

Looking back, I recognise the coherence of the work we've done

Francine Houben

As Dutch firm Mecanoo wins the competition to lead the renovation of the New York Public Library, Magali Robathan talks to its creative director Francine Houben about inspiration, playfulness, and why she's embracing getting older



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Last year was a huge year for Francine Houben and Mecanoo, the Dutch multidisciplinary practice that she co-founded three decades ago.

"It was a very special year; what we call a crown year in the Netherlands," says Houben, speaking to CLAD from Mecanoo's offices in Delft. In 2015 Houben turned 60, and the Queen of the Netherlands presented her with the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds Prize, a prestigious Dutch cultural award given in recognition of her lifetime of achievement as an international architect. Mecanoo, meanwhile, celebrated its 30th anniversary in September with a party at its offices. Two months later came the biggest news of the year, when the practice was chosen to lead the \$300m renovation of the New York Public Library, replacing Foster + Partners, who were dropped from the project in 2014.

The practice also completed a wide range of projects in 2015, including cultural heritage museum Het Hof van Nederland in Dordrecht, the Netherlands; the HOME arts centre in Manchester, UK; the Hilton hotel at Amsterdam Airport Schiphol; a new train station for Delft in the Netherlands and the Bruce C Bolling Municipal Building in Boston (Mecanoo's first US project).

"It was a chance to look back at the whole oeuvre; to realise how much I've achieved," says Houben. "I started when I was a young student, and I never really thought about the continuous line in my work. Looking back, I recognise the coherence of the work we've done."

During her career, Houben has hung out with Charles and Ray Eames, collaborated with legendary architects including Álvaro Siza, Alvar



Below: The 42m-high atrium at the new Hilton Amsterdam Airport Schiphol; The Martin Luther King Jr Memorial Library (right)



The Library of Birmingham's façade references the city's history of jewellery manufacturing (above); HOME Manchester opened in May 2015 (left)

INTERVIEW: FRANCINE HOUBEN

Aalto and Toyo Ito, and has worked across a diverse range of projects which cover libraries (including the Stirling Prize-nominated Library of Birmingham), museums, hotels, theatres, parks, skyscrapers and residential projects ranging from single houses to complete neighbourhoods.

There's a feeling, however, that the best may be yet to come. Being selected to lead the renovation of the iconic New York Public Library was a real coup for Mecanoo, whose first US project only completed last year. The practice is also working on a range of other high-level projects, including the renovation of Mies van der Rohe's Martin Luther King Jr Memorial Library in Washington DC; the National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts in Taiwan; and Three Cultural Centers & One Book Mall, in Shenzhen, China. And, as Houben points out, she's now the age that Frank Gehry has when he designed the Guggenheim Bilbao. "As architects, we need wisdom," she says. "There are so many valuable skills that come from being older."

STARTING OUT

Houben launched Mecanoo with two friends when she was a 25-year-old student (she studied architecture at Delft University of Technology). They entered a competition to design a social housing complex in Rotterdam, and won. "A year later there was a competition launched by UNESCO for housing of the future. The prize was a trip to Japan, and I wanted to go to Japan, so we entered it and won that too," she says.



Delft's new station hall features a dramatic vaulted ceiling

 The world of Mecanoo is warm, it's human, it's well detailed, it's reacting to local culture

"In the 1980s, there weren't really any interesting architectural firms, not just in the Netherlands but worldwide; not really. Housing was horrible, so we thought we should change the way people live in cities. That's the way we started."

During the early days, they worked from Houben's student sitting room. After winning the competition, they employed another two people, and came up with the name Mecanoo – inspired by the British model construction kit Meccano, and a reference to the playfulness of creating structures. Mecanoo then moved to the

back room of a historic building on the Oude Delft Canal which was being rented out to start up businesses. The practice has since taken over – and refurbished – the entire canal house, including some of the neighbouring buildings.

Today, Houben leads a team of 160 people from 25 countries in what she describes as her "symphony orchestra". They're deliberately employed with a variety of backgrounds and skills, and include architects, engineers, interior designers, urban planners, landscape architects, architectural technicians, model makers, graphic designers, photographers and movie makers.

Mecanoo's projects are suitably diverse, ranging from the sober, neo modernist housing projects of the practice's early days to the flamboyant, shimmering metal-clad Library of Birmingham.

What unites them, says Houben, is the practice's unique approach. "People expect architects to have a form-based style. For me, that's not intellectually interesting," she says. "The world of Mecanoo is warm, it's human, it's well detailed, it's reacting to local culture. Our projects are very different, but what unites them is the idea of people, place, purpose."

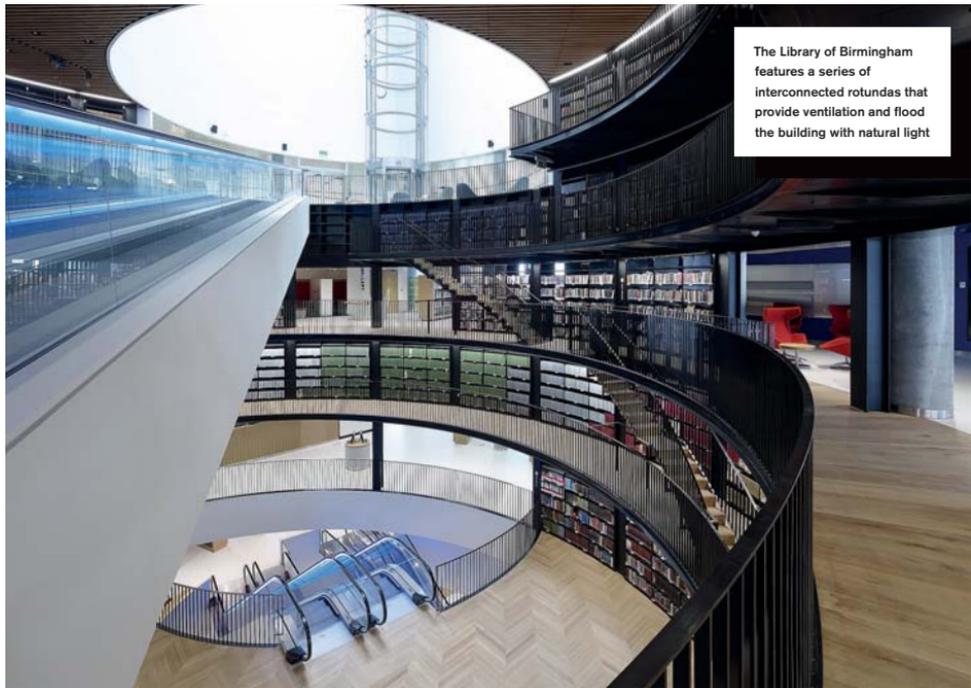
People, place, purpose sums up Mecanoo's approach to architecture and urbanism, and is also the title of a new book published by the firm in November 2015. The book highlights the practice's ethos of designing for people, and examines the effect time has on the function, or purpose, of buildings or landscapes. Houben believes strongly in "designing for unpredictable change"



PHOTO © VINCENT RESNAIS

The public areas at New York Public Library's Stephen A. Schwarzman Building will be expanded. Interior (left); exterior (below)





The Library of Birmingham features a series of interconnected rotundas that provide ventilation and flood the building with natural light

– accepting that the use of a building is likely to change in ways we might not be able to anticipate, and ensuring spaces are designed in a way that can absorb and accommodate those changes.

One element that crops up again and again in Mecanoo's work is a particularly vibrant shade of blue. It's the colour of a stage paint Houben first used in a theatre set design in the 1990s, and it can be seen in many of Mecanoo's projects, as well as throughout the practice's offices.

NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY RENOVATION

Houben has described libraries as "the cathedrals of our time," and "the most important public building in a city," so being selected to renovate one of the world's most famous was particularly exciting.

"For me, the New York Public Library is a symbol of all the libraries in the world," says Houben. "It's a library for everyone – for the whole melting pot that is New York society."

"Libraries are about so much more than books. They're about meeting other people, learning

from them, creating things. The New York Public Library had such importance for all immigrants coming to New York. They felt this was a place where they were free, where they could get connected to their own country and their own language but could also learn the new language."

The project will start with the renovation of the Mid-Manhattan Library, which will house a modern circulating library, a business library, a large education space, and spaces for public programmes and classes. Construction is expected to start in late 2017 and be completed in 2019. Once renovation has started on that branch, work will start on the expansion of public space – by 42 per cent – at the Schwarzman Building on Fifth Avenue.

"We will approach the New York Public Library project the same way we approach all of our projects – by observing," says Houben. "Trying to understand the history and the future of the library, observing people in the city and imagining how they could use it in five, 10 or 50 years' time."

Mecanoo already has several libraries in its portfolio, including the Delft University of

Technology Library in the Netherlands, which helped to put Mecanoo on the map when they opened in 1997. More recently, the practice designed the iconic Library of Birmingham – described by Houben as "a people's palace," which has won several awards and has been highly praised for its humanistic, accessible design.

"The Library of Birmingham is a very European building," she says. "I'm extremely proud of it. It's a beautiful interiors space, and one of the first things you notice is the people enjoying the building; people of all ages and sexes and races, all sitting together in a very harmonious way."

LOOKING AHEAD

Houben has promised to spend much of this year in New York in order to work on the New York Public Library design process.

Elsewhere, work is underway on the Martin Luther King Jr Memorial Library in Washington DC. "We're working very hard on that project," she says. "Intellectually it's very interesting because it's an existing building of Mies van der Rohe, and ▶

Francine Houben *in her own words...*



Which architects and designers do you admire?

I was always very impressed by the work of Charles and Ray Eames. I have met them, especially Ray Eames, several times. I was also impressed by the Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi, who did a lot of work heavily based on local culture.

I worked with Álvaro Siza in the 1980s because we were his local architects for a project in The Hague.

He had a very free form approach. For me, coming from a more rational educational background, I found that way of working gave me a lot of freedom. I met Toyo Ito in 1985 when I was in Japan, and found him very inspiring and I've also always admired the work of Alvar Aalto.

What inspires you?

I'm often inspired by people working in other disciplines. I've been working with

theatre directors, which has opened my eyes to new ways of dealing with light and colour. I also worked with the late Dutch astronaut Wubbo Ockels – we talked a lot about innovation and energy.

What makes you happy? What makes you angry?

I'm always happy. I only get angry if it makes sense to get angry; if the energy of anger helps me to change

something or do it better. I don't become angry about things I cannot change. That doesn't make sense.

What is your favourite place on earth?

Wherever my children are.

How would you describe yourself?

I'm very observant.

How do you relax?

Not enough. Sleeping. I like biking and swimming.

► it's the very first building named after Martin Luther King Jr after his assassination."

The concrete, brick and glass building was Mies's last project – and his only library – and was completed in 1972, three years after his death. The renovation project sees Mecanoo working with local partner Martinez+Johnson Architecture to transform the library's main entrance and two cores, turning them into focal points, creating new spaces and bringing more natural light into the building.

The biggest challenge for Mecanoo lies in respecting the iconic building, while creating a library that meets the needs of 21st century users. I ask whether Houben finds the project daunting.

"No, I like it," she says. "It's an opportunity for lifelong learning. I'm fascinated by the work of Mies van der Rohe. We went to visit as many of his buildings as we could, and we met with the original project architect, Jack Bowman. I knew the work of Mies van der Rohe, of course, but not as intensely as I do now. We've also spent a lot of time studying Dr. King's teachings, embedding his legacy into our design. I've learned a lot."

Another major project taking shape is the National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts in Taiwan. "It's a huge cultural complex featuring an opera house, a concert hall, a recital hall and a playhouse in combination with a huge open air theatre and a small library," says Houben.



The National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts design was very much inspired by the local banyan trees

"When designing the centre, we were very much inspired by the local banyan trees. People perform underneath them because they offer protection from the rain and sun and give you a kind of wonderful acoustic atmosphere."

The centre is an open structure, designed with Kaohsiung's tropical climate in mind, with a theatre on the roof. The other theatres and halls are housed in the building's four cores, or 'trunks', and the wind is able to blow through the centre of the structure. The project should be completed in 2016, and will be officially opened in 2017.

Work is also underway on Mecanoo's first Chinese project, Three Cultural Centers & One Book Mall, in Shenzhen, in the Guangdong Province. The complex includes a public art museum, a science museum, a youth centre and a vast bookshop, and is due to open in 2017.

I finish by asking Houben what else the future will bring. Her answer goes back to the Mecanoo philosophy of being ready for unpredictable change. "You never know what will happen," she says, simply. "You have to be open." ●



The Three Cultural Centers and One Book Mall complex comprises four building volumes that create sheltered outdoor event spaces beneath



The design of the the National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts in Taiwan was inspired by local banyan trees, which provide shelter and a place to meet

SELECTED MECANOO PROJECTS



Delft Station, the Netherlands

2015

Delft's new train station, designed by Mecanoo, opened to the public in February 2015. The building sits above a new tunnel, which has replaced the concrete viaduct that has effectively split the city in two since 1965.

Ascending the escalators into the main station hall, travellers are faced with a vast vaulted ceiling featuring a historic map of Delft. Walls and columns are covered in a contemporary reinterpretation of the

famous Delft blue tiles. The Station Hall is integrated into a new City Hall and Municipal Offices building, also designed by Mecanoo, which is due to open in 2017.

"This is an extremely important project for me," says Houben. "It's the crown on the work I've done on the aesthetics of mobility and what mobility means to people, and how we as architects, urbanists and planners should address that. It feels like a coming home, for me."



Hilton Amsterdam Airport Schiphol, The Netherlands

2015

Mecanoo set out to design a new building for Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport that would serve as a beacon for passengers flying in and out of the city. The 433 bedroom Hilton Amsterdam Airport Schiphol is instantly recognisable, with its cube shape and distinctive diamond patterned facade. The hotel is arranged around a huge atrium, which is flooded with natural light via a vast skylight. A covered walkway, with the same diamond patterned exterior, connects the hotel to the airport. "The outside is rational and organic; I like the form very much," says Houben. "It has become a new icon for Schiphol!"



Library of Birmingham, UK

2013

Opened in September 2013, the 35,000sq m Library of Birmingham integrated with the REP Theatre is one of Mecanoo's highest profile buildings of recent years. It is comprised of a series of stacked blocks which create a range of spaces inside including a children's library, a circular courtyard and rooftop rotunda housing the Shakespeare Memorial Room, which dates to 1882. The exterior is made up of a delicate metal filigree skin of interlocking circles over gold and grey façades, referencing Birmingham's jewellery manufacturing history.

The library was nominated for the Stirling Prize in 2014 and has won a range of awards.

Francine Houben has described the Birmingham library as "a people's palace" and says: "It's a very European building. I'm extremely proud of it."



La Llotja de Lleida Theatre and Conference Centre, Spain

2010

This theatre and conference centre in Catalonia, Spain, opened in March 2010 and features a 1,000 seat theatre, two congress halls, an exhibition hall and a restaurant and lounge.

It's a low, monolithic building, divided into six levels and with a solid façade of natural stone. Inside it's sleek and modern, with white plastered walls and marble or wooden flooring, and bright details throughout the building. The main theatre is distinctive, with 'trees of light' cut out of the dark wooden walls.

"For me this building expresses the joy of being in Spain," says Houben. "We were also inspired by the local gastronomy. The materials and colour schemes we selected really reflect the local oeuvre of Catalonia. It also has a very expressive interior."



HOME arts centre, Manchester, UK

2015

The opening of the £25m HOME arts complex last summer brought a major new arts centre to Manchester. The triangular dark-tinted glazed building houses five cinema screens, a 500 seat main theatre, a smaller 180 seat theatre and an art gallery, plus a bar and restaurant.

The shape of the building was determined by the triangular site, sandwiched between a hotel tower and a multistorey car park.

The interior concept is based on an urban living room, according to Mecanoo, with the aim being to create a sense of warmth and intimacy. Concrete floor and walls are softened with warm oak and splashes of colour.

"This building is named HOME, and that's really how it does feel to me, like a home in Manchester," says Houben.