

Unchanging Idioms

In a conversation with IA&B, Francine Houben of Delft-based Mecanoo Architecten speaks of her journey in architecture a 30 years, describing fondness for its sensory aspect and her struggle adhering to the initial values of her architectural vision.

Images: courtesy Mecanoo Architecten

Francine Houben, founding partner and creative director Mecanoo Architecten, began formulating the fundamentals of her architectural vision while studying at the Delft University of Technology. She officially founded the Delft-based office of Mecanoo in 1984 with Henk Döll, Roelf Steenhuis, Erick van Egeraat and Chris de Weijer. She currently directs the firm with partners Aart Fransen, Francesco Veenstra, Ellen van der Wal and Paul Ketelaars.

IA&B: How did the name 'Mecanoo' come up? How does it symbolise your firm and its philosophy?

FH: The name 'Mecanoo' is inspired by the Erector Set 'Meccano', a set of metal pieces, nuts, bolts, etc. and tools specially designed for constructing small models of buildings, machines, or other engineering apparatus. It symbolises the joy of building. The diver logo represents freedom of thinking and optimism. The name 'Mecanoo' is a combination of three different words, the British model construction kit 'Meccano', the neo-plasticist pamphlet 'Mecano' drawn up by Theo van Doesburg in 1922 and the motto 'Ozoo', we adopted in 1984 for a competition entry for a housing complex in the area of Rotterdam's former zoo, while we were still students at TU Delft.

IA&B: You have previously stated that, "Architecture is never a purely intellectual, conceptual or visual game alone". How would you define architecture?

FH: I feel that in combination, architecture should always touch all the senses. It is not just visual, it is also about hearing, smelling and touching. That is why I always maintain that it should touch all the senses. If I look at how we define architecture at Mecanoo, it is humane. It is tactile. It is innovative. It is about materials. It is about looking for identity in a world of globalisation.

IA&B: How do the '10 statements' that you have formulated apply to the different scales that you work at?

FH: First of all, the decision to formulate these 10 statements was important. Most architects base their work more on research



and formal language. But what I want to design is more about an attitude. So it is not that every project has all these 10 statements applied to it; for instance, 'land as an expensive commodity' is more suitable on an urban scale, but the 'law of nature' is applicable at all scales and 'wealth of urban planning' recognises that there is not one but many solutions; but the basic idea remains. The 'collective responsibility for sustainability' helps deal with issues together in a collective way; unless we take care, all of us together, poor and rich, we cannot execute solutions. Further, 'cooperation as a challenge' is about crossing borders and working with other disciplines or in other countries for innovation. I often feel more like a 'director and script-writer' than an architect and this is important to craft a good story-line; 'handwriting and language' develops the attitude, what one wants to say, one wants to communicate, what one wants to build and 'composition of empty space' helps look at the important part of architecture, the one you do not build, the one that is left open.

Of course, it is also about composition of different forms together, so our work is often the combination of a straight lines with fluid lines; when the landscape is fluid the architecture is straight and vice versa. For instance, the Whistling Rock Golf Club House in Korea is located in the mountains and so we made a very horizontal barely-there building. But in the Wei-Wu-Ying Centre for Arts in Taiwan, the land is flat and so we made it more curving, like a banyan tree. Thus, composition often alters with the landscape.

'analysis and intuition' helps understand that although a lot of work is done by analysis, it is also in combination with intuition; intuition based on experience, what you build up your whole life. A combination of intuition with analysis and a combination of rationalism with emotion is very important. The arrangement of 'form and emotion' refers to, and my big inspiration here was the work of Charles and Ray Eames, the humane attitude that is at the same time technical, innovative and timeless. For instance,

their chairs that were designed in the 40s, 50s or the 60s, are still good. That timelessness is what I want to express in my own work and in the work of Mecanoo.

IA&B: You have worked in many different countries and cultures. How do you find that different from working at home? Is it difficult to collaborate in an entirely different country?

FH: First of all, what I do in every country is try to understand it by spending a lot of time observing the people, observing the climate, observing the light, observing the materials I can use there. Most of the works we have done abroad are public buildings or public spaces and I try to imagine how the people will use it or how it will work in their context. The attitude that develops from the '10 statements' also helps me work better in other countries. But a reason I think I always manage well is also because I like it. I like to travel; I like to observe people; I like to observe cultures. What we always do is work with a local partner, and this is a good practice because it is inspirational; we learn from them and they learn from us.

IA&B: Your work abroad is majorly in the public domain. Are there some parallels or some rules that you employ as per each context?

FH: I think most important is the attitude that I derive from the '10 statements'. It is rational and it is emotional. It is almost always this combination, but in different contexts. For instance, in Mumbai you really could find solutions that could be very interesting, in terms of how innovative public space can work in combination with traffic, water, waste, public transportation etc. To come up with or solve such issues could be very interesting.

IA&B: If you had to talk about one of your most significant projects, which one would that be and why?

FH: I think the most symbolic of our work is the Technical University Delft Library in Netherlands, where you can see a holistic view of what we do. What is special about this building is that it is a building, it is landscape, it has a beautiful interior, it has beautiful daylight, and it is an innovative space. So, it is a very humane space but with the impression of a cathedral, yet it is very much a public space. And almost 20 years after the library was realised, the work is still good, and that is what I learnt from the works of Charles and Ray Eames. I hope that my work is still good after many years. This is also a part of the sustainability issue, people often talk about sustainability in a technical way which indeed is important, but there is also an emotional part. Something that is appreciated by the people is also sustainable.

IA&B: How do you think your work has changed in the 30 years of your practice?

FH: I started when I was 25 years old and of course, I am still the same person with the same goals, the same dreams. But I think my work has developed a lot. We started with social housing, then went into public space, then into designing neighbourhoods, and then into bettering education buildings, university campuses, libraries, performing arts centres, concert halls, opera houses and museums. The work got more public and also, some people say, more iconic, but the underlying values are still the same. Of course, the field is developing too and what we are doing



today, we could not have probably done 30 years ago. Times are changing, and we are glad to a part of the development of the world.

IA&B: It seems that your work in the recent years, say the past 10 years, is a little more playful? How come?

FH: Yes, that is true. I guess it is so because I feel freer. You know, as architects we have to learn a lot. When I was 25 years old, I was still so young; I still had a lot to learn. When I turned 50 years old, I felt that I now know almost everything. I have the knowledge, the skill and of course the people know that I have it, that I can understand and handle it. So you feel free, because you know everything that is necessary. To be an architect and to work with all these skills you need a lot of experience. You feel freer coz of your own development.

IA&B: Apart from Charles and Ray Eames, you have also spoken about the works of Alvaro Siza and Gerrit Rietveld. Can you tell us about the people whose work you like?

FH: Working with Alvaro Siza was a very important experience in my life. Sometime in the 80s, we were his local architects when he had a project in Holland and he spent much time in our office then. I learnt a lot by observing him. I was taught in the Delft University that we have to be very rationalistic and we worked like that. He taught me to be free.

I speak about Gerrit Rietveld in my other book because there is an image of him with his entire staff and you can see that all their eyes are sparkling. It is also the same in Mecanoo. We are very happy. And this is not just the architects, it is the whole team. We have fun working together as a team. In an architect's office, you never work alone. It is the entire team working together and if I



want to have a holistic view about urbanism, about landscaping, about interiors or restoration, I need all these people. Rietveld's office, although in a different time, shared the same kind of pleasure and inspiration of working together.

IA&B: This is your first time in India. What are your observations about the country?

FH: I have never been here before, but have heard a lot of people talking about countries like India, China, Brazil and Russia. I have been to the other places. But I had never been to India. Of course, I have been here only for 48 hours. But I think it is very energetic and you can feel the energy of the people here. A lot of people speak English and communication is quite easy. There is such a beautifully enormous coastline, a lot of history and culture, a lot of people; all in all, a very interesting country.

IA&B: What, according to you, is truly 'sustainable' in terms of architecture?

FH: I think 'sustainability' is a combination of rationale and emotion. It manifests in terms of minimising energy usage, not polluting the world, so that your children and your children's children will have a better world to live in. But again, it is very essential to not just have a holistic view about energy, about scale, about materials, about making things beautiful, but also about how to have people appreciate what you are doing.

For instance, water management is something that is not about one building but about the whole region of Mumbai. There should be a political will to do it, and it is not just the government, I think it is very essential that the people should want to have sustainability. No doubt, it is technical, but it is also social, economic and political. I cannot give you one solution, because sustainability is about long periods in time, about the future, about investment. Of course, it is important, but it is also very interesting. In a period in time when every country is so innovative, one can only hope that this innovation will also be applied to sustainability, to improve cities, like Mumbai for instance, because everybody knows it has problems, with water, with waste, with mobility, with public space. But I think there are enormous opportunities here and I am very positive about that. ■

The book 'Dutch Mountains: Francine Houben | Mecanoo Architecten' chronicling some of Francine's work is reviewed in this issue on page 110.

