



Atelier Kempe Thill

Profile



André Kempe and Oliver Thill
at their office in Rotterdam

When André Kempe and Oliver Thill talk about their work the words just gush out. They spend no time on long deliberation on the impact they are having. "And why" is a phrase they use repeatedly with a slightly defiant undertone. They do stand out among their employees – Germans, Dutch and interns from all over the world – with whom they sit at a long desk in the Van Nelle Factory. They still use the Styrocut themselves, build models and make renderings for the next presentation. Their love of doing things themselves was kindled early on. They come from Saxony and have a broad accent to prove it. André Kempe was born in 1968 in Freiberg, Oliver Thill in 1971, in what was then Karl-Marx-Stadt and is now Chemnitz. They met as students at the Technical University in Dresden, since when their career has evolved jointly. After six years of joint study and stints in Paris, Tokyo and Vienna they moved to the Netherlands, where they have lived and worked for 14 years.

They initially acquired insights into the construction of residential properties, working at Frits van Dongen, DKV and Karelse van der Meer. In 1999, their design for 300 residential units on Kop van Zuid in Rotterdam won 1st Prize in the Europen 5 competition, and it was then they established Atelier Kempe Thill. It was not a particularly good time to set up shop on their own. Though Dutch architecture still has a reputation of being one of the most exciting in Europe, there was a recession crippling the economy and as such the conditions for architecture emerging in the country. Their design was actually never built, but André Kempe and Oliver Thill persisted all the same.



TERRACED HOUSES

Roosendaal, the Netherlands, 2005

Not even two years later they won the “Living in the 21st Century” competition and the recently established studio landed the contract to construct terraced housing in the town of Roosendaal. For the 17 two-storey townhouses they got the maximum out of the limited budget. By doubling the height of the living space they attempted to reveal alternatives to the standard uniform footprint and succeeded in there being lots of light on the inside. The developers praised them, saying “nothing is standard, Kempe Thill see everything as a challenge.” In the Netherlands, where the construction of accommodation is to a large extent standardized and the building industry is extremely inflexible in its response to special solutions, this can be regarded as a great compliment. And indeed since then Kempe Thill have produced a number of special solutions, primarily for sliding glass elements in facades, which with each new project they refine still further in order to realize extraordinary solutions in other places. This is the credo with which they go about their work.

As early as 2002, they compiled their experience in a manifesto for the construction of accommodation as a whole entitled “Specific Neutrality”. In it they described the change from the construction of subsidized housing to consumer-oriented, individual architecture and came to realize: We no longer know who we are building for. For this reason accommodation needs to be flexible, not only when it is in use, but as early as the planning stage.

Just how they see “private landscapes for a contemporary style of living” can now be seen in their buildings in Amsterdam-Osdorp and Zwolle, each of which embodies one of the two preferred basic types: The load-bearing concrete cross walls and generous glass facades used in the construction of the 23 terraced houses in Osdorp mean the residents can design the footprint individually and provide the rooms with maximum natural lighting. In the case of the residential building in Zwolle in Holland, which was completed in 2009, they went against the developers’ wishes for a clinker façade, and won them over with a glass façade, packing 64 students’ and municipal apartments in a compact eight-unit structure – for EUR 869 per square meter. The future tenants are intended to be able to enjoy the benefits of a loft: floor-to-ceiling windows, a spacious entrance area and a restrained but elegant appearance.



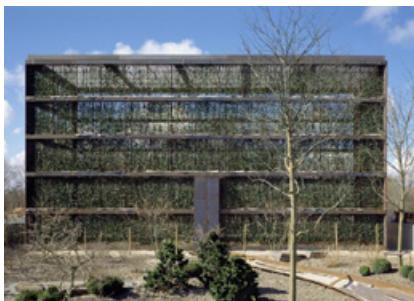
TOWN HOUSES OSDORP

Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 2008



HIPHOUSE ZWOLLE

Holtenbroek, the Netherlands, 2009



Museum pavilion „LightBuilding“
and the Dutch pavilion IGA

Nowadays residential construction is one of Kempe Thill's most important fields of activity, though they have also drawn attention to themselves on several occasions with public buildings. In the Austrian village of Raiding they are building a concert hall in the garden of the house where Franz Liszt was born, with a façade made of insulating panels sprayed with polyurethane and perforated by 18-meter long windows made of welded acrylic glass elements. They paneled the auditorium spruce wood. Kempe Thill are well known for conducting endless discussions with the developers about the use of materials. So as to get round restricted budgets these are sometimes processed using unconventional methods. For the Dutch pavilion at the 2003 International Horticultural Exhibition in Rostock they covered a 10-meter high steel framework with the sort of mobile ivy hedge elements normally used to separate the gardens of terraced houses. For the mobile art museum in Rotterdam, for which, among other things, they won the Bauwelt-Preis (world of construction prize), they stacked white, slightly translucent plastic beer crates on top of one another and, invisible to the observer, connected them using threaded rods. And for the curtain for the elongated concrete stage, which is intended to breathe new life into previously neglected Grotekerkplein in downtown Rotterdam, they used a fabric normally employed in animal husbandry. If you look closely you can see how precisely the detailing is for the way in which it disappears into the side stage.



PODIUM GROTEKERKPLEIN
Rotterdam, the Netherlands, 2009

When a jury awarded Kempe Thill the Maaskant Prize for Young Architects in 2005 one of the things on which they based their decision was the fact that: "They have a keen eye for the topicality of social questions and for the relevance these have for architecture."

André Kempe and Oliver Thill do not play golf to land contracts, preferring to champion architects' causes and discuss the future of the profession with politicians. Two years ago they published a study of competition in Holland and made it as far as the Dutch parliament with their call for lower participation hurdles in contract award procedures.

Trying things out, sounding out limits, getting going. Who dares, wins. This attitude seems to run through their career like a red thread. And why not.

Interview



André Kempe and Oliver Thill in conversation with Friederike Meyer

Oliver Thill



It is ten minutes by bus from the main station in Rotterdam to the Van Nelle Factory northwest of downtown. Built in 1931 according to plans drawn up by Jan Brinkman and Leen van der Vlugt, it is regarded as the icon of Dutch Modernism. In days gone by tea was transferred here from large into small packets, coffee was roasted and tobacco processed. Following its renovation three years ago graphic artists, film producers, musicians, architects, and lawyers moved in. In a hall opposite the impressive factory, where previously technicians serviced the machinery, there are today three long desks. One with PCs and telephones, one with blocks of Styrodur and cutting mats, and one with a tray full of marmalade, cocoa and Hagelslag, the famous Dutch sugar sprinkles. For the interview we have sat down with André Kempe and Oliver Thill in a small compartment separated from the hall by a glass wall – as if made just for the office management.

It doesn't really look as if we are sitting in the boss's office here. It would be perfectly suitable though.

André Kempe:

The employees and ourselves all sit at one desk. This way everyone is aware of what is going on. The non-stop talking can be a bit annoying, but the employees are also always well informed, for example, if someone has to step in to help with another project. That doesn't mean there is no form of hierarchy. It doesn't have to manifest itself in separate rooms though.

Oliver Thill:

The boss sitting in his own office is a very German concept.

But you are both originally from Germany. In many cases you are referred to as an “ethnic German studio”, in others as the “studio of the architects from former East Germany”. Others again regard you as “the Saxons enjoying success in Holland”. How do you see yourselves?

André Kempe:

We're a Dutch studio that is an integral part of the Dutch architecture scene. It has two German directors, we have German passports.

Do you work like a German company?

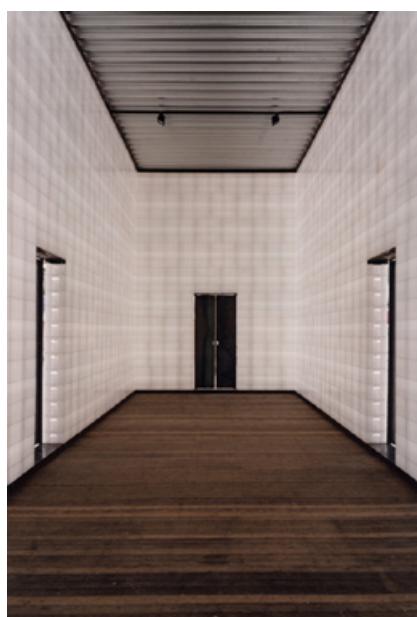
Prolonged loud laughter.

André Kempe and Oliver Thill

But we are very German in our roots, perhaps even more German than the Germans.



**MUSEUM PAVILION
„LIGHTBUILDING“
The Netherlands, 2001**



Why do you find the question so amusing?

André Kempe:

We have never actually worked in German companies. As such we don't know how they function. But we are very German in our roots, perhaps even more German than the Germans. We are like those Turkish women who don't wear a headscarf in Istanbul but of course do here. We have become more German here than we ever would have been back home.

To what extent does that influence your architecture?

André Kempe:

Like artists, in order to be authentic as an architect you really need to get right down to your inner being. In the European competition we suddenly realized that our approach to work was extremely structural and classicist. We discovered the Mies van der Rohe in us.

Why did you go to the Netherlands when you had completed your studies?

Oliver Thill:

Back then anyone who had studied in eastern Germany normally went to the west to work. I didn't want to be pressed into the east-west scheme of things. The Netherlands and Switzerland seemed more neutral.

André Kempe:

The Netherlands are a country that is enriched by other cultures. As a German architect you are welcome here. The Dutch know exactly what we Germans can contribute here: Mercedes quality, punctuality, orderliness. And they are favorably disposed to eastern Germany.

Oliver Thill:

The Netherlands has just as many inhabitants as the former East Germany. A small-country culture is dominant here. In East Germany it was Communism, which flattened hierarchies, in the Netherlands it is Calvinism.

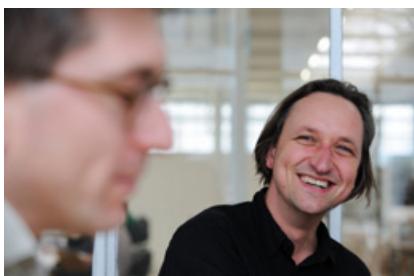
MUSEUM FOR TRADITIONAL**CRAFTS**

Veenhuizen, the Netherlands, 2008

We were the first intake following the fall of the Wall. We exploited the liberties we had.

**Do you see having grown up in East Germany as an advantage?**

André Kempe and Oliver Thill

**André Kempe:**

Oliver comes from the Ore Mountains, craftsmanship is in his blood. My grandfather was a locksmith. Young people today scarcely have any sense of crafts. Craftsmanship is dying out in Europe, people no longer have any idea of how things are made. We took that to heart. The Saxons are thrifty and extremely technically oriented. A tradition of craftsmanship in the family is far more important than education.

In the 1990s you were students at the Technical University in Dresden. What did you learn there?**Oliver Thill:**

We were fortunate to study at a university that was lacking in both profile and structure. This was the period of upheaval, the old professors were leaving and new ones coming. We were the first intake following the fall of the Wall. We exploited the liberties we had, just conducted our own projects, which we then handed in to the professor and got credits for. When André was in Paris I just used his design in the presentation.

Kees Christianse once referred to you as "model east Germans, who always seem to have some sort of sponsorship". You had scholarships to Vienna, Paris and Tokyo. How does that fit in?

URBAN HOUSING BLOCK IJBURG

Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 2008



Oliver Thill:

We wanted to do something we enjoy and we wanted to go abroad. That is why we applied for scholarships. There were loads of opportunities at the time, but in the East hardly anyone was aware of them. If you had been awarded a scholarship twice it was easy to get others.

What is good architecture?

André Kempe:

In a global society architects should be aware of their roots and continue to live them out. That is how all good architecture comes about, which is why the Japanese are so good.

Oliver Thill:

Previously German architects played a role in the international arena. Why does German architecture no longer have such well-known personalities as Nina Hagen and Kraftwerk? The fine arts and music have them, but not architecture. And this whole thing with sustainability is of no consequence either.

Why does German architecture no longer have such well-known personalities as Nina Hagen and Kraftwerk?

INFORMATION CENTRE

COURT OF ROTTERDAM

Rotterdam, the Netherlands, 2008





Oliver Thill

This whole discussion about sustainability is merely an attempt to legitimize a wasteful way of life.

André Kempe



But it is the topic of the future.

Oliver Thill:

You have to operate with the current state of technology, find a good balance. But that doesn't mean a moral position immediately has to be deduced from this based on the opinion we can save the world with better architecture.

André Kempe:

This whole discussion about sustainability is merely an attempt to legitimize a wasteful way of life. We grew up with relatively little. Consuming less, less luxury, now that is ecological. That is how we have always lived our lives.

I noticed that the word "crisis" often appears in your explanatory texts. You write for example "Accommodation construction as a whole is in a state of crisis", or "concert halls have been in a state of crisis since Modernism". Do you really think that everything is getting worse all the time?

Oliver Thill:

Though many of our clients want to try out new things they're afraid to do so. It is better to highlight their fears than enthusiasm. If we take the problems seriously more of them are likely to accept a solution.

André Kempe:

By highlighting the problem we disguise our architectural strategies. As an architect you can never expect the client to accept an architectural argument. After all, ultimately we are service providers.

How are you dealing with the crisis yourselves? Is it impacting on your company?

André Kempe:

Compared with 2008 all companies now only have half as many contracts. There is stiff competition for the remaining 50 percent, so it actually feels like 35 percent.

Oliver Thill:

Until 2008 accommodation construction accounted for half our contracts and public buildings for the other. Since the crisis contracts for accommodation construction have dried up almost completely. We are currently restructuring the company and trying to maintain the number of employees.

How do you acquire your contracts?

André Kempe:

Competitions are very important, though in the Netherlands there are only negotiation procedures, which are all about self-portrayal and a good lecture. Our competitors often put a thick book with all the projects they have completed on the table. We use arguments.

Two years ago you compiled an extensive study of the competition in the Netherlands. Why?

André Kempe:

We just weren't getting a foothold in the market. In the Netherlands private project managers, together with politicians, decide on whom contracts are awarded to. There are no Chambers of Architects as there are in Germany, which monitor the award procedures. As they have to prove they have the required turnover only a few companies

Architects are vain,
they don't pull toge-
ther.

can actually take part in the procedures. We see a huge cultural problem in this form of monopoly.

Oliver Thill:

We recently wrote a letter to the Architects' Association but got no reply. So we had to turn it into a political matter.

André Kempe:

We interviewed 26 people involved in construction in Austria, Germany, Belgium, and Spain and asked 70 companies to support our initiative. The needs an organization that monitors the awarding of contracts.

What did you achieve?

Oliver Thill:

We sent the study to the Dutch parliament. Three ministers had to take a stance, and the Rijksbouwmeester was also involved. An MP even visited us in the studio. Ultimately we were proved right. The conditions of participation have now been eased and an organization now writes letters if organizers are making disproportional demands. We recently landed a contract for a town hall worth 7.8 million. Two years ago we would have had to prove our turnover was EUR 2.5 million, whereas now that figure was just EUR 500,000. We can now take part. Things really have changed for us but not yet for smaller studios. Architects are vain, they don't pull together, but we have to be better organized and fight for our issues.

Friederike Meyer conducted the interview.

Friederike Meyer studied Architecture in Aachen and graduated from the Berlin School of Journalism. She is a member of the editorial staff of Bauwelt.

project management: Andrea Nakath



Atelier Kempe Thill, Rotterdam

Works

PODIUM GROTEKERKPLEIN

Rotterdam, the Netherlands, 2009



HIPHOUSE ZWOLLE

Holtenbroek, the Netherlands, 2009



TOWN HOUSES OSDORP

Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 2008



MUSEUM FOR

TRADITIONAL CRAFTS

Veenhuizen, the Netherlands, 2008



URBAN HOUSING BLOCK IJBURG

Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 2008



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Rotterdam, the Netherlands, 2008



FRANZ-LISZT-KONZERTHAUS

Raiding, Austria, 2006



TERRACED HOUSES

Roosendaal, the Netherlands, 2005



DUTCH PAVILION IGA 2003

Rostock, Germany, 2003



MUSEUM PAVILION

„LIGHTBUILDING“

The Netherlands, 2001

