



BUILDING THE SLOWLY

FOLLOWING HIS ARCHITECT'S
ROUGH DRAFT, A DUTCH CLIENT
SPENDS TEN YEARS (SO FAR)
BUILDING HIS OWN HOUSE.

TEXT ARTHUR WORTMANN
PHOTOS CHRISTIAAN DE BRUIJNE



THIS PAGE ELEVATING THE NEW-BUILD VOLUME ALLOWED THE OWNERS TO MAINTAIN EXISTING SIGHTLINES BETWEEN GARDEN AND STREET.

'NO, THE HOUSE ISN'T FINISHED YET,' SAYS the client as we tour his future home. But he's going to move in shortly anyway, since this is obviously a project without end. Building, improving, changing: it's in his blood. What kind of life would he have if he wasn't constantly tinkering with his living environment?

Ten years ago, in 1997, architect Eric de Leeuw received an unusual request. A couple working as estate agents and property developers were living in the centre of Groningen when a lot and its

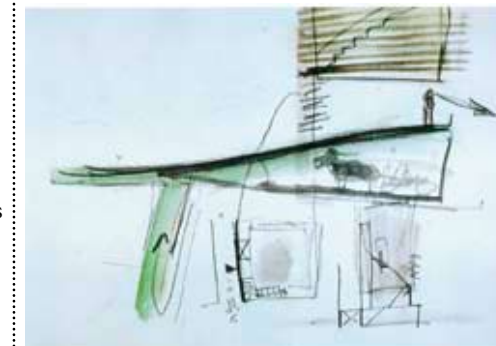


small dilapidated house – a piece of land that bordered on their garden – went up for sale. They decided to buy it, especially because owning the adjoining lot would give them control of the situation in their back garden. Their initial plan to extend the garden, and nothing more, was rejected by the municipality, which wanted a closed street wall in this part of town. The couple's reaction was, 'Okay. Let's build a house.' Not that they needed it, of course, but an extra house was not a bad idea. The place in which they were living and working could then be used exclusively as office space. They wanted to build the new house themselves – and to take as much time as was needed. They made a rough draft and then looked for an architect who would submit the building application.

Enter Eric de Leeuw. Confronted with the couple's design proposal, he said, 'May I make a suggestion?' No one objected. What's more, the cli-

ents immediately accepted his plan to put a new volume on columns atop the dilapidated house – a scheme that would preserve existing sightlines between garden and street.

What followed was something that probably has no precedent in the Netherlands. Client and architect convinced the municipality to give them a building permit – not on the basis of a definitive design, but on the basis of a few vague watercolours and a conceptual model of a transparent box filled with evergreen leaves. An agreement was made that building inspectors would drop by more or less regularly during the realization phase to examine the progress. Without a doubt, the clients' profession and their connections with municipal officials played a role in this remarkable procedure, not to mention the proximity of the building site to the office of the municipal authority charged with the supervision of the project: the inspectors pass the site every day on their way to work.

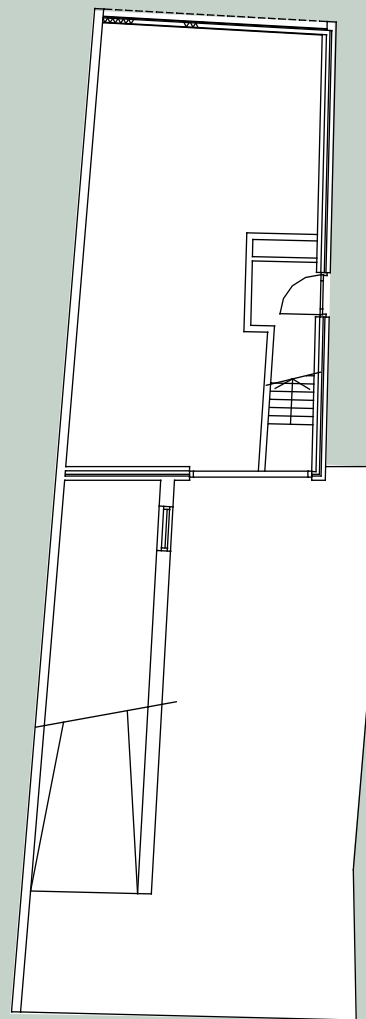


THIS PAGE WATERCOLOURS AND A CONCEPTUAL MODEL: EVERYTHING THE MUNICIPALITY OF GRONINGEN NEEDED TO GIVE THE PLAN ITS STAMP OF APPROVAL.

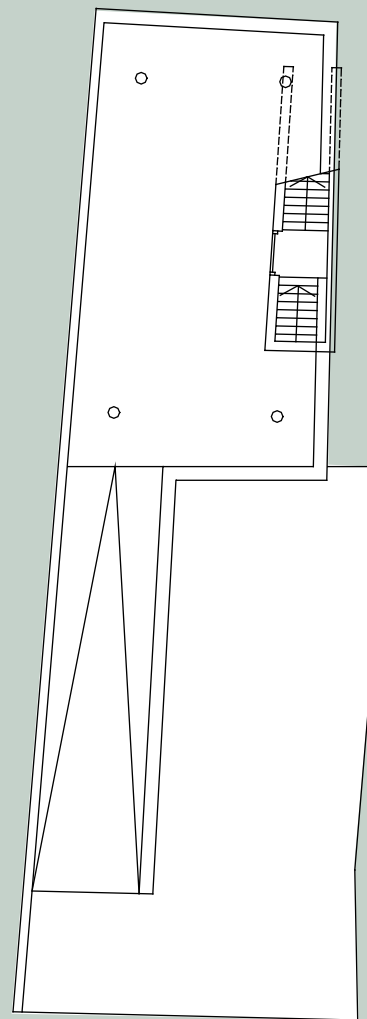
De Leeuw – a partner at Daad Architects until two years ago, when De Leeuw + Van Zanten opened its doors – came up with a design that responded to the clients' wish to build the house themselves. The simple concept of 'a box in a box' – an inner box containing living space and an area between the two boxes serving as a circulation zone – was one capable of surviving all sorts of modifications and elaborations. De Leeuw was enthusiastic about the prolonged construction phase. While working at Daad Architects, he had come into contact with the Stichting Tijd (Time Institute), an organization that sees time as a precondition for satisfactorily combining natural and creative human processes. Translating the idea into his line of work, the architect feels that today's building production, with its tight schedules and disregard of contexts, leads to buildings without character.

Architect and clients have come together in an architecture that revolves around physical perception. 'The point of departure is that the body "inhabits" the space,' says de Leeuw. The implication is that a certain amount of imperfection is indispensable. 'If every detail is elaborated to the point of perfection, if the materials are too slick and the rooms are not geared to human dimensions, you don't feel as though you're integrated into the space.' Exemplifying his thoughts is the location of the toilets. They are found outside the privacy of the inner sanctum, in the zone sandwiched between the two boxes: a space without heating or air conditioning that can be described as a cavity between two glazed walls. In this outer envelope, which also accommodates stairways and corridors, the occupants constantly collide with the elements – cold, heat, draughts – and are not even completely protected from the rain. The bustle of the city penetrates this skin. In an unguarded moment, chickens from the garden below can slip inside and flutter around on the floorboards.

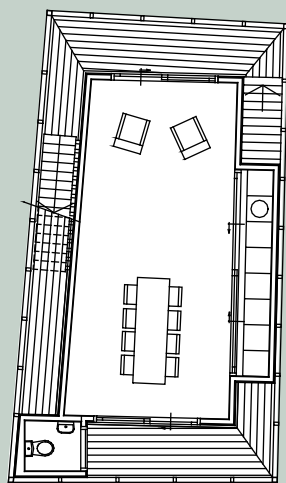
Having received permission to build, the clients once more took the reins. They had a contractor erect the steel frame of the house, but the rest of the job was theirs to do. The client's experience as a blacksmith has been a plus point. He's come up with solutions both pragmatic and ingenious for attaching exterior panels, for designing hardware, and for installing built-in



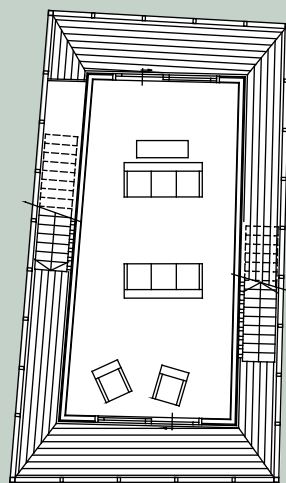
GROUND FLOOR:
STABLE, STUDIO AND
WORKPLACE.



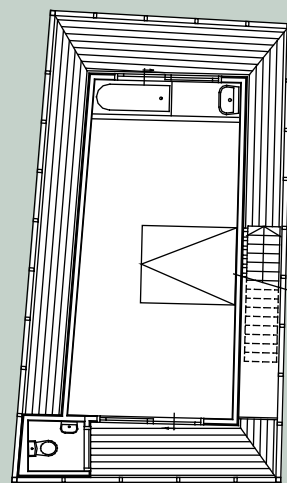
FIRST STOREY:
ELEVATED GARDEN.



SECOND STOREY:
KITCHEN.



THIRD STOREY:
LIVING AREA.



FOURTH STOREY:
BEDROOM AND BATHROOM.

*'THE POINT OF DEPARTURE
IS THAT THE BODY "INHABITS"
THE SPACE'*

ERIC DE LEEUW



THIS PAGE PURPOSE-DESIGNED HARDWARE APPEARS ON WINDOWS, DOORS AND WALLS THROUGHOUT THE HOUSE. HEAVY SWINGING DOORS IN THE RENOVATED GROUND-FLOOR VOLUME, FOR EXAMPLE, PIVOT OPEN WITH THE AID OF SPECIAL STEEL CONSTRUCTIONS. A TRAPDOOR IN THE FLOOR LEADS TO A 'WATER CELLAR'.



THIS PAGE AN OPENING IN THE LIVING-ROOM WALL LEADS TO A SEATING AREA IN THE CIRCULATION 'CAVITY', A SPOT WITH A VIEW OF THE CITY, WHERE ONE CAN SIT AND READ THE MORNING PAPER.

OPPOSITE TOP ABOUT 25% OF THE OUTER-MOST WALL CAN BE OPENED, AND THE SHORTER SIDES OF THE INNER SHELL BOAST ENORMOUS FOLDING/SLIDING WALLS. WHEN EVERYTHING POSSIBLE HAS BEEN OPENED, THE OCCUPANTS ARE ALMOST LIVING OUTDOORS.

OPPOSITE BELOW MATERIALS AND DETAILS IN THE HOUSE ARE ROBUST AND INFORMAL, IN LINE WITH A HOUSING PHILOSOPHY THAT FAVOURS PENETRATION OF THE OUTSIDE WORLD INTO THE VERY HEART OF THE HOME.

PHOTO MARIANNE BERKHOFF



closets and mechanical systems. The house radiates an aura of pleasure – pleasure in its construction and pleasure in its habitation. Glass panels on exterior walls are fastened to the steel skeleton by means of different techniques the client devised to allow their installation from inside the house without the use of a construction crane. Tucked into corners all over the house are built-in closets. Various 'hatches' within the walls can be opened to interconnect rooms. Ceilings and floors are made of wood, and walls are plastered with loam; the interior evokes images of an old farmhouse.

Despite having been approached as a project based on physical perception and a sort of archaic craftsmanship, the house as seen from the street looks like a *Fremdkörper*, an intruder into the city. It's incredible to think that the municipality gave its stamp of approval to this plan, if indeed the objective here was a 'continuous street wall'. And yet it's this very field of tension that makes the project so interesting. The house stands its ground like an aggressive billboard advertising modesty, pointing out the importance of contact with the elements, the significance of building your own shelter with your

own hands. When the occupants walk through the outer halls, they're in view of the entire town: 'Just look at us experiencing the intimacy of our home.' This ambiguous mix of exhibitionism and privacy places the house firmly within today's postmodern urban culture.

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