltstraat, where a lot of traffic passed by (Van Geel, 2018). For Truus, the common denominator among these houses was the desire to live upstairs. Reserved and detached from reality, free and at a distance from everyday events. In her parental home, her bedroom with a balcony, where she spent a lot of time, was on the first floor, as was her bedroom during her boarding school period. Even on Biltstraat, if only by a few steps, she lived above street level.

Often, it is thought that Truus Schröder asked Gerrit Rietveld to be her architect. Yet this is not true. Gerrit Rietveld had given her the idea of building her own house with him. Truus was not the only one to take advantage of this situation to be able to pursue her profession as an architect through a man. Conversely, this was equally true. Until then, Rietveld was a furniture designer. By offering himself as Truus' architect, he allowed himself to build a house for the first time. He may have seen an opportunity to make a name for himself as an architect. In each other, Truus and Gerrit saw a way to realise their dream. It was an equal partnership in which they could help each other go further. From the beginning of the design process, they both started designing as equals. Truus was not the client, and Rietveld was not the architect. Truus Schröder herself was very clear about this:

> Well, I think Rietveld drew out the buildable piece of land. So that was a pale, blank piece of paper, and then we said: What do we want with that? How do we do it? And I didn't really commission Rietveld either, they put that everywhere (in magazines). Rietveld said it himself, so I can't fall over it, but it wasn't that he received a commission. He immediately said, 'Let's do it together' (Schröder, 1982, as cited in Van Geel, 2018, p. 151)

After Truus bought the lot on the Prins Hendriklaan, Rietveld had his sketch design ready on paper the very next day (Figure 13). He drew a massive square box with balconies facing east and north. Truus immediately pushed this design aside. She had the oppurtunity to become an architect—to design something for herself. She thus needed someone who could put her ideas on paper, not someone who was going to design her house for her (Nagtegaal, 1987; Mulder & Van Zijl, 1999). Rietveld set to work again, this time together with Truus. Rietveld created a model made of a square block of wood (Figure 14). Yet, Truus was still not satisfied with this design. The model was again too massive and inward-looking (Overy et al, 1992).

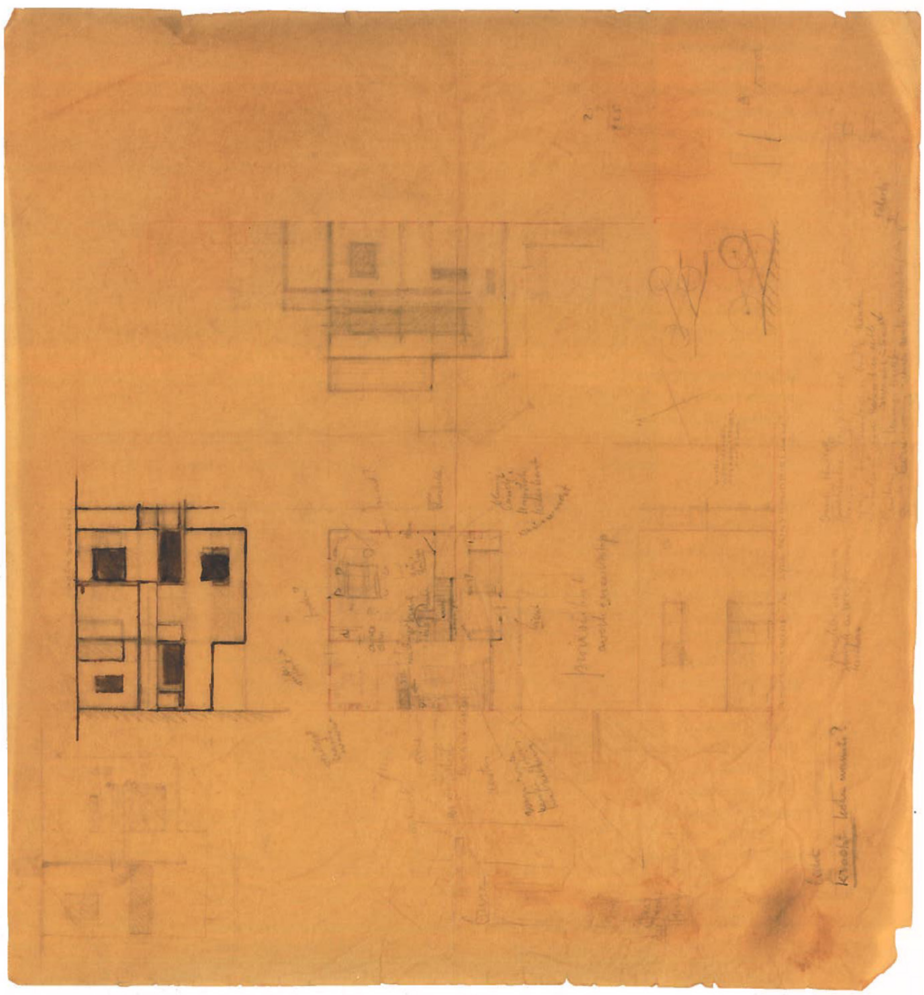


Figure 13.
Sketch design for the Prins Hendriklaan (Rietveld, 1924).

Truus could not design the layout herself, as she was not an architect. Yet, that did not mean she did not have strong opinions about it. She had a preference to live up on the first floor and wanted her children close to her (Nagtegaal, 1987). The area of the new house was only a quarter of that of the Biltstraat. The neoclassical house had so many rooms that she lived isolated from her children. In her new house, she wanted to live together with her children.

According to Van Zijl en Mulder (2009), a breakthrough in the design process came when they started designing with the interior as a starting point. Truus herself always confirmed this; the house was designed from the floor plan. Rietveld made another model, with light and transparent materials, and a new sketch (Figure 15). Now the open and free character of the design met Truus' requirements. Truus herself talks about the collaboration:

> I was not a commissioner. It was not a business deal. We made the house together. The idea of living in a house like this basically came from me. The first sketch was less radical in terms of existing functional views. Through Rietveld, my ideas were received and elaborated. Perhaps you could say that the inside was more of 'us' and the outside was more of Rietveld's. But then again, the outside was designed

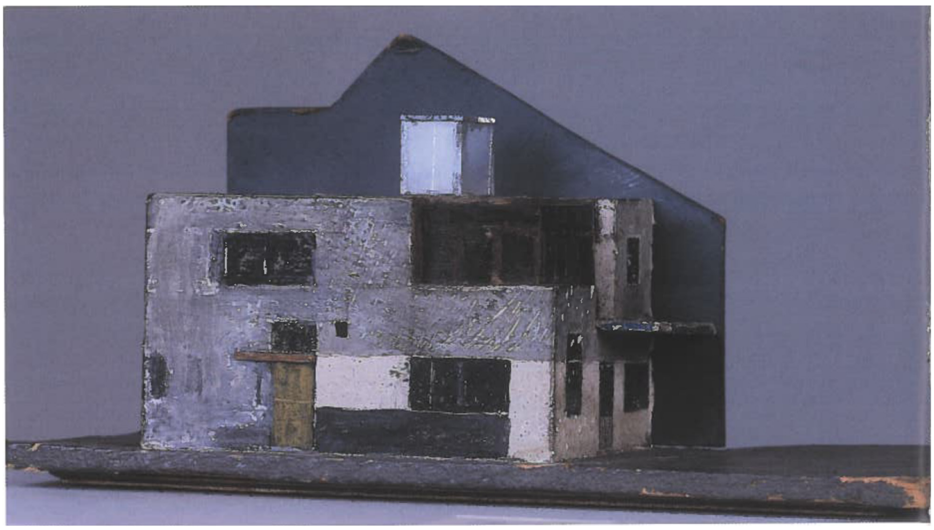


Figure 14.
First model for the house (Rietveld & Schröder, 1924).

from the inside, so separating isn't really possible. But then again, what does it matter? When a child is born, you don't ask 'whose is what?' either, do you?" (Schröder, 1982, as cited in Nagtegaal, 1987, p. 14).

In 1924, they started designing the first floor, as this would be where daily life would take place (Figure 16). Rietveld started drawing the floor plan: a living room, bathroom, and three bedrooms. Truus looked at the many rooms and asked the famous and crucial question: "Can those walls also go?" To which Rietveld replied, "Gladly! Away with those walls!" Now the floor plan looked like an open loft, to which Truus responded: "Yes, but I would also like to be able to close them." (as cited in Van Geel, 2018, p. 155).

Figure 15.
First sketch by Rietveld of the exterior of the final design (Rietveld, 1924).

And so the idea of sliding walls was born, although they had not been Rietveld's preference. Sliding walls creak and squeak. This did not matter to Truus; the coveted walls gave her the freedom to play with the layout of the house (Van Geel, 2018). The use of movable walls was the main innovation of the interior and was an idea of Truus and Rietveld together. Yet, the general view is that this was solely Rietveld's idea. Rietveld himself wrote in his notes: "The flexible interior was made in close cooperation with Mrs. "Schröder-Schräder" (Rietveld, 1963, as cited in Brattinga, 1985, p. 13). With this note, he confirmed Truus' role during the design of the doors.

The feeling of freedom was a major theme during the design process. Truus had broken free from her environment. She wanted to see this reflected in her home. From every room, she wanted to have the possibility of going outside. Rietveld drew a door to the outside of each room, either to the garden or to a balcony (Van Zijl & Mulder, 2009). Truus had modern ideas about the rooms. Each room had to be self-contained, meaning it had to have running water, central heating, and two plug sockets (Overy et al, 1992).

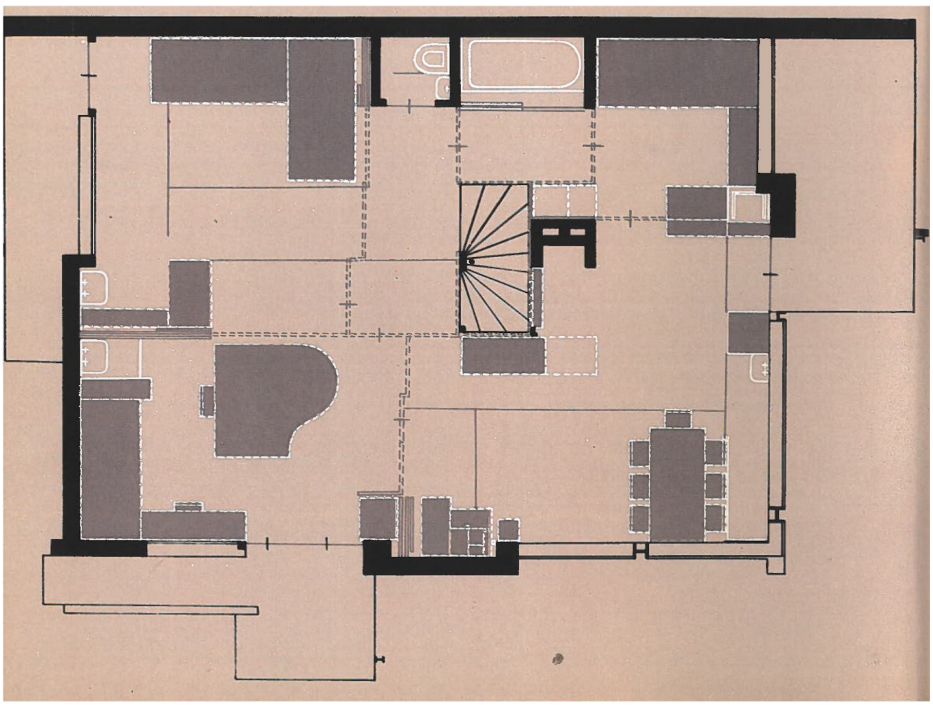


Figure 16.
Floorplan of the first floor of the Rietveld Schröder House (Rietveld, 1924).

Rietveld was impressed by Truus and her way of thinking:

> You sprinkle ideas around you. They say I have many ideas: you have many more. I sweep them up around you. They are not just ideas, you have a clear understanding of where it has to go. (...) We have to keep working together (Rietveld, 1979, as cited in Nagtegaal, 1987, p. 15).

The family lived and slept on the upper floor; the ground floor had the practical areas (Figure 17). The ground floor has four rooms around a central hall with stairs leading up. The functions of the rooms were a large kitchen, a room for the maid, and a study room. The fourth room, at the front of the Prins Hendriklaan, was first designated as a garage. In the permit application, Rietveld turned this into a sitting bedroom, to make it look like one could live on the ground floor (Figure 18). He marked the upper floor as an 'attic' because there were no requirements for attics in the building decree. This allowed them to get out from under the strict building regulations (Van Zijl & Mulder, 2009).

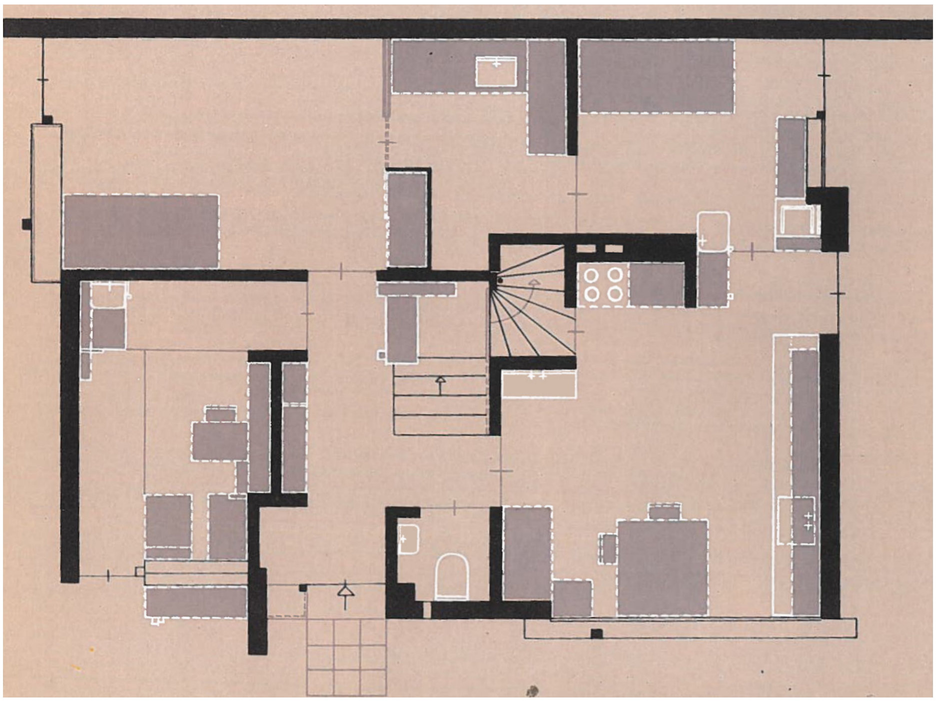


Figure 17.
Floorplan of the ground floor of the Rietveld Schröder House (Rietveld, 1924).

The garage actually had a different function. This is where their architectural firm would settle: Schräder and Rietveld Architects (Van Geel, 2018). Their architectural firm is listed in the phone book from 1925 to 1933 (Van Zijl, 2022).

The exterior is mainly designed by Rietveld. The facade became a light and airy composition of horizontal and vertical surfaces in the colours of De Stijl: black, grey and white, red, yellow and blue (Figure 19) (Van Zijl & Mulder, 2009). Gerrit (1935) explained: "We used only primary forms, spaces, and colours because they are so elementary and free of associations" (as cited in Van Geel, 2018, p. 157).

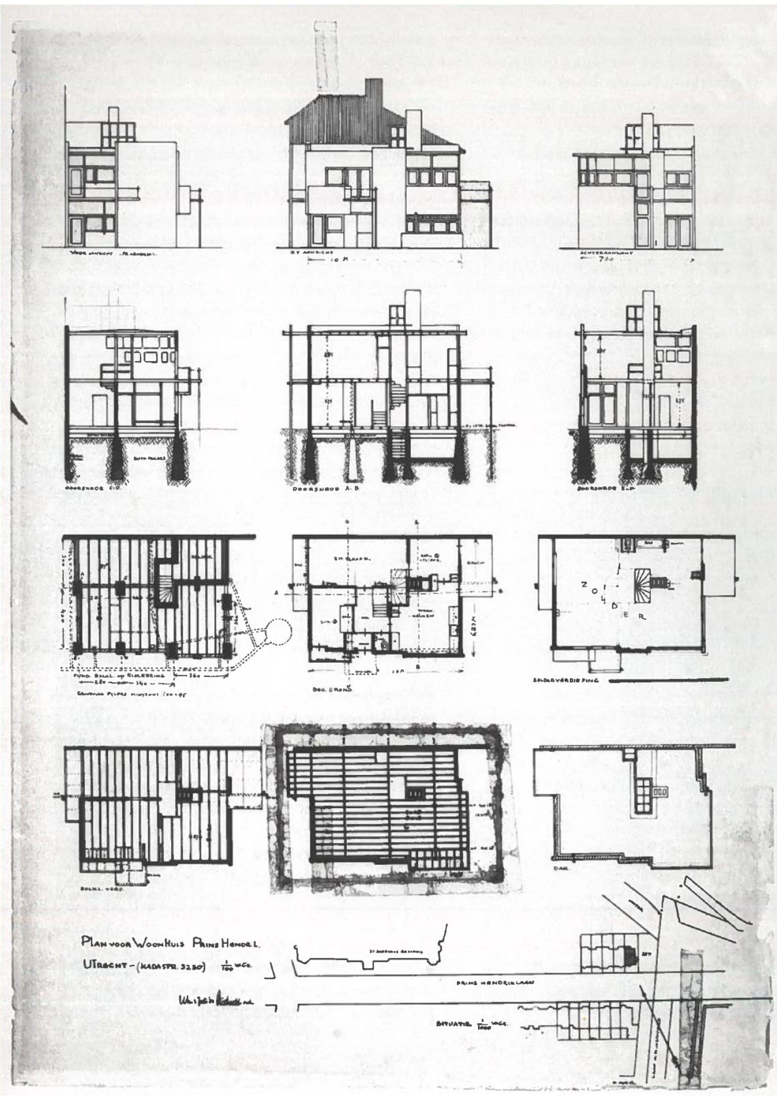


Figure 18.
Drawings accompanying the building application of July 1924 (Rietveld, 1924).

Within a month of purchasing the piece of land, the drawings were delivered to the municipality and approved. In August 1924, the construction of the Rietveld Schröder House began. During the construction of the house, a lot of the interior was designed on-site. Much attention was paid to finishing the walls, floors, and ceilings. Inventive solutions were devised to make life easier in the house. The house was completed in the summer of 1925 (Van Zijl & Mulder, 2009). Truus herself said about the design process:

> Everything ran in complete harmony. One said what the other thought. I couldn't draw a line, but I had a strong sense of space and a lot of wishes. Rietveld loved that. With another architect, it would not have worked (Schröder, 1982, as cited in Van Geel, 2018, p. 157).

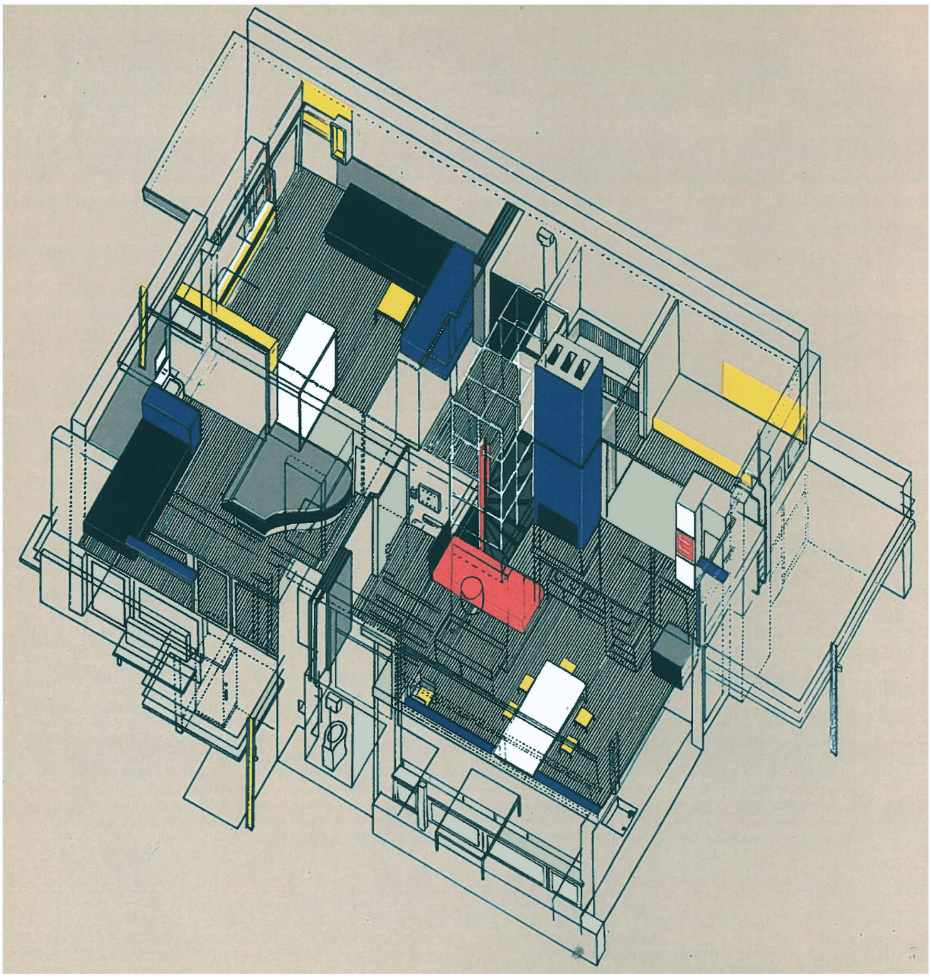


Figure 19.
Axonometry of the Rietveld Schröderhouse (Rietveld, 1924).

As established earlier, building the house was a win-win situation for both of them. It was giving Truus the opportunity to design her own house and be an architect, but furniture maker Rietveld also got a chance to make a name for himself. Rietveld must have been overjoyed when they continued to work together (Stichting Centraal Museum, 2023). His dream of becoming an architect became a reality. The office on the ground floor was used by him until 1933.

The collaboration between Truus Schröder and Gerrit Rietveld was equal during the design process (Figure 20). The division of roles was not entirely clear; they were creating together. Truus was not looking for an architect to design a house for her. She wanted an architect who could design a house together with her. Rietveld was the one who gave the house its spatial design, and Truus was the one who suggested the functional design of the house. The idea of the sliding walls was initiated by her, as was living on the upper floor. The exterior and the stylistic interior are Rietveld's merits. During the design process, Truus and Rietveld did not have the traditional roles of client and architect, but rather worked together as architects.

Figure 20.
Gerrit Rietveld and Truus Schröder, after the house was finished (Wattel, 2020).

4. THE 'WOMAN' IN ARCHITECTURE

Chapter 2 describes how the collaboration between Truus and Gerrit came about. Chapter 3 examined how this developed during the design process. It is now relevant to examine the historical framework in which this all took place to answer the research question. This will be examined in this chapter using the following question: "What ideas, norms, and values underlie the Rietveld-Schröder House, and how do they relate to the male and/or female ideas of the time?". This will be investigated by visiting the Rietveld Schröder House. With this question in our minds, we critically examine the elements of the House. Which parts were designed from a woman's perspective? Which practical solutions are there to increase living comfort?

Figure 21.
The Rietveld Schröderhouse from the garden (own photo).

Upon arriving at the Rietveld Schröder House, one immediately notices how radically different it is compared to the other houses (Figure 21 and 22). The white and grey surfaces, the clean horizontal lines, the primary colours, and the lack of ornaments give the house a unique appearance. It is one of the first modern houses built in the 20th century, a paragon of modernity (Stichting Centraal Museum, 2023). Typical of modern living are solutions to

Figure 22.
The facade of the Rietveld Schröderhouse from the Prins Hendriklaan (own photo).

increase convenience, as may be present in the Rietveld Schröder House. These are examined using the knowledge gained from the Rietveld Schröder House itself as the primary source. Where can we recognise Truus in the design? Where is the 'woman' in architecture?

The first thing we notice when standing in front of the house is the vertical red bar next to the door (Figure 23). Next to this is a white sign. This indicated that groceries could be put behind the window by delivery men. Next to it sat a mouthpiece to communicate from outside with the residents on the first floor (Stichting Centraal Museum, 2023). It is striking that the functions of these parts are explained with painted text next to them. It immediately becomes clear that a house is an object of use, rather than an object to behold. The house quite literally communicates with its users.

Figure 23.
The practical solution for the groceries and communication (own photo).

The first room to be analysed is the kitchen and dining room. The kitchen consists of a worktop, a display cabinet above it for crockery, and a cooker with pans above it. There is a food lift in the corner (Figure 24). In the centre of the room is a large dining table with chairs designed by Rietveld around it (Figure 25) (Stichting Centraal Museum, 2023).

The cabinet above the kitchen sink has sliding doors and is handleless. The uprights used to slide them are painted dark blue. In this colour, dirt is less visible, in comparison to the white of the rest of the cabinet. The sliding doors of the kitchen itself are also painted black for this reason. We see this practical way of designing more in the kitchen. The black colour is also painted behind the cooker, a place that usually gets dirty from food and fumes. Black vertical and horizontal strips can be found on the doors and along the skirting boards. Besides having aesthetic value, these inventions came from a practical point of view (Van Zijl & Mulder, 2009).

Figure 24.
The kitchen with the food lift and door to the garden. On the left we can see the cooker with the black painted wall behind it (own photo).

Figure 25.
The kitchen with the dining tabel and chairs, designed by Rietveld. On the left is the cabinet with the blue painted slides (own photo).

Truus, as a housewife, saw architecture as a utilitarian object. Her own house had to be furnished in such a way that she spent little time maintaining it. It can be established that the intervention with dark colouring comes from Truus. The other home that Truus and Rietveld designed together, her sister An Harrenstein's flat (Figure 26), also has a black surface behind the cooker to prevent it from getting dirty (Nagtegaal, 1987). Yet, the apartment complex on Erasmusstraat Rietveld designed later in his career has completely white walls throughout the house (Figure 27).

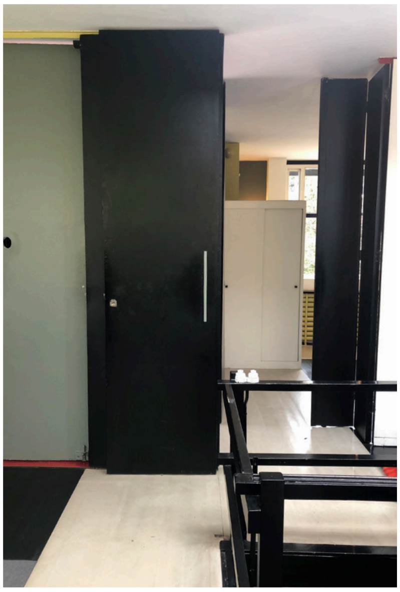
Figure 26.
The flat of An and Rein Harrestein in Amsterdam. Truus and Rietveld created the design together (Rietveld Schröderarchief, n.d.).

Figure 27.
The flats on Erasmusstraat, just after its completion in 1931. Rietveld designed these without Truus (Rietveld Schröderarchief, 1931).

Truus was the one who asked if the upstairs walls could be removed. Rietveld harshly agreed. Remarkably, Truus then added: "But, I would also like to close them." Truus saw the practicality of the living room. It should provide a space for living together during the day and offer privacy in the evening when residents want to sleep. Rietveld was not a fan of the sliding walls. For him, spatial qualities were more important than practicality. Truus commented on this (1982): "It was too complicated for him, especially the moveable walls. He even did not know how they worked" (as cited in Nagtegaal, 1987, p. 15).

In his own house later, which also had an open floor plan, he installed curtains to divide up the space (Van Geel, 2018). However, curtains are not soundproof and do not close off the space. They do not provide the privacy that adolescent children ask for, something Truus understood. These two views clearly show the difference between Truus and Rietveld; the feminine and the masculine. Truus saw the house as a home, and Rietveld saw the house as an object. Nowadays, the moveable walls still function in the Rietveld Schröder House (Figure 28, 29 & 30). It is a special experience to see the impact the installation of the walls has on the perception of the space. The privacy Truus was looking for becomes clear.

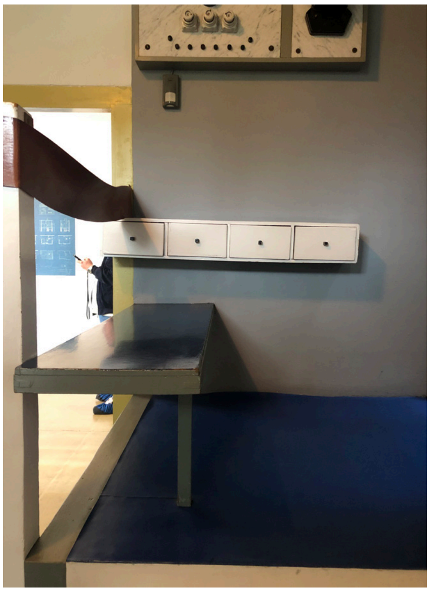
Figure 28, 29 & 30.
The moveable walls being shifted to transform the open living area to the seperate bedrooms (own photos).



The most remarkable thing about the house is, of course, the sliding walls, but the influence of the feminine can also be seen in the smallest details. Next to her bed, is a small red shelf where she could put her watch at night (Figure 31). In the hall near the stairs, there was a bench where you could sit while making phone calls or sorting mail (Figure 32). There were four compartments for mail next to the bench, one for each member of the family. Next to the door hung a key rack, painted bright red to stand out, so you couldn't forget the key (Figure 33) (Stichting Centraal Museum, 2023). These interventions seem to be based more on experience than architectural value.

In the book of Van Geel (2018), there is a list, written by Truus in one of her notebooks, in which she sums up who designed what. With Rietveld, she notes, among other things, the canopies, overhangs, corner windows, the light, and bulkheads to the ceiling. With herself, she writes: use of floor plan, lift, ventilation window, glass around stairs. She concludes to herself: 'In fact, the whole layout of the house'. The parts Rietveld designed have more architectural values (such as the corner window and the lights), while Truus' designs have more practical values (such as the food lift and ventilation window).

Figure 31, 32 & 33.
From left to right: the red shelf for the watch, the bench and mail compartments and the key rack (own photos).



The Rietveld Schröder House was a unique collaboration between a woman and an architect. Yet, when investigating iconic modern houses around this period, there is an interesting discovery. A significant number of the most significant homes built in Europe and America around the twentieth century were designed in collaboration with a female client. The Rietveld-Schröder House is not the only example. Consider the Hollyhock House by Frank Lloyd Wright and Aline Barnsall or the Edith Farnsworth House by Mies van der Rohe and Edith Farnsworth. Due to the relatively large number of women in modern architecture, it could be argued that women were catalysts for innovation in domestic architecture. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the first feminist movement arose. Women started to change their thinking about their role in the family, in their house, and in society. It is possible that these ideas found their way to fruition in the designs of privileged women who had the opportunity to design a house for themselves (Friedman, 1998).

In the design of the Rietveld Schröder House, we can confirm that this was the case. Truus was a privileged woman, given the chance to turn her ideas into reality. She had new ideas about the family, the woman, and her role in the family. Several signs of her influence and solutions can be seen in the house. Thus, the house is innovative not only because of its shape and colour, but also because of the new way of living performed here. This was particularly due to the feminine influence Truus had as a mother and wife—not because she was a woman, but because she had this role in the family.

5. CONCLUSION

This thesis sought to answer the research question, "What influence did Truus Schröder have on the design of the Rietveld-Schröder House, and how can we understand the way women shaped the modern house?" By investigating the secondary questions, we can answer the main question.

The reason Truus Schröder chose to construct her own home is evident. She was trying to find a way out of her environment, where she felt unhappy and trapped. She had previously gone through phases, such as creating the "Room-with-the-Lovely-Greys". She abandoned Catholicism and enrolled her kids in a public school. Truus regained autonomy as a result of her husband's passing. She had the chance to set up her entire life—as well as the lives of her children—in the manner she preferred. Truus looked for a different kind of femininity. The final phase was designing her own home.

Truus Schröder and Gerrit Rietveld were two kindred designers who sensed and complemented each other well during the design process. The division of roles was not entirely clear; they created the house together. It could be argued that Truus was more the idea-bearer and had an eye for the practical side of living, while Rietveld was more responsible for the technical realisation. These practical demands did not come from Truus the designer but from Truus the housewife and mother. The modern and innovative interventions were to her credit. It illustrates how, besides the aesthetic side of designing, she had defined ideas about the use of the house.

It is proven that Truus not only influenced the design of the Rietveld Schröder House, but she was also a co-architect. Her part was not only of great importance; the Rietveld Schröder House as we know it today could not exist without her. The history of architecture falls short of mentioning her as a client. She is, along with Rietveld, the architect of the Rietveld Schröder House, and thus one of the leading architects of modernism.

Without her, Rietveld might not have come to light as an architect. She is indispensable when it comes to the house and Rietveld's career and should receive more credit for it in the literature. Yet the result is also due to Rietveld's progressive vision and wanting to revamp the traditional way of building. Through their passions and dedication, the house developed into a distinctive, modern structure, a residence where the difficulties of modern living were celebrated with passion and enthusiasm.

When visiting the house, there is obvious evidence of its recognizably female architect: Truus Schröder. The practical solutions show that the designer was close to everyday life. The ideas, norms, and values underlying the house are reflected in the architecture. A new way of living was presented, in which shapes and colours are free of associations. Living with each other rather than next to each other is important in the Rietveld Schröder House. The house acknowledges and supports the caring role of women in the family. Through the freedom of the floor plan, the house gives autonomy back to women, something women of the time lacked and craved. The practical living solutions increase living comfort and facilitate the role of women, unlike the houses built up to that time. The Rietveld Schröder House is not just designed by a woman; it gives women a new role in the family and thus in society.

6. DISCUSSION

In this thesis, the role of the 'woman' in architecture is investigated through a case study. The cooperation during this project between woman and man—client and architect, Truus Schröder and Gerrit Rietveld—has mainly been discussed. Despite the fact that the Rietveld Schröder House is their most well-known design, Truus and Rietveld have built a career together since. It might be interesting to see how the collaboration progresses over time. Rietveld was not yet an architect when he designed the home; thus, Truus may have been able to exert more influence than if he were already working in the field. In addition, despite her design role, Truus was the client of the project. She was the paying party; this may have played a role in the amount of influence she had. It is relevant to examine the subsequent projects of both of them to see whether the 'woman' in architecture is recognizable.

Women's history has not received too much attention in this thesis. It would be interesting to examine this more and relate Truus to the feminist movement that was emerging around that time. Contrary enough, Truus herself did not see herself as a feminist, even though she was a modern and progressive woman. Truus was an example of a woman who was looking for an alternative way to develop herself. Women were not normally responsible for their own money. Because her husband died, Truus got the independence that many women yearned for. This societal relevance could be included more in this thesis. A follow-up research could investigate Truus Schröder's influence on women's emancipation in architecture.

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EPILOGUE

On April 12, not coincidentally Truus' day of death, I received an email titled "Who was Truus Schröder?" from the Rietveld Schröder House Museum. The house's website had added a page dedicated to the woman behind the Rietveld Schröder House. I felt supported in my research. In addition, I felt satisfaction for the museum's recognition of Truus. A week later, the Volkskrant Magazine featured an article on compact living. Junte (2023) claims the Rietveld Schöder House is the first of its kind because of its innovative sliding walls. Unfortunately, he writes about "Rietveld's concept" and "a lonely genius". Truus her name is not mentioned. She gets no credit for her part; her role reduced to that of a "sophisticated and, moreover, rich client" (Junte, 2023, p. 51). As a result, the argumentation of my research still proved relevant.

I learned a lot from my thesis on the Rietveld Schröder House, Truus Schröder, and women in the modern movement. I found the subject increasingly interesting. I am passionate about modern architecture, and I have always been interested in women's rights. However, I had not yet delved into women in architecture. I enjoyed reading Jessica van Geel's book about the relationship between Truus and Gerrit. I had postponed visiting the Rietveld Schröder House until I had done all the secondary research, and loved visiting the house again with my mother now that I knew so much more about it (Figure 34). Despite all the photos, floor plans, and drawings I had studied, the experience of the house itself is incomparable.

Truus Schröder is an inspiring woman and architect who has had a huge impact on modern architecture. She was a woman with a vision, and she was fortunate to realise it. Since few women are mentioned in architectural history, it is important that we acknowledge and highlight them. As a woman in architecture, I have more opportunities than she did. Unlike her, I can study and work without feeling the social pressure to get married and have children. Truus is a role model for many young, feminine architects, showing that it is possible to realise your own dream in a man's world, even if it deviates from the ordinary. I would like to conclude with a quote from Truus Schröder from 1982 that continues to inspire us to this day:

> Rietveld gave me the medicine with which I would dare to live. What your senses experience, you have to rate highly. Be elementary. It's not the quantity that counts, but the quality. I was ripe for it and hungry. I had missed so much (as cited in Van Geel, 2018, p. 466).

Figure 34.
April 16, when visiting the Rietveld Schröder House together with my mother (own photos).