

Rietveld's Universe—and Beyond

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"How should I feel? I feel defeated—a lost man, who believed he still had a very long journey ahead of him, but has suddenly found himself here at what seems to be the end of the line."¹

With these words, designer and architect Gerrit Thomas Rietveld (1888–1964) accepted his Honorary Doctorate from Delft University of Technology for his impressive oeuvre in 1964. From his acceptance speech, we can deduce some information regarding Rietveld's own thoughts on his works, ambitions, and success. As architectural historian Rob Dettingmeijer argues, toward the end of his life Rietveld became more and more aware that he was going to be forever linked to two works he made at the beginning of his career—the Red-Blue Chair, 1918, and the Rietveld-Schröder House, 1924—despite the many great projects he realized in the following decades.² We can conclude that Rietveld felt there was still much to be done as an architect; indeed, his acceptance speech at Delft University was titled "The real Nieuwe Bouwen has yet to begin."³ We can also sense his reluctance to retire and, perhaps, a personal annoyance with the unavoidable end of his life. Five months later, a day after his 76th birthday, Rietveld passed away after suffering a heart attack. His obituary in the *Haagse Post* states: "On Thursday the 25th of June, [...], he was still working away ambitiously at his architecture bureau [...] in Utrecht."⁴

In 2010, 46 years after Rietveld perplexedly observed he was nearing the end of the line, his heritage was celebrated extensively in Holland. The year was officially baptized a "Rietveld Year," and exhibitions, symposia, and festivities dealing with the carpenter-turned-architect were organized in a.o. Utrecht, Amsterdam, and Eindhoven. At the heart of all these activities was the exhibition, "Rietveld's Universe," in the Centraal Museum in Utrecht.⁵ In this essay, I not only review "Rietveld's Universe" and give an outline of the side-activities related to the exhibition, but also briefly show the role Rietveld's oeuvre now plays in contemporary Dutch design.

Rietveld's Universe...

Rietveld's Universe was a direct follow-up to an earlier exhibition in the Centraal Museum in Utrecht in 1992, *Gerrit Rietveld 1888–1964*.⁶ The goal of the 1992 exhibition was to give a definitive overview of the complete works of Rietveld; meanwhile, its successor tried to contextualize this oeuvre. A direct link was also made to a yet earlier exhibition: The audio-tour of Rietveld's Universe is a voice-

1 "Hoe moet ik me voelen? Ik voel me verslagen een verloren man, die meent nog heel ver te moeten gaan, schijnt hier plotseling op een soort eindstation te staan." Fragment of a short acceptance speech delivered by Gerrit Rietveld on January 11, 1964. A transcript of the speech, in Dutch, can be found in the digital archive of the Foundation Rietveld Schröder Archive, kept by the Centraal Museum: <http://collectie.rietveldjaar.nl> (accessed June 14, 2011).

2 Dettingmeijer 2010, p.35. Rietveld and the Writing of Architecture History, in *Rietveld's Universe*, 2010.

3 "Het echte Nieuwe Bouwen moet nog beginnen." The "Nieuwe Bouwen" is a Dutch functionalist movement, roughly translated as "new constructing."

4 An excerpt of the obituary is included in Van Zijl 2010 (a), 186.

5 Rietveld's Universum, from October 20, 2010 until January 30, 2011, Centraal Museum Utrecht, in collaboration with the Dutch Institute for Architecture (NAi), the Technical University of Delft, and the University of Utrecht.

6 Gerrit Rietveld 1888–1964, from November 28, 1992 until February 21, 1993, Centraal Museum Utrecht, in collaboration with the Nederlandse

recording of Gerrit Rietveld, guiding his public through the 1958 exhibition, “Rietveld: Contribution to the renewal of architecture,” a retrospective initiated by Rietveld himself.⁷

The most recent exhibition was consistently planned to bring the public as close to Rietveld as possible. In addition to his virtual presence as an audio-tour, the curators tried to bring Rietveld to life in a number of ways. For one, the works on display were not the final products and maquettes one might expect; rather, the Centraal Museum showed early sketches, simple models, try-outs, and experiments, focusing on the process of his “creative genius.”⁸ Furthermore, the works of other architects and artists that served to place Rietveld in a framework of his contemporary peers were selected not for their historical relevance, but for their actual presence in Rietveld’s life. The only two paintings shown in Utrecht, for instance, both hung on the wall in Rietveld’s house at a certain time: works by Bart van der Leek and Theo van Doesburg (and not, one should note, the unavoidable Mondriaan).⁹ To complete the picture, the exhibition was subtly but thoroughly punctuated with life-sized photos, movies, and musical fragments from various time periods in Rietveld’s life (e.g., the reconstruction of Dutch cities after World War II).

Being this close to the old master—“almost joining him at the dinner table”¹⁰—got most intriguing in the final, third room of the exhibition. Here, the curators showed how Rietveld became a somewhat tragic hostage to his own works made in the early years of his career, under the auspices of *De Stijl*. This early modern movement in Holland consisted of a rather loosely connected band of abstract painters, sculptors, designers, and architects affiliated with the periodical *De Stijl*, which was headed by the aforementioned Van Doesburg. The movement had been more or less fading away after its first appearance on the scene in the 1920s, but it became very popular after World War II, due mainly to an exhibition on *De Stijl* in Amsterdam (1951), Venice (1952), and New York (1951–2).¹¹ As a result of this increasing popularity, Rietveld began to be regarded solely as a De Stijl architect, even though he himself had considered that chapter of his career to be closed for decades.¹² This identity led to the rather bizarre story that Rietveld was once asked to design a “real Rietveld” by an dissatisfied client in the 1950s.¹³ Anecdotes aside, “Rietveld’s Universe” clearly shows how Rietveld revisited his former style in the last parts of his career; Van Zijl points out that Rietveld was pragmatically adapting a kind of neo-De Stijl that appealed to his clients.¹⁴ Examples of this stylistic revisit can be found in the Dutch Pavilion on the Biennial grounds in Venice (1953–4), in the Sonsbeek Pavilion in Arnhem (1955), and in the Steltman chair (1963), originally designed for Steltman Jeweller’s in The Hague.¹⁵ Rietveld presumably felt a little disregarded to be praised solely for his De Stijl works, but he seemed to have accepted it nonetheless.¹⁶

7 Rietveld. Bijdrage tot vernieuwing der bouwkunst, 1958–9, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. This retrospective was held in honor of Rietveld’s seventieth birthday. Dettingmeijer 2010, 21.

8 To quote main curator Ida van Zijl, during the press preview of Rietveld’s Universe.

9 Man on Horseback (1918) by Van der Leek, Colour-study for Maison Particulière (1923) by Van Doesburg.

10 Van Zijl during the press preview of Rietveld’s Universe.

11 Van Zijl 2010 (a), 160. The exhibitions were shown in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the Venice Biennial, and the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York. After New York, the exhibition travelled to Richmond, VA. After this successful exhibition, initiated by the MOMA, a number of different exhibits on De Stijl were shown in the 1950s among other countries, including Uruguay and Italy.

12 On the audio-tour of the exhibition, which gives an intimate and rather charming encounter with Rietveld (there’s an unexpected comical quality in his statements), the then 71-year-old Rietveld explains how he became a member of De Stijl more or less by accident, a year-and-a-half after Van Doesburg founded the group.

13 Or so the rumor has it...

14 Van Zijl 2010 (a), 160.

15 Van Zijl 2010 (b), 244–9.

16 And indeed, Rietveld is now popularly known in his country of origin for his early works. In the “Canon of Dutch history,” a book published recently in an effort to counter the increasing lack of national-historic knowledge among younger generations, De Stijl is featured as the only artistic entry in the book. A prominent part of this entry covers the work of Rietveld, showing both the Red-Blue Chair and the Rietveld-Schröder House. See Graddezz Hellinga 2007, 139–41.

... and Beyond.

The Rietveld Year was the kick-off of a four-year campaign devised by the city of Utrecht to boost Rietveld, who was born there and lived there throughout his life.¹⁷ In addition to the exhibition in the Centraal Museum, other activities were organized to renew Rietveld's heritage in the city of Utrecht and the rest of the country.

The iPhone-application, Rietveld's Architecture, for instance, checks your current location and gives you a list of nearby buildings made by Rietveld. All entries are accompanied by a short description, some pictures, and the location on the map.¹⁸

Another project is the song, "The Sitdown," by the Utrecht band C-mon and Kipski, and the video clip made to accompany the song.¹⁹ The song was supposedly inspired by Rietveld's furniture, and in the video clip some of his chairs are prominently shown as attributes in an odd, multi-cultural game of musical chairs. After the opening of "Rietveld's Universe," the band toured Holland with a special mini-tour called "C-mon and Kypski plays Musical Chairs"; they jokingly announced they were playing "in Style."²⁰

At the kick-off of the Rietveld year, "Rietveld-krentenbollen" were handed out—a pastry considered to be typically Dutch and apparently Rietveld's favorite. Furthermore, two books on Rietveld were published: one connected to the exhibition in Utrecht and the other a rich biography by Ida van Zijl.²¹

Close to the Centraal Museum, a workshop was equipped to allow visitors (primarily children) to build models of a few Rietveld designs; special master classes were organized for adults who wanted to make a 1:1 copy of a Rietveld piece of furniture.²² First published in 1986 and reprinted in 2001, the popular book, *How to Construct Rietveld Furniture*, has re-entered bookstores in the wake of the Rietveld year.²³ In the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, a specialist symposium was held focusing solely on Rietveld's few aluminum chairs. Plans for a new Rietveld Park in the city of Utrecht were presented in 2009, but it is not clear at this point whether this park will actually be realized.²⁴ And finally, the entire archive of the Foundation Rietveld Schröder, containing 8,000 objects, has been made available online.²⁵

Most of the initiatives mentioned (which make up only a part of all the activities connected to the Rietveld year!) are aimed at a sizeable public and try in some way to correct the image of Rietveld as the author of just the Red-Blue Chair and the Rietveld-Schröder house and, where necessary, even to make the public aware of the existence of Rietveld. To quote Pauline Terreehorst, former director of the Centraal Museum: "The plan is to make Gerrit Rietveld the icon of Utrecht. Much still has to be done to do so, because too few people know who he was."²⁶

However, there's something paradoxical about this attempt to change the perception of Rietveld's oeuvre. Contemporary design from the Netherlands has taken the design world by storm over

17 A brief outline of the plan, also available in english, www.rietveldjaar.nl (accessed April 28, 2011).

18 As it turns out, I have walked many times past a house designed by Rietveld on my way to the house of my parents-in-law, without knowing it. The app is available in Apple's app-store.

19 The video can be found on the website, www.rietveldjaar.nl (accessed April 28, 2011) or on YouTube.

20 See the website of the band, www.c-monandkypski.nl (accessed April 28, 2011). C-mon and Kypski are well known for the video clip of an earlier song, "More is Less," which was directed by graphic designers Roel Wouters and Jonathan Puckey.

21 See the list of consulted books at the end of this article.

22 In this "Werkplaats Rietveld," visitors can make models of the villa Brandt-Corstius, the Birza-chair, and of course the Red-Blue Chair. Visitors are encouraged to pose with their creations, and all pictures are streamed to a screen in Rietveld's Universe and can be found on the website www.rietveldjaar.nl (accessed April 28, 2011).

23 See the consulted books at the end of this article for details.

24 The Rietveld Park was proposed in March 2009 by Pauline Terreehorst in her study, "De Stad van Rietveld" (Rietveld's City), and the proposition was featured in a few newspapers in the Netherlands. See, for instance, the archive of De Volkskrant: <http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2676/Cultuur/article/detail/319905/2009/03/11/Utrecht-heeft-Rietveld-maar-nog-geen-geld-om-de-naam-te-exploiteren.dhtml> (accessed April 28, 2011). The article refers to the successful rebranding of the city of Glasgow through the cultural heritage of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and the ten thousands of new tourists a Rietveld Park could bring to Utrecht.

25 At <http://collectie.rietveldjaar.nl/english> (accessed April 28, 2011).

the past few decades, and in the numerous attempts to ground this design approach as a specific national style—"Dutchness"—Rietveld is often propagated as one of the first "Dutch Designers" (if not *the* first)—the first to be praised internationally for highly unconventional designs in a clear modern style. We can see this attitude clearly in the well-known celebration of Dutch design, *False Flat: Why Dutch Design Is So Good*, by Aaron Betsky and Adam Eeuwens, written in the heyday of Dutch design. Rietveld's early work is mentioned as a crucial point in the development that led to the international success of design from the Netherlands.²⁷ Both the Red-Blue Chair and the Rietveld-Schröder house are featured, but no mention is made of any other project from Rietveld's career.

A great example of this selective history can also be found in the ongoing debate over what designer can be considered Rietveld's contemporary successor. In the entry on Rietveld in *Designers in The Netherlands*, a reference book published in 2003, two modern-day designers are proposed: Richard Hutten and Piet Hein Eek.²⁸ The former is well known for his aesthetic, meaningful minimalism; the latter for his trademark use of carpentry skills. In a special edition of *Items Live* initiated by *Items*, the Dutch magazine on design, and organized on the occasion of the Rietveld year, Richard Hutten was the only designer featured in a panel discussion on Rietveld's meaning today.²⁹ And in an interview with an editor of the website *design.nl*, a number of curators and policymakers connected to the Rietveld year were asked whom they considered to be a modern-day Rietveld; Piet Hein Eek and Joris Laarman were mentioned.³⁰ Interestingly, the works of these designers, and the few others that are named in relation to Rietveld, share their respective characteristics with Rietveld's early works: simple but prominent aesthetics, an "honest" set of carpenters' skills, and a love of experimenting with forms and materials.

Rietveld, the carpenter, who made use of simple crafts to develop unique pieces of furniture, has become a protagonist in the narrative of Dutch design. So has Rietveld, the young architect, who brilliantly made use of an artistic ideology to build a radically new house. But Rietveld the decent and pragmatic functionalist, who designed a great number of public buildings, villas, and houses, reached the end of the line many years ago. We may doubt whether the splendid exhibition Rietveld's Universe will be able to broaden the common knowledge of Rietveld's oeuvre, as it aims to do. Because this aim is counteracted by a persistent picture of Rietveld that remembers only his early works and neglects his development thereafter, the exhibition may again revitalize the interest in just two works: a beautiful chair and an amazing building.

26 "Ja, dat is het plan, om Gerrit Rietveld icoon te maken van Utrecht. En daar moet nog heel veel voor gebeuren, want te weinig mensen weten wie hij was." Terreehorst, in an interview with the main Dutch news station, NOS, on March 12, 2009. The interview can be found in the archive of the NOS: <http://nos.nl/audio/22197-rietveldpark-in-aanbouw-in-utrecht.html> (accessed April 28, 2011).

27 Betsky and Eeuwens 2004, 156–64.

28 De Rijk (ed.) 2003, 334–5.

29 *Items Live* #6, September 1, 2010.

30 The interviews can be found on the website, <http://www.dutchdesigndouble.com> (accessed April 28, 2011), and were featured in the promotional magazine accompanying Dutch Design Double, another Rietveld-year-related activity.

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Consulted web pages:

<http://www.rietveldyear.com>

<http://collectie.rietveldjaar.nl>

Other:

Selection of press-releases on occasion of the Rietveld year, provided by the Centraal Museum, Utrecht

Rietveld Magazine, program book of the Rietveld year

Dutch Design Double, program book of Dutch Design Double, an event overlapping the Rietveld year activities