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'Books are a way of finishing off a building'

Hans van Heeswijk finds architecture books useful when they contain clear plans and drawings.

Text
Jane Szita

Photo
Jeroen Musch

Hans van Heeswijk in his self-designed home in Amsterdam.

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After spending the 1990s designing offices with the brief 'design as many square metres of rentable space as possible', Amsterdam architect Hans van Heeswijk has lately become the Dutch go-to guy for museum renovations, extensions and new builds. Boasting a clutch of covetable and cool cultural projects, his practice has already completed the luminous Hermitage in Amsterdam and the Graphic Design Museum in Breda – and is currently putting the finishing touches to the extension and renovation of the Mauritshuis in The Hague (home to *Girl with a Pearl Earring*), which opens at the end of June. Next year will see Van Heeswijk unveil the Museum for Modern Realism in Gorssel and a new glass entrance space at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

Some 45 minutes from the latter is another, much less public, glass and steel composition by Van Heeswijk – his own house, recently completed on the new IJburg Island, to the east of the city. This is where we meet, with light pouring into the architect's second-floor study and the sun slowly sinking behind the trees and distant Diemen. Competing with the view are some seriously smooth aluminium shelves of his own design, holding a library of densely packed architecture books arranged alphabetically: no prizes, therefore, for guessing today's first question...

How many architecture books am I looking at in this collection?

HANS VAN HEESWIJK: The last time I counted – and that was a couple of years ago – there were about 5,000.

Are you a great reader?

No, not of architecture books. I buy books mainly to look at the pictures. I don't mean the photographs; I mean the plans and drawings. These are what I like to study, to understand the organization and the detailing of a building. That's probably because I work from drawings myself, rather than models.

When did you start accumulating books?

Forty years ago, when I was a student at TU Delft. The first book I bought was on Walter Gropius. It was a disappointment, because it had too many photos and not enough plans. I actually hate architecture books that contain only photographs, because they give you no idea of how the building was designed or how it

that every detail is designed for a specific use: the house really is a machine for living. Every piece in it has more than one function. This particular book is by far the best one on the Maison de Verre, and it's been my favourite for years. I think you could rebuild the house on the basis of this book; it documents it so well. What I've learned from it is mainly Chareau's approach to details. In fact, I stole a detail from the book for my own house; you can see it over there [points to a steel column protruding from the wall]. The idea of a column with the light switches on it was Chareau's. He's really one of my favourite architects.

What do you particularly like about his work?

He uses steel a lot, and that's my favourite material. He does amazing things with simple steel strips and plates, which no one has done since. Steel is much more refined than wood or stone and, in my eyes, a very pleasing material. I don't consider a design for a building finished unless I've included lots of steel. For example, the staircases in this house are very open and light in structure – that's possible only with steel.

In the case of Chareau, what I like most is that he designs all the furniture for his projects. He's an interior designer as well as an architect. Of course, because buildings change hands and functions, interiors are often preserved only in print. I have a rare book in my collection, *Innenräume*, which is a record of the interiors of the Weissenhof Estate in Stuttgart. They were created for the exhibition of 1927 and featured work by Mies van der Rohe, Gropius, Le Corbusier, Mart Stam and many others. These interiors were subsequently lost when the houses were sold, so the book is a unique document – some 90 years later, it's the only place where we can see how you were supposed to live in these houses. I first saw *Innenräume* in the TU Delft library during my student days, and years later I bought it from an antiquarian bookseller in the United States – how it got there is a story I'd love to hear. It was expensive, but I think it was worth it. It's the only way to visit these interiors.

Do books often inspire you to visit the buildings they portray?

They do. As an example, last year I finally visited the Douglas House by Richard Meier, which is on the shore of Lake Michigan, near the Canadian border and 400 km from Detroit, the nearest big city. So it's hard to reach. But I've wanted to see it since encountering the book on Douglas House, also edited by Yukio Futagawa, when I was a student in 1974. It really lived up to my expectations. Meier's house is how I like a house to be: a sky box with open views. You can take as many photos of a building as you want, but real spatial quality is something you have to experience. It's part of the magic of being an architect that when a building you've designed is actually built, it always has views that you hadn't anticipated.

Visiting buildings has become easier since I was a student – not only financially, but now many houses that were formerly inaccessible have become museums. When I was study-

ing, Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater was the only one that was open to the public. And I'll never forget my first visit to Villa Savoye, somewhere in the eighties, which was completely empty at the time and guarded by a rather forbidding fat caretaker and two Alsatian dogs. You didn't exactly feel welcome.

'Even the biggest stars in architecture have problems convincing clients'

You have many books about houses – how was the experience of building this one?

It's the most rewarding project I've done; I could finally execute many ideas I've had for years. When you design a project for a client you have to be flexible, to allow for different kinds of furniture and uses. But when you design a home for yourself, you know exactly how you will use it. I designed most of the details – kitchen, door handles, tables – and as a result the house is a complete piece of design in which every detail fits. Although it's the only house I've done to date, I'd like to do more, for instance one in concrete. I'm a big admirer of Tadao Ando. I think you always see the most refined essence of an architect's work in the private residence.

Looking at your bookshelves, I see a lot of biographies.

I recently read the revised biography of Mies van der Rohe by Franz Schulze. Especially interesting are Mies's relationships with his clients and his career moves. It's also consoling to read that even the biggest stars in architecture have the same problems convincing clients as the rest of us. There's a book that meticulously documents the construction of the Hongkong Bank by Norman Foster. Every time you have the usual discussion with a client about simplifying a building and making it cheaper, you question yourself and wonder about the extent to which you should be stubborn or compromise. These books encourage me by showing that world-famous architects have to deal with the same issue – and that if you want a building of good quality, you have to fight for it.

But these days you have some very nice commissions...

In the 1990s, we spent all our time doing offices, and the brief was always the same: design as much rentable space as possible. Then there would be a moment when you had almost finished the space, and lorry loads full of terrible furniture would arrive. Now we more or less specialize in museums, and when the building is finished, all the attention tends to go to the first exhibition. We have to remind people of the architecture. But we do get some great commissions, and public buildings are among the most gratifying projects for architects, because people will see them and use them.

I'm 62 now and have no plans to stop. Architects can have very long careers, and I love what I do. One day you get a call and you discuss a building over the phone, and months or years later you're walking inside it – it's a kind of magic. The moment they take the scaffolding away from a building you've been working on – that's just an amazing feeling, time and time again.

Your office has produced some publications, too. Is publishing a necessity for an architect?

You want your work to be seen, and you want to preserve the original design. Then, too, all that energy and all those ambitions need some way to live on. Our monograph of a few years ago was designed by Irma Boom. Good-quality buildings need good-quality books.

Also, books are a way of finishing off a building; publishing is a way to gain closure. Another aspect is how books can be

used to show the ideal form of a building. Rietveld, Le Corbusier, Richard Meier – they all published plans that are different from what they actually built, plans that show not how the building turned out but how it was meant to be.

Le Corbusier made five designs for Villa Savoye before it was constructed. He mixed them all up in his *Œuvre complète*, so the plans don't match the photos. I think he did it deliberately, because to him the ideas behind the project were more important than an exact representation of how the house was ultimately built.

So books bring us closer than buildings to the architect's thought process?

There's an example in one of my favourite books, *Un inventeur... l'architecte Pierre Chareau*, made in 1954, when Chareau was still alive. The photos were taken very carefully, to reveal as much as possible about the buildings. But in one series he 'photoshopped' his work, even though Photoshop hadn't been invented at the time. The photos in question are those of the Maison de Verre, which is actually an apartment he refurbished in Saint-Germain-des-Près. He took out the background in the images, suggesting that he wished he'd designed a detached villa rather than a few floors of an apartment building.

What do your favourite architecture books have in common?

They are all about craftsmanship in one way or another. As an architect, I see myself not as a creative artist but as a craftsman. In terms of architecture, my main ambition is not so much to design experimental, iconic buildings but to make buildings that fit into their surroundings and are functional and well detailed. To put it another way, I hope I'm designing not just the chassis of the car but also the engine.

Speaking of engines, there's an issue of *Rassegna* magazine that really interests me. It's full of drawings of early aeroplanes and streetcars, which are like high-tech architecture before it existed. I admired high-tech architecture in the 1980s, so I studied these drawings, enlarging them with a photocopier to see all the details. I still use that issue a lot for inspiration. ←

'Steel is a much more refined material than wood or stone'

is organised. You can't understand a building from photographs, which I find a very superficial way of representing architecture.

What kind of books do you particularly gravitate towards?

I like books on single buildings, and I have a lot of those – I look for ones with clear plans and drawings. I think a book about a building should add information that you can't see when you visit it. My books are, therefore, study aids, memory aids and sources of inspiration.

Have they influenced your work?

One that definitely has is the book on Pierre Chareau's Maison de Verre, which was edited by Yukio Futagawa. For this publication, all the details were beautifully redrawn and photographed very accurately. What I like about the Maison de Verre is

The craftsman's choice: Hans van Heeswijk's favourite reads

Bernard Baubach, Yukio Futagawa and Marc Vellay, *La Maison de Verre, Pierre Chareau*
ADA Editors, Tokyo, 1988

Maritz Vandenberg, *Farnsworth House: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe*
Phaidon, London, 2003

René Herbst, *Un inventeur... l'architecte Pierre Chareau*
UAM, Paris, 1954

Werner Gräff, *Innenräume: Räume und Inneneinrichtungsgegenstände aus der Werkbundausstellung 'Die Wohnung', insbesondere aus den Bauten der städtischen Weißenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart*
Akad. Verlag Dr. Fr. Wedekind & Co., Stuttgart, 1928

Yukio Futagawa (ed.), *Richard Meier Douglas House*
ADA Editors, Tokyo, 1974

Rassegna #18
June 1984 (Veicoli, 1909-1947 / Vehicles, 1909-1947)

Peter Carter, *Mies van der Rohe at Work*
Phaidon, London, 1974

Stephanie Williams, *Hongkong Bank: The Building of Norman Foster's Masterpiece*
Jonathan Cape, London, 1989

Franz Schulze and Edward Windhorst, *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography, New and Revised Edition*
University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2012