

## An extraordinary photograph

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# An extraordinary photograph: Gerrit Rietveld, Mart Stam and El Lissitzky at the Schröder House, 1926

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The Schröder House, designed in 1924 by Gerrit Th. Rietveld (1888-1964) in close collaboration with the client Truus Schröder-Schräder (1889-1985), has been photographed countless times.<sup>1</sup> Most of the photographs of this well-known monument are architectural photographs, of its exterior or interior. Only a few of them include one or both of the designers. One such photograph, from 1926, appears in many publications concerning Rietveld or the Schröder House. It is an intriguing shot; but what exactly does it tell us? [1]

## A visit to Utrecht

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In 1926, El Lissitzky and his wife Sophie visited the Netherlands and stayed with Mart and Leni Stam in Rotterdam. After years abroad, Stam had returned to the Netherlands that summer and had begun work at the architectural firm Brinkman & Van der Vlugt. He showed his guests projects of his Rotterdam employer; he and Lissitzky visited Cornelis van Eesteren and J.J.P. Oud, and they also travelled to Utrecht. There, Stam and Lissitzky met Rietveld at the Schröder House on 27 September.<sup>2</sup> This meeting was captured in the well-known black-and-white photograph about which Ivan Nevzgodin wrote in 2010: 'Here we have the representatives of the *Nieuwe Bouwen* (the Dutch manifestation of the Modern Movement in architecture), *De Stijl* and Russian constructivism and Suprematism together as a triad.'<sup>3</sup> The Schröder House, which had been completed over a year and a half earlier, had in the meantime gained national and international fame. Right from the start, it attracted the attention of neighbours, of curious passers-by, and above all, of interested architects and students. The attention the house received was – incidentally – not only positive. In her book about Truus Schröder, for example, Jessica van Geel recounts a story about students of the Delft University of Technology. They were sent to Utrecht by the renowned and newly appointed professor M.J. Granpré Molière, representative of the so-called Delft School, to see how not to build.<sup>4</sup>



FIG. 1 Left to right, Mart Stam, Gerrit Rietveld and El Lissitzky at the Schröder House, 27 September 1926 [Centraal Museum, Utrecht, Rietveld Schröder Archives]

Back to the picture. To my knowledge, this is the only photographic evidence for (one of) the many visits famous architects and artists paid to the house. Unfortunately, the picture is out of focus, but we can still derive a lot from it. It is certainly not a casual snapshot; the three gentlemen clearly posed for it. The setting is not the house's exceptional living floor, but Rietveld's -- or rather Rietveld's and Schröder's -- studio on the ground floor, opening onto the street side, the Prins Hendriklaan. Rietveld is in the middle, inside the studio, resting his hands on the lower part of the half-open door; Mart Stam (1899-1986, left) and El Lissitzky (1890-1941, right) are outside, in front of the studio. All three of them are looking straight into the camera. Stam looks quite poised, with his right hand at his side; Lissitzky has one hand loosely in his trouser pocket; in the other, we see a sketch pad. The two visitors are dressed in suits and ties, while Rietveld is wearing a kind of dust coat, as if he just got up from some activity.

The scene seems to have been staged; would they have come up with it themselves? Or was it directed by the photographer? We do not know who took the picture. Was it Sophie Lissitzky? Or was it Truus Schröder? In any case, there was plenty of time to take the photo, since the Russian guests stayed over in the Schröder

House. It was Lissitzky's second visit to Utrecht.<sup>5</sup> A few years earlier, he had visited the 'room-with-the-fine-greys' that Rietveld had designed for Truus in 1921 in her previous home on the Biltstraat. Truus Schröder later said that on this second visit, to the Schröder House, she had prepared her son Binnert's 'red' room for Lissitzky and his wife, or maybe that woman was his mistress. She had inquired whether they wanted one or two bedrooms, and seemed to remember that in the end, they each got their own room.<sup>6</sup> Many years later, Sophie Lissitzky also had a clear memory of this visit, during which she and Lissitzky had been very impressed by the beautiful upper floor, the beautiful furniture designs and the ingenious solutions Rietveld had devised in the house. The sketches Lissitzky made in the Schröder House would serve him well afterwards, too.<sup>7</sup>

The door behind which Rietveld is standing is painted black on the outside. Behind Mart Stam, a white surface is visible, against the dark grey outer wall. It is the inside of the open upper part of the door. The front door of the Schröder House on the Laan van Minsweerd is of the same type, a so-called stable door, where the upper and lower parts can be opened or closed independently of each other. It seems an odd choice for this avant-garde house, but apparently Truus Schröder thought these doors were safer: her youngest daughter could not just run onto the street and the doors kept animals from the nearby meadows out.<sup>8</sup> Lissitzky is under a kind of canopy. It seems this was part of the window that could be folded up and outwards.<sup>9</sup> We know that the wide windowsill behind it was used initially as a display case. The window also extends outward, like a showcase. [2] On the interior side, this display case used to be enclosed with frosted glass. On the one hand, Schröder wanted to be able to showcase examples of 'the new', and on the other, the showcase hid the interior somewhat from passers-by, as Natalie Dubois relates from the recollections of Truus Schröder.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, there are no photographs of exhibited objects; the literature does, however, mention small works by Bart van der Leek and Jacob Bendien.<sup>11</sup> With a little difficulty, we can recognise this showcase behind Lissitzky in the photograph, but there are no objects on display to be seen. We do see, however, two works of art on the wall behind Rietveld. One of them is largely hidden by Rietveld's head and in the other, the details are only vaguely distinguishable; very likely, however, these are variants of the 1923 *Maison Particulière*, designed by Theo van Doesburg and Cornelis van Eesteren.<sup>12</sup> Whether we are dealing here with a counter-construction (or counter-constructions) or with one or two axonometries is difficult to distinguish.<sup>13</sup> Their size can roughly be estimated, but nothing can be said about technique and exact dating by looking at them.<sup>14</sup> We also know nothing of their origin, since no additional documentation is known to exist; it is interesting to consider these works, however.



FIG. 2 The window of the former studio in the Schröder House extends out like a showcase [photograph by Marie-Thérèse van Thoor, 2020]

### Maison Particulière and the Schröder House

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An important question in this context is whether there might have been a reason for showing Van Doesburg and Van Eesteren's designs other than offering a podium to 'the new'. The most obvious hypothesis in this context is that we see here (the) sources of Rietveld's inspiration for his design for the Schröder House. In 2009, Henk Engel wrote: 'The Counter-Construction image shows a clear similarity to the appearance of the Rietveld-Schröder House, completed in 1924.' Engel links this conclusion to the fact that Van Doesburg depicted the house in the 1925 German reissue of his *Principles of Neo-Plastic Art* (1919) as 'the most perfect realization of De Stijl's ambition to create a "four-dimensional" architecture.'<sup>15</sup> Late in 1925, Van Doesburg also placed two photographs of the Schröder House in *De Stijl*, an exterior

photograph with the caption ‘G. Rietveld & Schrader, Maison de Mme Schrader à Utrecht’, and a month later, a photograph of the interior of the living floor. The caption now reads ‘Architecten G. Rietveld en Schröder. Interieur (indeelbaar) van het Woonhuis, gereproduceerd in No. 10/11’ (Architects G. Rietveld and Schröder. Interior (divisible) of the Residence, reproduced in No. 10/11).<sup>16</sup>

It is indeed tempting to compare counter-constructions, axonometries, facades and floor plans of *Maison Particulière* with the much scarcer sketches and drawings of the Schröder House.<sup>17</sup> [3–8] The open space, the relation between inside and outside, the play with loose planes and elements, horizontals and verticals and also the colour palette are certainly related. The influence of Rietveld’s *De Stijl* colleagues on his design has been mentioned repeatedly, before and since Engel.<sup>18</sup> The fact that Van Doesburg immediately classified Rietveld’s house as a perfect example of *De Stijl* architecture is certainly responsible for this. Later, too, Rietveld played a central role in post-war exhibitions, by means of which *De Stijl* underwent a true ‘revival’ from the 1950s onwards. As a result, both he and the Schröder House enjoyed renewed international interest.<sup>19</sup>

If, however, we look more closely for the connection between *Maison Particulière* and the Schröder House, there is, apart from their general similarity, no evidence of a direct influence of Van Doesburg and Van Eesteren on the Schröder House. Ida van Zijl and Bertus Mulder rightly identify major differences between these designs. In the utopian counter-constructions, the bearing and supporting parts are mere floating lines and planes. All elements and colours are treated in the same way. The Schröder House, on the other hand, has the configuration of a solid, rectangular house; at its core is the stairwell with, on the first floor, a large space around it. Only the outer shell is broken up in disparate lines and diverging planes, with all colours having a separate meaning.<sup>20</sup>

In the first sketches and the model Rietveld made for Truus Schröder, the house already had its final basic form of two storeys under a flat roof. The design was, however, too closed in Schröder’s view. Rietveld might have received inspiration to break up the walls as they are in the ultimate design from the counter-constructions of Van Doesburg and Van Eesteren, as Van Zijl and Mulder also suggest. This only came up when Schröder and Rietveld approached the essence of designing the house differently, however. It was not the structure or the exterior, but the interior and its uses that formed the basis of the final design. Once Schröder and Rietveld conceived of the central living floor as one open and freely divisible space, the appropriate design emerged.<sup>21</sup> The design and placement of the outer walls that followed can be seen as first examples of what Rietveld took as a guiding principle for his future architectural work and thinking: delineate space.<sup>22</sup>

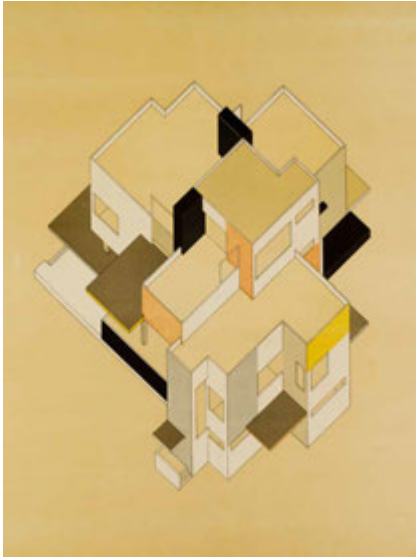


FIG. 3 Theo van Doesburg & Cornelis van Eesteren, Maison Particulière, axonometry, 1923 [Het Nieuwe Instituut]



FIG. 4 Theo van Doesburg & Cornelis van Eesteren, Maison Particulière, counter-construction (made by Van Doesburg), probably 1925 [Het Nieuwe Instituut]



FIG. 5 Theo van Doesburg & Cornelis van Eesteren, Maison Particulière, plan of first floor, 1923 [Het Nieuwe Instituut]

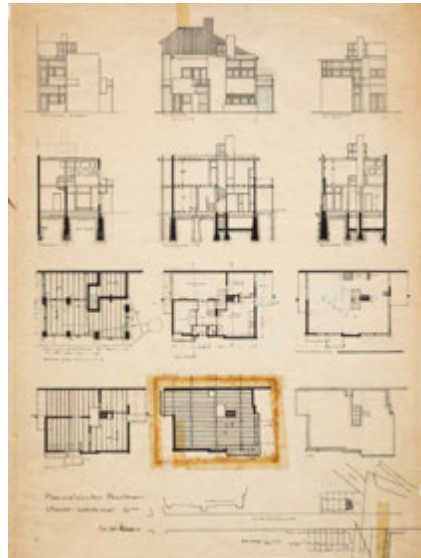


FIG. 6 Gerrit Rietveld, drawing of the Schröder House that Rietveld sent to the municipality of Utrecht shortly after 2 July 1924 [Centraal Museum, Rietveld Schröder Archives]

### G. Rietveld & Schröder, architects

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If the designs for *Maison Particulière* were not the initial sources of inspiration for the Schröder House, why would Rietveld have hung them on the wall of his studio, when the works of art of his artist friends were not in the showcase -- at least in the photograph? In 1919, Rietveld was introduced to Van Doesburg by Robert van 't Hoff and thus joined the ranks of *De Stijl*. In her research, Marijke Kuper paid a lot of attention to the relationship between Rietveld, *De Stijl* and other *Stijl* members.<sup>23</sup> The new network, the new [sources of] inspiration and the foreign contacts coincided with a new phase in Rietveld's creative life. A few years earlier, he had met Truus Schröder. In these years she too distanced herself more and more from her old life and developed into an independent woman with modern ideas that harmonised well with Rietveld's. Rietveld and other members of *De Stijl* certainly influenced each other in those early years. For Rietveld, however, the principle issue during this period was shaking off his 'narrow-mindedness' and developing the new.

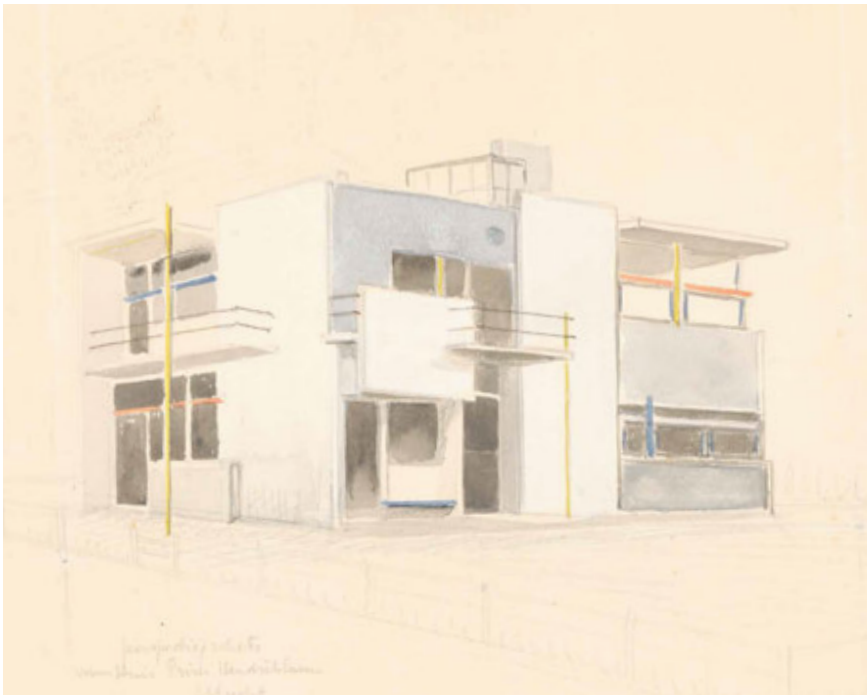


FIG. 7 Gerrit Rietveld, coloured perspective sketch of the Schröder House (pencil, water colour and ink), signed, c. 1950 [Centraal Museum, Rietveld Schröder Archives]





FIG. 8 The Schröder House, perspective cross-section; coloured-in collotype; unsigned; probably 1950 [Centraal Museum, Rietveld Schröder Archives]

As Kuper shows, Rietveld's collaboration with his Stijl colleagues came about mainly through invitations from others. Van Doesburg, for example, involved Rietveld and Van Eesteren in a De Stijl architectural exhibition held in the autumn of 1923 at Léonce Rosenberg's Galerie L'Effort Moderne, in Paris. Although Rietveld's share was initially expected to be larger, due to a lack of time, he would ultimately confine himself to making a model of the Hotel Particulier (or Maison Rosenberg), after a design by Van Eesteren.<sup>24</sup> At a distance, Rietveld was nonetheless involved throughout the year in the plans for this exhibition, where Maison Particulière and Maison d'Artiste were also exhibited. He was undoubtedly familiar with these designs, and it is not unreasonable to assume he had obtained the works hanging on the studio wall of the Schröder House in 1926 from Van Eesteren.

Rietveld had also been busy making his own design for Rosenberg, but it did not result in a successful issue. ‘Dear folks, I’m busy working on the Rosenberg model - but I have to abandon it so often that I haven’t yet succeeded in turning it into a simple, self-explanatory whole that would satisfy me,’ Rietveld wrote in August 1923.<sup>25</sup> In 1923, too, he was already employed by Truus Schröder in her search for a new house. Thus, the contact with the Stijl colleagues slowly petered out, at least with Van Doesburg. For the anniversary issue of *De Stijl* in 1927, Rietveld submitted a short text and images of a few furniture designs and his latest architectural project, the Utrecht Chauffeur’s House (1927-28).<sup>26</sup> Following the death of Van Doesburg (1931), however, he would not respond to the invitation to contribute to the commemorative issue of *De Stijl*. According to Marijke Kuper, Rietveld gave up on *De Stijl* in the second half of the twenties, at the latest.

While the Schröder House might be the best example of Rietveld’s architectural contribution to *De Stijl*, it was also the moment when he began to detach himself from this movement. The collaboration between Rietveld and Truus Schröder-Schröder at the Schröder House had in the meantime led to the partnership of ‘Schröder & Rietveld arch-atelier’ - or ‘G. Rietveld & Schröder architects’ - which they were to conduct from their studio in the Schröder House until 1933. In my opinion, it is therefore reasonable to assume it was Truus Schröder who took the special photograph on 27 September 1926. In it, she pictures her companion Gerrit Rietveld, as an architect, amidst like-minded colleagues. This observation also raises a new, intriguing question: in the designs of this architectural firm, what were the role and significance of the partner next to Rietveld, of the woman behind the camera?

## Notes

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- 1 Since 1970, the house has officially been called the Rietveld Schröder House.
  - 2 Stef Jacobs, Mart Stam. *Dichter van staal en glas*, Amsterdam 2016, 96.
  - 3 Ivan Nevzgodin, ‘Perspective from the East: Rietveld’s Impact on the Soviet Union’, in Rob Dettingmeijer, Marie-Thérèse van Thoor & Ida van Zijl (ed.), *Rietveld’s Universe*, Rotterdam 2010, 216.
  - 4 Jessica van Geel, *I love you, Rietveld*, Amsterdam 2018, 180.
  - 5 Van Geel, *I love you, Rietveld*, 176; Ida van Zijl & Bertus Mulder, *Het Rietveld Schröderhuis*, Utrecht 2009, 42.
  - 6 El Lissitzky would not marry Sophie Küper until 1927, which probably explains Truus Schröder’s doubts about whether she was his wife or his mistress.
  - 7 Sophie Lissitzky-Küpper (1967) quoted by Ivan Nevzgodin, ‘Perspective from the East: Rietveld’s Impact on the Soviet Union’, in *Rietveld’s Universe*, 216-217. Lissitzky used examples of Rietveld’s design solutions in his teaching and in his texts.
  - 8 Van Geel, *I love you, Rietveld*, 170.
  - 9 During research funded by The Getty Foundation into the Rietveld Schröder House (2015-18), a large collection of historical photographs has been brought together and studied. It can be deduced from this that the studio window has had various layouts since 1925. See Marie-Thérèse van Thoor (ed.), *Colour, Form and Space. Rietveld Schröder House challenging the Future*, Delft 2019, <https://books.bk.tudelft.nl/>

index.php/press/catalog/book/681. See also: <https://www.rietveldschroderhuis.nl/nl/ontdek/ruimtelijk-archief>.

- 10 Natalie Dubois, 'The house of Truus Schröder: from home to museum house', in Van Thoor, *Colour, Form and Space*, 80.
- 11 Dubois, 'The house of Truus Schröder', 80; Van Zijl / Mulder, *Het Rietveld Schröderhuis*, 52.
- 12 Both Van Zijl and Dubois point to this in the above-mentioned texts. They only mention Van Doesburg as author, while it would be more accurate to attribute the designs jointly to Van Doesburg and Van Eesteren. For this, see Kees Somer, "'We werkten steeds vollediger samen." Van Eesteren and the "construction collective"', in Dolf Broekhuizen (ed.), *Maison d'Artiste. Onvoltooid icoon van De Stijl*, Rotterdam 2016, 43-52.
- 13 Herman van Bergeijk and Sjoerd van Faassen suggest that what we see here is a drawing of *Maison Particulière* [De kleur lost de architectonische ruimte op. *De briefwisseling tussen Theo van Doesburg en architect C.R. de Boer, 1920-1929* (ed. Sjoerd van Faassen & Herman van Bergeijk), Haarlem 2019, 74].
- 14 For several variants of these works, see Els Hoek et al. (ed.), *Theo van Doesburg. Oeuvre Catalogue*, Utrecht/Otterlo 2000, no. 702.III.
- 15 Henk Engel, 'Theo van Doesburg & the Destruction of Architectural Theory', in Gladys Fabre & Doris Wintgens Hötte (ed.), *Van Doesburg & the International Avant-Garde. Constructing a New World*, London 2009, 36-37.
- 16 Respectively, *De Stijl* 6 (1924-25) 10-11, 160; *De Stijl* 6 (1924-25) 12, 140. A photograph of the Schröder House ('Rietveld et Schrader') also hung at the *Deuxième Exposition Annuelle: Architecture Internationale* in Nancy. See: *De kleur lost de architectonische ruimte op*, 74.
- 17 For images, see, for example, Broekhuizen, *Maison d'Artiste* and Ida van Zijl, *Gerrit Rietveld*, London 2010.
- 18 See, for example, Van Zijl, *Gerrit Rietveld*, 68-69.
- 19 Rob Dettingmeijer, 'Rietveld and the Writing of Architecture History' and Ida van Zijl, 'De Stijl als Style', in *Rietveld's Universe*, 20-35 and 226-249.
- 20 Van Zijl / Mulder, *Het Rietveld Schröderhuis*, 42-43.
- 21 For a more elaborate description of the construction of the Schröder House, see Van Zijl / Mulder, *Het Rietveld Schröderhuis*; Van Zijl, *Gerrit Rietveld*, 47-71.
- 22 Marie-Thérèse van Thoor, 'Factors of the Visible. Rietveld's Ideas about the Renewal of Architecture', in *Rietveld's Universe*, 154-173.
- 23 Marijke Küper, 'Rietveld and De Stijl', in *Rietveld's Universe*, 194-211. See also Marijke Küper, 'Gerrit Rietveld', in Carel Blotkamp et al., *De beginjaren van De Stijl 1917-1922*, Utrecht 1982, 263-284; Marijke Küper, 'Gerrit Rietveld', in Carel Blotkamp (ed.), *De vervolggjaren van De Stijl 1922-1932*, Amsterdam/Antwerp 1996, 196-240.
- 24 The design is usually attributed to Van Doesburg and Van Eesteren, but Rietveld only mentioned Van Eesteren. See also Somer, 'We worked together more and more completely', 45-48; Evert van Straaten, 'Theo van Doesburg', in Blotkamp, *De vervolggjaren van De Stijl 1922-1932*, 26-27.
- 25 Cited in Van Straaten, 'Theo van Doesburg', 27.
- 26 *De Stijl* 79-84 (1927), 46, 47.