

MANSION

HOUSE TOUR

Designing a Double Dutch House

BY J.S. MARCUS

THE DUTCH, like everyone else, dream of owning their own homes. But they rarely realize that dream by starting from scratch. “In Holland there is not a tradition of building your own house—even among architects,” says Francine Houben, founding partner of Mecanoo, a booming architecture firm in the city of Delft.

As it turns out, Ms. Houben, 58 years old, is an exception to the rule. Over the past two decades she has designed and redesigned a unique residence in the Kralingen neighborhood of nearby Rotterdam. The home is made up of two adjoining and strikingly different houses. The first, an ethereal glass pavilion designed by Ms. Houben and her then partner, architect Erick van Egeraat, was finished in 1991; the second, a late-19th-century brick row house next door, was incorporated into the first house in stages, ending in 2006. The two buildings are now joined at the ground floor and again on the second floor. The onetime alley between them serves as a very unusual joint entryway.

The home is made up of two adjoining, strikingly different houses.

Together, the two houses have around 600 square meters of living space, with a total of four bedrooms, three bathrooms—and three front doors. A sprawling outdoor area behind the 1991 house has a canal-side patio with a fireplace, a Japanese-style rock garden and a thriving bamboo grove.

Ms. Houben and Mr. van Egeraat split up shortly after the first house was finished, and she started to raise their three young children there alone, turning the glass house into a warren of small, adjustable spaces that could open up to accommodate the needs of a single mother, but close back down into separate spaces as her children grew older and clamored for privacy.

In 1997, Ms. Houben married Hans Andersson, a management consultant and media executive who often worked from home. In

ON THE LEVEL This page, clockwise from top, the open-plan first floor has a northeast exposure, providing a direct view of the Kralingse Plas lake; Francine Houben; a rear view of the home in the early 1990s. The original house, right, was finished in 1991. Later, Ms. Houben and her husband bought and renovated the older house, left.



Herman van Heusden for The Wall Street Journal (7); Christian Richters (this page, exterior)



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2003, the couple bought and began the process of remaking the neighboring house into a series of open-plan spaces, suitable for a stacked home-office suite and a spacious master bedroom.

While accommodating her family’s ever-evolving needs, Ms. Houben also used her home as a laboratory for her architectural ideas.

Founded in 1987, Mecanoo has left its mark in and around Rotterdam, with buildings like the city’s conspicuous Montevideo residential tower, a playful 43-story skyscraper finished in 2005. Over the past decade, the firm has expanded into a world-wide practice, and is now working on projects from Chile to Taiwan.

A pioneer in sustainable architecture, Mecanoo has also come to specialize in library construction.

After attracting acclaim for its 2013 Library of Birmingham in the English Midlands, the firm was chosen this year to renovate and expand Washington, D.C.’s Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, one of the final works of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. The project, with an estimated budget of around \$250 million dollars, is expected to take around three years.

In the early 1990s, Ms. Houben created a beautiful ground-floor home studio, facing the property’s outdoor area, but she rarely uses it when working at home. Instead, she takes her laptop to the main area of activity—the open-plan second level of the 1991 house, which contains a kitchen, a dining room, and a living room with a direct view of the Kralingse Plas, inner Rotterdam’s wooded lake. This level has floor-to-

ceiling northeast and southwest exposures, which Ms. Houben describes as “perfect.”

The level’s interior is an array of muted textures—“we didn’t want to use color,” she says. Instead, she stresses “the different atmospheres” of several kinds of wood and varied grays of concrete.

The centerpiece of the level—indeed, of the house—is a massive L-shaped concrete bar, poured on-site, which is a hub for family activities, large and small. Its metallic gray plays off the pale gray of the waxed concrete floors. A quick glance takes in warming teak-framed windows and various detailing in exotic tropical hardwoods like doussie and movingui.

The cold effect of the thin steel staircase, which leads up to a gallery library, is countered by the

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ALL ABOUT EAMES This page, clockwise from top, the wood-and-metal stairway connects the first floor with a gallery library; the ground floor of the 1991 house contains Ms. Houben's home studio, which opens onto a rock garden; the original alley between the two houses is now a hallway; a view down to the open-plan first floor of the 1991 house; the living room of the 1991 house features two pairs of Eames chairs.



TOP TIPS

KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES

Ms. Houben believes a house's design should keep pace with the changing needs of the family. Redesign your own home in response to changes in your life.

INTO THE WOODS

Don't be afraid to mix and match different kinds of wood in the same room.

LOOK NORTH

Make the most of north-facing rooms in your home, which will have indirect but constant light. "Northern light is always the best," Ms. Houben says.



Continued from previous page railing's hardwood trim. Ms. Houben first juxtaposed "bold and fine" materials, as she calls them, in the house in the early 1990s. The combination went on to become a signature of her architecture. "This is really a Mecanoo detail," she says of the staircase.

The entire second level is a veritable showroom of designs by Charles and Ray Eames, including a pair of the 1940s plywood leg splints that presaged the couple's experiments with plywood furniture. Ms. Houben hangs hers on a living room wall as sculpture.

Ms. Houben met the pair in the late 1970s, near the end of Charles Eames's life, and maintained a friendship with his widow for many years afterward. She learned, she says, from the Eameses that "things

should be comfortable"—even "fun." A bit of levity and a splash of color emerge in the living room, with a discreet skyline of blue-and-white ceramic houses, novelty gifts from Dutch airline KLM to passengers flying first class. Ms. Houben exhibits her family's collection along a shelf just below the ceiling.

She still has a to-do list. She wants to add solar panels to the roof, and occasionally dreams of a fireplace in the kitchen.

At times the double house, which is larger than many mansions in the Netherlands' poshest suburbs, seems too big for the empty-nester pair, but selling it is isn't in the cards at this point. Ms. Houben says she would miss the views, and the dense accumulation of memories.

"This isn't a museum," she says. "It's what happened in my life."



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