Breaking the mould

Architecture, even more so than professions like law or medicine, remains a bastion largely dominated by men. Names like Frank Gehry, Rem Koolhaas, Tadao Ando, Steven Holl, and Jose Rafael come to mind. One exception is Prof. Francine Houben, founder, director, and architect at the Dutch architecture firm Mecanoo architecten. Under her watch Mecanoo has forged a reputation for designing unique eye-catching buildings that are also highly functional.

“We are one of the Dutch market’s leading architecture firms,” states Prof. Francine M.J. Houben, managing director and founder. “While our references cover the entire spectrum from residential homes to offices and factories to churches and schools, our focus is on the design congress centres, hotels, schools, and theatres as well as city planning. Our customers are typically cities, communities, and private investors. When it comes to industrial planning, it is vital that the customer completely identifies with the project. Moreover, the benefit of the project must justify its cost.” Prof. Houben is the driving force behind the success of Mecanoo. She first distinguished herself as an up-and-coming architect at the University of Delft in the late 1970s. In 1980, she took the bold step of establishing her own architecture firm. Seven years later, her ambition was rewarded when she won the prestigious Maaskant Prize for young architects in 1987. The award put her on the map, bringing the fledgling firm increased exposure. Since then new projects and, for that matter, awards at home and abroad have followed, including the Jhr. Victor de Stuers medal 1994, the Prize for Best School Building 1996, the National Steel prize 1998, the Corus Construction Award for the Millennium 2000, the Prize for Building Quality 2000, the TECU Architecture Award 2001, the A.M. Schreuders Prize for underground building 2001, the Dutch Building Prize 2003 and the Culture Award 2005 of the Province of South Holland.

Today, Mecanoo is one of the Netherlands’ largest architecture firms, realising five million EUR. Its 70-strong workforce consists of landscape and building architects, city planners, interior designers, and engineers.

“We have forged an environment where people with many different skill sets and age groups can work well together,” points out Prof. Houben. “This results in designs that take all aspects into consideration. We strive to create designs that combine existing infrastructure with new elements.” Regardless of the project, Mecanoo seeks to unlock what is unique about a specific site, weaving technical, human, and playful aspects into one cohesive design. Professor Houben believes that good architecture stimulates the senses. “Architecture can never be a purely intellectual, conceptual and visual game. What counts in the end is the interweaving of form and emotion.”

Moreover, the firm gets high marks for its ability to integrate itself into its setting. This is by no means an accident. “Architecture is a combination of various elements, like town and landscape planning and interior design,” adds the managing partner. “My work is characterised by the integration of these disciplines.” This explains why it is difficult to put Mecanoo’s projects into neat boxes: “All our projects are statements, unique projects which are imitated by professional colleagues,” says Prof. Houben. “That makes me proud.”

Owing to its growing international reputation for cutting-edge design, Mecanoo derives around 25% of its revenue from projects outside of the Netherlands. “We have carried out projects in Spain, Poland, Italy, and Germany. Most notably, we were the lead design firm on the Palace of Justice in Cordoba and the Theatre and Congress Centre La Llotja in Lleida, both in Spain,” she adds. “We earned the right to design these buildings by winning international design competitions. We want to expand this aspect of our business.” The fact that the company is just as often directly contacted by interested customers illustrates Macanoo’s outstanding reputation. With numerous awards and exposure in the international press, Prof. Houben is doing more than lead her firm to the pinnacle of her field; she is also tearing down outdated misconceptions and industry structures, while offering something completely new. The strategy seems to mirror Mecanoo’s design philosophy as well.

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