

52 DESIGNING A BUILDING FOR ART AND CULTURE

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This is the report of a design process of Wiek Röling. The report describes the design for a centre for arts and culture in the city of Velsen. Each illustration indicates an important step in the design process.

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52.1 INTRODUCTION

The first spark for this project was struck eight years ago. Evert Jan Meijer, member of the governing board of the theatre group Amsterdam, Chairman of the *‘Witte Theater’* in Velsen, and building contractor as well, asked me to build something for him. That commission came to nought, but a comparable one in Velsen resulted.

The existing theatre in Velsen is at odds with the availability of space. The building was constructed in the thirties as a home for clubs and as a cinema (REX). It was changed in 1954 by Bijvoet, who added an auditorium, and between 1988 and 1990 it was extended by the city architect of Velsen – with a lounge and a theatre house. The whole did not function as yet, but money for further improvements was lacking.

There are three more institutes in Velsen with housing problems: the *Witte Theater* (the *‘White Theatre’*), housed in an old storage space for life-boats (the theatre wants a cinema room; furthermore the municipality has another destination for the location. Meijer saw a connection between the two); then there is a creativity centre in Velsen, an amateur academy of arts (this centre is housed in a school-building beyond its prime; in an area that will also be used for something else.); and finally there is a set-dressing workshop of set-dressing hobbyists fighting lack of space (a room free of dust is needed for painting), maintenance problems and a changed destination plan. Meijer saw that these four institutes might fit within one building: a Centre for Arts & Culture Velsen.

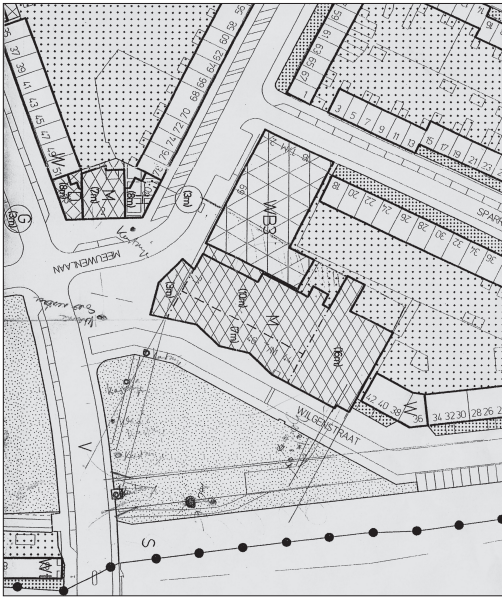
The four parties and their wishes itemised:

- *Theater Velsen*; wants a better lounge and a ‘grand café’, a restaurant and a rehearsing room.
- *Witte Theater*; is pleased with its present small auditorium, but would like to have a cinema. In addition the delivery of stage props is very good; the new situation should at least match it. The distinct identity of the theatre is sacred. It should be possible to organise pop-concerts with a lot of noise; that audience not mixing with the more sedate theatre audience.
- Creativity Centre Velsen; must move to a different site because of the destination plan. In addition the maintenance costs of the present building are too high. They are contented with the spaces they’ve got now, excepting some smaller adjustments.
- Set-dressing Workshop Velsen; is lacking a dust-free painting workshop. Like the Creativity Centre, the painting workshop is now occupying a spot in the city’s centre for which the municipality has different plans; and there are maintenance problems as well. There is an additional requirement: storage for the collecting boxes of a national charity.

I received the commission to study the question, whether the programmes of the four institutes could be combined in one building. It is logical to select for the location the area surrounding the existing theatre. It features the largest auditorium, there are 900 parking lots available at the soccer stadium of Telstar, next to it, and it is fairly accessible by cars and public transportation.

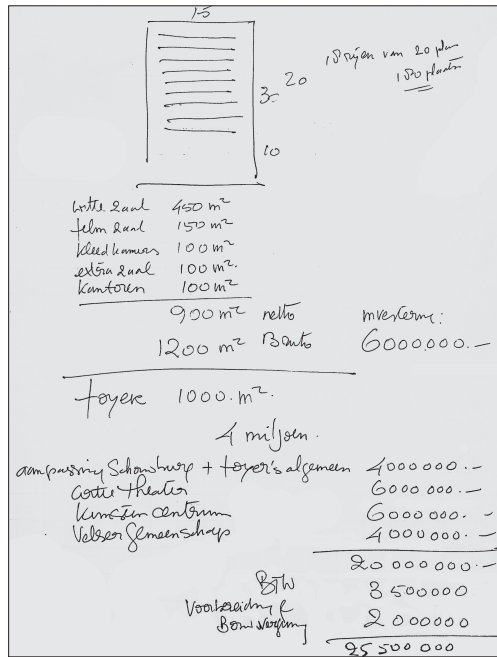
Meijer initiated a Foundation that would act as the commissioner. The Municipality and the Province (North-Holland) should also help to finance the project. The *Witte Theater* rather wanted that this commission should go to architect Crouwel. However, the parties could not come to terms in financial conditions. I was proposed by Meijer in March of the year 2000. I got a commission for making a sketched design; a model, cross-sections and floor plans, plus an estimate of costing.

52.2 DESIGN PROCESS



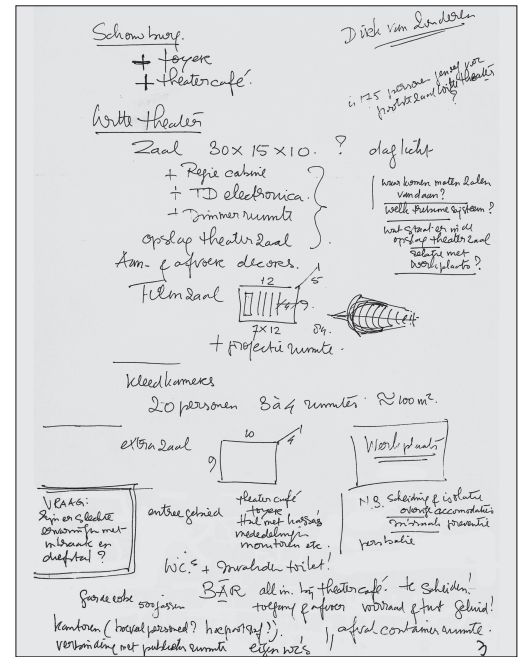
512 Visit location

As I am wont to do for each design, I visited the location first. I have been there some dozen of times. The first time I indicated on the map the positions of trees and important visual lines.



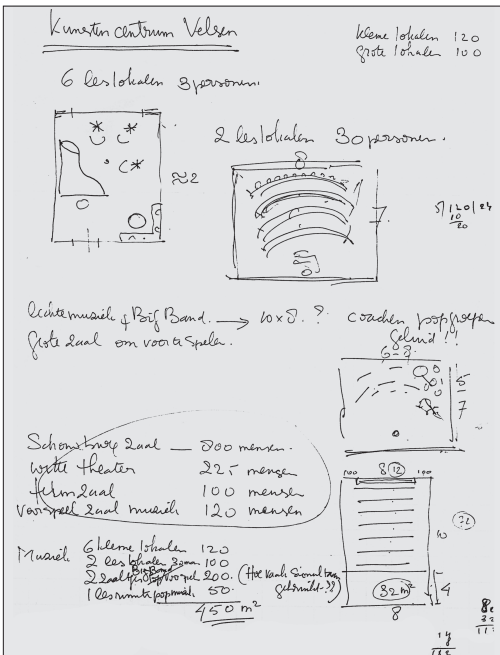
513 Costing calculation

A first global costing calculation; just to see whether it is possible to put there a new building at all.



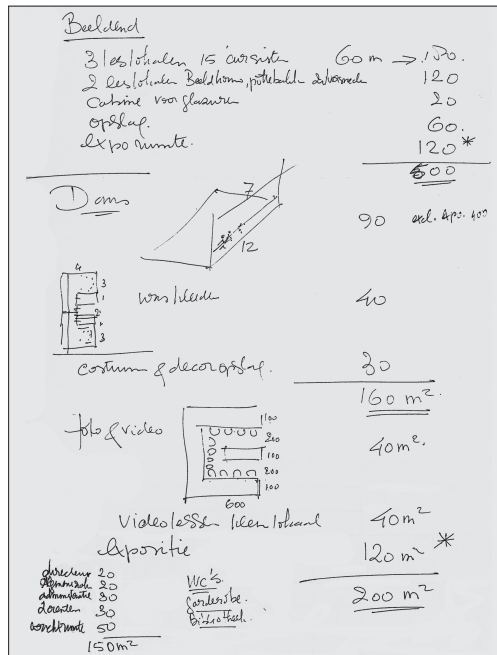
514 Programme of Requirements

I study the programme of requirements and verify it by attending the theatre performances and visiting the workshops. In this way I am learning the programme of requirements by heart. I am making notes, small drawings (without scale, 3D, floor plan, cross-section), calculations, while conducting small studies in ordering.



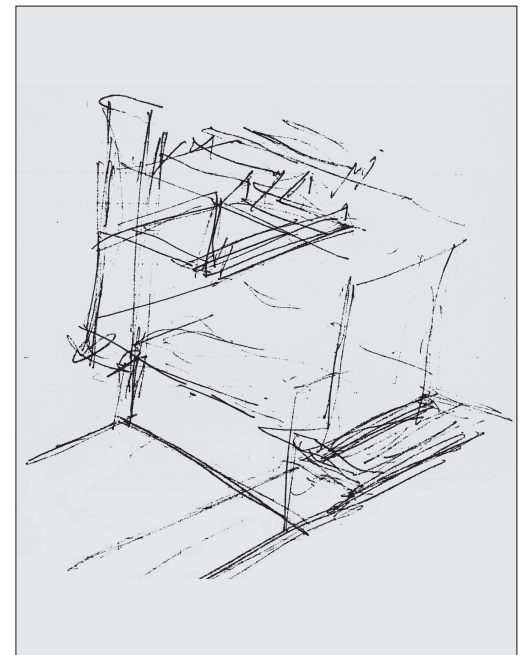
515 Interviews

I interview users and observe their behaviour in order to see whether they have been asking too little or too much in the programme of requirements. Often one is too forgetful about what is existing, while emphasising too much what is lacking. It is important that the programme of requirements should be written in accordance with function and intention, not solely in terms of surfaces.



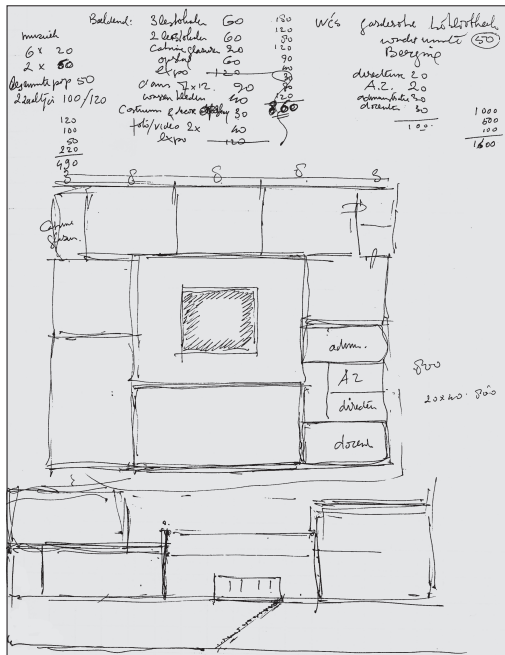
516 Experiencing

Experiencing wishes and the existing is important; if I design a house, I usually ask the principal whether I can stay over for a weekend. The design sketches are made in a fresh A4 notebook, squarely ruled, with pencil and pen, by hand.



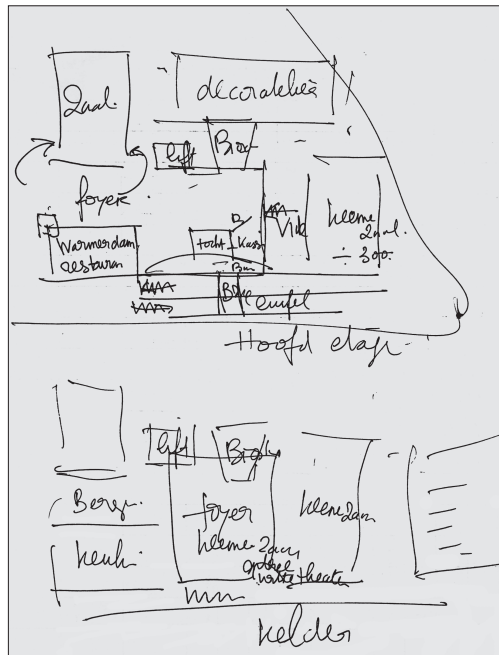
517 Northern light

It is great luck to be able to put the set-dressing workshop and the new painting loft to the northern side of the building. Usually this side of the building is less useful, but these spaces can make good use of the favourable light from the north.



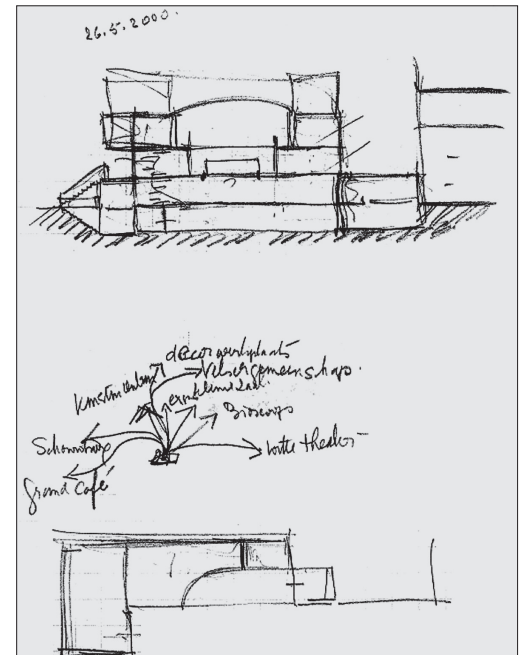
518 Surfaces

As a start I calculate the surfaces that should minimally be available.



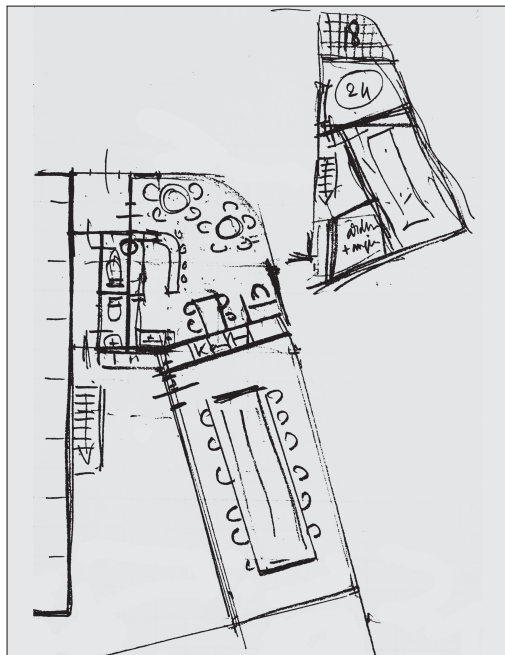
519 Rectangles

All these spaces with minimal surfaces I draw as rectangles and fit them together in order to see, whether all wishes would fit into the situation. At the same time I make a cross-section occasionally to see which spaces might fit on top of one another.



520 Light

The beauty of walking from the shared entrance for the four institutes into the light was a point of departure. This may be realised by positioning the building within a square. However, that is not possible on the site. A light from above in the heart of the building may serve the same purpose. As soon as I had imagined this, the idea occurred of an exhibition space connecting the institutes. This is something I added myself to the programme of requirements as a connecting element between the institutes. It happened in a split second and it became the guiding motive for the design.



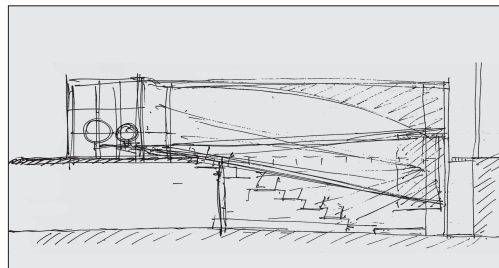
521 Café Warmerdam

During a guided tour in the Theatre in The Hague I saw Café Wasserman, a part of that theatre. I had great difficulty with the former residence of the caretaker of the theatre in Velsen, Mister Warmerdam; and with the lounge of the theatre. In an analogy with Café Wasserman in The Hague I invented Café Warmerdam in Velsen. The example of the theatre in The Hague was the inspiration of my design intervention.

(Wasserman was a famous actress; Warmerdam is a famous now living 'actor's family' known for their movies and house 'Orkater'. The brothers Warmerdam are the sons of the former property man (and occupant of the official residence) of 'REX'.)

522 Idea for cinema: below street level

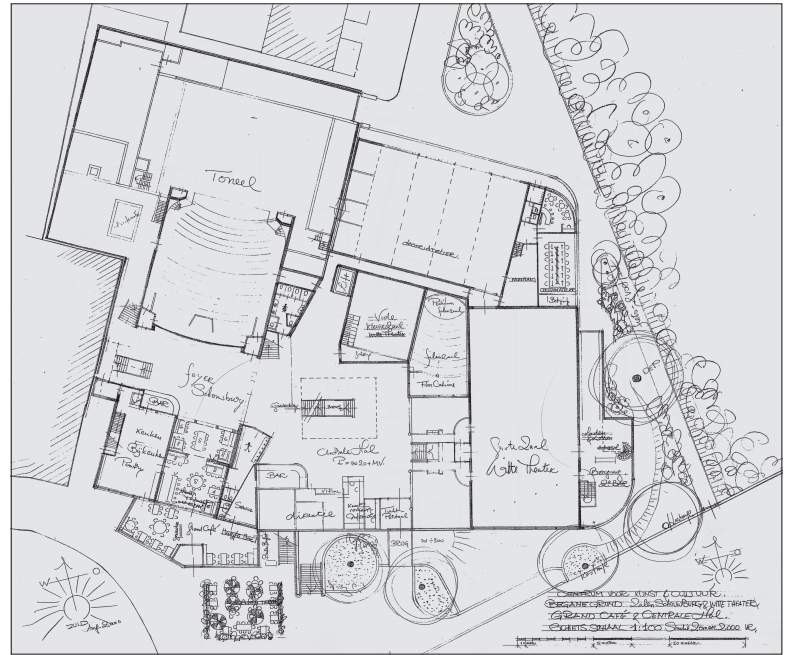
It was an idea of Meijer (remaining from the commission of the Amsterdam Theatre Group) to build the Witte Theater in a sub-terranean way. However, the programme of requirements specified a wish for daylight in the auditorium. In addition this vast space was some ten metres high and it was an important requirement that loading and unloading of stage props and requisites should be done very simply. So the idea of sub-terranean building was discarded quickly, but it seemed to be a good idea to make the entrance of the balcony on the main level and the entrance of the cinema on minus three metres. The operator room can be seen as the Cineac of Duiker in Amsterdam. In this way the wish for its own identity would also be honoured.





523 Adjustment

I adjusted the spatial and organisational structure to the context of the urban landscape and the existing theatre. The trees present were no problem; I preserved as many of them as I could and gave them space. However, the adaptation built in 1988 did pose a problem. I found out that this extension was clashing with the logic of the building. Each building has its own logic, its own consistency, its own laws. Everything I questioned in terms of functioning and fitting in the new approach proved to be a part of that adaptation.



524 Line of the façade

What I did take over, though, was the line of the façade of the new lounge. That became the basis for the orientation of the new building. Now, that the organisation of the spaces, the traffic and the urban adjustment have been settled designing starts: the tuning of the lighting, the atrium, the expression of the mass of the building.



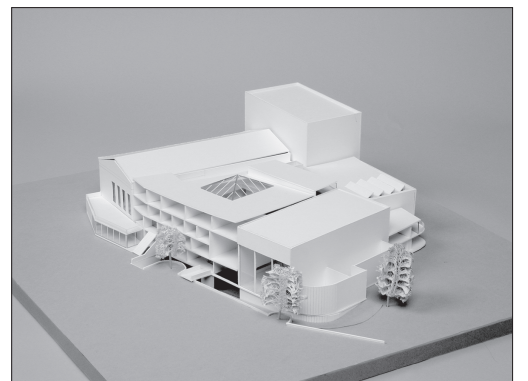
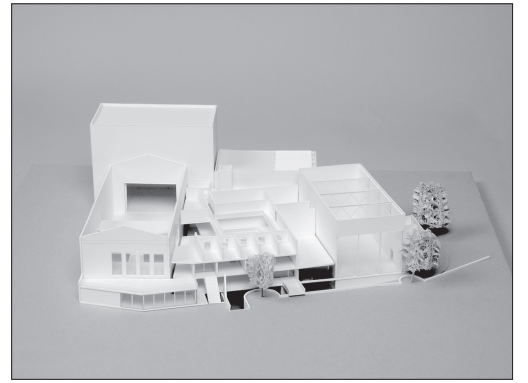
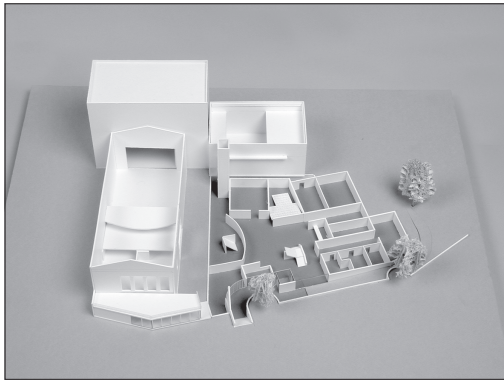
525 Exposition space

Up to now I am pleased with the accessibility, the organisation of the building, the connecting idea of the exposition space, lounge of the Witte Theater, entrance and in- and output. I still want to give thought to the fact that the street is not accessible anymore for cars; and the volumes are still needing change.



526 Mayor & Aldermen

August 29, 2000 I visit Mayor and Aldermen with blueprint, cross-sections and façades. I always make models in order to see whether there is a bottle-neck and how the form of the building happens to be and to improve the logic and "building" aspect of the design.



527 Photographs of the working model

51.3 LOOKING BACK

Start

Meijer has been commissioning me for years. Given previous experiences with him, it seemed appropriate not to begin before I had a commission. Nevertheless, I went immediately to the site to have a look; I always do.

Golden moment

A golden moment in this design is the intuition that for all forms of art collected in the building the visual arts can be a connecting factor. Other golden moments were the visit to the theatre in The Hague; the insight that I could use the exposition space as unifying element for the four parts; the example of Café Wasserman, seen during my tour in the theatre in The Hague, legitimising my making a suitable building in what is, after all, a true small-town environment.

Dead end

Up to now there has not been a dead end. In a flash I saw the solution. Actually, I always have that in all my projects. And I always come back to them.

Decisive constraints

I like to keep the existing building as classical as possible, I even try to give it more the looks of a classical theatre, so that it may be recognised as such. I want to give the *Witte Theater* the atmosphere of a real hall theatre (like theatres in factory halls). I want to give the four institutes their own identities with great emphasis. I do this by giving each institute its own entrance. In order to get a unity in spite of that, I want to make a central hall as well with a central box-office. In addition a space with visual art on a central spot can be a connecting principle. Another point of departure to me is that the building should be a hospitable one for 30 as well as for 2000 visitors at the same time. Finally, the façade should disclose something of what is behind it. However I want to give to the building a façade with the same handwriting.

Requirement not linked to the concept

I want to preserve as many trees as possible. I am also very happy with these trees in the design. I also want to bring the existing building closer to its original state. That means retracting from the change of 1988.

Indeterminacy in the design

I want to maintain the indeterminacy in the design as long as is possible; for instance in the height of the rooms.

Method

I do not work methodologically.

Budget

This is a study commission, based on a building costing 30 million.

Possible problems

Perhaps it is not acceptable that the road is vanishing; one of the partners may bow out; and the budget may get smaller.

Contact with commissioner

I have design meetings very regularly with the study group composed of representatives of all interested parties. I speak with people that have to do the work (stage manager, actors, cleaners etc.). Up to now I have already given six presentations. Everybody is very enthusi-

astic. That has also to do with the fact that everybody is seeing his wishes honoured. Nobody had thought that four such different programmes could lead to such a consistent building.

The use of former research or research from third parties.

Of course I read a great deal. I try to follow the development in architecture by a subscription to four periodicals and I read very many books. The periodicals I read a lot are: 'Bouw', 'De Architect', 'Gezond bouwen en wonen', 'Duurzaam bouwen', 'Oase' and foreign journals. For a specific commission one is going to read in a more directed way. For this commission I have read as an extra book: Ian Mackintosh, "A Book on Theatre Building". It is about history and contains advice. Of course books and magazines about acoustics make further reading. The periodical about theatre techniques especially was very interesting.

The influence of other people on my design.

In principle I strive for making every design decision myself to take care that the building receives a great consistency of thought. The influence of future users is great; beyond measurement. I keep on speaking with them until I understand what they want and make and change proposals until they are content or do not change them if I can persuade them that my proposals are better than their ideas. The installation advisor and particularly the construction advisor do have a great influence on my decisions, provided that their result pleases me. I want their advice as early as possible in the design process, so the building, not only concerning its use, but also the 'making', looks self-evident. (Logical building methods are often to be realised more easily and through that more economically.)

Iterative and more cyclic design process?

Alongside all attempts I do to rationalise my choices (analysis of the place, analysis of the methods of the making) to me the designing is an absolute intuitive, inimitable process. Very often I have a flash of the requested building at the first meeting with the commissioner. I see it, so to speak, before me and can 'walk' in it. The reality value of that image is often as unreal as buildings you dream of, in which rooms seem to lie logically near to each other. As soon as you think what the building looked like when you awake you discover that such a building can not exist at all.

During the work (finding out what the building should look like) the invented building appears continuously in my head. And, if the building is noted down and recorded, often very soon in the beginning of the design process, I continuously doubt whether this is, indeed, the best solution.

It happened to me once that I finished my design in a week, then for at least four months I tried out all kinds of alternatives, tested them to the analyses, discussed them with eventual commissioners and discovered at last that the best plan in my opinion very much resembled the plan of the first week. However, these months of wrestling with the right plan turned out to make the setting of functions and their relation to the construction more logical.