



EVELIEN VAN VEEN



Attract the Young and Reach out to the Old.

Evelien van Veen

By Linda Peeters

You design public spaces for their users, says architect Evelien van Veen. You can build the most beautiful buildings, but if people don't use them, your work is ultimately irrelevant. Furthermore, with a third place, you don't want people to just visit it once; you want them to keep coming back. Van Veen's message? Make sure the visitor is central to everything you do. Don't just design for a young and trendy audience. Older people also deserve to be catered to.

From the moment you arrive to the routing through the building, Van Veen and her team leave no detail to chance. As with the nature experience centre De Oostvaarders in the Flevopolder. 'It is a beacon right in the middle of the nature reserve De Oostvaardersplassen. The nature there is splendid and speaks for itself, so you have to make sure the building is of added value.' Van Veen therefore chose a robust dark wood silhouette. The building has a distinctive vertical entrance, marked by a large yellow colour block. Visitors are automatically drawn to it.

The yellow of the entrance is also used in the interior of the nature centre. Van Veen: ‘At the top of the building you have a view of the area through a yellow frame; this colour enhances the nature’s green and blue. This mix of colours appeals to your senses. The experience you offer people is extremely important. Outside, nature speaks for itself; people are overwhelmed. Inside the building, I want them to feel the wow-effect in a different way, so they will come back for it.’

Mix of Functions

Van Veen thinks The Oostvaarders is a successful third place. The area has almost a million visitors a year, most of whom also visit the building. Of course it’s not just the design that appeals to them. It is also the mix of functions. You will find an information centre there, a restaurant, a classroom and an area for bird watching.

Urban Spaces

Van Veen also designs theatres and libraries in urban environments. The function of the building in this case becomes a different one. Van Veen explains, ‘In cities, people want more of an extension of their living room.’ Take School 7, the new library in Den Helder. It has been nominated for best library in the Netherlands. Van Veen: ‘We designed the interior and the exterior together with Mars Interior Architects.’

It has become a nice place where people feel at ease, with windows and seats everywhere. There is space between the bookcases, so you can look out. That surprises people and makes them proud of all the things their city has to offer. Everyone has his favourite place. People love to come back here.’

Co-Creation

Of course you can sit around a table with the municipality and urban planners and come up with ideas of what you want to build for your city, but Van Veen prefers the approach of co-creation. ‘Ultimately, it’s the visitors you build for. The management and staff of a building are equally important. The success of De Oostvaarders and the library in Den Helder is also due to the fact that the clients and staff are so committed. Moreover, because of their experience, they had a good understanding of the needs of their visitors. Such close cooperation is a real added value to the final result. I understand the profession of architect, but the people who work in the building have their own knowledge and expertise. You should really appreciate that.’

London Knows

Van Veen studied in London and visits the city regularly. ‘They have taken the creation of public spaces a step further there. People’s homes are smaller and the commuting distance is long. As a result, they visit public buildings more often, restaurants, cafés or pubs. You can easily spend an entire working day in such a café – at the cost of a few cups of coffee. They offer Wi-Fi and meeting rooms, convenient for start-ups and freelancers.’

She herself enjoys going to the National Theatre. It is close to the Tate Modern on the South Bank. ‘This old factory area is constantly

developing. The theatre is so much more than just a theatre. There are skaters there, markets, and you can also work there. It buzzes and is truly an urban living room.’

Seizing Opportunities

Van Veen thinks Eindhoven too is a city that understands the meaning of third places. ‘There is even more going on in this city than in Rotterdam. In any case, at a much faster pace. There are experiments with pop-ups everywhere, new temporary restaurants and spaces for working and living. There are many building tasks here and much innovation, and you can feel the energy. At Strijp S and R, old factory buildings are being redeveloped into houses and businesses. Entrepreneurs can often start somewhere for free and only have to start paying rent once their businesses have grown. This way, Eindhoven makes itself very accessible for young people and innovative minds. You can seize opportunities here.’

Don’t Forget the Elderly

Eindhoven, Rotterdam, London... Van Veen sees that there are plenty of nice initiatives for the hip and the happening. However, it is important that we do not forget the elderly. ‘We see more and more of a counterpart to the individualistic thinking and the desire to own property. New groups want to share; they think it’s fine if their living space is not very big, as long as they get a beautiful public space in return.’

‘Let the young and the old meet each other.’

Social Responsibility

‘When I design for health care institutions and talk to the elderly, they often indicate that they would like to do something together with others: cooking, gardening, and simply meeting others. They are willing to give up a few square meters of living space for it. The ageing of our populations is an issue that will only become more pressing with time. As architects and planners, we have a social responsibility. When people can be together more often and can, for example, pay for healthcare together, not everyone has to go to a nursing home. In my designs, I always take such a communal space into consideration. If it were up to me, every street would also get a place with a public character. Then, the young and the old can meet each other, help each other, and neighbourhoods become much more lively.’



About Evelien van Veen

Van Veen studied at the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam and at the Architectural Association in London. She owns Van Veen Architects in Rotterdam and chairs the Committee on Environmental Quality in Eindhoven. Van Veen always chooses a clear design language that suits the surroundings. Enhanced through a careful selection of materials and colours along with precise detailing, her method always results in buildings with a strong identity.

‘At the end of the day it’s the visitors you build for.’

Nature-education-centre The Oostvaarders in Almere, The Netherlands (2009).