

# Modernism's Influence on Architect-Client Relationship: Comparative Case Studies of Schroder and Farnsworth Houses

Omneya Messallam, Sara S. Fouad

**Abstract**—The Modernist Movement initially flourished in France, Holland, Germany and the Soviet Union. Many architects and designers were inspired and followed its principles. Two of its most important architects (Gerrit Rietveld and Ludwig Mies van de Rohe) were introduced in this paper. Each did not follow the other's principles and had their own particular rules; however, they shared the same features of the Modernist International Style, such as Anti-historicism, Abstraction, Technology, Function and Internationalism/Universality. Key Modernist principles translated into high expectations, which sometimes did not meet the inhabitants' aspirations of living comfortably; consequently, leading to a conflict and misunderstanding between the designer and their clients' needs. Therefore, historical case studies (the Schroder and the Farnsworth houses) involving two Modernist pioneer architects have been chosen. This paper is an attempt to explore some of the influential factors affecting buildings design such as: needs, gender, and question concerning commonalities between both designers and their clients. The three aspects and two designers explored here have been chosen because they have been influenced the researchers to understand the impact of those factors on the design process, building's performance, and the dweller's satisfaction. This is a descriptive/ analytical research based on two historical comparative case studies that involve several steps such as: key evaluation questions (KEQs), observations, document analysis, etc. The methodology is based on data collation and finding validations. The research aims to state a manifest to regulate the relation between architects and their clients to reach the optimum building performance and functional interior design that suits their clients' needs, reflects the architects' character, and the school they belong to. At the end, through the investigation in this paper, the different needs between both the designers and the clients have been seen not only in the building itself but also it could convert the inhabitant's life in various ways. Moreover, a successful relationship between the architect and their clients could play a significant role in the success of projects. In contrast, not every good design or celebrated building could end up with a successful relationship between the designer and their client or full-fill the inhabitant's aspirations.

**Keywords**—Architect's character, Building's performance, commonalities, client's character, gender, modernist movement, needs.

## I. INTRODUCTION

MODERNISM has a myriad of definitions. Reference [1] defined it as a movement towards modifying traditional

beliefs in accordance with modern ideas, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Additionally, [2] explained it as specialized ideas and methods of modern art, especially in the simple design of buildings of the 1940s, 50s and 60s which were made of modern materials. On the other hand, [3] stated that, it has meant so much that it has often meant nothing. Perhaps, the belief of [3] stemmed from a misunderstanding of the definitions of Modernism, or what might be true is that it does not have a clear meaning to be understood. Although this movement was first established in Europe and America, it has become global. Applying Modernist principles on residential projects, sometimes did not meet the inhabitants' needs. As Le Corbusier claimed that *a house is a machine for living in* [4]. This philosophy of Modernism's influence may lead to undesirable design outcomes and unsatisfied dwellers. Therefore, two historical case studies involving popular designers who followed separate schools of thought within the same international Modernist movement have been chosen.

The successful relationship between any designer and client is based on social and technical aspects where knowledge and beliefs can be easily shared [5]. Other characteristics of a successful relationship include similarities between parties and mutual knowledge. Furthermore, [6] asserted that the unsuccessful relationship exhibits mistrust, differences between parties, conflicts, and misunderstandings. Therefore, three main influential factors, which are needs, gender, and questions concerning commonalities between designers and their clients, are being assessed. The paper aims to investigate the influence of Modernisms features on the design outcomes through interior spaces, material considerations, and colors. Furthermore, it explores in-depth, the modernism impact on the architects-clients satisfaction and relationship.

## II. METHODOLOGY AND APPROACHES

The methodology is based on qualitative comparative analysis. This comparison is held in order to design a theoretical framework that would foster the building's performance and enhance the architect-client relationship.

Based on literature review, the researchers suggest two KEQs concerning other factors that could affect both the design process, and the architect-client relationship. KEQ 1 investigates how a difference in gender (architect and client) may affect their communication and the project's final result. Also, KEQ 2 explores if the commonalities between the designer and their clients may be another factor to be considered in the design process and outcomes. The paper

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explores certain criterion monitoring this relation through the designer's characteristics, client's characteristics, building characteristics, and building performance.

### III. LITERATURE BACKGROUND

#### A. Gerrit Rietveld/The Schroder House



The first designer is Gerrit Rietveld from the Dutch artistic "The De Stijl" (The Style) movement, which [7] described as an effort to renew the links between life and art. In creating a new visual style, it attempted to create a new style for living. Rietveld's Schroder House in Utrecht has been chosen as a positive example because he understood his client's needs very well. In addition, the collaboration between Rietveld and Truus Schroder (the owner) in designing the house provides an extraordinarily impressive example of good relations and commonality between the designer and his client. It both satisfied the inhabitant's aspirations and also represented one of the most remarkable Modernist architectural achievements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. De Stijl inspired many later

architects, designers and other schools with highly original modern designs, including "the Bauhaus school" in Germany [8].

#### B. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe/The Farnsworth House

The second case study involves Mies van der Rohe who was the last director of "the Bauhaus school" from 1932-33 [7]. He was also a member of a group in Berlin called the "G-group". Within this group he was the main source of the "De Stijl" influence. Reference [8] claimed that "*no other men have succeeded as have Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe in building complete system*". Despite everything positive that the press wrote about van der Rohe and his works, his celebrated Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois, unfortunately demonstrates a clear example of the damagingly conflicting needs between the client and the designer. In this negative case, the architect imposed his own philosophy on the client and neglected her needs as a single middle-aged woman (see Table I).

TABLE I  
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: THE SCHRODER HOUSE VS. THE FARNSWORTH HOUSE

Comparison Points	The Schroder House	The Farnsworth House
<b>Date</b>	1924	1945 -1951
<b>Designers</b>	Gerrit Rietveld ➤ Dutch Architect, furniture designer	Mies van der Rohe ➤ German-American architect.
<b>Clients</b>	Mrs. Truus Schroder (widow) with 3 children	Dr. Edith Farnsworth (single middle-aged)
<b>Building's Style</b>	De Stijl Movements <u><b>Building type:</b></u> Residential house (permanent house) <u><b>Exterior:</b></u> ➤ Facades are collage of panels. ➤ Distinguishable levels. <u><b>Interior Space:</b></u> ➤ Flexible spaces ➤ Multi-functional Furniture. <u><b>Material Considerations:</b></u> ➤ Concert, glass, wood and rubber floors. <u><b>Colors:</b></u> ➤ Primary colors: Red, blue, yellow & Shades of grey.	Bauhaus School <u><b>Building type:</b></u> Residential house (vacation house) <u><b>Exterior:</b></u> ➤ Shelter intertwined with surrounding nature. ➤ Elevated on a platform. <u><b>Interior Space:</b></u> ➤ Glass pavilion ➤ One open space. <u><b>Material Considerations:</b></u> ➤ Consists of eight I-shaped steel columns support roof & floor. <u><b>Colors:</b></u> ➤ Neutral colors: White, grey and beige.
<b>Building's characteristic</b>		
<b>Current Situation</b>	➤ Museum ➤ UNESCO World Heritage Sites Listed in 2000.	➤ Museum ➤ Illinois Institute of Technology considered an iconic building in 2011.

### IV. CHARTING THE ARCHITECT-CLIENT RELATIONSHIP

The relationship between any designer and their client is conducted through several factors; one of the most important being communication. Many studies investigate the relationship between designers and clients. Reference [9] claimed that the most common complaints from clients who have used architectural services are related to misunderstandings and dissatisfaction. References [10] and [11] suggest that the reasons for communication difficulties

between designers and their clients is due to the client's needs not being fully considered, as well as their changeable requirements, a lack of communication, and a lack of client feedback.

### V. KEY INFLUENTIAL FACTORS

#### A. Architect/ Client Needs

Human needs seem to be insatiable and changeable.

Usually, there is a huge difference between the needs of one person to another, according to gender, age, social status, culture and careers. On this point, [12] argued: “*we are what we have*”. In particular, our home design speaks volumes about our identities and lifestyles. Undoubtedly, there are basic needs for any dwellers. Reference [13] stated that: “*basic needs are those things which allow us to take part in a particular culture*”. So, culture determines need, function and meaning. Moreover, an accomplished designer should understand his client’s requirements and personality, and whether he or she is an introvert or extrovert. Designers may also be concerned about their prestige, developing a signature style and establishing their reputation. Reference [14] emphasized that in the Modernism period, “*designing houses was not just a question of pleasing the client, but of advancing the architect’s career*”.

In the case of the Farnsworth holiday house, which was designed by van der Rohe, following the principals of his school was more important than recognizing his client’s needs. Reference [15] clarified van der Rohe’s aim in this project that “*his goal was to develop a language of form which reflected universal, rather than particular, aspect of human activity and concern*”. On the other hand, van der Rohe client’s needs were totally different to his. In the late of 1940s, the pressure of the press and those publications which argued and criticized the lifestyle of single women in American society increased dramatically. This debate played a great role in Edith Farnsworth’s decision as a single female to build her holiday house. At the beginning of their relationship, both the designer and the client thought that they found what they needed most. Van der Rohe, as a popular German architect, was eager to spread more of his Modernist design principles across the world, in particular to his new prospective American client, while his client was looking for something to fill her loneliness [15]. The designer neglected the inhabitant’s requirements by not considering the impact of her being seen from the outside by others (see Fig. 1). At the end, their argument was not only about the design of the house and their different goals, but also the final cost of the house which was almost double the price that van der Rohe estimated. Farnsworth had to struggle for almost 20 years living in a house where the outside world almost existed inside.

In contrast, in the Schroder House, Truus enjoyed living with her children in the flexible interior and multifunctional furniture of the house from 1924 until her death in 1985. Although Rietveld was considered the first architect who applied the De Stijl concepts on a complete building and formulated the Modernist features into the third dimension, his priority seemed to be to facilitate his client living with her household. This project was not only deemed as a unique, fascinating and remarkable Modernist building from the outside, but was also a successful, functional and cozy house inside (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 1 Farnsworth House exterior reveals the interior space

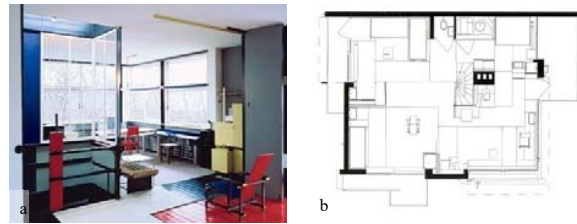


Fig. 2 (a) The Schroder House flexible interior space (b) The house’s open plan

Reference [15] introduced Truss’s demands:

“The goal of the project was to facilitate communal living, eliminating physical and social boundaries between children and adults”.

Therefore, Rietveld designed the interior to be as flexible and adaptable as the exterior to create an open space as one big room. Furthermore, he created some new multi-functional furniture to accommodate his client’s unconventional and changeable demands. Consequently, following the inhabitant’s needs or ignoring them can have a great impact on the relation between the designer and the client and their lifestyle. For van der Rohe, his connection to the client ended with an enormous argument and in court. On the contrary, the association between Rietveld and Truus was extremely illustrious. It started from couple of years before establishing the Schroder House project and extended for many years later.

### B. Gender

Identifying the gender of the client and the designer might be the easier first step to establish the design process. This is particularly true if the client is female and the designer is male, because the architect may fail to understand a woman’s needs because they tend to have special interests and different priorities in terms of their lifestyles, family and career. In spite of the Modernist movement aspiring to universality, designers in this school still need to be aware of their client’s individual demands in relation to their gender and social status. Thus, designers should consider each project separately; finding out who is the prospective inhabitant can help the architect to determine their client’s needs. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many women were not satisfied with some of the modernist architects’ work, they complained that applying Modernist features to more houses around the world was more important than their interests and needs. Reference [14] supported this notion and suggested that more recently, a

strand in feminist writing has revived the idea that Modernism represented the imposition on home-based women of masculine values: over-rational, repressed and inhuman.

During the period 1940s and 1950s in America, many writers such as Anne Parsons, the author of the *Feminine Mystique*, described the single woman as a kind of poison that society should exclude. While, Farnsworth needed to escape from all of that society pressure, unfortunately she was forced to live in tensions where the interior of her house was designed to be seen from the outside. In that case, the different gender of both designer and his client's could be one of the reasons that generated inconvenient and uncomfortable home design.

With regard to the Schröder House, even though the designer was also a man and the resident was a widow, the dissimilarity in their gender did not affect the design negatively. Reference [15] explained the reason why Truus Schröder chose the Modernist style design for her house, saying that she explicitly defined her differences with those around her, using architectural design to mark her avant-garde values, her feminism, and her embrace of unconventional ways of living. Thus, even though for the Schröder House, a male designer was working for a female client, he was concerned with all of the fine details of her way of living. In addition, they shared many common things together, which also might have an influence on the appropriate design (see Fig. 3).

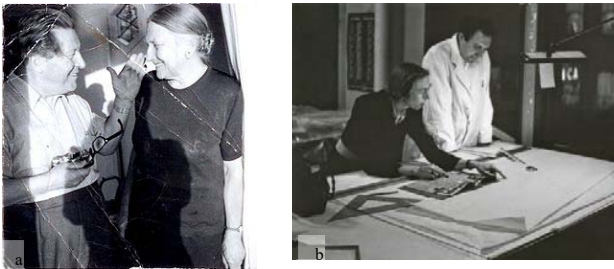


Fig. 3 (a) Truus Schröder and Gerrit Rietveld (b) Dr. Farnsworth in the office of Mies van der Rohe

### C. Commonalities

Sharing things in common between designers and clients is not considered a fundamental aspect in the design process. However, it may affect the fulfillment of the client's aspirations and the design as well. Nevertheless, even if a designer has no similar interests with the client, following the demands of the project's future inhabitants is more important than their ego and personal interests.

Looking at the example of the Schröder House, many things connected Rietveld with his client, such as both being Dutch and the parents of numerous children; they also had a close friendship and artistic relationship, as they both followed the Modernist manifesto. Additionally, sharing several things in common not only produced an exceptional example of Modernist architecture, but also influenced Rietveld and Schröder's future working relationship. For example, in 1926, together they designed the interior of an apartment in

Weteringschans, Amsterdam, and a block of terraced houses in Eramuslaan in Utrecht in the 1930s.

With regards to the Farnsworth House however, the architect and his client had few aspects in common. Farnsworth was a single, 42-year-old American woman and a successful professional doctor, whereas van der Rohe was 59 years old, German, and separated with three adult daughters. He was also the last director of the Bauhaus Movement and much admired within the field of architecture. Interestingly, when Farnsworth first met van der Rohe, there were no obvious commonalities between them. Afterwards, she discovered in herself an unusual interest in the arts and an attraction for European culture. She also started to read about the Modernist movement and came to admire some of the work; in particular Mies's designs [15]. However, at the end, the huge differences between them forced her to live in a home she was not comfortable with.

TABLE II  
ASSESSMENT OF INFLUENTIAL FACTORS: THE SCHRÖDER HOUSE  
VS. THE FARNSWORTH HOUSE

Assessment Factors	Needs Satisfaction	Gender		Commonalities
		Architect	Client	
Schröder House	✓	M	F	✓
Farnsworth House	✗	M	F	✗

## VI. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the relationship between any architect and their client plays an important role in the success of a project. Even though, there are plenty of celebrate Modern buildings that gained worldwide popularity; in some cases it did not successes to create a positive relationship between the designer and their client or even full-fill the dweller's needs. There are various factors that set off a chain reaction that impact on the design outcomes. Through the investigation in this paper, it was shown how the different needs of the designer and the client can transform the lives of the inhabitants of the proposed architectural project. For example, in the case of Farnsworth House, the client/ resident was constrained by having to live in a home that did not meet her original aspirations. In fact, inhabiting such a glass house where one can be obviously seen; had a great negative impact on her personality. It changed her from a successful social woman to an introvert. In addition, she battled van der Rohe in court for almost 20 years for both reasons: the wrong cost estimation of the total project and the psychological damage that affected her personal life. In this case, the ego of the architect consequently had an extremely negative impact on his client's living and needs.

On the contrary, Rietveld's design for the Schröder House was aimed at facilitating his client's lifestyle with that of her children. In this case, the architect probably succeeded in breaking down the barriers between the lives of the children and their outer world, which was exactly what the client was looking for. The conclusion of this study has been revealed that the Modernist house was not designed for just anyone. Although, it intended for those who could understand and

appreciate; Truus Schroder has greatly benefited from applying the Modernist features by living in a flexible interior space and unique multifunctional furniture that facilitated her family living.

In conclusion, architects who are following the Modernism principles may design remarkable buildings; but they may also fail to fulfill their clients' needs. Through this study, designers could success to compromise between the needs of both and the clients aspirations. This could happen through several key influential factors such as: when they manage to accommodate the clients' needs and consider also the gender of the resident which has inspirations of the design. Although, the commonalities are not major factors for creating a unique project, the fact is, common interests between designers and their client would, perhaps, foster the final result of a successful design and enhance the architect-client relationship.

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