

Shifting Spaces

The Enduring Legacy of Flexibility in Rietveld's Architecture



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Abstract

This thesis examines the impact of Gerrit Rietveld's innovative approach to flexible design, particularly in his iconic Schröder House (1924), on modern architecture and contemporary residential design. Rietveld's pioneering use of movable partitions and open-plan layouts redefined the traditional concepts of space, providing inhabitants with the ability to adapt to their living environments according to their needs. The concept of spatial flexibility was a radical departure from the static, compartmentalized structures that dominated architectural design at the time. Rietveld's approach emphasized user-centered design, allowing spaces to evolve dynamically based on the daily demands of the residents, and this idea resonated deeply with the modernist belief that architecture should serve human functionality.

The thesis explores Rietveld's principles of flexibility and adaptability in the Schröder House, tracing how these concepts influenced not only modernist architects like Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius but also contemporary design practices. As cities became more densely populated and living spaces more constrained, Rietveld's flexible layouts anticipated modern needs for multifunctional spaces, which have become increasingly relevant today in response to urbanization, remote work, and sustainability concerns. However, the thesis also critically examines the limitations of applying Rietveld's vision in the contemporary context.

Although Rietveld's design was groundbreaking for its time, modern inhabitants often find the practicalities of movable walls less appealing than originally envisioned. Issues such as the effort required to constantly reconfigure spaces, along with the increasing demand for stability, privacy, and routine in residential environments, challenge the ongoing applicability of flexible layouts. Studies show that many users eventually revert to fixed layouts, as the novelty of movable walls

fades, highlighting a conflict between the idealized flexibility of Rietveld's design and the reality of modern living preferences.

Despite these challenges, the thesis emphasizes that Rietveld's principles of spatial fluidity continue to influence contemporary architecture. The development of new technologies, such as smart home systems and automated modular designs, presents opportunities to address some of the practical barriers of flexible spaces. The thesis concludes by suggesting that further research is needed to explore how flexible design can be optimized to align with modern needs, considering both technological advancements and evolving societal preferences regarding stability, privacy, and convenience.

Ultimately, while Rietveld's vision for adaptable spaces remains a significant influence on modern architecture, it must be reinterpreted considering the practical demands of contemporary living.

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Introduction

Architecture is more than just walls and roofs—it shapes how we live, work, and interact. But what if a house could transform with its inhabitants, adapting to different needs at different times? Long before today's discussions on modular living and dynamic workspaces, Gerrit Rietveld revolutionized the way we think about space with the Schröder House (1924). This radical experiment in flexibility challenged the rigid conventions of early 20th-century architecture, introducing movable walls, open-plan layouts, and a vision of living that was as fluid as life itself.

Born from the ideals of the De Stijl movement, the Schröder House was not just a building; it functioned as a kind of architectural manifesto—expressing a radical vision for flexible, user-centered living, and offering a powerful contribution to the broader modernist discourse. Its influence rippled through modernist design, inspiring architects like Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius to rethink the relationship between form, function, and adaptability. But Rietveld's ideas were not just revolutionary in their time—they remain strikingly relevant today. As cities become denser, remote work blurs the line between home and office, and sustainability demands smarter use of space, flexible design has never been more critical.

While the Schröder House was the result of a close collaboration between Gerrit Rietveld and Truus Schröder, her role in shaping the project's ideas and spatial qualities cannot be overlooked. Schröder brought a strong vision of how a modern home should function—open, adaptable, and free from traditional constraints—which deeply influenced Rietveld's design approach. Their exchange of ideas was fundamental to the radical nature of the house. However, this thesis focuses on Rietveld, as it aims to explore how his architectural thinking, as demonstrated through the Schröder House and beyond, contributed to key developments within modern archi-

ture. Schröder's influence is acknowledged, but Rietveld's broader body of work provides the main lens through which these themes are examined.

This thesis investigates how Rietveld's pioneering vision of adaptability not only influenced modernist architecture but also continues to resonate in contemporary design. Through an in-depth case study of the Schröder House and an exploration of its enduring legacy, the research seeks to reveal how today's architects can embrace flexibility to craft spaces that adapt to the dynamic rhythms of modern life. A century ahead of his time, Rietveld challenged the static nature of architecture—could his ideas now offer a blueprint for its future?

Research Question

"How did Gerrit Rietveld's use of movable walls and open-plan layouts in the Schröder House influence the evolution of flexible floorplans in modernist architecture, and how can contemporary architects apply these principles to create adaptable spaces in response to today's urban and social challenges?"

Methodology

This thesis follows a qualitative research approach, combining architectural analysis, literature study, and direct observation. The aim is to understand how Gerrit Rietveld's spatial principles—particularly movable walls and open-plan layouts—can inform contemporary design strategies for adaptable architecture.

At the core of the research is an in-depth study of the Schröder House in Utrecht, which serves as the primary and most influential case study. The analysis is based on architectural drawings, photographs, and academic literature, complemented by a personal site visit. Observing the house in person allowed for a deeper understanding of the spatial experience and the functionality of its flexible layout.

In addition to the Schröder House, three other Rietveld projects were analyzed: the Rietveld Pavilion, the Erasmuslaan houses, and the Van Gogh Museum. These cases provide insight into how Rietveld's early ideas evolved and were adapted across different typologies and time periods.

The methodology is both analytical and experiential. It builds on spatial reading, historical interpretation, and reflective observation to form a solid foundation for addressing the central research question and exploring the relevance of Rietveld's principles in today's urban and social context.

Historical Context – The ‘De Stijl’ Movement and Modernist Architecture

To fully understand the significance of Gerrit Rietveld's flexible design approach in the Schröder House, it is essential to examine the historical and theoretical context in which he worked. This chapter explores the origins and principles of the De Stijl movement, its impact on modernist architecture, and Rietveld's role in shaping spatial innovation. By situating Rietveld within the broader trends of early 20th-century architecture, we can better appreciate his contributions to flexible and adaptable design.

The Origins and Principles of De Stijl

The De Stijl movement emerged in the Netherlands in 1917 as a response to the fragmented and decorative architectural styles of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Founded by Theo van Doesburg, Piet Mondrian, and other artists and architects, De Stijl sought to create a universal aesthetic based on abstraction, geometric forms, and primary colors (Overy, 1991). The movement's principles emphasized harmony, asymmetry, and the reduction of elements to their most essential forms. (Ottevanger, 2008)

In architecture, De Stijl's core ideas were manifested using open-plan layouts, floating planes, and dynamic spatial compositions (Frampton, 2007). This departure from traditional enclosed rooms and structural rigidity reflected a broader modernist ethos—one that embraced innovation, technology, and a new way of living.

Rietveld and the Application of De Stijl in Architecture

Gerrit Rietveld, a key figure in De Stijl, initially trained as a furniture maker before changing to architecture. His early works, particularly the Red and Blue Chair (1918), demonstrated his commitment to De Stijl principles, incorporating simple geometric shapes and bold primary colors (Naylor, 2004). However, it was his architectural work, especially the Schröder House (1924), that fully realized De Stijl's spatial ideals.

Unlike traditional houses that relied on fixed walls and compartmentalized rooms, Rietveld designed the Schröder House with a system of movable partitions, allowing for fluid, multifunctional spaces (Kuper & Van Zijl, 1992). This approach aligned with De Stijl's vision of dynamic and open composition, where space was treated as an evolving entity rather than a static enclosure.

Modernism and the Shift Towards Flexible Design

While De Stijl was primarily a Dutch movement, its influence extended into the broader modernist architectural discourse. Architects such as Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius shared similar ideas about flexibility, functionalism, and the breaking down of traditional spatial boundaries (Curtis, 1996). The concept of the open-plan interior, campaigned by Rietveld, became a fundamental aspect of modernist housing and urban planning.

Le Corbusier's Dom-Ino house (1914) introduced the idea of a free plan, where structural columns replaced load-bearing walls, allowing for flexible spatial arrangements (Frampton, 2007). Similarly, Gropius and the Bauhaus school promoted adaptable living spaces, recognizing the need for architecture to accommodate changing social and economic conditions (Banham, 1960). These modernist developments demonstrate that Rietveld's work was not an isolated experiment but part of a larger architectural movement toward spatial adaptability.

Towards a New Spatial Logic

Rietveld's work within the De Stijl movement played a crucial role in redefining architectural space, breaking away from traditional rigid structures and embracing flexibility. By placing his work in the context of broader modernist trends, it becomes evident that his design philosophy was both revolutionary and deeply interconnected with contemporary architectural thought. Understanding this historical background is essential for evaluating the lasting influence of Rietveld's approach on modern and contemporary architecture.



02/ The famous chair - not yet painted



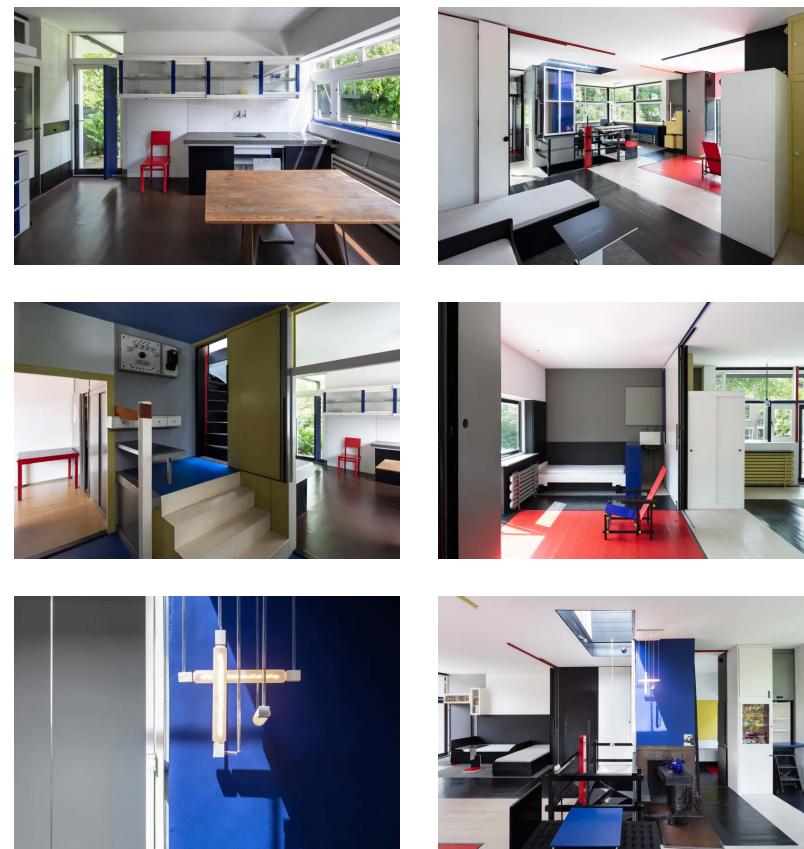
03/ Gerrit Rietveld

The Schröder House: A Case Study of Flexibility and Adaptability

Gerrit Rietveld's design of the Schröder House (1924) in Utrecht remains one of the most iconic and innovative examples of flexible architecture in the early 20th century. As a radical departure from traditional residential design, the house's open-plan layout, movable partitions, and multifunctional spaces redefined how architecture could respond to the changing needs and desires of its inhabitants. This groundbreaking vision was not developed in isolation: Truus Schröder, the client and co-designer, played a pivotal role in shaping the conceptual framework of the house. Her progressive ideas about independent living and spatial fluidity directly influenced Rietveld's approach.

This chapter examines how the Schröder House—born from their collaboration—embodies the principles of flexibility and adaptability, marking a significant evolution in modernist architecture. By analyzing its spatial organization, material choices, and functional adaptability, we will uncover how the design challenged architectural conventions and laid the groundwork for future explorations into dynamic and user-oriented floorplans.

One of the most striking aspects of the Schröder House is the way the movable partitions enable the space to shift between distinct configurations, offering a rare flexibility not found in traditional homes. A visit to the house reveals how the interior can be transformed with ease, as the partitions shift effortlessly to alter the spatial dynamics. This tangible experience illustrates that Rietveld's design principles of adaptability and fluidity are not merely theoretical concepts, but practical strategies embedded in the architecture itself. The ability to change space in real-time serves as a direct manifestation of Rietveld's vision, demonstrating how dynamic and user-oriented the design truly is (Franssen, 2025).



04/ Schrodinger House

A Departure from Traditional Norms

The most notable aspect of the Schröder House is its departure from the conventional residential floorplan of the early 20th century. Traditional houses were characterized by clearly defined, fixed spaces, separated by walls and doors, with little interaction between them. These compartmentalized designs reflected a rigid understanding of domestic life, where each space had a designated function and was separated from others. In contrast, the Schröder House introduced a radically different approach, where the boundaries between rooms were not fixed, but instead defined by movable walls and open spatial connections. As Naylor (2004) observes, "Rietveld's innovative use of movable partitions marked a shift away from the traditional compartmentalization of spaces."

Rietveld's design challenged conventional notions of the home as a static structure, proposing instead a living environment that could evolve and adapt to changing circumstances. The idea of flexibility was embedded in the very fabric of the design, with walls that could be moved, expanded, or contracted to create spaces that were responsive to the needs of its inhabitants. This fluidity contrasted sharply with the rigid layouts of contemporary residential architecture and demonstrated an early commitment to the idea that the built environment should be adaptable, user-centered, and capable of responding to the dynamic nature of daily life (Frampton, 2007).

The Role of Movable Walls and Open-Plan Layouts

The Schröder House is often celebrated for its innovative use of movable walls. These partitions, constructed from lightweight materials such as pine wood and glass, allow the inhabitants to adapt the spatial layout to their specific needs throughout the day. When the partitions are closed, the house functions as a traditional home, with clearly defined rooms for living, dining, and sleeping. However, once opened, the space transforms into a fluid, open-plan environment—reflecting the modernist ideal of flexibility and the dynamic nature of daily life. However, when the walls are moved, the space opens into a more expansive, unified environment, allowing for greater flexibility and freedom of movement.

The open-plan layout of the Schröder House goes beyond merely eliminating walls. It introduces a spatial organization that prioritizes the relationships between spaces rather than the individual function of each room. As Frampton (2007) notes, "The layout was not only about removing walls but about creating a fluid spatial experience, where each room is part of a larger interconnected whole." This open-plan design encouraged a more fluid way of living, where spaces could be adapted for different purposes, such as entertaining guests, working, or relaxing, without being confined to the traditional functions of enclosed rooms.

In addition to the movable walls, Rietveld's design also employed a modular approach to furniture and fixtures. Many of the built-in elements, such as the shelving units, were movable, further emphasizing the adaptability of the space. This focus on modularity was an important precursor to later architectural and interior design trends that emphasized customization and personal control over space (Naylor, 2004).

Materiality and Spatial Composition

Rietveld's use of materials in the Schröder House was also integral to its flexibility. The house's structure was built using concrete, steel, and glass, materials that allowed for greater openness and transparency. Glass was used extensively in the façade, creating an uninterrupted visual connection between the interior and exterior. This openness was not just a physical characteristic but a conceptual one: the use of glass and steel reinforced the idea of fluidity and the breakdown of traditional spatial boundaries (Naylor, 2004).

The color scheme of the Schröder House, another hallmark of Rietveld's design, also played a crucial role in enhancing the sense of flexibility. Bold primary colors—red, blue, and yellow—were applied to walls, doors, and furniture, creating an energetic and dynamic interior. This use of color, in combination with spatial openness, reinforced the idea of a living space that could be shaped and reshaped according to the needs and desires of its inhabitants. Kuper and van Zijl (1992) comment, "The use of color was not only aesthetic but also functional, highlighting the fluidity and dynamism inherent in the house's design."



05/ Diagrams of Schröder House

Functional Adaptability and User-Centered Design

One of the most radical aspects of the Schröder House was its emphasis on the user's ability to alter the space. Unlike traditional houses, where the architect imposed a fixed arrangement of rooms, Rietveld's design allowed the inhabitants, particularly Truus Schröder, to actively shape the environment around them. Schröder's progressive vision for a flexible home, one that could adapt to her changing needs, was instrumental in shaping Rietveld's approach. The house was not simply designed as a building but as a piece of furniture, with movable partitions and adaptable elements that allowed for an evolving spatial experience. This focus on user-centred design reflects a deeper understanding of the relationship between people and their environments, with Rietveld recognizing that architecture should respond to the changing demands of daily life (Frampton, 2007), (N. Dubois, 2024).

For example, the movable partitions could be adjusted depending on whether the family required more privacy or preferred an open, communal space (Image 05). The kitchen, traditionally a separate room in most homes, was integrated into the open-plan living area, further reinforcing the idea of a space that could be adapted to suit different social functions. This flexibility was particularly innovative in the context of the time, when the rigid division between public and private spaces was the norm. (Banham, 1960).

Influence on Modernist Architecture and Contemporary Design

The principles of flexibility and adaptability demonstrated in the Schröder House had a profound impact on the trajectory of modernist architecture. Rietveld's approach to spatial fluidity influenced a range of modernist architects, including Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, who were also exploring ways to break down the rigid boundaries of traditional design. The open-plan layouts and flexible arrangements in the Schröder House presaged later developments in modern residential architecture, such as the International Style and the Bauhaus school's focus on functionalism and adaptability (Banham, 1960).

Rietveld's design has had lasting relevance in contemporary architecture, particularly as cities grow denser, and as people increasingly demand spaces that can accommodate multiple uses. In today's context, architects continue to draw on the principles of flexibility and adaptability established by Rietveld, especially in response to modern challenges such as remote working, environmental sustainability, and the need for multifunctional spaces (Frampton, 2007).

Enduring Lessons in Spatial Flexibility

The Schröder House stands as a testament to the power of flexible design in modern architecture. By moving away from the static and compartmentalized floorplans of the past, Rietveld created a home that was responsive to the evolving needs of its inhabitants. The house's use of movable walls, open-plan layouts, and user-centered adaptability set a new precedent for how architecture could engage with social and spatial flexibility. As we face new challenges in urban living and changing lifestyles, the lessons from the Schröder House continue to offer valuable insights into how architects can create spaces that are both adaptable and resilient.

Influence of Rietveld's Flexibility on His Own Designs

Gerrit Rietveld's innovative approach to flexible floorplans, first showcased in the Schröder House (1924), not only revolutionized modernist architecture but also had a profound impact on his subsequent works. This chapter explores how Rietveld continued to integrate principles of adaptability and flexibility in his later designs, reflecting his evolving architectural philosophy. These works reveal how his early experiments in fluid spaces shaped the broader trajectory of modernist architecture and laid the foundation for contemporary flexible design practices.



06/ Photograph interior in one of four houses on Erasmuslaan

Early Influence and Evolution of Design Philosophy

Following the groundbreaking success of the Schröder House, Rietveld refined and applied his flexible design principles across his body of work. His later designs exhibited an increasing awareness of how spatial configurations could be adapted to respond to the needs of users. This evolution can be observed in projects such as the Erasmuslaan houses (1931), where movable walls and modular structures remained central (Kuper & Van Zijl, 1992). Rietveld's ability to rethink the relationship between space, user interaction, and functionality was a direct outcome of his commitment to creating environments that could evolve alongside the changing demands of daily life.



07/ P Rietveld Pavilion at the Kröller-Müller Sculpture Garden

Rietveld's Continued Exploration of Flexibility at Home and in Public

The design of the Schröder House (1924) was pivotal in shaping Rietveld's approach to architecture, influencing his later works, including the houses on Erasmuslaan (1931). The flexible spatial organization and movable partitions first introduced in the Schröder House set a precedent for Rietveld's continued exploration of adaptability in architecture - image 06. In www applied similar principles of flexibility, allowing for fluid reconfigurations of the interior to suit the diverse needs of its inhabitants. Much like the Schröder House, the interiors of the Erasmuslaan houses featured adaptable walls and open plans that could transform from private to shared spaces. This evolution of design reflects how Rietveld's early experimentation with flexible, user-centered spaces informed his later projects, ensuring that his commitment to creating environments that could evolve with the changing demands of daily life remained central to his architectural philosophy. The Erasmuslaan houses, influenced by the Schröder House, underscore Rietveld's consistent exploration of flexibility, demonstrating his belief that architecture should always respond to the functional needs of its users.

Furthermore, the Rietveld Pavilion (1931), designed for an exhibition in the Netherlands, reflected an understanding of how spaces could be transformed for different uses, though in a more restrained manner compared to the Schröder House (Banham, 1960) - image 07. While the Pavilion was designed as a temporary structure, its modular approach to layout demonstrated Rietveld's growing interest in how adaptable design could meet both functional and aesthetic needs within a confined spatial context. As Rietveld's career progressed, the use of flexible elements became more systematic, emphasizing the integration of user autonomy without sacrificing aesthetic integrity.



08/ Van Gogh Museum Exterior



09/ Van Gogh Museum Interior

Influence on Modern Housing and Post-War Design

After the war, Rietveld applied his flexible design principles to housing projects in Utrecht, particularly in the Hoograven neighborhood, as well as in Rotterdam's Nieuwbouwprojecten. These residential designs featured modular layouts and interchangeable components, allowing for future adjustments to accommodate the evolving needs of inhabitants (Frampton, 2007). These postwar designs emphasized the same adaptability that Rietveld had earlier championed, ensuring that homes could evolve as social and economic conditions changed. The influence of Rietveld's modular approach to housing, whether in Utrecht or Rotterdam, provided a clear example of how flexible design could respond to the broader societal shifts of the postwar era, particularly the increasing demand for sustainable, adaptable living solutions.

The Shift from Pure Flexibility to Modular Functionality

As Rietveld's career progressed, his ideas about flexibility evolved, shifting towards a more systematic approach that emphasized modularity. This change reflected both the growing industrialization of architecture and the increasing complexity of urban environments. The transition to modularity allowed Rietveld to retain the user-centered adaptability central to his earlier works, while also addressing the limitations and opportunities posed by mass production. A clear example of this transition is seen in Rietveld's design for the Van Gogh Museum (1950s), which, although completed after his death, reflected his approach to modular, flexible design. The building's spatial configuration allows for varying gallery sizes, adaptable layouts, and multiple functions within the museum, reflecting Rietveld's emphasis on creating environments that could adapt to the changing needs of both visitors and curators (Banham, 1960).

The Lasting Legacy of Flexibility

Through these various projects, Rietveld's work continued to evolve but remained rooted in his early commitment to flexible, user-centered design. His ability to create spaces that adapted to the needs of their users, whether in the residential or public domain, has had a lasting impact on both modernist architecture and contemporary design. Today, architects continue to look back to Rietveld's principles as they navigate the challenges posed by rapid urbanization, remote working, and the increasing demand for sustainability in architecture.

Rietveld's continued exploration of flexible design, as seen in his later works, exemplifies his ongoing commitment to creating architecture that could adapt to the changing demands of society. From the Schröder House to his postwar housing designs and public buildings, Rietveld's focus on user-centered, adaptable spaces left a lasting legacy in modern architecture. His principles continue to inspire contemporary architects as they respond to the dynamic needs of urban living, sustainability, and multifunctionality. By examining Rietveld's influence on later works, it becomes clear that his approach to flexibility remains relevant in addressing today's architectural challenges.

The Relevance of Flexible Design in Contemporary Housing Architecture

Gerrit Rietveld's innovative use of movable walls in his Schröder House (1924) was a revolutionary approach to architecture, aiming to provide flexibility and adaptability to residential spaces. The idea was that inhabitants could alter the internal layout of their homes based on daily needs, creating a dynamic, user-driven environment. While Rietveld's philosophy was deeply rooted in the modernist belief that architecture should serve the needs of its users, the practicality and long-term enjoyment of such flexible systems in residential spaces remain a point of contention. This chapter explores how contemporary users engage with flexible wall systems, discussing whether Rietveld's vision still aligns with modern living preferences and the potential conflicts that arise when these concepts are applied today.

The Ideals Behind Flexible Walls

Rietveld's design was built on the idea of flexibility, allowing spaces to be easily transformed depending on the requirements of the moment. The movable partitions in the Schröder House were not merely a stylistic choice, but a means of allowing inhabitants to customize their environment—whether for privacy, communal gatherings, or everyday tasks. The concept was rooted in the idea of adapting to the changing rhythms of life, a response to the rigid, compartmentalized structures of traditional homes that did not account for the evolving needs of their residents.

While Rietveld's design was progressive for its time, particularly in its break from rigid layouts and its embrace of user agency, modern responses to such flexibility are mixed. Over time, the appeal of adjustable environments has been questioned by those who have lived in such spaces, with some residents expressing a preference for more fixed layouts. Despite the freedom that flexible systems offer, their practical application in daily life often proves more challenging than anticipated.

The Case Against Movable Walls

One of the key arguments against flexible wall systems is the issue of convenience. While Rietveld's idea of altering space at will may sound appealing in theory, many residents report that, in practice, constantly moving walls can become tedious. A study by architect and urban planner Thomas A. Schmidt in 2016 found that users often opt for more fixed solutions due to the effort required to reposition walls regularly. Schmidt's research revealed that, in many cases, the novelty of adjustable walls wears off, and people revert to using the walls in static positions. The effort involved in rearranging walls can become a barrier, especially for those with busy lifestyles.

"The flexibility is often seen as a burden rather than a benefit, as it requires regular maintenance and active decision-making from users," Schmidt concluded (Schmidt, 2016).

Another critical perspective is that the desire for flexibility often conflicts with the inherent need for stability and permanence in a living environment. A 2017 study by the Architectural Review highlighted that while flexible living arrangements can be appealing in theory, there is a strong cultural preference for permanence when it comes to home design. People desire fixed spaces where routines can be established, and the transient nature of flexible walls detracts from the comfort of a consistent home environment. Homeowners interviewed for the study reported dissatisfaction with movable walls that created too much uncertainty and lack of privacy, which is often essential for mental and emotional well-being.

Furthermore, the experience of privacy and acoustic comfort is impacted in flexible spaces. Research published in the *Journal of Architectural Psychology* (2019) highlighted that individuals in spaces with movable partitions often reported feeling less secure and more exposed, particularly in multi-user households. Fixed walls, in contrast, create clear boundaries that allow people to establish more personal and private zones within their home. As societal norms around privacy have evolved, particularly with increased use of digital technology in the home, the demand for fixed and predictable boundaries in living spaces has risen.

Rietveld's Philosophy: Is It Still Relevant?

Rietveld's underlying philosophy—creating spaces that respond to human needs—was undoubtedly ahead of its time, but whether it fully aligns with today's expectations is debatable. In an era where design trends are increasingly focusing on sustainability, minimalism, and multifunctionality, the idea of flexible space still holds value. However, the idealized vision of a home where walls can be moved with ease seems to conflict with modern demands for consistency, stability, and private spaces.

Rietveld himself envisioned his design as something people would appreciate, emphasizing the joy of experiencing a space that responds to human needs. Yet, contemporary users seem to have a more nuanced relationship with such flexibility. Some users may enjoy the adaptability of their living space in specific contexts—such as during social gatherings or when there is a need for spatial change—but over time, they may find themselves preferring fixed configurations that do not require constant attention.

In addition, advancements in technology and materials today may offer new possibilities for flexible spaces, such as movable partitions that are easier to handle and more durable. The widespread use of smart homes, where elements of space can be adjusted through voice commands or automated systems, could renew interest in flexible walls. However, as noted by architectural theorist Sarah Williams in her 2020 book *The Future of Space: Flexibility and Design*, “Today, while the aspiration for flexible spaces remains, the realization of true flexibility remains elusive without the use of advanced technology that minimizes the effort required to shift between configurations.”

Conclusion

Gerrit Rietveld's Schröder House represents a landmark in modernist architecture, fundamentally changing the way architects approached spatial design. Rietveld's innovative use of movable partitions and open-plan layouts in the Schröder House exemplified a vision of architecture that was fluid, adaptable, and tailored to the evolving needs of its inhabitants. By rejecting the rigid, compartmentalized floor plans of the past, Rietveld created a space that could be easily transformed, allowing for greater interaction, privacy, and personalization. His design was not just a stylistic choice; it was an embodiment of modernist ideals, particularly the belief that architecture should serve the functional needs of its users.

While Rietveld's flexible design principles were groundbreaking for their time, their application in contemporary living environments presents several challenges. As urbanization accelerates and living spaces become more compact, the demand for adaptable, multifunctional spaces has grown. However, modern residents often find the practicalities of movable walls less appealing than expected. Research has shown that the effort required to reposition walls regularly can become burdensome, particularly for individuals with busy lifestyles. Additionally, many residents express a preference for fixed layouts that provide a sense of stability, privacy, and predictability, elements that flexible designs may fail to consistently offer.

Rietveld's vision of a highly adaptable and user-driven environment, though innovative, may not fully align with contemporary expectations. While the ideals of flexibility and responsiveness to human needs are still valued, the practicalities of maintaining such environments have raised questions about their long-term viability. Furthermore, societal shifts toward privacy and the desire for stability in residential spaces challenge the notion that movable walls can create an optimal living environment for everyone.

Despite these challenges, Rietveld's work remains a foundational influence on contemporary architecture. His commitment to creating spaces that responded to the needs of the inhabitants paved the way for modern, user-centered design practices. As architects continue to address the evolving demands of urban living, sustainability, and remote working, Rietveld's principles of flexibility and adaptability continue to inspire new ideas. However, the future of flexible design in residential spaces requires a careful balance between innovation and practicality, ensuring that the needs of modern inhabitants are met without sacrificing comfort, privacy, and stability.

Discussion

While the principles of flexibility and adaptability championed by Gerrit Rietveld in the Schröder House remain relevant, their real-world application in contemporary housing environments presents a more complex set of challenges. Rietveld's vision of spaces that evolve according to the needs of the user was revolutionary, particularly for its emphasis on flexibility, autonomy, and user-centered design. However, in practice, modern residents' needs for stability, privacy, and routine sometimes clash with the demands of a flexible environment.

One of the primary concerns with flexible design today is the convenience of maintaining and reconfiguring such spaces. The notion of frequently adjusting walls to meet the varying needs of daily life, while appealing in theory, can become cumbersome over time. A study by Schmidt (2016) found that users of flexible wall systems often reverted to fixed configurations due to the time and effort required to adjust the space regularly. This finding suggests that, while flexibility is an attractive concept, it may not always align with the rhythms of modern life, which often prioritize efficiency and ease.

The evolving nature of privacy and the increasing demand for personal space in contemporary society further complicate the application of flexible walls. Research from the Architectural Review (2017) indicated that many homeowners prefer the predictability and permanence of fixed walls, which create distinct boundaries for privacy and personal comfort. In flexible spaces, particularly those with movable partitions, residents often report feeling exposed, and the lack of defined private zones can contribute to stress and dissatisfaction. This highlights the tension between the ideals of flexibility and the practical needs for stable, private environments in residential settings.

Despite these challenges, the enduring appeal of Rietveld's ideas can be seen in the ongoing exploration of flexible design in contemporary architecture. Advances in technology, such as automated systems and smart home solutions, could address some of the practical difficulties associated with movable walls. These innovations may allow for greater flexibility without the inconvenience of manual reconfiguration, potentially renewing interest in adaptable environments. However, for flexible designs to succeed in the 21st century, architects must consider the balance between user preferences for stability and the adaptability that Rietveld envisioned.

Further research is needed to understand how flexible spaces can be optimized to meet modern demands. Investigating how new technologies can facilitate adaptability, as well as exploring the cultural and social factors that influence residents' attitudes towards flexible design, will be key in shaping the future of residential architecture

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Image

01/ Blue & Red Chair, Gerrit rietveld. MOBILA

02/ Rietveld on this famous chair - not yet painted, Rietveld Foundation

03/ Gerrit Rietveld. Photo. From De Stijl, 7th year, no. 79/84 (1927): p. 46.

04/ Schröderhouse Images, Stijn Poelstra

05/ Diagrams of Schröderhouse, own authorship

06/ Photograph interior in one of four houses on Erasmuslaan, executed in collaboration with Mets & Co in 1931, Gerrit Rietveld p. 92

07/ Rietveld Pavilion at the Kröller-Müller Sculpture Garden, Arch Daily

08/ Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 1962-1973. Rietveld Stichting

09/ Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 1962-1973. Rietveld Stichting

