

**Gesamt-
kunstwerk
—An Icon
on the
Move—
Madeleine
Steigenga**



In 1996, I called Martin and Joke Visser to ask whether our office would be allowed to visit their Rietveld House renovated by Van Eyck. I studied in Eindhoven for almost ten years without visiting it. Van Eyck played an important role during my studies. Angered by the appointment of our final year professor Dick Apon - one of his Forum friends - Van Eyck then avoided any contact with this alternative architecture course at the TU/e. And Rietveld - having died not too long before - was given little attention in those days.

❖❖❖ The architects who did play a part in this period and promoted their work in Eindhoven, were Eisenman, Koolhaas, Hertzberger and Krier. We travelled through both Europe and the USA, but I did not go to the little town of Bergeijk for its architecture, but for the De Ploeg fabric remainder sale in Rietveld's building. So, twenty years after my leaving Eindhoven, that is why I paid a visit to this work by Rietveld and Van Eyck.

❖❖❖ What did I know about the client and the inhabitants Martin and Joke Visser, about their designs and their art collection? During my studies, one of Panamarenko's aeroplanes was bought by the university art committee; Visser had mediated the deal. He occasionally took a class with his first wife Mia in a series by Wim Quist. And I naturally knew about his furniture. His se43 dining-room chairs upholstered in pulp cane stood round the meeting table in my dad's study at university. And the Spectrum's br02 'couch' together with his sz02 chairs fitted with black saddle leather were soon to be found at my sister's in Lelystad. A friend told me about Joke that she was a fabric designer and taught at the Design Academy.

After that first visit, I stayed in touch with Joke and Martin and I join them at the table a few times a year. We clicked: Joke – hospitable, lucid and direct, interested in everything and everyone; Martin – curious in conversation, drawing you out. Always the same pattern. Setting a date. Taking their time. Coffee served in large green cups, the same familiar crockery I used to drink coffee from in my first job. Something sweet with the coffee, a bowl of soup, a glass of wine and a sandwich. Very interested in us, the guests. And, when you leave, being waved off on Eikendreef. I sometimes go to Bergeijk with Niek, sometimes alone, sometimes with one of the children. Friends are welcome, too. Our daughter loves Mendini's baroque chair: the Proust Geometrica where the pattern of the upholstery is continued onto the woodwork paint. She settles into the chair and stays there all afternoon, questioned eagerly by Joke and Martin: 'so, is it just the chair that makes you happy?'

When the Visser family – Martin and his wife Mia, who died early – gave Rietveld a commission, the Vissers live in an apartment on Keizersgracht in Amsterdam, with two small children and a rather expansive art collection. But there is no sign of the art collection with its more than 100 Cobra pieces in Jan Versnel's first photograph of the house in Bergeijk's interior – the world has ground to a halt. In the period that the Vissers are having the house built, there are small plots for sale in Bergeijk. The standard houses to be built on these plots are prefab wooden Swedish ones, not even 50 square metres in size, with a snazzy tiled roof. In the building archive these houses with temporary planning permission are designated as 'chicken coop'. The Vissers are the only ones to build a real house. They buy two plots, giving Rietveld the space to



situate the house. This house isn't large either, as funds are limited.

❑❑❑❑ The Vissers are satisfied with their house. Mia Visser writes a little note to Rietveld, on a postcard: 'Dear Mr Rietveld. Since 13th December we have been residents of Bergeijk. Aside from a few minor details, our house is now finished. It has turned out exceptionally well, we enjoy it more every day. The tables are much to our liking... It really is quite extraordinary to live in such a house. I would also like to thank you on behalf of my husband. All good wishes for 1956 en my dearest wishes to Mrs Schröder and Hanneke. Mia and Martin Visser.'

❑❑❑❑ Rietveld's house proves quite influential on the Visser family's art collection. The Cobra's are sold and exchanged. An extensive collection of modern art accumulates in Bergeijk, and is then moved to the Kröller Müller Museum. In 1968, Visser relates of this change to Wies van Moorsel: 'That actually happened due to living here. We just couldn't see those Cobra items on the wall... In this Rietveld house we were confused at first. We didn't know how we were supposed to live in it. We had moved from one of those canal-side houses in Amsterdam. And all those Cobra works just didn't fit, that ragged, shabby Cobra... It was also the transition from the city climate to the rural. Because the country really absorbed us. We went out camping... While the house's interior was quite clinical. There was nothing on the walls.'

❑❑❑❑ Those first pictures of the Rietveld-Visser house display a tidy interior, everything in its proper place. In the middle, the Fröling stove that cannot compete with the floor-to-ceiling panes of single glazing. In the



After years of silence, Aldo van Eyck calls Martin Visser to let him know the extension's exterior brickwork needs to be painted in matching tones. Aldo asks Martin which colour he has in mind. Martin answers that he hasn't thought about that, to which Aldo says in response: 'you want red but I don't'. Moved by his death, Joke and Martin nevertheless carry out Aldo's wish. Based on the sample in Aldo's preferred colour the round extension is painted in a glossy red. (picture: Dirk van den Heuvel)

first winter, Visser wrapped up the entire house in rush mats. The pictured furniture comprises a built-in open shelved cupboard, Thonet chairs behind a glass-topped table and two low chairs – by Hein Stolle and a frivolously lined chair of unknown origin – by a square, austere coffee table, also glass-topped. By then, Martin has been working as a furniture designer at Spectrum for a year, part of the De Ploeg cooperative in Bergeijk. However, there aren't any pieces of furniture of his design in this first interior picture of the Rietveld-Visser house. The glass table was designed by Gerrit Rietveld. A picture taken from the same viewpoint a couple of





**If Joke Visser had not herself painted Lawrence Weiner's phrase "Raised up by a force of sufficient force" (1983, in Kröller-Müller Museum collection since 1993) at the front of the bedroom extension along the street, you would not recognise this as the work of a famous architect.
(picture: Dirk van den Heuvel)**

years later, shows that the new stove looks more austere, that the Rietveld table has been replaced, that safari chairs have been added and that art has been reintroduced to the Visser household.

❑❑❑❑ The renovation by Van Eyck of this house built by Gerrit Rietveld is quite drastic. At first, the house opens with a floor plan split open, the split featuring a wall-high pane of glass. It is the first house that Rietveld builds with such a split floor plan. Three years after Rietveld's death (1964), Aldo van Eyck takes on the assignment of enlarging the house and until after his death the Visser house changes by his direction. The

first plan – a substantial extension – is a brute intervention. The outward-facing Rietveld house becomes inward-looking. A round living room is added, situated slightly lower, the level difference bridged with a couple of steps inside the house. The bedroom wing is extended: the master bedroom gets a separate bathroom visible from the street. Rietveld's small kitchen is also expanded, the entrance modified and a draughted proposal by Van Eyck's office to expand the garage is also carried out at a later date. Furthermore, Van Eyck has a plan to expand the house with a second, round extension. In the drawing to this plan, 'the bicycle' there is a pink sticker reading 'retracted final proposal|Aldo van Eyck'. Another proposal, to build a studio beside the house – a design by Coop Himmelblau – is not carried out in the end, either.

❏ With the acquisition of Manzoni's first artworks, the house comes alive. The living room, which never had a carpet, features Square Peace a few years later, a carpet of 100 steel tiles by Carl Andre. Simon Vinkenoog interviewed Martin Visser in 1964 for the *Goed Wonen* magazine (Good Living) and describes the interior as he finds it: '...along one side of the house there is a glass wall that still offers privacy. On the walls the Cobra painters and contemporary artists: Christo's wraps, Manzoni's monochromes, the 'accumulations' by Arman and the frenzied narrative of Cy Twombly: the work of the Nul Group and the New Realists...' And, later still, on the wall beside Rietveld's living room window, a green-and-white striped wallpaper by Daniel Buren.

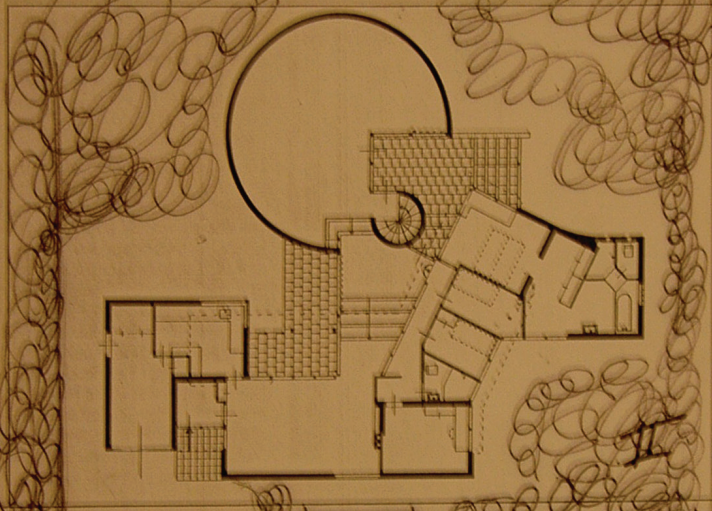




Window by Rietveld with Daniel Buren, Panamarenko, Sol LeWitt.
(picture: Madeleine Steigenga)

im te gaan aanpakken. Visser
ronde wand van Van Eyck vier

deed niet of het huis niet bestond. Hij veranderde van kleur
als hij wat génants hoorde, hij creëerde een penibele sfeer,
dus ik heb het er nooit meer over gehad.'



BIKENDREEF.

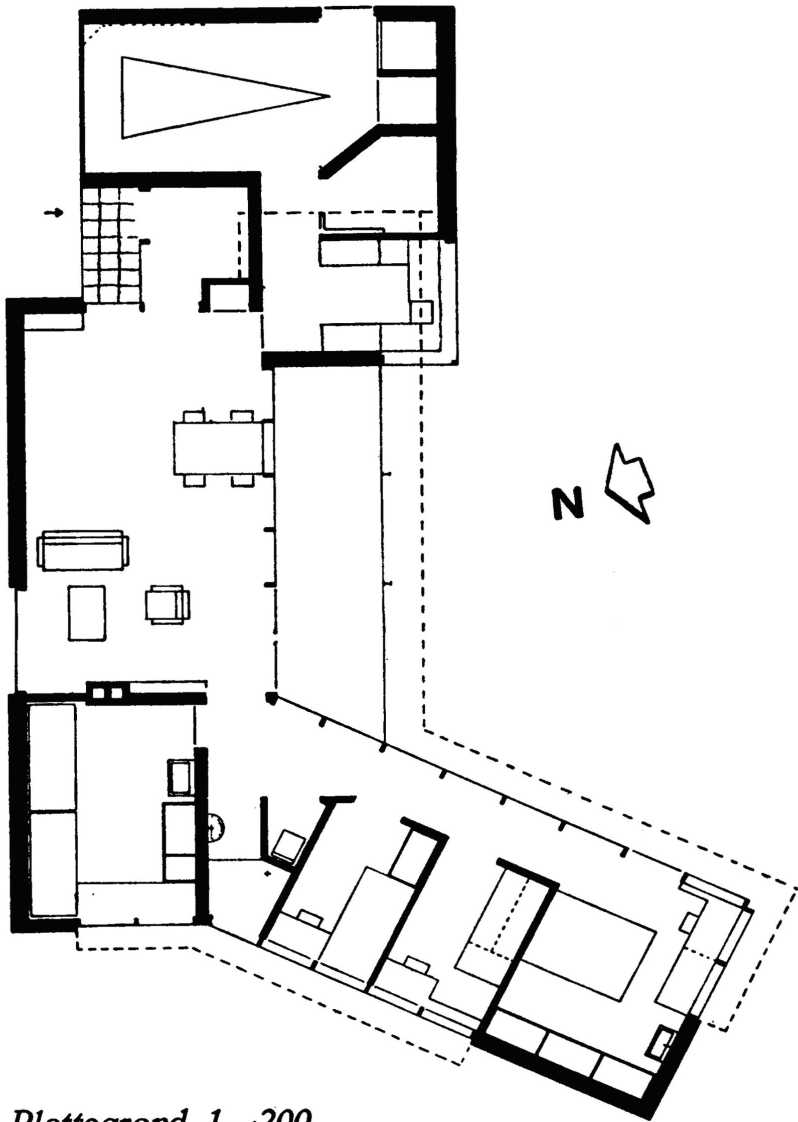
uis van Martin Visser voor
Aldo van Eyck
maken dan Rietveld)

aan groen. 'Twee weken lang is
jes uit het bos te zoeken,' ver-
ge zelden enthousiast over de cir-
et te spelen was over de mini-
Het boek heeft te veel met de
er over de bouw van Van Eyck

En in het vorige jaar verschenen boek *De huizen van Rietveld*
probert auteur Henk Rodijk zijn oog te richten op de
verbouwing van Van Eyck en hij te zoeken naar wat er
aan te halen uit een brief die Rietveld in 1960 aan Van
Eyck schreef. 'Ik herinner me een gesprek met Berlage. Ma-
ken hij maakt kapot wat ik opbouw. Ik heb de neiging om te
zeggen tegen een in bouw op wat ik kapot maakte,' citeert
Rodijk. Hij vervolgt dan: 'Met deze brief heeft Van Eyck
herhaalde malen aan de weg getimmerd. De ironie van
Rietveld's woorden is hem koraalijk ontgaan. Maar de me-
morabele van de Rietveld huis heeft te zeer profetisch ve-

I Sculptuur Sol Lewitt. (5x5x5M.)
II Beplanting, gemiddeld 2 m hoog.

The layout sketch for the building permit application for Sol LeWitt's sculpture, on the floor plan of the Visser house from a Vrij Nederland magazine supplement on Gerrit Rietveld (Bergeijk municipal archive). (picture: Madeleine Steigenga)



Plattegrond 1-200

Visser house, Gerrit Rietveld 1955 (illustration from Forum 1958-3)

❑❑❑❑ Trees were uprooted and planted around the house and artworks placed. While Van Eyck blocks the view through the living room window with his extension, Joke and Martin Visser have a work by Sol LeWitt set in front of Rietveld's window facing the entrance run up in concrete stone. Because of this five-metre tall, deep and wide piece, the view is also blocked on this side, which confirms Van Eyck's inversion of Rietveld's concept: an outward-facing house faces inwards. In the 57-year existence of the house, not only the house but also its contents and surroundings have been continuously on the move. An apparently casually elapsing process of transformation.

❑❑❑❑ You arrive. The most attractive feature in recent years is The Garden Fence (Het Tuinhek) by the young designer Admar van Schalen, commissioned by Joke and Martin. The flint stone entrance gate was bright orange, but during a later visit it proves to have been painted charcoal grey by Joke. Then you take a walk through the woods to the front door.

❑❑❑❑ According to Martin, you can tell the client's character in Rietveld's house designs from the way the entrance has been situated. Walking towards the Visser house, the front door lies directly on your route. In pleasant weather, they sit outdoors. But not on the living room terrace that Van Eyck built in later. In an often published picture, a number of American artists – young at the time, famous now – sit together on chairs with the Visser family and a Bergeijk producer of their work, in front of the house, by the front door. It is still the place to sit outdoors. Jurgen Bey has a sturdy tree trunk hauled up to which three bronze backrests are fitted. I also sat on the prototype of the stackable chair Alida, later produced in aluminium. When Martin grows less



agile, Friso Kramer's concrete outdoor bench is placed behind the kitchen – Kramer being the Netherlands' best furniture designer according to Visser.

❑❑❑❑ When it isn't warm enough, they sit indoors. During my first visits to the Visser house we drank coffee in Van Eyck looking out on Rietveld. And in the case of soup or some other treat – carefully prepared to taste and healthiness by Joke – we eat at the large steel table in Rietveld. Later, perhaps because Martin is less agile, but perhaps also due to the arrival of Jean Nouvel's ultra-slim table in Van Eyck, we sit there during all phases of the visit, embraced by Van Eyck's curve. A space that is lived in. The factors providing stability are the two artworks on the curved wall. Richard Long's circles made up of twigs from the area and his bucket of watered down mud from the river Avon thrown against the wall are the immovable anchors. Timeless works of art.

❑❑❑❑ When the wall is whitewashed, Joke keeps a close eye on the fresh whitewash surrounding the artworks being adapted to the cream discoloration of the original white paintwork. Everything else in this space is subject to change. Paintings arrive and are lent out, exchanged or hung elsewhere. Furniture is tested, disappears or moves. With cleverly installed armrests the house is adjusted to the increasingly shaky balance of the inhabitants. The artworks on the floor – now accompanied by Martin's urn – are placed and replaced. A large lead book by Anselm Kiefer lay on the floor almost casually for a while; later, one of Kiefer's terraria is standing on the same spot, followed by a stacked statue of brother Carel Visser, chairs and dressing tables belonging to Joke, a Concept rowing machine, the latest table support.



Initially, Martin and Mia Visser ask Aldo van Eyck to design their house. He turns the assignment down. In the edition of *Forum* in celebration of Rietveld's 70th birthday, published by AetA, Aldo criticises Rietveld's design in the article 'The Ball Is Cast Back' (*De bal kaatst terug*): '...a house for someone whose passion it was to have themselves surrounded by paintings and graphic art... The ball was cast at Rietveld with compassion. In the end, the urge for purity beat purity itself. Not a painting allowed on any wall...' (picture: Dirk van den Heuvel)

❏ The Visser house's interior is alive. It is a continuing process of searching and above all, enjoyment. Change is not only about placing artworks and furniture, but also concerns trying them out and adapting furniture to use. The different versions of Visser's own chairs are standing unobtrusively among the many chairs of other designers; Joke's series of taped up and painted garden chairs stood there a while and have now gone. There are two robust tables in the living room of Rietveld's section designed by Joke and Martin, using 100x100mm aluminium tubing that Sol LeWitt had left behind in their workshop elsewhere in Bergeijk. Resting on the cylinders are bulky steel tabletops, in blue enamel.

👁 Edited by 4 members



Through his job with Het Spectrum, Visser fulfils his lifetime ambition: becoming a furniture designer. There is a letter in the nAi archive from Martin to Rietveld, in which he courteously, but urgently, asks for the promised furniture designs. Rietveld designed the luminaires for both house and tables. (illustration from Forum 1958-3)

❑❑❑ The next time I arrive in Bergeijk, the interior has been drastically changed. The two blue steel tables have been replaced with two white ones. The reflection of the light on the tables has a great influence on Rietveld's living room dominated by the liver coloured ceiling and charcoal grey floor. An artwork by Sol LeWitt – realised in white concrete stone by the local bricklayer – that was part of the interior for a number of years, has gone: given to the Kröller Müller Museum in memory of Martin.

❑❑❑ Most conversations take place in this space. That might concern browsing a catalogue of building materials, discussing recent exhibitions 'that's not worth it, you should go there', questions like what should hap-

pen to the flagship of the former De Ploeg cooperative, the Rietveld/Beltman factory building ‘Demolish it? Disgraceful!’ and the tentative questioning of the seating qualities of one of the chairs. Not only their chairs are constantly on the move, also those by other designers are updated with cushions, fabrics, padding.

❏❏❏ The atmosphere, hospitability, the small talk about mutual acquaintances, the cup of coffee, the cake from the local bakery, the glass of wine, all this makes the Visser house into what it is, a melting pot of architecture, art and design. A house’s architecture might be impressive, but a monument like the Visser house will surely die if it isn’t lived in and experimented upon to the full. In the way that a visit to Joke is still a surprise. The process of change, the inquisitive mind, curiosity, always looking across borders – there is no other way of preserving the atmosphere of the ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ this house encapsulates, other than in your thoughts.

Sources: this article used information from conversations with Joke and Martin Visser, from the nAi archives, the Rietveld Archive of the Central Museum in Utrecht and the Building archive in Bergeijk and from articles from the Museumjournaal (1968 article

by Wies Leering-van Moorsel) and Goed Wonen (1964 article by Simon Vinkenoog, 1960 article by H. Warnau), description by Herman Hertzberger of Aldo van Eyck during a seminar in Delft 11 Oct. ’12: ‘Aldo is always homecoming’

