NL Architects

Text: Jeanette Kunsmann  Photos: Allard van der Hoek
“A little bit more?” – The proverbial ‘extra mile’ is an integral part of the work of Amsterdam-based studio NL Architects, which demonstrates an unwavering clear idea of what it wants to achieve. Yet that is not ‘more’ in the sense of volume, but more content, more system, more function. The architects initiated a new trend in the late 1990s with their design for the façade of a heat exchanger station in the Netherlands: To prevent vandalism, they transformed the shell of the small, functional building into a climbing wall made of polyurethane, which was originally developed as a road surface coating for parking decks. Thus the black monolith with the integrated climbing holds became a surprising hybrid of functional building and climbing wall, which is a vivid expression of the studio’s approach.

NL Architects, not an entirely unpatriotic name, conceive their ideas and buildings in an open-plan office that was presumably once a warehouse. The studio on Van Hallstraat is located directly on one of the many small canals in central Amsterdam. The architects occupy the rear section of a two-story 1930s commercial building. Unfortunately the windows are a little high – you have to stand on your tiptoes to see the water.

They share the building with neighbors who could hardly better reflect the typical Amsterdam blend of Rembrandt and red light: a wholesaler for art supplies, a PR agency and a tattoo studio. This is where the architects work. Like silent witnesses, the countless models stacked on the shelves recount the studio’s history over the past 15 years. Outside the seagulls glide past.
NL Architects was founded in 1997, in the “SuperDutch” era, by Pieter Bannenberg, Walter van Dijk, Kamiel Klaasse and Mark Linnemann, who had met and started collaborating at Delft University of Technology. “Kamiel joined a little later. Mark and I were the first of the group to graduate – we worked on our first project with Pieter: the interior design of a movie theater in central Amsterdam,” recalls Walter van Dijk. Mark Linnemann only recently started working as an architect in Germany (Molter-Linnemann Architekten). Today NL Architects is headed by Bannenberg, van Dijk and Klaasse. With 21 employees, astonishingly few of whom are Dutch, they are today a medium-sized company.

The three words “Wow! What? Wow!” embody NL Architects’ corporate philosophy, a reference to architectural theorist Robert Somol. He splits architecture into two categories. One can be described as “Wow! What?”, the other as “What? Wow!” “The first functions via the visual effect, the second via its content. In addition, we seek to create in our work a feeling of ‘Wow! What? Wow!’”, explain the architects. They don’t like architecture that misses its chance.

After having garnered international attention with their first project “WOS8” in 1998, NL Architects received the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi) Award (Rotterdam) in 2004 for “BasketBar” at Utrecht University. The jury was impressed by the casual architecture and “inventiveness with which the architects had approached the very banal remit”. In 2005 NL Architects won the Emerging Architect award of the Mies van der Rohe Award for its unusual hybrid of coffee house and sports ground.

Following the first few successful years, things gradually slowed somewhat for NL Architects. The construction industry stagnated, many of their experimental projects were halted. In 2007 NL won first prize in the competition to design the Groninger Forum by popular vote. Their proposal, which envisages a multi-use building that opens up vertically to form an atrium, saw off competition from international studios including UN Studio, Zaha Hadid, FOA Foreign Office Architects and Wiel Arets. In 2008 the quartet once again caused a stir and established its name with “Sound Shower” at the Venice Architecture Biennial.
The studio has recently completed an apartment block in the east of Amsterdam with an extraordinary roof, namely “Funen Blok K”. Two diagonally opposite corners of the structure rise up, creating a hill-like landscape. And while in Vredenburg near Utrecht work is well underway on the construction of the new concert hall “Crossoverzaal”, an extension of Hermann Hertzberger’s music hall, the media-savvy architects can boast several ongoing projects this year: 2012 is projected to see the completion of, among others, two residential complexes in Rotterdam, a new entrance pavilion for an industrial park in Arnhem and “Port Transformer” in Amsterdam. Groninger Forum, their largest and most intricate project to date is currently on hold again. “They want to start work on the underground carpark section next summer, and on the Forum itself in 2014”, reports Kamiel Klaasse. Architects certainly need a good deal of patience.

After 15 years NL Architects are able to present an extensive portfolio. Their works are difficult to describe in few words, be they wild, humorous, experimental or radical. The crucial factor is always what can arise beyond the required design parameters and what unexpected potential it offers. They themselves describe their architecture as a “remix of reality”. In the interview Walter van Dijk and Kamiel Klaasse talk about their expectations of architecture, sports facilities, and why all good stories begin in a car.
It’s Friday lunchtime and things are quiet in the office of NL Architects: the weekend is fast approaching. Along one wall, all the monographs and publications are lined up as if on sale at a newspaper stand; models are stacked on shelves or wedged in-between. While we talk, Walter van Dijk and Kamiel Klaasse arrange the models around their laptop like a landscape. In the background low music envelop the office in a peaceful mood; it is gradually growing dark outside.

It’s nice and cozy here! How did it all start?

Kamiel (reflects):
Oh, that’s a long time ago.

Walter:
Unfortunately, neither of us has a very good memory these days.

Kamiel:
It all started in the car. Back then we lived in Amsterdam and studied in Delft – a kind of car-sharing studio.
In a car? What make?

Kamiel:
It was a metallic blue Ford Escort station wagon.

How are we to envision that? How do architects work in a car?

Walter:
We were a group of perhaps 15 students from Amsterdam. You travel a good hour from Amsterdam to Delft; we used the time to talk about architecture and discuss projects. That’s how it all started.

Kamiel:
A very concentrated work situation! You spend a lot of time together.

Walter:
There were lots of traffic jams – a lot of time for discussing!

Kamiel:
Later we rented an office to work on our study projects – there are no studios at Delft Uni.

Kamiel:
In the first few years we took part in many competitions; back then you still got those nice state subsidies and that meant we could finally buy a BMW! (laughs) No, that really was a big advantage for us. Especially at the beginning it helped us enormously to ease our way into the world of freelancing. It was a good time!

Which architects influenced you?

Kamiel:
The list is probably endless. There is so much happening out there that we find inspiring. As architects we basically grew up in the 1990s – a time when lots of things changed and totally new possibilities opened up both on the virtual level and in reality. It was the age of optimism, anything seemed possible.

You caused quite a stir with the first project you realized, the WOS 8 heat-transfer station in Utrecht.

Walter:
It wasn’t really our first project. Before that we developed a movie theater and designed a few other interiors. But that wasn’t as exciting, which is why you won’t find it in our portfolio.

Kamiel:
Incidentally, the cinema was recently modernized.

Walter: Yes! Totally amazing: After 15 years they modernized it exactly in line with our initial plan. Normally you would re-design a room after that length of time but there you can hardly see a difference. The interior is our first monument!
Kamiel (interrupts):
That is the big dilemma in architecture: You only do every project once yet you can learn so much from it! For instance, we just completed a gymnasium. As the building was not to have any windows but only indirect light, it looks as if you’re doing gymnastics in heaven. It’s a building type you could simply copy and paste – similar to fast-food outlets. With every additional gym you would perfect this type of building more and more.

How did you get the contract for the heat-transfer station?

Walter:
In 1994 there was a large urban-development master plan for the entire region in Leidsche Rijn. Rients Dijkstra from the Rotterdam-based studio Maxwan Architects had decided that infrastructure buildings such as these should be designed specially. He recommended us to the energy supplier, and they were grateful for it. Everything had to be done really quickly so there was no time for a lot of decision-making – Luckily for us!

Kamiel:
The seamlessness of the polyurethane skin was quite meaningful: it is the architects’ dream to finally solve the clumsiness of gridded buildings, but it was also the sublimation of the process on the inside...

In a way this was one of your first pieces of sports architecture; other projects followed, such as the Basket Bar and other functional buildings with integrated climbing walls. Is that your central theme?

Kamiel:
Sports applications in architecture are a very inspiring field. You have an infinite number of options. The buildings can be read as a kind of sculpture that is activated through sport and serves to precipitate social interaction. And you can do wonderful
things visually – there's so much you can develop just from the lines of a basketball field! In Sanya in China we are now working on a pavilion with a small velodrome as a roof: the curves of the cycling track – the bank – are in a way reminiscent of Chinese temples!

Walter:
That is the main aspect of our work: an additional program for our buildings to intensify their use. But to return to the heat-transfer station: Such buildings are often located quite a way from the city; their façades quickly fall victim to vandalism and graffiti. In our design we offered an alternative: people can meet here, play basketball or climb. We wanted the heat-transfer station to radiate a positive message, to be more than an attractive shed.

You are best known for the Basket Bar. How did you come up with the idea?

Kamiel:
We wanted this place to be both part of the campus and part of the city. The brief was to expand the university bookstore into a ‘grand café’ with a bar and restaurant. It was an elegant glass pavilion; we enlarged the roof to the size of a basketball court and opened up new options for the building. We see basketball as a very urban sport and we wanted to invigorate the place, although it wasn’t part of the plan.

Walter:
The Basket Bar is also planned from the perspective of the neighboring high-rises. It looks entirely different from above.

It is a wonderful stage in the middle of the city.

Walter:
Yes, it was not just about basketball. The entrance is also more than just an entrance, thanks to the ramp it is barrier-free, but also a meeting point, a terrace, an arena...
Kamiel:
And an enormous orange ash tray! (laughs)

Walter:
That is always the big problem with projects in the public space – they get dirty quickly. Everyone goes there to smoke. It is only cleaned once a week by the city, but now the bar takes care of the daily cleaning. The success of a project is not only determined by its design, but also its functionality.

How would you describe the architecture of NL Architects in general?

Kamiel:
Our projects are shaped by logic – sometimes fuzzy logic, sometimes hardcore logic, sometimes amplified logic, sometimes logic pushed too far... We hope that our projects will bring out the hidden potential of the world we live in, that they will help create a form of understanding and reveal beauty.

Walter:
In this way, we hope to produce buildings and ideas that are communicative. Our bottom line is to aspire to create a form of poetry. In concrete. Or in wood or foam or pixels...

What role do aesthetics play in your projects?

Kamiel:
We are very much interested in form, but the idea is always dominant. As such, shapes become meaningful. If we're lucky. We hope to find sexy reductions: throw all the ballast overboard… just keep the ‘core’, find the essence. It can be flat – as long as it is not shallow!

Walter:
Usually we like to tweak only one parameter; as that way the intervention remains in the domain of what you know, just slightly different, not entirely new or alien. Then the project is ‘readable’, or understandable. But it is also in our nature to contradict: we tend to undermine our own preoccupations, to break our own rules …
You said you learn from your own projects. Do you return to the scene and look how your buildings are accepted?

**Walter:**
Yes, we are often in Utrecht, for example. When we want to visit the heat-transfer station we have to put on bullet-proof vests because the neighbor hates this building! It was built in a garden behind a house whose owner received generous compensation. His neighbor, who has to look out at the black building from his house, never got a cent – and boy is he annoyed! And on top of that has all the architecture tourists trampling over his property....

**Kamiel:**
It is really an unfortunate situation: His property has depreciated in value and he hasn't been able to sell his house.

**Walter:**
Incidentally, this is one of our most current projects, a gymnasium in Dordrecht. You have to realize that climbing is a very popular sport in the Netherlands – although we don't have any mountains at all.

**Kamiel:**
The climbing wall is also an additional program in the gymnasium in Dordrecht – we were supposed to design a complex with four large sports halls. The climbing hall is intended to activate the façade.

**Walter:**
Unfortunately, it wasn't that easy finding someone to realize it. We had to sort it out ourselves and phoned around a lot. It wasn't a matter of just drawing up the idea; in order to create this form of animated beauty we had to stretch the notion of what an architect is: we had to become reality brokers!
The sports center was finished two years ago, and now the spectacular climbing walls developed by Cas Oosterhuis will also soon be completed. We can finally see if the hypothesis works...
You are not only sports architects, but also storytellers. Your collages “virtual realities”, which were exhibited in 2008 at the Venice Biennial, depict radical scenarios. Will you continue them?

Kamiel:
They are intellectual games. Architecture without the usual constraints, like gravity for instance. What if you could swim in the canals? Can we make windmills look more attractive? Power Flower, Google Forest and Cruise City are important images for us.

Walter (showing a small model):
The Power Flowers are more than just an idea; we have had inquiries from around the world, above all from Mexico and Dubai. (With an accent) “Hello, I would like to order two million windmills”.

You also work as designers – do you see this working on a small scale as a way of practicing your skills?

Kamiel:
Yes, there is an unconscious connection for us.

Walter (placing something on the table):
We always show this vase at the beginning of lectures to demonstrate our design strategy. It is a three-dimensional collage, a combination of three different but completely normal vases. A simple idea really (turns the vase upside down) but that produces a totally new shape!

Kamiel:
You can only put a little water in it: less is more! We also designed a bridge (places another model on the table, a heart-shaped bridge). Very Dutch, isn’t it?

Walter:
And here we have another small, but exciting project (fetches another model). The “Port Transformer” – a sculpture at the Amsterdam docks for fashion shows and performances. The fashion industry loves docklands! Since the whole object can rotate, the catwalk can turn into a diving board!
Ah – with a catwalk, but without a climbing wall...

Walter (laughs):
No, just for a change you cannot climb here.

You have an amazing number of models!

Kamiel:
We keep all our models; there are a lot more up in our workshop. Models are like a built thinking process for us and very important for our work. We can go up and look at the studio if you like.

I’d love to! Just two more questions: Why NL Architects?

Kamiel:
The name comes from the time when we worked a lot in the car – so you can relate it back to the Dutch license plate. The dot in our logo stands symbolically for our passion for the highways of the World Wide Web.

Walter:
We thought about the right name for a long time. Lots of people means lots of suggestions and little willingness to compromise. ‘Lego’ topped the list for a long time. Then we struck it out again and in large letters we wrote ‘Not Lego’ over it. Then ‘NL’ became our logo.

Thanks very much for talking to me!

Interview: Jeanette Kunsmann.

Jeanette Kunsmann studied architecture at Berlin Institute of Technology. She has worked among others for Francis Kéré, raumlabor Berlin and Archplus. Since 2008 she has been working as a freelance journalist and editor for BauNetz.

Project management: Ines Bahr
Projects

GYMNASIUM WELGELEGEN
Utrecht, Netherlands,
completion 2011

FUNEN BLOK K
APARTMENT BUILDING
Amsterdam, Netherlands,
completion 2011
GYMNASIUM DORDRECHT
Dordrecht, Netherlands, 2011

POWER FLOWERS
SELF-INITIATED STUDY
2010

PORT TRANSFORMER
MULTI HILL, HAPARANDADAM,
Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2010
ORDOS 100#13
DESIGN FOR A VILLA FOR THE
CHINESE ARTIST AI WEIWEI
(FAKE DESIGN)
2008

VIRTUAL REALITIES
CONTRIBUTION TO ARCHITECTURE
BIENNALE
Venedig, Italy, 2008

GRONINGER FORUM
Groningen, Netherlands, estimated completion 2016
NICOLAS BEETSPLEIN SQUARE
Dordrecht, Netherlands, 2006

LOOP HOUSE EXPERIMENTAL APARTMENT BUILDING
Heiry Art Valley, Korea, 2004
BASKETBAR
CAFÉ WITH BASKETBALL PITCH FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF UTRECHT
Utrecht, Netherlands, 2003

LAACK BLOK 6
SEMI-DETACHED HOUSE
Amersfoort, Netherlands, 2004
3VASE
CERAMIC VASE FOR UNUM
2003

WOS8
HEAT-TRANSFER STATION
Leidsche Rijn, Netherlands, 1998