

INTERVIEW MEI ARCHITECTS AND PLANNERS

Last May, Sophie and Wout had the opportunity to visit Mei architects and planners, an architecture firm that focuses on transformation, urban planning and sustainable new building concepts. We talked about working at Mei architects and the topic of sustainability with Michiel van Loon, architect-partner, who has been working at Mei architects for ten years, and Marloes Bier, who has been working at Mei architects for two years and is currently junior architect.

How is sustainability handled within your firm?

Michiel: We have been working on sustainability for a while now. It is important for us to express what our added value is within the sustainability task in the Netherlands. This is reflected in our five core values, what we do our work for, and therefore what is most important for Mei architects. It's not just about making beautiful things, quite the contrary. The first thing to start with is the context, meaning the story and history of a location. This is what we want to take into account. With new aesthetics, we want to make sure there is something thought-provoking,

something special, that stands out in a sympathetic way. With community, we try to ensure that architecture connects people and that we can connect people with buildings. This attracts a certain kind of people.

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Does this mean that you have a specific target group?

Michiel: It is very diverse. For example, the design of the apartment complex SAWA appeals to a diverse target group because of its circular construction, while Fenix, a transformation of a warehouse into housing, appeals to a target group looking for a fun environment with lots of activity.

Marloes: This does not mean that only people with a lot of money can live at SAWA. Half of this specific project is mid-rent, part is free sector and part is for sale. Everyone who wants to live there should be able to live there.

Michiel: Inclusivity is indeed an important aspect. It is interesting that people from different groups still like to meet each other in, for instance, a courtyard or an atrium. We try to encourage inclusivity by applying these elements in our designs.

Another core value is the flexibility of buildings. One sustainability aspect is that a building should last a long time and be adaptable over time. Materials should remain applicable so that buildings do not have to be demolished. Our workplace is a good example of this. The office consists of an open structure, with load-bearing columns, beams and floors, but no load-bearing walls. This way, we can move walls ourselves and arrange the space flexibly. Also, installations are visible and not hidden in the floor, so they can easily be replaced in a few years' time. Mei's last key point is new values. Today's generation is increasingly concerned with climate impact, just as you are concerned with sustainability on the big trip. We are much more occupied with it now within Mei than we were 25 years ago. Climate issues are serious, and aspects like heat stress and water issues should always be taken as starting points at the start of a project.

In what way do you translate this into projects?

Michiel: First of all by making it discussable, both internally and externally. Not all projects are now built in wood overnight, but we regularly ask ourselves and the client whether we are doing the right thing regarding sustainability.

Marloes: We also don't hesitate to seek knowledge

from experts. If we develop projects all by ourselves, we can go for sustainability, for instance in the case of the SAWA mentioned above, one of the first wooden high-rise buildings in the Netherlands.



SAWA. Mei architects and planners.

In this project, we design a wooden structure that is demountable. This is one of the first large wooden building structures in the Netherlands because, unfortunately, building practice is more conservative than we would like to be as architects. In addition, biodiversity is also an important issue. You can easily put some trees in a render, but we really go to specialists to see which planting does well on specific balconies, at specific heights and with different wind directions. By exchanging this knowledge, we try to become a little bit of an expert in each area.



Kabeldistrict. Mei architects and planners.

We briefly talked about places within buildings where people can come together to meet. Cohousing is something we as students find very interesting, are you also working on that and do you see a future in it?

Marloes: I think it could be a solution. On one hand, we have a housing shortage, and on the other hand, you have problems with loneliness. I myself had a great time living in a student house. You always have someone to talk to.

Michiel: We also notice that there is more of a demand for shared functions within buildings, especially among the elderly. A way to ensure this in a design is by leaving spaces empty until there is an initiative from the residents.

An example is a deck at SAWA with a vegetable garden, where people can garden together. People want this because there was a huge demand for it in this area. We are also trying to find places within a design where people have a shared workshop, or craft space.

What do you see as a solution to the housing shortage? You guys are mainly working on transformation. Do you see this as the best way to get new housing?

Michiel: Transformation is a way to give buildings a longer life. A lot of office buildings were transformed into housing after the economic crisis. However, now this transformation is being stopped in several cities, as office surfaces are also starting to run out. Lately, we have been more concerned with area development like, for instance, the Kabeldistrict in Delft. We want to slowly transform the absurdly large halls, which functioned as a cable factory, into a nice environment for the city. Parts of the halls will remain standing, and be interwoven with the new programmes. Adding a base layer with different programmes; hospitality, shops, parks, allows for a higher housing density to be designed. After all, with a high housing density, you also have to return something great so that it becomes fun to live here too.

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What is the working atmosphere like at Mei architects?

Marloes: We are quite a young company, our employees are 32 years old on average, with many different nationalities. I am now a junior architect and what I do varies a lot from day to day. It's also mainly working on what you like. This can be indicated within the office and everyone then knows what to approach you for. Most people work part-time here, and we're fine with that. We do work hard, but it's sociable.

Michiel: Once every six weeks we also have Mei Inside, where we can share knowledge together. We do this in a neighbourhood pub we own. It is an extension of our office, where we also have get-togethers. We are also very portfolio-driven, not only as a company but also individually. We think personal development within the company is very important.

Interested in Mei architects and planners?

There are regular open drinks at Mei, to introduce interested parties to the agency. We are always looking for new people who are enthusiastic. Keep following Mei architects to stay informed about such activities. In addition, you can find more information about Mei architects and planners on the website www.mei-arch.eu