



De Stijl in Utrecht: Rietveld's architecture

A century ago, the De Stijl art movement caused a revolution in architecture. One of the most famous contributors to the movement was the Utrecht-born furniture maker and architect Gerrit Rietveld, who achieved world fame with his red-and-blue chair and Rietveld Schröder House. However, there is so much more to this innovative designer, waiting to be discovered. So get on your bike and meet Gerrit Rietveld's legacy!

① The cycling tour starts where the city's history once began – i.e., **Dom Square**. Around 50 AD, the Romans built a castellum (fort) here. In the late 7th century, the missionary Willibrord used the dilapidated fort as a basis from which to disseminate Christian ideas. Utrecht grew into a major religious centre with a majestic Dom church. However, fate struck in 1674. During a hurricane, the church's nave collapsed, never to be rebuilt. You can tell from the colour of the flagstones how large the church once was. Steel plates around the square mark the boundaries of the Roman fort.

Start at the Domplein Square with your back towards the Dom Tower. Continue to the left of the church. Go straight

ahead at the first crossroads. Take the first street on your left (Achter St-Pieter). Then the first street on your right (Keistraat). Go straight ahead at the canal (Drift). At the busy crossroads, turn right into Nobelstraat. Halt before the canal, to the right of the bridge.

② Utrecht was invested with town privileges in 1122. Among other things, this meant that it was allowed to erect city walls and dig a moat around the city. This moat, called **Stadsbuiten-gracht**, still exists today. The footpath on the right leads to what remains of the city wall. For centuries, the moat formed the outer border of the town. However, in the nineteenth century, Utrecht's population grew so fast that the medieval town could

What was De Stijl?

In 1917, artist Theo van Doesburg founded a journal entitled *De Stijl* ('the style'). It provided the impetus for a radical turnabout in the visual arts and architecture, with traditional shapes being replaced with straight lines, geometric shapes and a limited colour scheme (primary colours, combined with black, white and grey). De Stijl grew into a wide-ranging art movement, whose best-known members were Theo van Doesburg, Bart van der Leek, Piet Mondrian and Gerrit Rietveld.

no longer accommodate everyone. Starting from 1830, the defences were gradually taken down. The first neighbourhoods outside the canal were constructed after 1875.

Rietveld seated in his famous chair, in front of his furniture workshop



Cross the bridge and turn left. A little further down the street, keep right (Kruisstraat). At the end of the street, turn right, then immediately turn left, into an alley (Bekkerstraat). Take the second street on your right (Palmstraat). Then second street on your left (Poortstraat). Halt at the first crossroads, at the start of Ooftstraat.

3 The neighbourhood of Witte Vrouwen ('white women') – named after a convent whose nuns wore white clothes – is an example of such a nineteenth-century residential neighbourhood. The area boasts big mansions in the main streets, with small working-class houses

behind them. A plaque at Ooftstraat 14 commemorates the fact that this is **the house in which Gerrit Rietveld was born** on 24 June 1888. His father was a furniture maker who had a workshop at Poortstraat 98. The family later moved to this address. After completing primary

school, Gerrit was apprenticed to his father. He was a dreamer, but talented. In 1911 he married a nurse named Vrouwgjen Hadders. They moved into Ooftstraat 23.

Continue cycling down Ooftstraat. At the end of the street, turn right into Oude

Kerkstraat. Halt at the end of the street.

4 Rietveld wanted to do more than make furniture. He explored other techniques and worked at a silversmith's for a while. During this period, his development was influenced by several people, including the artist **Truus**

Schröder-Schröder, who lived with her family in the stately building on the other side of Biltstraat, at No. 423. Rietveld and Schröder-Schröder turned out to be soul mates. Rietveld designed a room for her with blocks of various shades of grey. It was the start of a close collaboration, which would later result in a relationship. More about that later ...

Art. Between 1904 and 1908, young Gerrit Rietveld took evening lessons from him, during which he learned about architecture, styles and proportions. Houtzagers designed buildings in the revivalist styles that were popular in the late nineteenth century. Rietveld would later adopt a style completely his own, but first he needed a push in the right direction.

Cross to the other side of Biltstraat and turn left. Once you have passed No. 473, turn right, then immediately keep left (Oorsprongpark). At the end of the street, turn left at the roundabout (complete three-fourths of the circle). Cross the railway track, then turn a slight right and enter Ramstraat. Halt at No. 12.

Continue down Ramstraat. Turn right just before the end of the street, into a tarmac road, past the church (Oudwijk). At the end of the road, keep right and follow a tarmac road towards Wilhelmina Park. Halt at the roundabout, near the second street on your right (Burgemeester Reigerstraat).

5 Another major contributor to De Stijl was **P.J. Houtzagers**, the designer of the eclectic mansions at Ramstraat 2-16 and 23-27 (constructed in 1892). Houtzagers was not just an architect, but also served as the Managing Director of the Utrecht Museum of Applied

6 The houses at Burgemeester Reigerstraat 80-84 were designed by the architect and furniture designer **P.J.C. (Piet) Klaarhamer**. Starting from 1908, Rietveld took courses with him – among other things, on the relationship between



Length of tour
9 km

Start
Domplein (Dom Square)

Bike rental
VVV Utrecht (Tourist Office)
Domplein 9
tel. 0900-128 87 32
(each call € 1,30)
www.visit-utrecht.com
from €10 per bike per day



The house Rietveld built for a driver with pre-fab components

architecture and visual arts, politics and philosophy. In this way, Rietveld gradually freed himself from the stifling atmosphere of Utrecht. In terms of visual language, too, Klaarhamer turned out to be a major source of inspiration to Rietveld. He strove to create his designs with clear and honest shapes and a functional layout. His furniture often showed off its structure, and he liked using basic and cheap materials. Even so, the pupil would soon outshine his mentor. It was Rietveld rather than Klaarhamer who was invited to publish his furniture designs in *De Stijl* journal in 1919.

Continue through the roundabout. Turn right into the second street on your right (Wilhelminapark). After

50 m, keep right. Enter a street paved with bricks. Halt half-way through the street.

7 The **Wilhelmina Park** was opened in 1898. Mansions and villas for well-to-do families were erected around the park. It was precisely this elite which was open to new ideas and movements. As a result, Houtzagers and Klaarhamer were commissioned to erect several buildings here.

Continue down the street. Keep right at the end of the street, then take the first street on your right (Julianalaan). Halt across the street from Julianalaan 10.

8 Rietveld, too, was allowed to show off his skills as an architect in this neighbourhood. At the time it was

completed in 1917, the house at **Julianalaan 10** looked just like any other house on the block. In 1927, Rietveld gave the house a new façade with a black plinth and a flat roof, which were quite modern at the time.

Cross the street and walk around the block of houses, staying on the pavement. Once you have crossed the water, turn left onto Rembrandtkade. Halt after 25 m.

9 Behind the house at Julianalaan 10 (which belonged to a doctor) Rietveld built a **house for a driver**. He did so in just three weeks, using pre-fab components. Rietveld called it a 'test for industrial construction methods'. Unfortunately, the test was only partially successful. The roof leaked and the steel window frames were draughty. This was because Rietveld mainly erected prototypes; he never test-ran his designs.

Return to the main road, then turn left into Adriaen van Ostadelaan. After 150 m, turn right into Bosboomstraat. Once you have passed the hospital, turn left into Burgemeester F. Andraeelaan. Go straight ahead at the traffic lights (Mesdaglaan). Take the second street on your left (Breitnerlaan). At the end of the street, keep right (Breitnerlaan). Halt at No. 9.

10 Before World War II, Rietveld received few commissions, but this changed during the post-war reconstruction period. For instance, he designed two houses in Breitnerlaan in 1958. No. 9 is known as the **Muus House**, after the first family to inhabit it. Not a single surface of the façade is identical, and the roof appears to be floating unsupported, but apart from this, the design is quite sober.

11 Much more striking is the **Theissing House** at No. 11. Rietveld's patron, Mr Theissing, worked at the Bredero construction company, which also built the house. Construction involved the B2 concrete blocks developed by the company, which were hollow on one side and were easily stacked. Next to the front door, a few blocks were installed with the hollow side facing the exterior. The interior is classic Rietveld: The walls can be slid to the side, thus creating one single large space. However, the Theissing House, too, suffered severe leakage. When the house was renovated in 1980, the sliding inner walls were removed and the concrete blocks were treated against leakage. This is the reason why they are white these days, because they used to be concrete grey. Primary colours break up the white surfaces.

12 To the right of No. 9, walk down the path to the River Kromme Rijn. To your left you will find a **Rietveld bench**, a bench designed by Rietveld in 1959 for the garden of the Calvé Factory in Delft. From this place you will be able to see that the rear façades of the two houses contain a great deal of glass, which meant lots of light and a great view of the nearby park.

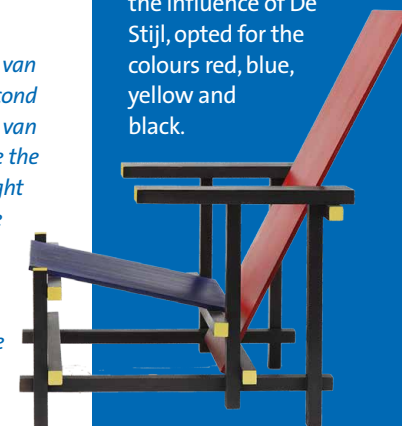
Continue down Breitnerlaan. At the end of the street, turn left into Israëlslaan. At the end of this street, turn right, then turn left at the traffic lights (Adriaen van Ostadelaan). After some 200 m, turn left into Ferdinand Bolstraat.

13 From 1917 to 1924, Rietveld owned a **furniture workshop** at Adriaen van Ostadelaan 93. The photo on the side of the building, taken in 1918, depicts him seated in his red-and-blue chair, which was to become very famous.

Continue down Adriaen van Ostadelaan. Take the second street on your right (Jan van Scorelstraat). Again, take the second street on your right (Hobbemastraat). At the end of the street, turn left, then take the first street on your right (Frans Halsstraat). At the end turn left into Laan van Minsweerd. Halt at the end of the street.

An iconic chair

As a beginner furniture maker, Rietveld was strongly opposed to the traditional furniture made by his father. He strove for simplicity, both in terms of shape and construction methods and to create furniture which would match the interior of a house. In 1917, Rietveld established his own furniture workshop in Adriaen van Ostadelaan. Here he was able to experiment with new shapes and designs. This is how he came to design the famous chair that was discussed in *De Stijl* journal in 1919: a minimalist design of slats and planks, highly suited to automated production. The first versions of these chairs were not painted. It was not until later that Rietveld, under the influence of De Stijl, opted for the colours red, blue, yellow and black.



14 In 1924, Rietveld designed his first entire home. This house was commissioned, again, by Truus Schröder-Schröder, who had recently been widowed and was looking for a new home for herself and her children. The result was an exuberant experiment with shapes and colours, which sharply contrasts with the adjacent houses. The exterior of the **Rietveld Schröder House** consists of asymmetric surfaces and lines, painted in the colours of De Stijl. The interior is entirely about light and space. The house marked Rietveld's first experiments with sliding partitions. He designed all the furniture himself. By now the designer and his female patron were growing very close. Between 1925 and 1933, Rietveld had an office at the ground floor, and after his wife's death in 1958, he moved in with Truus Schröder. In 1964 he passed away in what has come to be considered one of his masterpieces – and a UNESCO World Heritage site.

15 In the viaduct next to the Rietveld Schröder House,

Margot Berkman and Eline Janssens created a work of art entitled **Sitting in Blue** in 2001. Ceramic tiles show 32 chairs designed by Rietveld. The designs look like they can be assembled quickly and easily, as if designed for a certain famous Swedish furniture brand. At the time, however, people were not ready for such revolutionary concepts.

*Pass under the viaduct, then immediately turn left. Halt at the beginning of **Erasmuslaan**.*

16 After completing the Rietveld Schröder House, Rietveld gradually withdrew from De Stijl. In the early 1930s, he designed **two blocks of houses** in Erasmuslaan, in accordance with the principles of Het Nieuwe Bouwen (i.e., modernist architecture). This style was characterised by its emphasis on function, which would inform the shape of a house. The houses in Erasmuslaan were constructed around a steel skeleton frame, with 'light, air and space' all given centre stage. The blocks of houses were intended to

serve as an example of social housing projects, but did not result in Rietveld being given many more commissions. His services as an architect were not in high demand until the 1950s.

*Return under the viaduct and go straight ahead into **Prins Hendriklaan**. At the end of the street, enter the park and go straight ahead. Follow the main track (straight ahead). At the end of the track, keep right. At the roundabout, take the third street on your right (**Burg. Reigerstraat**). Continue straight ahead towards the city centre (**Nachtegaalstraat, Nobelstraat, Janskerkhof, Lange Jansstraat, Potterstraat, Lange Viestraat**). Once you have passed the **Oude Gracht canal**, take the first street on your left (**Vredenburg**).*

17 Between 1934 and 1936, Rietveld renovated the **Vreeburg cinema** (currently ESPRIT at Nos. 9-10), again in accordance with the tenets of Het Nieuwe Bouwen. He added another floor, where he lived from 1936 until his wife's death in 1958.



Rietveld Schröder House



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This route was compiled with the utmost care. However, the information provided is subject to change. The publisher shall not be held liable for any damage resulting from any incorrect information provided.

This cycling tour was drawn up on the occasion of the Mondrian to Dutch Design Year (2017).



Rietveld Schröder House

You can visit the Rietveld Schröder House Tue-Sun, 11am-5pm. The ticket office is in the adjacent house.

Be sure to book your visit well in advance on www.centraalmuseum.nl. To see the famous red-and-blue chair, visit the Centraal Museum in the Utrecht city centre (Agnietenstraat 1).

Mondrian to Dutch Design

2017 will mark the centennial of the foundation of De Stijl. For more information on activities organised in Utrecht and Amersfoort, consult www.destijlutechtamersfoort.com.

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