Who wouldn’t love to live inside a cheese factory? Thanks to a major renovation and transformation project by Mei Architects, it’s now possible. In fact, a lot of people might not even have known that there is actually a place named ‘Gouda’ in The Netherlands... but indeed there is, and it’s where the world-famous cheese heralds from. This former cheese-making warehouse, a national monument, still contains traces of the 100-year-old process for making the delicious stuff. The transition to modern residential lofts might not have seemed obvious at the outset of the project.

Because of the historical nature of the building, changes to its exterior are minimal, but inside, it’s a different world altogether. A newly glassed-over atrium space at the heart of the plan proved crucial to making the layout work. This space is a showstopper, and the main social, as well as organisational, hub of the warehouse. It transforms a former ventilation corridor through the plan longwise, which is echoed in the two opposite entryways. Two glass lifts have been attached to the historical facades, allowing access for residents to the upper floors of the four-storey block. On each floor, a delicate, open balcony-corridor encircles the long, tall atrium space, and this is backed by the yellow doors to each apartment, along with vertical windows onto the secondary rooms. The prime living rooms face outward from the exterior facades. The corridor walls are clad in vertical boards that have been repurposed from shelves that used to hold the giant rounds of Gouda cheese, and they still display the shadow imprints of the circles. No word on whether they also emit the scent of the delicious cheese.
The public facades facing the city are handsome though staid arrangements of regularly spaced windows, with occasional inserts of square 'bays' that have been cut into the masonry walls as recessed 'loggias'... attractive enhancements of the original building. There is a variety of apartment layouts, thanks in part to a pre-construction consultation stage with future owners, and they range from 60 to 180 sqm each. The simplified structural system proved fairly adaptable, and because the warehouse had originally held massive weights of cheese, it already had a double structural system, which later allowed the architects extra latitude to innovate the placement of new partitions and services. Cheese, it seems, is heavier than people (which may explain its effect on waistlines). Much of the original factory structure here, from steel columns to concrete floors to timber beams, has been retained to give added character to the interiors.

The loft-like flats are contemporary and pleasant, and the exterior of the warehouse is a proud urban participant. But it is undoubtedly the atrium that steals the show. The sun-doused space is a lobby, a playground, a meeting room, a winter garden, a multifunction space and lots of other things. Its relatively narrow, vertical proportions add to its looks, and the interplay of white steel elements and pale beige wood walls is fresh and uplifting. It creates a semi-public urban space that is sure to have residents hanging out and interacting with each other; perhaps to plan regular social events, catered with wine and...
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