

jean-pascal

flavien

philothée

graymond

, inhabitant of
the rietveld-schröder house

Philothée, character of space

Philothée Gaymard was permitted to live in the Rietveld-Schröder House in Utrecht for a few days. She became the new inhabitant of the house. Nobody had lived in the house after Truus Schröder and it was turned into a museum. Later that year Philothée travelled to Herford to stay in the Statement House designed by Jean-Pascal Flavien, inside the Marta Museum. To the public, she talked about her stay in the Rietveld-Schröder House.

The house has become a museum and a lot of people visit it. I could not be in the house by myself during the day. The administration hired a guard to sleep in the ticket office while I was in the house at night. We would meet at 11 pm and he would open the house for me. A little before 6 am, I would leave the house and he would close it. This became our ritual.

I was not allowed to use any of the tables. On the first day I laid some paper down on one of the tables and the tour guide told me I could not do that. I did not eat while I was in the house. I brought a bottle of water with me. Jean-Pascal and I made sure it didn't appear on the photographs we took.

When I visited the house on the first day, a group of tourists was visiting it at the same time. There were people on the street as well, photographing it from the outside. I knew the house was famous but I truly realised it in that moment, surrounded by all these people who had travelled just to see it.

I first entered the house as a regular visitor. I was shown a short film about Gerrit Rietveld and Truus Schröder in the ticket office, and then a guide took me to visit the house. I had to put on plastic overshoes so I wouldn't damage the floor. A group was visiting the house too. When they left, the guide gave me a pair of gloves and showed me how to fold and unfold the walls. He told me which furniture I could touch — they tell the visitors they cannot touch anything. I was allowed to take my shoes off so that Jean-Pascal could take pictures without the blue plastic bags on my feet. That's probably when I first became the inhabitant of the house.

I've said this elsewhere but I was charmed by how clever and simple all the moving mechanisms were. The small hooks were wisely placed, the wooden panels fitted perfectly. There was something evident and childish about them. Like this is how it would be if we lived in a place we built ourselves.

I looked out the window and saw a woman taking pictures of the house and of the plaque next to the garden gate, as if she thought she could not remember all that information and she had better take a picture. I snapped a photo of her and it made me feel like an insider: I'm photographing a tourist who is photographing my house, and she doesn't know that I can see her.

I fell in love with the cabinets, the closets, the drawers. There was something familiar, intimate about them. In the living room there is a cabinet made out of wooden boxes: one box for each of the children. In my family, each one of us has a cardboard box where we store childhood memories. I had a fleeting moment of “Oh, we have something in common.” I felt closer to Truus’ world.

The guide had shown me how to close the small latch that blocked the sliding door to the staircase, so that nobody could come upstairs. At night, the whole house was locked and a guard was staying in the ticket office next door. But, somehow, it was the small latch that made me feel safe. There was light coming through all the windows. There were noises I didn't recognise but I didn't mind. I don't think I ever woke up during the night. There was something peaceful about the house.

When I went to bed the first night, I wondered if I would be able to charge my phone, and then I remembered I saw an electric fan running during the day, next to the staircase. I found the plug. Later, I realised there was another one right next to the bed. Luckily I didn't need an adapter. I hadn't thought about that when I packed my suitcase.

The guide showed me how to open the glass ceiling leading to the rooftop. We didn't go on the roof. I didn't know we could. It's only when I was in Herford, in the museum, that a visitor told me it was possible to do so. To open the glass ceiling you pull on a rope and it feels like opening a hatch on a boat. The window blinds were also kept open with little silver pegs to which you tie the rope in a figure 8 shape. As I am writing about this, it brings back memories of my grandmother's bathing house in Denmark, a 12 square meter wooden shed with no water and no electricity where she spends every summer. Everything in that house has its own distinct place, just as if it were a boat.

It was always hot in the evening when I returned from the city centre. All the windows had been closed for a long time. I slept with one window left ajar and every morning I felt the cold just before sunrise.

I imagined quite a lot what was possible for the first inhabitants of the house. I wondered what it was like for Truus' children. They must have had to use all their strength to unfold the walls and make a room of their own when they wanted to be alone.

I would have liked to be able to write
at the table in the dining room and look
up at the trees.

I took a photo of my two dresses laying next to each other on the bed. They are both blue; one is denim and the other a sort of navy-blue chiffon. They looked like two people on the bed. As I was looking at them I noticed the walls of the room were a pale yellow.

I hung my dresses on the coat rack in the entrance. There is a photo of Truus Schröder's coats hanging there, a long time ago.

I was allowed to sit in one of the chairs. A blue and red one. It was surprisingly comfortable. It faces a window that opens onto a balcony. There are large trees outside, and the new highway. But when you're sitting in the chair, even with the window open, you barely notice the cars, you can hardly hear them at all. I thought I could read in this chair, but I had to leave too early and I got back late at night. I still don't know what it feels like to sit in it for a long time.

I first got to know the house from the outside. We were taking pictures of the garden around the house. It was early afternoon, and the light was dim. I was drawn to the textures of the shrubs, to the colours that were muted, as if desaturated. It smelled of lavender and something fresh. There were a lot of bees foraging in the bushes. I photographed them but it didn't come out well.

Jean-Pascal asked me if I could sit on the bench while he took pictures of me. He said “Imagine you are in your garden”, but at that moment I still felt like a visitor. I never got to spend any more time in the garden.

The view was very different from one room to the next. From my bedroom and the living room I could almost only see trees. One of the children's bedrooms faces the overpass, and the other one overlooks a small street with people passing by on their bikes. One day, a group of teenagers climbed onto the roof of a house across the street, to throw water bombs at the cars and passers-by. People didn't seem to mind. It was a hot day.

I slept in a corner of the first floor room, in a short bed on which I fit perfectly. They told me it was Truus Schröder's bedroom. I liked *my* room because the bed faced a large window, and mostly because there was a cupboard with a little sink and a light in a corner. That cupboard looked like it belonged in a dollhouse.

I say *my* room because it's the one I slept in. Of course it doesn't belong to me. It is still Truus' room, I suppose. It's like when you stay at a hotel, or at a friend's: the room you sleep in is your room, for the length of your stay.

Upstairs, there was a small cabinet with a glass door that held a tea set. It looked like any cabinet with a tea set in it, but because we were in a house that is also a museum, it felt quite different. That is, it felt both intimate and museum-like, as though I were seeing cups people used to drink from a very long time ago at the Louvre. Did these tea cups belong to Truus? Did she ever drink from them? Not being allowed to touch them made them not quite into a work of art, but rather something that belonged to the past and could never be used in the present. Like archaeological pieces.

The bathroom was hidden. There was this door, and when you pulled it, it unfolded at an angle, which made up two of the bathroom walls. When the door was closed you could never guess it was there, with a bathtub and a sink and a mirror. I liked the disappearing bathroom. I thought it was something that could be in a children's book or a fantasy novel.

I couldn't use the bathroom because there was no running water in the house. Every night and every morning, I used the toilet and brushed my teeth in the ticket office. Lilas put me in touch with a girl she knew in Utrecht so I could go take a shower at her place.

It was very early when I first woke up,
I think the rain or maybe the cold woke
me up when daylight was just starting
to break. All I could see were the leaves
of the trees that were still dark against
the sky.

It wasn't really cold. It was summer.
I slept with the window partly open when
it didn't rain and it only felt cold just
before dawn.

I parked the bike in front of the house at night. The bike was an ugly shade of green but I was grateful for it. When it was parked there it made it look like the house was mine.

In the morning I took my things downstairs and called the guard with the walkie-talkie. I put my shoes on while he opened the side door. He helped me carry my suitcase inside the ticket office, where I left it for the day.

The light was still young when I left the house. I got on my bike and explored the outskirts of Utrecht before going to a café for breakfast.

The light switches were very unusual: to turn on the lights, you rotate the switch clockwise, and to turn them off you do the same. Clockwise. The lamps were all designed by Rietveld and very beautiful. There was a pendant lamp above the staircase I particularly liked: it diffused this warm light throughout the first floor.

I brought a sleeping bag. I could sleep on a bed but I had to use a sleeping bag. In the morning I would make sure I hadn't left any stray hairs on the mattress. It would have given my presence away.

My presence in the house was minimal and the traces of my stay made non-existent. It was like camping: you occupy a space for a little while and return it as it was when you leave. I like to travel lightly, to have just what I need with me. I brought a sleeping bag, a book, a notebook, a change of clothes and a bottle of water. And that was it. I was inhabiting the house and yet always ready to go.

I like to talk, and talk, and talk, and then
I need to stay silent for a while.

When I was in the Statement House,
I talked about my stay in the Schröder
House. Now I am writing about it.
Talking mainly meant answering the
public's questions. Writing this
book is like answering Jean-Pascal's
questions.

I was going to a house that I didn't know where I could live by myself for a while. I was intrigued to see what it would feel like. Usually when you go to a house you don't know, it is because someone invited you over. In Utrecht I was no one's guest.

The guide showed me how to fold and unfold the walls. I was surprised at how heavy they were, when he seemed to move them so effortlessly.

We could say that I set camp in the house. It was not camping because of the roof over my head. The house and the bed were comfortable. But there was no water, I couldn't use the bathroom, I slept in a sleeping bag, I couldn't fix myself anything to eat or drink. It was like staying in a show house.

I rented the green bike on the second day and it suddenly broadened my life in Utrecht. I went to see the University and I rode by an outside swimming pool that made me think of the one in Humboldthain Park in Berlin. It made me feel like I lived there.

I went from Berlin to Amsterdam by plane and then took a train to Utrecht. I flew very early in the morning. It was a beautiful day. The train tracks went along a canal for quite some time.

In Berlin, I live with Lilas.

Lilas and I try to live somewhere else for a few months every year. Last year we went to South Africa, and this year to Peru. We travel and work and live all at the same time.

During the trip to Utrecht, Jean-Pascal and I talked about the project, about what it was going to be like for me to stay in this house, about what I should do while I was there. I could not sleep on the plane so I started writing a story for my friend's baby boy. I finished it while I was in Utrecht, and I asked a friend to illustrate it, and now it is a book.

**The Statement House is a house made by
Jean-Pascal. I went to visit it for a few
days when it was installed in the Marta
Museum in Herford.**

In the Schröder House, there were things I could move and others I could not touch. In the Statement House, visitors were allowed to move almost everything, but most of them didn't dare to do so.

Jean-Pascal and I didn't talk on the plane.
We did talk on the train, as we were
watching the landscape move and trans-
form around us.

When I first started biking in Paris, I finally understood how everything in the city is intertwined, how one neighbourhood doesn't end when the other begins. I saw how La Bastille leads to Ménilmontant, how the boulevard Saint-Michel somehow brings you to Château d'Eau. Neighbourhoods ceased to be islands; they were part of a wider fabric.

Talking about being in the Schröder House while I was in the Statement House led me to say things out loud that I hadn't even thought. People asked me what it was like to inhabit this house and I tried my best to answer them. But, really, what does it feel like to inhabit a house? I can talk about the noises, the light and the smells, I can talk about the firmness of the bed, but is this enough to convey how it feels to live in this house? Talking to people about it made me exaggerate things. It's not that they weren't important, but they just were. I don't know if you can really know what it's like to live anywhere.

In Utrecht I was reading *The Prime of Life* by Simone de Beauvoir. I had been meaning to read it for years and a friend had just given me a copy.

In the book, there are a lot of bars,
cafés, drinks, cigarettes. A lot of conver-
sations.

In the Statement House, when I was talking about my time in the Schröder House to the visitors, I was surprised when someone asked me if I had seen a ghost.

People asked if the neighbours called the police on me because they would've been alarmed to see the lights on in the house at night.

In the Marta Museum, the first thing I did was visit the exhibition about Rietveld and De Stijl. I learned a lot of things. But it also made me feel special. I had inhabited the Schröder House, and, in this museum, I found a movie, and models, and texts about it. I knew I was the only visitor who had ever had such a connection to the house. Later, when I spent time in the Statement House, which was inside the museum, I was no longer visiting. It was like I was suddenly part of the art. And yet I had done nothing to earn this, except coming and staying for a while.

Simone says that when she was a child, she believed that things existed because she could see them and that they died when she closed her eyes. She thought she gave life to the world.

I stayed in the house for seven hours each night, three nights in a row. So twenty-one hours in total. I also spent time in the house on the first day, when I was given a tour, and when we took pictures of me inside the house. We took these pictures to continue my presence in the house.

In the dining room there were a few ragged books in a small glass cabinet. A couple of them were in French. I hadn't read any of them. I suppose these books belonged to Truus, but who chose the specific ones now on display?

Simone writes that she loved life so much she decided to write her memoirs, so she would not have to choose between art and life.

I read a lot when I was a child. Now I feel like I lose a lot of time to the Internet and TV shows, and, of course, work. I didn't read very much in Utrecht. I was too tired at night. During the day I had to work, mostly, and then I spent my time biking around.

What strikes me is how little physical space books occupy in my life now. Since I moved to Berlin I've been buying more and more ebooks. My bookshelf is not really filling up anymore; it doesn't hold so many of the books I have read in the past few years. There is no tangible proof that I have even read them — sometimes bookshelves act like that, as a reminder of everything you have read.

**Fiction occupies a large space in my life.
I read novels and I write novels.
I think a lot about fiction.**

Jean-Pascal said there are no empty spaces. The way I understood this is that spaces are designed for a purpose they embody even when nothing is there. Truus wanted this house to be the way it is, and shaped it to her will. Does this mean that the house is never empty?

At the moment, I am writing my first
novel.

I didn't expect Berlin to be so vast when I moved there from Paris over three years ago. There is a lot of physical space; it gives me much more mental space than I had before. Now I live in an apartment with a large balcony, which means I also live outside.

From the window of the first apartment
she ever rented, Simone could see the
Seine, ivy, trees and Notre-Dame.

I am freelancing as a journalist and copywriter. Berlin is a good city to be a writer, but I can do it anywhere. I'm writing this while I am in Peru. I wrote last year when I was in South Africa for three months, I write when I go visit my grandmother in the Alps or when I am in Paris for work. I take my work everywhere I go.

I was hoping to be able to write in the Schröder House but it didn't happen. I worked in an apartment, also designed by Rietveld, just across the street from the house.

At night I put my gold earrings and my hair tie on the little sink in the bedroom. In the morning I made sure I left nothing behind.

It was dawn when my alarm went off in the morning. It was the blue hour, too early for the world to have true colours. It was the hour where everything suddenly turns colder.

When I laid on my back the bed was exactly my size. If I stretched I felt the headboard against my head and the foot of the bed against my toes. If I slept on my stomach my feet touched the bed frame, so I had to tilt and sleep diagonally. The mattress was firm.

There were creaks and noises at night.
I left the blinds open and could see
the shadows of the leaves dancing on the
walls and on the floor.

All I could see from the window when I
was lying in bed were leaves.

I imagined my mother living in this house. She's small so she wouldn't have a problem with how short the bed was, she travels lightly so she wouldn't mind the camping part, and most of all I'm sure she would fall in love with the house: how the lights fill it, the way things fold and unfold, how everything has its right place, how it can be spacious and cosy at the same time. I pictured her reading and writing and drawing there.

The day I arrived to the Schröder House I was wearing black pants and a black T-shirt. The next few days I wore two different blue dresses. One is a denim dress and it's quite new; the other one is a vintage navy blue dress I bought years ago in Lyon.

I bought the dress in Paris to replace an old one. It was also a denim dress. It was a vintage piece and I had it cut because I thought it was too long. Later my tastes changed and I regretted it. I had to throw it away because it got a large bleach stain.

**When I think about my stay in the
Schröder House, it's mostly physical
sensations that come back to me.**

I remember how the light came into the house during the day and during the night, the light sensation of the sleeping bag, the firmness of the mattress and the bed that was just a tad too short, the noises and sounds that I didn't know.

When you are in a new place, you start noticing things. The way the curtains are drawn open or closed, for example.

Every morning I had to make sure I didn't leave anything behind that could betray my presence. It became a sort of a game to me. Every morning I packed my suitcase, neatly folding my clothes and rolling the sleeping bag in its case, as if I was not coming back. And every evening I unpacked again.

In the Statement House, there were a lot of traces of my stay in the Schröder House. In the Schröder House I had to make my presence invisible, unnoticeable; in the Statement House I put that experience into words when I met the visitors.

I hung my scarf on a peg on the wall in the Statement House. I left my book on the table by the printer. I left a sweater on the stool when I went to have lunch in the museum's restaurant.

Everyday in the Statement House,
I wrote tweets. They were traces of my
presence.

On November 5, I tweeted:
“A man stood in the circle and pretended
to be taking a shower.”
And later the same day:
“Only children lie on the bed.”

In the two houses, I experienced solitude differently. I was always alone in the Schröder House. I didn't have to interact with anybody, except the guard. I enjoyed that. In the Statement House, I was there to talk to the visitors about my stay in the Schröder House. Some of the chats were enjoyable, but most of the time there was an awkwardness that made me feel even lonelier.

At night, I was always alone in the house. If I needed something, like to use the bathroom, I could call the security guard with a walkie talkie, but I never did. During the day, except when Jean-Pascal was in Utrecht the first day and a half, I was alone too.

I see Truus Schröder as a woman who knew what she wanted. She didn't want to stay in a grand bourgeois home after her husband died. She asked Rietveld to remodel a house for her, and when they couldn't find the house she wanted, she decided they should build it. She must have had a creative and resolute mind, determined to overcome the obstacles that were in her way.

**I moved between the two houses.
I moved things around in the two houses.**

I became a messenger for the Schröder House after I lived in it. The Schröder House was the message I passed along to the visitors of the Statement House. I was a go-between. I guess I still am one.

When I was in the Schröder House,
I was inhabiting it. When I was in the
Statement House, I was talking
about the Schröder House.

I started by visiting the Statement House. Then I stayed in it every day to meet the visitors of the exhibition. They did not see me as a visitor. I somehow belonged to the Statement House at that point.

Sometimes I am visiting a place,
sometimes I am visited in a place.

I could move many things in the Statement House: the wooden plans, the bed, my coat and scarf. Some of the movements you make in that house are similar to what you can do in your own house, and others are completely different.

Becoming a museum is an accident
in the life of a house. It wasn't designed
for this purpose. And this new state
completely takes over the previous one,
because you can never really live in
a house that is a museum.

I occupied the space where Truus once was, and even more than that, I occupied a space that she thought of, shaped and made. If it wasn't for her, I would never have gone to Utrecht to spend a few days alone in a house I didn't know. Maybe I wouldn't have written the story I wrote for my friend's son on the plane to Amsterdam. I didn't replace her, but I spent time in a space she carved out in the world.

jean-pascal flavien

philothée gaymard,
inhabitant of the
rietveld-schröder house

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onestar press

onestar press
49, rue Albert
75013 Paris France
info@onestarpress.com
www.onestarpress.com

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