Interview with Robert Winkel

Architect at Mei architects and planners

"De Fabriek"

Written by Koen Fischer & Jelmer Niesten

Robert Winkel founded Mei architects and planners in 2003 and is the office's energetic leader. He is ambitious and enterprising both inside and outside the office.

Robert has a love of the craftsmanship involved in treating and finishing materials, as reflected in his solid understanding of (industrial) production processes. This is illustrated by details such as the screen of woven stainless steel applied to the Schiecentrale 4B building and the panels of the Kabouter garage. He also designs and makes his own leather shoes, and loves to make his own traditional sausage, which he then places to dry in a storage unit, made of composite materials developed by Mei, located opposite his home on the gallery on the top floor of the Schiecentrale 4B building.

Do you have a strategy when approaching a new project?

It is of the utmost importance that you start loving the building you work on. And to love something, you have to know it. An important aspect is the history of the building; in which circumstances it was built or previously transformed. Often historical buildings have not been built at once and are made up of different parts. You'll find many existing elements that make the building unique and may need to be replaced. It's important you understand the technology and materials behind these elements.

The building method can tell you right away in which period each part was built. Like the way modernists after the 20's use concrete that isn't plastered to keep it 'honest' as a material. That way you can unravel the techniques used and also divide the building into different time layers. You can find what makes the building special to you and use this to start telling its story to others.

And if you don't fall in love with the building?

Most of the time I know quite soon if a project is right for us or not. We tend to look for projects with something special. Either because of the building itself, or because of the ambitions of the client. If both the building and the client don't inspire us then we see that as a reason not to take on the project.

How was this strategy used at "De Fabriek"?

In "De Fabriek" located in Delfshaven I immediately saw the different layers of time. First small houses appeared on the side of the dike over several years, built out of masonry and timber. Later on, in the 30's, a factory hall was built on the space between the houses and the water, with a main load bearing structure of steel.

Figure 2. "De Fabriek" building

When you make adjustments to a building you have to be aware of the load bearing structure and its stability, but you must also realize what kind of emotions the materials can induce in people. In this building we found timber window frames on one side and steel window frames on the other side, facing the water. These steel window frames were something special and really impressed people; especially so when we found that those windows could be opened in a specific way to get rid of steam. This reflected on the historical use as an industrial steaming and painting facility.

The location of "De Fabriek" at the "Mathenesserdijk" was also just right. This dike has had a turbulent history as the main road between Schiedam en Rotterdam until 1900. The traditional ribbon development alongside is easily noticeable. The turbulent history as well as the time layers intrigue me. The building is named "De Fabriek" but when we found it, it looked more like a maze due to all the different buildings connected to each other.

What's the next step in the design process?

From this point on it's all about strategy. Everybody wants to have a design for free. They want us to make a quick sketch to give to the contractor and continue without us. This time the project developer tried to sell the project including us as the architect to the contractor. Only after convincing the contractor we wouldn't be just another price tag but could actually help save money the contractor agreed.

During the reconstruction that followed we made design decisions in accordance with our sketch design and the wishes of the contractor. Every day we had to walk through the building and see what we could find and what to do with it. This makes for an interesting job and left little time to think about the situations that arose; we had to make quick decisions.

How did you deal with parts of the building that were too dilapidated for re-use?

The funny thing about the whole idea behind the vide is that we came up with it because a part of the building was rotten and partly collapsed. This part used to be where several small courtyards provided the houses with light and air. So we kept the hole we found in the old building to bring some quality to the new.

Figure 3. "De Fabriek" before the re-development

How did you connect the new parts to the old?

It really was a day to day effort. Every day we used to see what we found in the old building and had to find a solution right away. For example we couldn't stir the soil. Therefore it was impossible to dig a hole for the elevator shaft. However the floor height in the basement was quite high so we could think about raising the floor and thereby creating a base for the elevator.

Another example is the structure. The little houses gained their stability from the front and rear facades. When we had to take away the rear facade we had to think about how to support the houses. To solve this we came up with a construction that functions similarly to a walker for the elderly. These kind of practical things, the decisions we had to make on site, are characteristic for the design of „De Fabriek".

In technical terms, what were the hardest problems to solve?

We didn't want to add any vents to the building, but the building codes stipulate a minimal ventilation requirement. However by studying the regulations closely we found that natural ventilation is permitted when applied above 1.8 meters. We were very lucky to find that the typical industrial windows in the building could meet this regulation. This left a need for heating during cold seasons. Regrettably we weren't able to apply a closed system with heat recovery due to the low budget.

Due to the vide we ended up with a fire compartment that was twice the size of what the regulations would allow. But again by reading the regulations very closely we found a clause that spoke about dealing with fire regulations from a different perspective. With this we were able to convince the fire department that our building was easily escapable during a fire by using the old routes through the building. For all these cases we needed to be smart, fast and sly. As an architect knowing the rules and regulations is indispensable in the building process. Everybody can make a nice sketch but only a few have the knowledge and knowhow to make a sketch into reality.

What materials are used in "De Fabriek"?

We used a lot of prefabricated products. For example the glass roof is originally used in greenhouses. The handrails for staircases and the vide are a standard product we customized slightly. But generally we use a lot of glass, steel and plaster. Generally it isn't our highest priority but as it happens these are all cradle to cradle materials.

How do the old and new meet in „De Fabriek"?

This is exactly what „De Fabriek" is all about. The old structure is partly peeled so we could combine it with the new structure. The new structure connects everything together: the old steel construction, the old houses and the vide. The new structure is not a piece of art. That was never the purpose. It had to function. Clean details aren't my priority. Sometimes it has to be beautiful and sometimes it just needs to do its job. These rough details form the character of the building. We even try to make little mistakes on purpose.

What detail are you most proud of?

It's a specific element that connects the old and new steel structures. (Figure 4) The old part is built by hand and therefore irregular and crooked. It's an impossible task to get accurate measurements on it. Due to this the new steel structure doesn't fit exactly. To connect the two parts we had to weld on some crooked beams. Some people see this as a mistake but we see it as a symbol of the fact you can't control everything when working on exciting buildings. Besides, no one really notices this "fault". Only those who know of it, see it.

Figure 4. Connecting the old and new doesn't always fit exactly.

To what extent is The Factory a typical project for your office?

Most important in our designs is creating communities and bringing people together. We try to do so with all of our projects, making places where people can see and meet each other. Also our style of collaboration with different experts and advisers is typical for our office. We try to learn from them instead of simply using their knowledge. And of course we try to be smart, fast and sly with every design.

How important is restoration now and in the future?

I don't know if this is our task for the future but I think it is very important for every architect and engineer to experience at least one restoration. So much can be learned from old buildings and technologies. Not only is it interesting to figure out how people used to build in the past but even more interesting is why they built that way. With this knowledge you gain more understanding of the contemporary building techniques. I can't predict the future nor say what the task for architects will be in five or ten years. Most important is to stay flexible.

Figure 5. Connection between old and new in "De Fabriek"

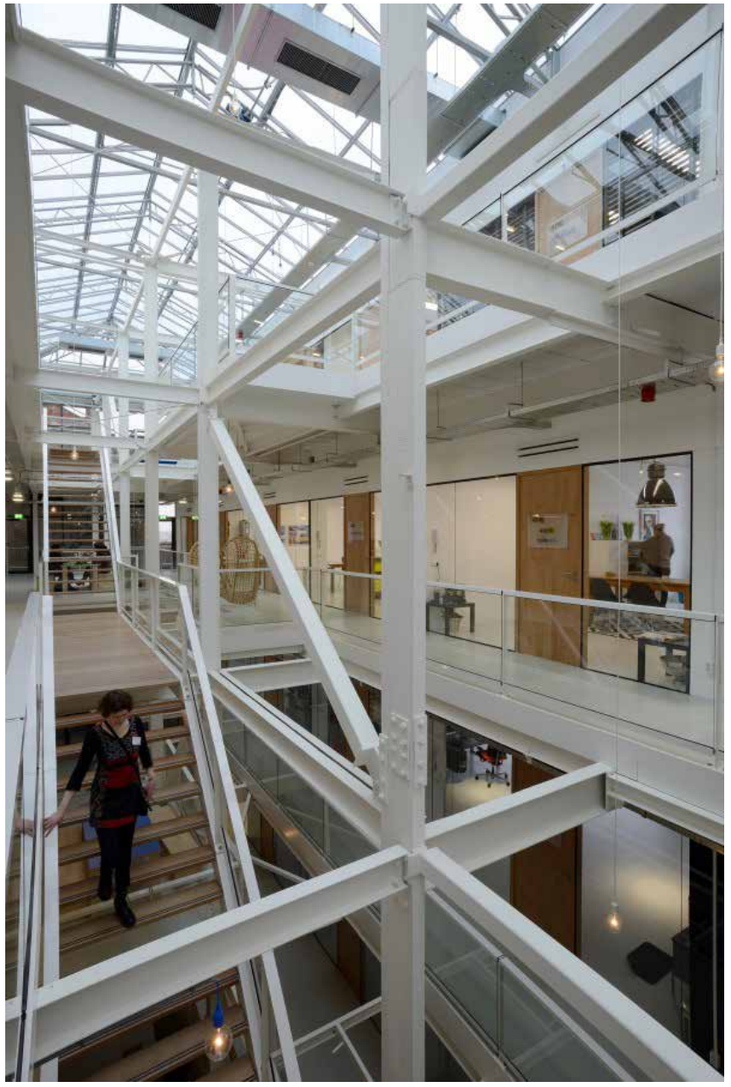

Figure 6. Interior of "De Fabriek"