

Anna WIŚNICKA (John Paul II Catholic University Lublin)

New Architecture for a New Man. *De Stijl* and the Process of Redesigning Architecture in the Age of Modernism

Abstract

This article presents the activities of the *De Stijl* group that was active in the Netherlands after World War I in all its forms (activities of artists, a magazine, architectural style). The ideas of *De Stijl* were created for a 'new man' — a man of modernity who was not afraid of the unknown. The Rietveld-Schröderhuis in Utrecht is the most visible example of the new thinking by *De Stijl*.

De Stijl group has been one of the most influential artistic movements in the age of modernism in Europe. There are many scientific works concerning different aspects connected both with the members of the group and their general art rules. This text aims to focus on the groundbreaking aspects of the new architecture directed to the new society after World War I which has been strictly connected with the emergence of modernism. It shows two main types of buildings — those for civic use and private one and the way how they revolutionized the perception of architecture. The work begins with the general description of modernism and proceeds to the emergence of *de Stijl*. To be able to fully present the matter, the author decided to provide the reader with the term *de Stijl* in all its forms — a group of artists, a magazine, and most importantly a particular architectural style. Moreover, to be precise in explaining the thesis the reader is provided with the definition of *a new man*, mentioned in the title. The following paragraphs present *de Stijl* group against the background of the cultural changes in England and Germany at the turn of the 20th century. The great architectural heritage of the *Stijl* group was indebted to the three main architects — Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud, Gerrit Thomas Rietveld and Theo van Doesburg. Successive paragraphs present the case of civic architecture designed by J.P.P. Oud. They provide the reader with the realizations of the following housing estates — Tusschendijken, Kiefhoek and Hoek van Holland. Another issue mentioned in the text is private architecture and the key role of the patron in the process of creating a new kind of a private mansion house. The Rietveld-Schröderhuis villa designed by Thomas Rietveld

for Truus Schröder-Schräder serves as an example. The last kind of architecture designed by *de Stijl* members are the projects of Theo van Doesburg and their accomplishments — Hotel Particulier, Maison d'Artiste, and atelier in Meudon which present another interesting approach to house building.

The 19th and the beginning of the 20th century were the time of a sort of rebellion since one had had enough of beauty and the vastness of architectural solutions. One could argue that as far as art is concerned, anything that was new, beautiful and remarkable had already happened, examples of which are represented by the following styles: historicism, eclecticism and art nouveau.¹ One started to wonder then what art truly was and if any more architectural breakthroughs, ones being far from copying the well-established patterns, could still be expected out of art. This was the time when a new epoch began — modernism. It brought along so many changes and style alternations that it cannot be compared to any other artistic period.

The developing industrialisation of the 19th century and technical possibilities became a source of new theories and ideas, which then, in turn, would influence the art of the 20th century. Modernity had already its chance for development in nineteenth-century England, where in the second half of the 19th century Henry Cole² began to popularize the ideas of mass production. However, his progressive ideas stood no chance with John Ruskin's and William Morris' vision of the man being ennobled by art. Consequently, the emergence of the new style, which was supposed to be available for a broad public, and not for the richest classes of society, has been stalled.

The key role in the process of changing the perception of architecture was played by a German writer and designer Herman Muthesius.³ He had lived in London for many years investigating the architectural design achievements. "Das Englische Haus" was the result of his life in England, which sparked off the alteration in the perception of architecture and design. And thus France and England had lost their artistic leadership in design and architecture lasting for the previous hundred years for another two leading countries — Germany and Holland.

One cannot consider any artistic movement as something isolated from other European cultural phenomena. It has always been the case that all of the artistic trends come to life due to the merge of ideas and experiences of artists from various cultural backgrounds. It was also the case with *de Stijl* group. The beginning and the end of this group tends to be marked as the period between 1917 and

¹ Cf. P. Thornton, *Authentic Décor: the Domestic Interior 1620–1920*, New Jersey 1993. M. Praz, *An Illustrated History of Interior Decoration from Pompeii to Art Nouveau*, translated by W. Weaver, London 1964.

² He was member of a committee which had organized The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations in London in 1851. Together with Richard Redgrave, Matthew Wyatt and Owen Jones, Cole was a publisher of "Journal of Design and Manufactures".

³ H. Muthesius, *Das Englische Haus*, Berlin 1904–05.

1931. Anything that was new came with the end of World War I, the consequences of which, both industrial and societal, forever changed the way one viewed the reality and the art which depicted it. The consequences of the war were not so devastating for the neutral Holland⁴ as they were for Germany. This could explain the fact that *de Stijl* emerged earlier than one of the essential modernistic artistic organisations of Europe — i.e. the *Bauhaus*.

And so *de Stijl* group had a chance to flourish in the period of relative peace as World War I was coming to an end, sparing Holland, and World War II did not begin yet. Other artistic trends such as dadaism, expressionism and futurism had also a chance to develop at the same time. The year of the publication of the first issue of “*De Stijl*” magazine by Theo van Doesburg is considered to be the beginning of the group. Officially, *de Stijl* ceased to exist in 1931⁵, the year in which van Doesburg died. *De Stijl* group was developing basing on certain ideas and concepts published by its members. They all could be found in the journal of the group. “*De Stijl*” magazine had become a suitable place for presenting new projects of the members of the group as well as artists who were an inspiration for them. They all presented in it their reflections concerning the art touching upon the past as well as the reality they lived in.

The architecture created by *de Stijl* was a continuation of the ideas of Neo-Plasticism (*nieuwe beelding*) by Piet Mondrian as well as the constructivist theories, thus joining together the two most important art theories which emerged after World War I. Their main purpose, connected with architecture, was to create the language of art which puts universality above one’s artistic individualism. The architecture received back its “human” proportions becoming more inhabitant-friendly. The previous monumentalism had been done away with for the sake of functionality. The colouring corresponded tightly with Mondrian’s theory — primary colours were used on the background of large white surfaces, which underlined the simple geometric shapes of the buildings.

This architecture derived from the early works of Frank Lloyd Wright. His Unity Temple projects designed in period between 1905–1908 were presented in the “*De Stijl*” journal.⁶ This proved that a simple geometric form with no ornaments had already become the most influential tendency in the twentieth-century art. *De Stijl* and its architects moved much further in the reduction of form, though, than their American colleagues. Moreover, they faced bigger challenges which included financial limits — namely designing housing estates.

It is very meaningful that *de Stijl* architects created architecture for a new group of people who appeared after World War I. A change of attitude is quite vis-

⁴ M. M. Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral: The Netherlands in the First World War, 1914–1918*, Amsterdam 2006.

⁵ Sometimes sources give the year 1932, in which the last issue of „*de Stijl*”, which was devoted exclusively to Theo van Doesburg, appeared.

⁶ R. van ‘t Hoff, *Architectuur en haar ontwikkeling*, “*de Stijl*”, 4/1919, Leiden, pp. 40–42.

ible in this case as the notion that good architecture is available for the rich only ceased to exist. The architects represented their skills by realizing commissions both private and civic. This was a sort of architectural breakthrough which was present in Europe at that time thanks to *de Stijl* and the *Bauhaus*. The clients created also a brand new group of people who were not afraid of the new and unknown. Even though the modernistic architecture did not instantly win over a vast majority of receivers — especially private clients, one could argue that a new man was born; a man of modernity for whom new houses and buildings would be built.

Whichever assumption one makes, (it is certain that) the new man was firstly an autonomous individual who, at the same time, as a small cog in a large wheel had to contribute to the new society.⁷

Welke overtuiging men ook aanhing, de nieuwe mens was in de eerste plaats een autonoom individu, dat tagelijkertijd als een radertje in het grotere collectieve geheel moest bijdragen aan de nieuwe maatschappij.

That indicated that new receivers of architecture by *de Stijl* were present both within individual clients and receivers from vast societal groups. Those houses had nothing to do with the architectural past but reflected times in which they were created. Thus the proponents of modernism were a relatively small group as the vast majority viewed architecture and art in a traditional fashion.

Those architectural realizations were remarkably easy, universal and timeless. At the time that they were created they faced criticism as people were being sceptical about whether it was an architecture for the sake of functionality and discrete elegance, or a simple lack of architectural skill. Many of those buildings survived up to this day serving as an example of innovative attitude towards art and architecture presented by eminent modernists of *de Stijl*.

De Stijl was created by three major architects — Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud⁸, Gerrit Thomas Rietveld⁹ and Theo van Doesburg¹⁰ who, thanks to their hard work, forever changed the Dutch architecture. Even though their projects differed from each other they all showed the spirit of *de Stijl* described on many occasions in the journal by J.J.P. Oud.

One of the greatest achievements of J.J.P. Oud were the projects of housing estates. They created an architectural novum. They were a part of the projects connected with the arrangement of city space.¹¹ In 1918 Oud started working as the major urban planner of Rotterdam, which changed the whole city signifi-

⁷ I. van Zijl, B. Mulder, *Het Rietveld Schröderhuis*, Utrecht 2009, pp. 35.

⁸ 1890–1963, cf. D. Broekhuizen (ed.), *J.J.P. Oud Poetic Functionalist 1890–1963, Complete Works*, Rotterdam 2001.

⁹ 1888–1964, cf. B. Mulder, *Gerrit Thomas Rietveld: Life Thoughts Work*, Amsterdam 2010.

¹⁰ His real name was Christian Küpper (1883–1931), cf. E. van Straaten, *Theo van Doesburg: schilder en architect*, 'S-Gravenhage, 1988.

¹¹ In 1901 a national supervision of city development was introduced in the Netherlands. Cf. P. Overy, *de Stijl*, translated by T. Lechowska, Warszawa 1979, p. 44.

cantly. Holland was the first country which satisfied the needs of the economically disadvantaged part of the society. According to the idea of city development, the new housing estates were supposed to serve the working class who were coming from the provinces. It was a clear contrast to the previous tenement houses. The simplicity, harshness, lack of ornaments were introduced for the very first time on such a big scale. The first housing estates designed by Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud sprang up in Rotterdam. At the same time, the city itself was flourishing as well, since the Rotterdam port was in its heyday. The civic space was needed for working families. The two housing estates — Tusschendijken and Kiefhoek were a manifest of the new art. Oud refers to this sort of art as follows,

Flexibility is a feature of architecture. Architecture is a flexible art — an art of determining space, and in this sense a cityscape could be generally elaborated on as determining space in single buildings, in a complex of buildings and in buildings which are in confrontation with each other.

De karakteristiek der Bouwkunst is Plastiek. Bouwkunst is plastische kunst — kunst van ruimte-bepaling en als zodanig in het stadsbeeld het meest algemeen uit te drukken: in het enkele gebouw en in de samenvoeging en tegen-over-elkaar-stelling van gebouwen.¹²

Oud designed Tusschendijken from 1920–1921, referring to his earlier project¹³, in the spirit of the above mentioned ideas. This housing estate consisted of a group of four-storey blocks with their own yards. The buildings were simple and geometric. Due to its concrete construction, simple roofs, repeatable window pattern, the project reflected the simplicity declared by *de Stijl* manifesto. The dominance of white made the whole construction look neat and modern. The windows facing the yard provided the feeling of privacy. The sections outside were both private (those connected with the apartments on the ground floor) as well as belonging to all of the dwellers (e.g. green sections whose task was to integrate the inhabitants).¹⁴ This very accomplishment of the housing estate project was a turning point in the history of architecture as it proved that even with little financial capacities one could economically build a set of housing estates which included a modernistic spirit as well. It is well known that Oud was a keen adherent of savings as he mentioned expressing his attitude towards the art of architecture,

The development of architecture is determined not only by spiritual influences but also, to a significant extent, by social and technical ones as architecture is embedded in the social life more than any other art form and is in all its aspects connected with the societal issues.

One could argue that architecture is an indirect art because the perfection of this art leads eventually to its utilitarian usage.

De ontwikkeling der bouwkunst wordt niet allen geestelijke, maar voor een belangrijk deel ook door sociale en technische invloeden bepaald, omdat de bouwkunst meer dan een anderen

¹² J.P.P. Oud, *Het monumentale stadsbeeld*, “de Stijl”, 1/1917, Leiden, p. 10.

¹³ It concerns the Spangen housing estate in Rotterdam which was built between 1918–1919.

¹⁴ M. White, *De Stijl and Dutch modernism*, Manchester 2003, pp. 55–58.

kunstvorm in het maatschappelijk leven wortelt en zelfs in haar meest individuele uitingen aan maatschappelijke overweningen gebonden blijft.¹⁵

Men zou van de bouwkunst kunnen zeggen, dat zij indirect kunst is, omdat de idealiteit der kunst tot uiting langs den weg der utiliteit.¹⁶

Another interesting architectural solution was the Kiefhoek housing estate in Rotterdam. It was in opposition to buildings a couple of storeys high. Instead it was created out of terraced houses, one storey high, connected with each other to seem as one geometrical unity. What was interesting about this neighbourhood were the small square gardens in front of the houses, thanks to which the whole estate was referred as the “white village” (witte dorp). It resembled small down-town houses placed very close to each other. New technical solutions were used while building this estate, which allowed to cut the costs to an absolute minimum. Terraced pattern and the repeatedness of form ideally matched the universal ideas of the art. Despite the universalism of the whole complex, however, some room was spared for dwellers’ individualism who could freely arrange the space around their house. The buildings consist of the ground and first floors, which made them relatively small, and spacious enough for an average family. The Kiefhoek estate offered its inhabitants the feeling of privacy, being a large neighbourhood at the same time.

Oud’s most remarkable accomplishment in the field of architecture was the working estate — Hoek van Holland located at the North Sea and built in 1924. In some sense it denies the theories and ideas created by Oud himself. Hoek van Holland was a group of blocks of flats, the form of which differed significantly from the two previously mentioned projects. The buildings looked simple but they were finished with circular shape, which triggered the brand new aesthetic values not present in the case of the previous buildings. The blocks seemed to be floating, they were more dynamic. It is due to this dynamics of the structure that this group of buildings differed from other realisations of Oud, and also served as an inspiration for other artists of the time of modernism as for instance the Finnish architect and designer Alvar Aalto. It was him who made the circular shape his trademark, proving that modernism does not necessarily have to rely on right angles.

Private architecture presented a different character however. It created a climax of the new art, fulfilling the needs of the new man. It was supposed to be functional, taking advantage of the available space, it even allowed to arrange the space according to one’s wishes. It demanded, however, a lot of courage from the commissioner to make a decision of building a project so much different from the well-established Dutch architecture.

One of the most well-known examples of residential architecture coming from modernism is The Rietveld Schröder House.

¹⁵ J.J.P. Oud, *Bouwkunst en normalisatie bij den massabouw*, “de Stijl”, 7/1918, Delft, p. 77.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 78.



The Rietveld-Schröderhuis in Utrecht, designed by Thomas Rietveld, photography © digitalimagination

It is located in Utrecht and it was designed by Gerrit Thomas Rietveld in the years 1923–1924. In fact the commissioner and the owner of the house was Frits Schröder's wife — Truus Schröder-Schräder.¹⁷ Throughout the realization of the entire project the contact between the architect and the commissioner was imperative as Mrs Schröder-Schräder was an art-lover herself and had clear vision as to how the house should look like. The plans and drafts that were being drawn up created a sort of laboratory in which a brand new vision of living space, known both to the designer and the client, came to life.

Eventually, the house was ready in 1924 and even though the building and the place where it was to be constructed were very unusual, the client was adamant as Rietveld confirms,

No one had ever looked at this little lane before this house was built here. There was a dirty crumbling wall with weeds growing in front of it. Over there was a small farm. It was a very rural spot, and this sort of fitted in. It was a deserted place, [...] a real piece of no-man's-land. And we said, 'Yes, this is just right, let's build it here.' And we took this plot of ground and made it into a place with a reality of its own. It didn't matter what it was, so long as something was there, something clear. And that's what it became. And that's always been my main aim: to give to a yet unformed space, a certain meaning.¹⁸

¹⁷ The achievements of Truus Schröder-Schräder and a female patronage in the creation of modern architecture is described in A. T. Friedman, *Women and the Making of the Modern House*, New Haven 1998.

¹⁸ L. Büller, P. Overy, *The Rietveld Schröder House*, Cambridge 1988, p. 52.

The building had a rectangular shape with many horizontal elements. It had two storeys, both of which were supposed to serve different purposes. The 1st floor served as the living space, the kitchen, and two bedrooms. The ground floor included studies and guest rooms. The elevation of the building included two white surfaces dynamizing the simplicity of the form. The white colour was animated by simple pillars and red, yellow, and blue ledges. Thus Rietveld was faithful to the ideas of Mondrian as he used only primary colours. The huge surfaces of the windows made the interior and the exterior to intermingle with each other in a subtle way. The form reduction underlined also the proportions of the building. The proportions were “human”, specifically adapted to the needs of the dwellers. The asymmetry of the building was another dynamizing factor.

The biggest innovation of the villa, apart from its architectural form, was its interior. The way it was organized allowed the partition walls to be randomly arranged. This enabled one to create huge spaces as well as small, intimate rooms. The white walls intensified the impression of order, which was vivified by columns and patterns of colours in the form of painted stripes. In order to make this impression even more intense practically no furniture was included. The traditional chests of drawers and wardrobes were replaced by built-in compartments with no handles, thanks to which they merged with the background creating a white undisturbed space. The furnishings and all of the pieces of equipment were also designed by Rietveld.

The building has become a statue of modernism¹⁹ and its owner has proven that one could build a modern house in the traditional Holland. It was also an example of a new attitude towards residential architecture, which would later on find many followers creating their projects in the spirit of modernism such as Mies van der Rohe, Richard Neutra, or Robert Venturi.

Gerrit Thomas Rietveld tried to create another modern villa by designing the house for a fabulist Anton Hildebrand. This residence was similar to the villa of Truus Schröder-Schröder. Right angles, white surfaces and huge windows are dominant there. Yet, it lacked the dynamism of colours characteristic of the villa in Utrecht. The only colourful element in the house was the black dominant chimney. Nonetheless, the house of Hildebrand is yet another example of modern residential architecture which started to spread across Europe.

Rietveld was also known for designing buildings of public use in the same modernistic spirit. His clients, being impressed by the new aesthetics, appreciated the functionality of his buildings as well. The music school in Zeist, Venice Biennale Dutch pavilion or Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam are just a few of his

¹⁹ In the building all the original housing equipment and space arrangement were preserved. In 2000 the building and its equipment were both inscribed on Heritage List by the World Heritage Committee (UNESCO). Currently The Rietveld Schröder House serves as a museum in association with Centraal Museum Utrecht.

projects proving the change of attitude of the Dutch society towards the new art and the spread of modernism.

The last of the three architects, thanks to who *de Stijl* owns its architectural immortality, was Theo van Doesburg. He was, first of all, a painter for whom architecture was a secondary occupation. Yet, his projects showed different areas of the architectural activity of *de Stijl*. Van Doesburg worked together with a Dutch architect Cornelis van Eesteren with whom he designed all of the buildings mentioned below.

In 1922 van Doesburg was a co-designer of Hotel Particulier. This project, unfortunately, was never realized. It had an interesting form created by rectangular buildings of various heights joined together in a multilayered geometric unity. The whole building seemed to be very light and thanks to the gradation of height it gained dynamism. Similarly to other architects van Doesburg used big windows unifying the interior with the exterior. The rooms in the project were supposed to be spacious and full of light. The elevation of the hotel looked differently from every angle, which made it look very plastic. A huge concrete terrace for the guests, being a continuation of simple, concrete walls and finishing the whole building off, was also designed.

Van Doesburg and Eesteren created also villa projects. One of them — Maison d'Artiste was planned to be van Doesburg's private residence. The plans represent a three-story building whose floors all rise above. It was a very dynamic building being a denial to the harshness of the form. It employed only right angles which seemed to be arranged spirally and circularly.²⁰ Thus van Doesburg tried to implement the dadaistic ideas²¹, of which he was a keen follower, into architecture.

The atelier in Meudon from the years 1927–1930 was a totally different story. It had a very simple form which was based on the rectangular surface, it also had huge glass surfaces which let the light into the interior. The whole building was constructed to create the impression of tension in the shape. Hence it included big arcades at the top floor. Similarly to the most of the modernistic projects, the building was painted white which made the building stand out from all other buildings in that area.

Considering the architectural achievements of the designers connected with *de Stijl*, one could argue that they contributed to a breakthrough which has forever changed the perception of architecture. Their works have shown that simplicity holds a great power which proves to be timeless. They have also demonstrated that minimalism is not a temporary style but a continuous strive for order and perfection. *De Stijl* has also proved that one can create great architectural things with

²⁰ A. Doig, *Theo van Doesburg: Painting into architecture, theory into practice*. Cambridge 1986, p. 161.

²¹ An international movement of Dada stood in opposition to the previously established art canon. It opted for deliberated irrationality and rejection of the prevailing art standards. Cf A. Verdier, *ABCdaire de dada*, Paris, 2005.

little money — hence the Dutch housing estates. The architecture represented by Oud, Rietveld and van Doesburg is also a cultural breakthrough which declares war to the ever glorified historicism and a widespread cult of the past.

The architecture created by *de Stijl* is unique as it brings the ideas connected with the art of painting onto the architectural ground, thanks to which the buildings became remarkably colourful. The colours of the buildings were something that cannot be found elsewhere in Europe. All this makes the Dutch modernism unusual and full of stylistic nuances. The buildings created in the 30s have lost absolutely nothing from the originality, they withheld the passing time, and still continue to be a source of inspiration for artists fascinated by the art of the beginning of the 20th century. The ever-living modernism by *de Stijl* proves how powerful simplicity is and that it takes a genius to make it happen.