

## RIETVELD AND THE MAN-MADE OBJECT

Only within such a fertile ferment as the World War I period could a man like Gerrit Thomas Rietveld • enter international architecture and contribute to a collective design consciousness. A self-taught cabinetmaker whose vision developed in shortsighted Utrecht, he appeared on the European artistic scene around 1918 with his now famous Red-Blue chair, recognized and publicized by the farsighted *de Stijl* group.

Conceived as though he had never seen a chair, Rietveld established planes for horizontal and vertical support and a skeletal frame to suspend them, a pristine space composition of classical pedigree. This "slender space animal," as Theo van Doesburg characterized it, was the germ of Rietveld's own architecture; and the composition entered the pool of European design at the beginning of the 1920's.

Around 1921 Rietveld designed a jewelry shop (since destroyed) in Amsterdam. Glazed, discontinuous, rectilinear volumes, perpendicularly related, linked the inside with the outside in a space continuum channeled by discrete, colored surfaces. This was the first full-scale architectural application of *de Stijl* principles, then being formulated.

Constructed in 1924, the well known Schröder house in Utrecht, designed in collaboration with its owner, Truus Schröder-Schröder, marks the swift culmination of Rietveld's mastery of a fresh design vocabulary. Similar to its furniture progenitor, volumes are defined by independent, interlocking planes. Like the interior of traditional Japanese houses, the open space of the upper level can be subdivided by sliding panels. The lower level is composed of small, interlocking space cubicles. Planes, as though suspended by hidden magnets, seem forever shifting their relationships as observer moves in and around the building. Clashing with its archaic surroundings, the house was an uncompromising manifesto of the pristine *new* within the decaying *old*, an architectural phoenix rising proudly from the ashes of

prewar Europe, and has remained a fountain of youth, joy, and hope, even within our own world of escalating psychic and physical traumas.

The insectile table lamp (1925), glazed radio cabinet (1925), and garage-living quarters (1927–28) are but a few more of the myriad of small objects issued from his fertile mind. The reality of the lamp—its "lampness"—is forcefully expressed by the bare, half-painted bulb, primly poised upon its metallic stalk. The visual satisfaction of electronic components has never been more candidly promoted than in Rietveld's radio cabinet, a whiff of the future. And the garage, constructed of prefabricated concrete planes suspended within a modular metallic frame, manifests a fresh approach to the problem of industrialized architecture.

During the next decade (1928–1938) the visual gains of the early Twenties were consolidated and applied; but here Rietveld's elemental vision was not as relevant as it was during the period when a formal syntax was being established. Yet, after World War II he recaptured the flair that characterized his early, historically pregnant, works. The sculpture pavilion at Arnhem (destroyed; rebuilt recently in the garden of the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo), the Van der Doel and Van Slobbe houses, all built during the last decade of his life, exhibit the old wizardry, now combined with an assurance accrued with time.

Throughout his life Rietveld's work and thought exhibit a stubborn single-mindedness rare in our frenetic world. His lifetime concentration on the designed object parallels the patient pursuit of an artistic ideal by other Dutchmen such as Vermeer and Mondrian. Rare also is Rietveld's intellectual position, which bears little relation to the prevalent aesthetic and technical ideals of contemporary architects.

We construct objects for a variety of reasons: utilitarian, military, aesthetic; things are made also to record experience and to embody values. Rietveld built

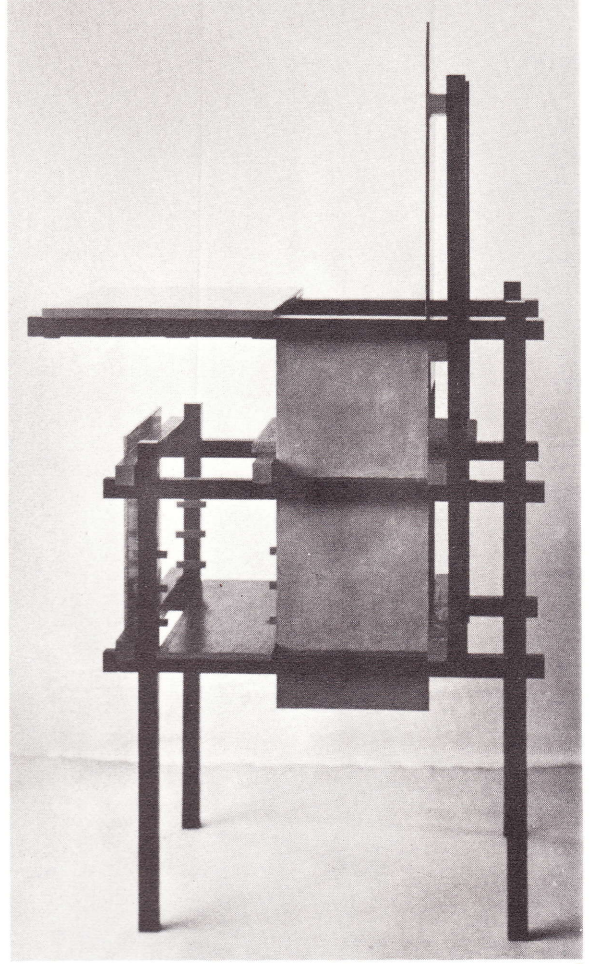
• Born 1888 in Utrecht, The Netherlands; worked as cabinetmaker until 1919 when he became an independent architect and joined *de Stijl*; founding member of C.I.A.M. in 1928; and practicing architect until his death in Utrecht, 1964. See T. M. Brown, *Work of G. Rietveld, Architect*, Utrecht, 1958.

Fig. 1. Red-Blue chair, about 1918. Photo Hulskamp.

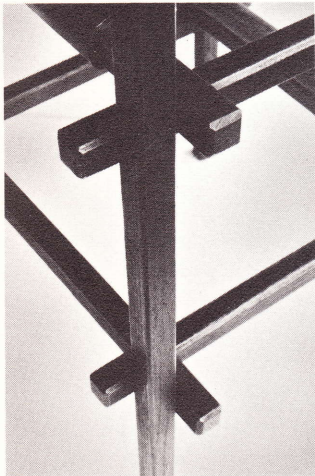




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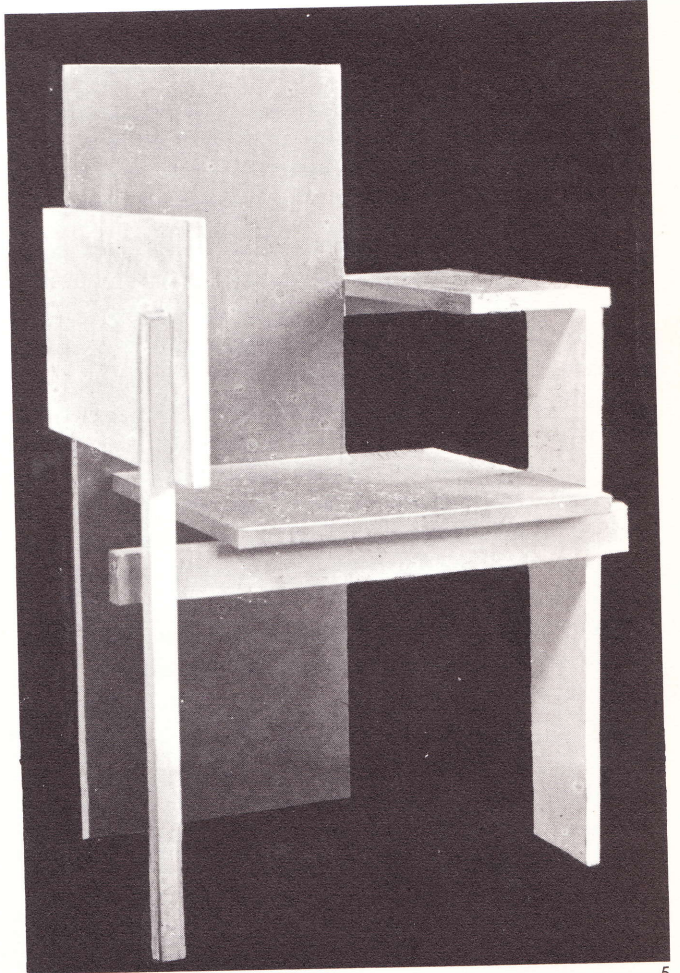
Fig. 2. Baby chair, about 1920.

Fig. 2a. Structural detail of same chair.

Fig. 3. Baby chair, about 1919.



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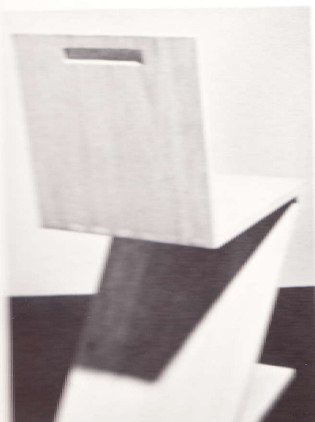


Fig. 4. Chair, 1919.

Fig. 5. Berlin chair, 1923.

for still another reason. "The purpose of art," he said, "is to develop and nourish a specific sense organ." ●

As our senses are more or less cultivated, we become more or less aware, and our consciousness develops. Breadth of vision depends upon growth of awareness. *Welfare of our being depends upon the development and health of the senses.*

With reverence for "the immediate life, the ordinary, simple, direct experience of reality," Rietveld formulated his goal: intensification of life-enhancing sensory experience. His method: cumulative visual experience, catalyzed by the designed object.

Assuming that "All . . . experience is based upon the activity of our senses," Rietveld wrote that "the absorption and digestion of sensory information" develops ourselves, awareness of surroundings, and our grasp of reality. "The process of becoming conscious [*bewustwording*] of reality determines both our nature and our image of environment."

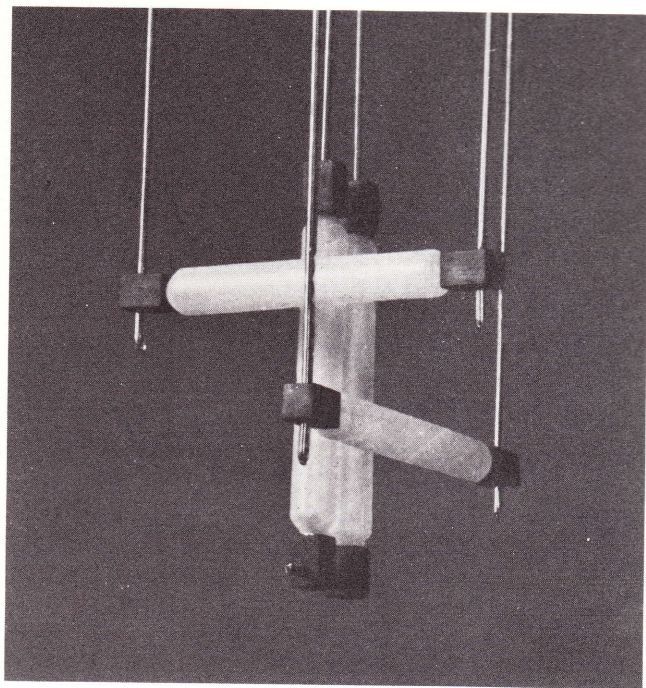
Rietveld's reality is restricted to that conscious awareness of the visible world gained through sensory activity. As he explained:

If I looked at something, for example, a newspaper clipping, I saw dots [and] understood that I was not supposed to see them; because there is a definite scale whereby I should see the paper. With a magnifying glass I saw only different dots without any image; and had I looked through a microscope I would have seen fibers, threads, and specks. I knew that I was supposed to see a newspaper, letters, and an image; and I determined for myself the scale necessary for this experience. Such a scale is obvious for the newspaper; but there are things and ideas where the scale is not so easily determined and can be observed only through proper scale. And there are many realities; and different creatures have special sensory systems [to experience these realities]. What then is reality . . . ?

[Rietveld's conclusion:] . . . reality is that experience which is circumscribed by our humanly scaled percepts to see, hear, and taste.

Yet, since "Sensory activity is very limited and varies from person to person," awareness is inherently nar-

● All quotations are from Rietveld. For a more comprehensive analysis of Rietveld's theoretical position, see T. M. Brown, "Rietveld's Egocentric Vision," in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 24 (1965), pp. 292-296.



rowly restricted; because only a small fraction of external stimuli penetrates our selective sensory apparatus. We peek out at the world through the slightly open doors of our restricted human systems; and with the data which filters through the screen of unaided senses, we establish the outer world for ourselves in accordance with the specialized nature of our system, thus creating our reality.

This reality develops gradually in correspondence with the awakening of our consciousness. Step by step we gain meaningful awareness of our surroundings: a single, finite world-image [*wereldbeeld*].

Through our own existence we feel partnership with cosmic events; the growth of our consciousness *to be* enlarges with the urge to be a part of general life . . .

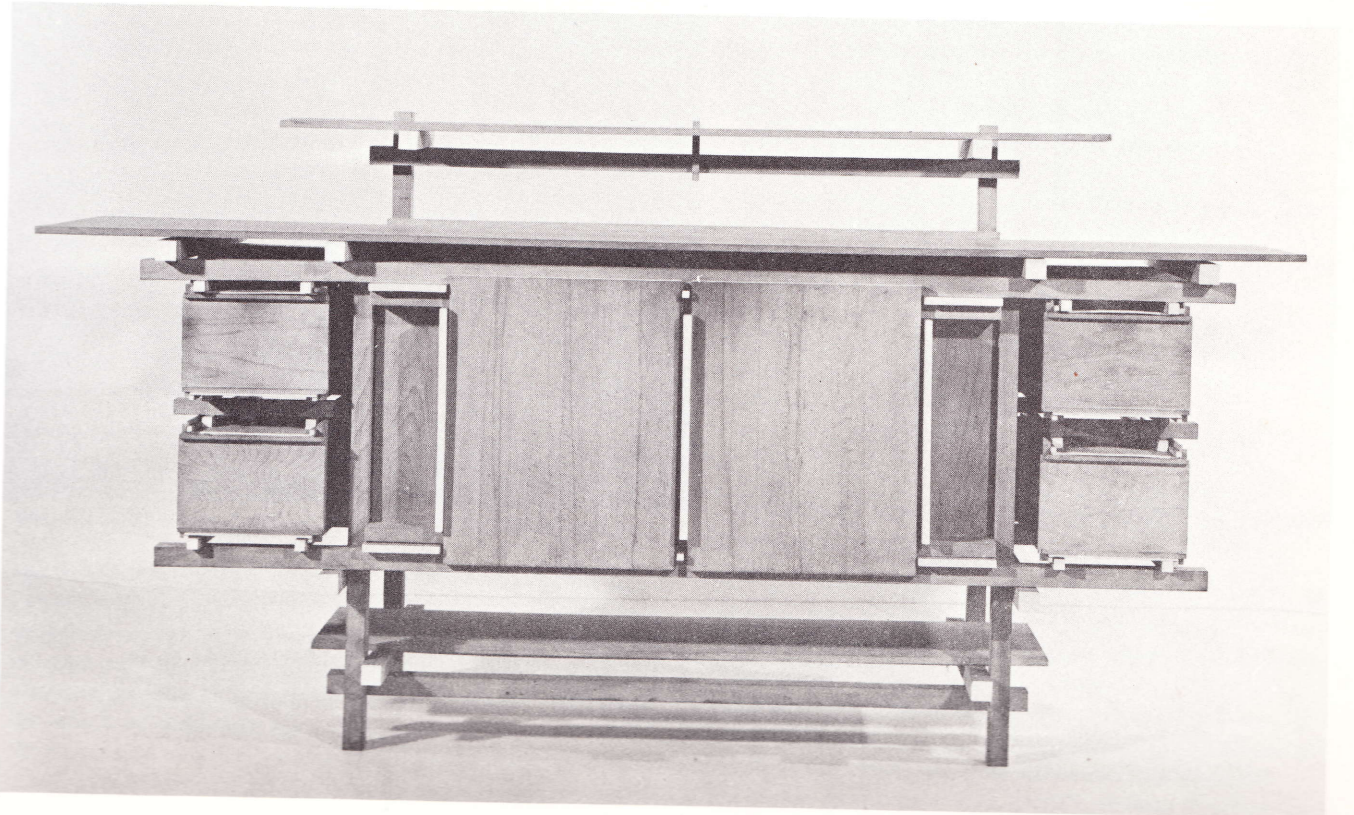
Our *Umwelt* and our *I* grow each time a snapshot of life is absorbed by our consciousness.

Growth = joy.

Art, according to Rietveld, is an activity which identifies, clarifies, and intensifies reality; each of the visual arts must specialize in a different aspect of reality; painting for color; sculpture for form; architecture for space. Each requires a special vision; and the artist's job is to

Fig. 7. Lamp, 1920.

Fig. 8. Buffet, 1919.



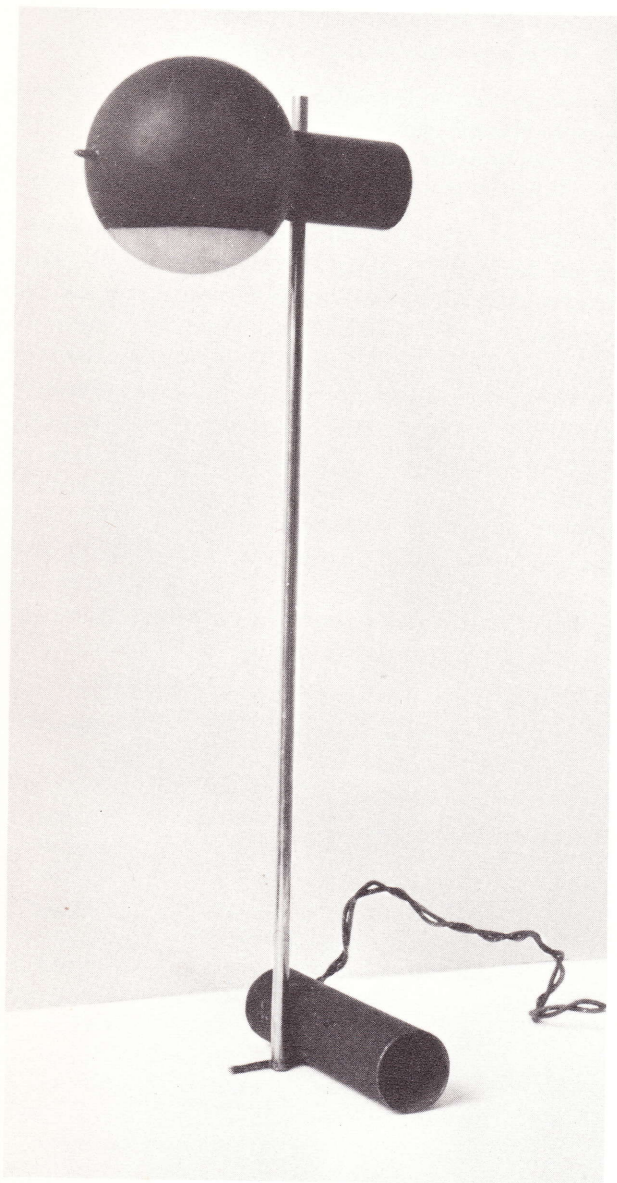


Fig. 9. Table lamp, 1925.

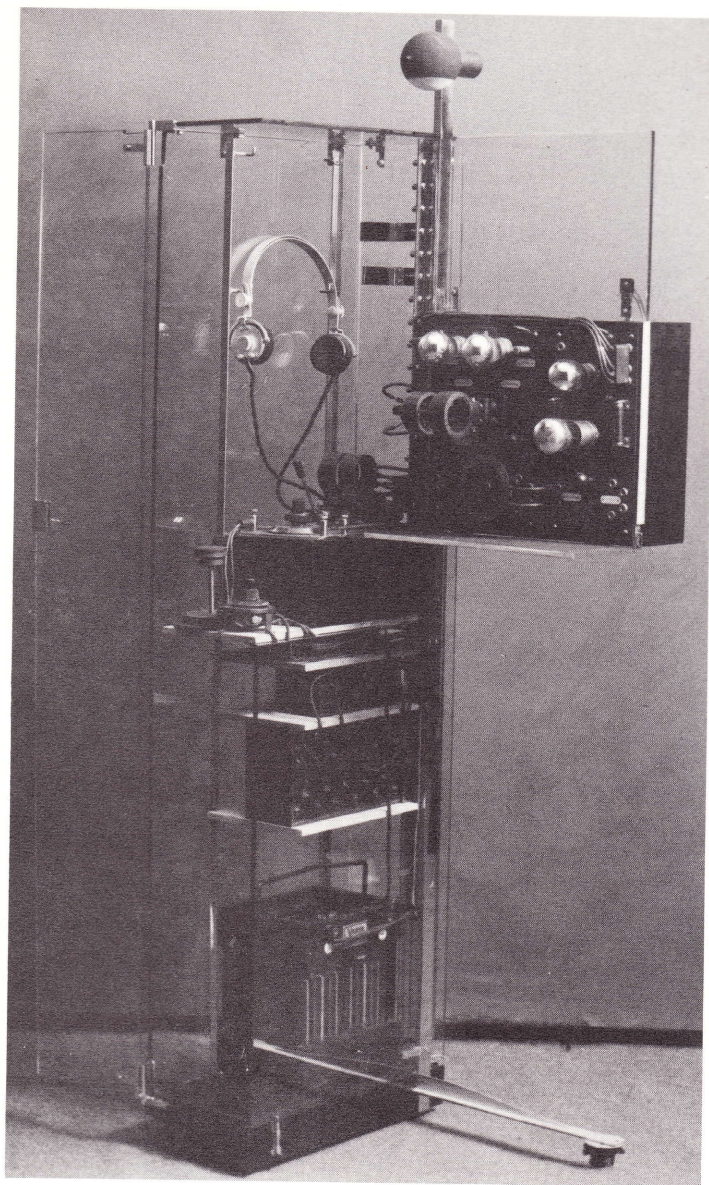


Fig. 10. Radio cabinet, 1925.

formulate his particular material so as to maximize experience within his specific sphere.

Through an art object we enter joyfully into a piece of reality, in contrast to the perceptions which we usually undergo passively . . . From what height or depth came the spark of consciousness we do not know; but certainly we experience joy through growth and melancholy through withdrawal of our being. Every passive sensation shrinks us . . .

Every art work contributes something to the activity of the senses, not because the artist is greater than others; but, through his specialized application of the senses, the artist concentrates on only one aspect of nature.

Where some artists view limitations as life-crippling, Rietveld rejoiced in them; because

. . . limitations of seeing are necessary, [as] unlimited space is not visible (and actually does not exist). The spatial value of a tower is that it defines place and measures height, thus making the space around it "real."

Unreflected light does not illuminate space. Material is visible only through its limitation, the separation of material and environment; [and] environment becomes color only through a limited color surface.

Paraphrasing Rabindranath Tagore, as he did frequently in his writing, Rietveld wrote:

Tagore says, speaking about the nature of art: Through limitation of the unlimited, truth becomes real. Every art work illuminates a facet of the reality of the observer and gives us the joy of creating the basis of our existence.

Art in general, architecture in particular, is not concerned primarily with beauty but with the clear expression of the appearance of form . . . Tagore says: "Art has no other objective than that it appears to be" [Rietveld added.] what it is.

Art should become detached from its creator; and indeed it "will destroy itself; only a great artist can create pure artless work."

Art is not a luxurious excess or, even worse, a kind of spiritual sublimity which stands outside, above, or beside society. . . . art is action.

Art is not a matter of liking . . . [and] is *certainly not concerned with the making of beauty*; it has no transcendental objective or tendency. The purpose of art is to develop and nourish a definite sense organ. It is the one-sided, yet immediate, experience of reality, the ordinary, simple experience for which we need only open the eyes or extend the hand.

Perception of an art work is not contingent upon impetuosity of brushstroke; virtuosity of line; or the dramatic, comic,

or epic quality of its subject. It depends only on its clarity. We can absorb space, color, and material only through their clear limitation.

Through appearance of form, color, sound, odor, and . . . hardness [a] thing becomes real (perceptible) for us. That we find this reality beautiful or ugly is a question of relationship and insight, in each case a personal preference or aversion.

Art clarifies reality and carries personal beauty to a general form language.

As a cabinetmaker turned architect, Rietveld's principal media were material and space; and in his view, "*the reality which architecture can create is space*," the most fundamental reality of all.

Space is the first discovery of man; through separation of *I* and *environment* there originates a sense of *becoming conscious* [*bewustwording*], what for convenience we call consciousness.

The first step toward consciousness is the knowledge of an individual existence, and this begins with the separation of the *I* and the space around the *I*. One can observe this in a growing baby. *Therefore space means more than other elements as a necessity of life.*

For selfish reasons we must love our environment and our neighbor as our self. And architecture is the best profession constituted to realize the spatial expansion of our *I* and to create a livable human scale; because the medium of architecture is space.

Characteristic of all architecture is that we live in it, on it, around it, and between it.

Art forces the activity of one, or a part, of our senses; for architecture it is our space sense. Isolated fragments of primary reality enlighten our consciousness, through clarification of our discernment. They *provide* and *maintain* our joy of living, which then becomes less dependent on "having," on property and power.

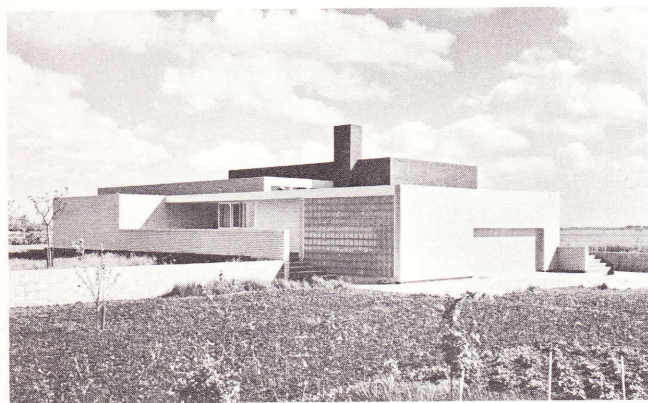
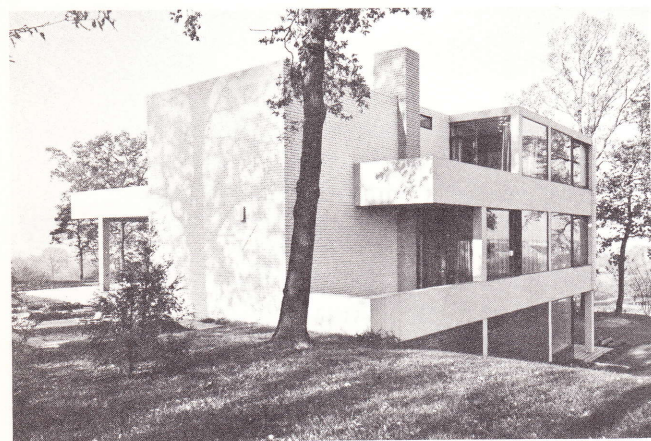
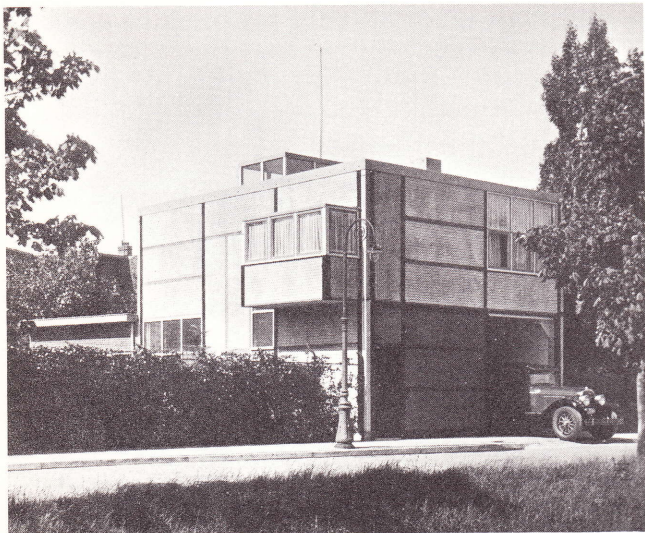
[This "primary reality"] broadens the scale of our *wereld-beeld*.

Explaining the space-defining nature of his early furniture, Rietveld said in 1919:

With this chair an attempt has been made to have every part simple and in its most elementary form in accordance with function and material, thus the form which is most capable of being harmonized with the whole. The construction is attuned to the parts to insure that no part dominates or is subordinate to the others. In this way, the whole stands freely and clearly in space, and form stands out from material.

The wood connection used here is obvious because of its





simplicity and clarity of expression . . . the greatest advantage [of the system] is that one is very free in placing the rails, thus giving the object a greater spatial expression, which liberates one from the constructive-bound plane.

As an instrument in the process of realization, architecture establishes tentative conditions which bring life to an ever richer fulfillment.

Life as a whole is like a balance eternally seeking its center of gravity, . . . the practice of architecture is a sober self-maintenance . . . [Therefore] we must not consider the human scale, which in our field is so highly praised, as a cultural attainment. Because . . . we must bring things into a human scale, in contrast with the inhuman in nature, as a means of self-preservation.

. . . I see architecture more as a tenuous equilibrium than as an unshakable monumentality!

Each work is only a part of the unending expressional possibilities; and an attempt toward completeness in a single work would injure the harmony.

Man's goal is "to realize one's existence, to discern the self from that which is outside oneself and to awaken one's consciousness." This is accomplished through the medium of the human body, assisted by the man-made object, resulting in a "direct experience of reality." Thus,

All perceptions and experiences unite in knowing; and all alter our condition, either toward joy (expansion) or melancholy (contraction) . . .

Architecture is not a matter of beauty or ugliness, but of clarity . . .

Good architecture is a fragment of reality which forces a partial expansion of our self . . . It is the background of our life, neither more beautiful nor ugly; but if it is good: clear . . .

Fig. 11. Garage-living quarters, Utrecht, 1927–1928.

Fig. 12. Van Slobbe House, Heerlen, 1961–1964.

Fig. 13. Van der Doel House, Ilpendam, 1958–1959.