

interview

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'Towards a new era'

Sustainable building: everyone is talking about it. Clients are putting about terms like cradle-to-cradle and passive building, but the real meaning of sustainable building does not always come across. "We still have a long way to go," says interior architect Odette Ex of Ex Interiors. She is convinced that sustainable building, housing and living is the future. "Something beautiful is about to happen."

What role does sustainability have in the Netherlands?

"A collective awareness is slowly rising about sustainability being the future. We do realise that we are not doing enough in a lot of areas, that we are not taking good enough care of the world around us and that we have distanced ourselves from nature. Property developers have been building and building without really taking the needs of the users into account. But change is coming. In many areas of society, sustainable alternatives are being explored. Not only food, clothing and everyday objects are produced sustainably, but buildings are too. We are entering a new era, however, this transition doesn't come naturally. It takes time and it will 'hurt'. It's like having a character trait you would like to change. But it isn't easy. In a way, we can all feel that it is coming and we know that 'we need to go in that direction', but it requires effort and dedication to take the necessary steps to get there."

Who is leading the way to sustainable interiors?

"Clients often need to take the initiative nowadays. I meet many directors of companies with a clear vision. People who dare to look further into the future and



Activity Based Working, Achmea Corporate Campus, Apeldoorn, the Netherlands.

TNT Green Head Office, Hoofddorp, the Netherlands.



interview

think of what is necessary for their business and will benefit society at the same time. In 2008, we were commissioned to design the interior of the new TNT head office in the City of Hoofddorp. One of the board members had ambition, and so the assignment had ambition written all over it: it had to become the most sustainable interior in the Netherlands. It needed to meet the highest requirements in terms of sustainability and the environment, produce no CO2 emissions, have an A++ energy label, a Greencalc score of more than a thousand points, and a 'Platinum' score in the LEED certification."

Is it difficult to design in such a sustainable way?

"Yes, it was very difficult. Especially trying to find the right materials was a real challenge. For example, all the used materials needed to be obtained and manufactured within a 500 mile radius from Hoofddorp. Unfortunately, there were hardly any companies in the area which produced the materials in the right way. For example all the building materials had to be formaldehyde-free due to the potential health hazard. Eventually we ended up developing the walls ourselves, using environmentally friendly materials. We were confront-

'We realise that we are not taking good enough care of the world around us'

ed with the facts: we were identified with the standardisation of products. Nowadays, we no longer ask ourselves where something comes from or how it is made. Almost everything that is build today is done by using hazardous products."

What is the role of an interior architect in this process?

"Interior architects should take responsibility in being aware of the composition of the materials that they use. It should not be allowed that materials are being used in interiors that pose a risk to the human health. This means that interior architects might have to decline projects.



Round conference room, William Schrikker Group, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Clients from healthcare and educational sectors prefer synthetic flooring because they last a long time. This may come across as sustainable, but hazardous substances are used in the manufacturing process. Even though it isn't a matter of course yet, there are plenty of safe alternatives. By choosing the right materials, an interior architect can influence the production process of suppliers. Desso and Interface Flor are two examples of suppliers who consciously focus on sustainability, for instance."

Does the sustainable aspect affect your design?

"At TNT, I was greatly limited by the strict sustainability requirements and the financial crisis. I was forced to rethink my interior design choices, and started to look at materials differently. I chose to use a lot of wood-wool cement boards in the new TNT building, for example. Initially, I didn't really like the look of it, but once you know something is durable, it gets better in time. I used it to build the inner walls. The same applies to linoleum, for instance. Usually this material is associated with schools and hospitals, but knowing it is a very natural product makes me find it very appealing."

Does sustainable building call for a different approach?

"Often, there is an integrated way of working. Together with a couple of people you form a design team sharing knowledge and skills. This can be scary because you will need to expose yourself. Everyone needs to let go of their ego and function within the team. You are a part of the design team and together you want deliver something good. This is incredibly inspiring."

Is the Netherlands leading the way when it comes to sustainable building?

"There is a lot of knowledge in this country, but unfortunately the Dutch government isn't very progressive, and pays little attention to sustainability. The government should focus more on and stimulate sustainable building. For example, by banning unsafe or hazardous materials. Adhesives that pose a health risk should be prohibited. Countries such as Germany, Denmark and Sweden are a lot further. A missed opportunity for the Netherlands really, we could indeed lead the way. It's time for Dutch interior architects to take the lead here and start banning these products."

'I see sustainability as a matter of course'

Is it easy to convince clients to opt for sustainability?

"Clients like to put about a lot of specific terms. The terms of reference often states that the project must be fully certified according to BREEAM, however, clients don't always realise what the consequences of this are. It is mostly just a fad. Saying it is easy, but to actually take the responsibility for it isn't. The design and construction process of green building is more complicated as the required materials aren't widely available, and thus it takes time to retrieve these

well-produced materials. At the same time, clients who choose to work according to the sustainable building method are often asked to justify their choices to the outside world. Especially in this time of crisis, people quickly jump to conclusions by saying that sustainable buildings probably cost a lot."

Are the expenses really much higher?

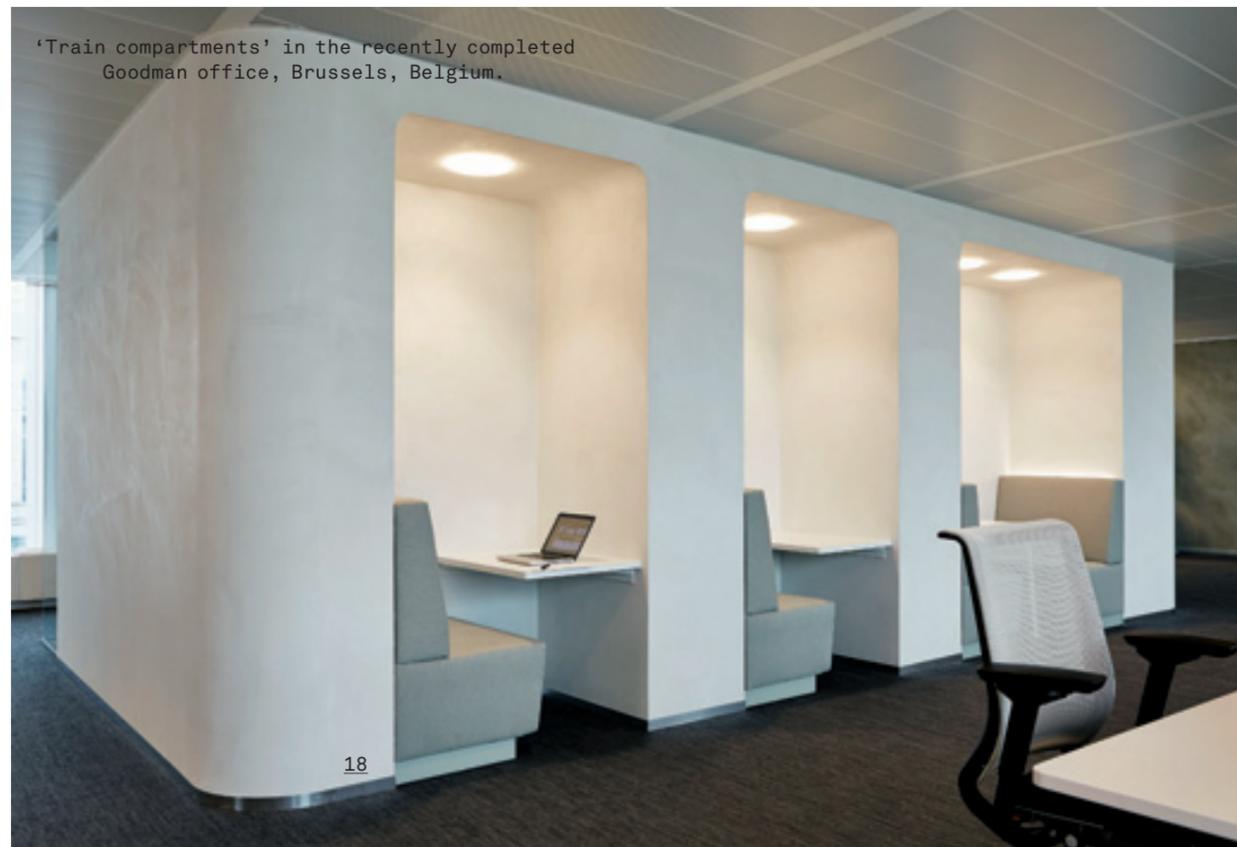
"It honestly upsets me that people use the expenses as an excuse to not build in a sustainable way. Sure, it costs money, but sustainability does not necessarily have to cost more. It requires creativity, innovation and perseverance, and many Dutch interior architects are good at this. They can make the difference. I see sustainability as a matter of course: nothing at the expense of the future!"

What will the future bring?

"We are entering a new era. The years of ostentation lay behind us. For a long time things could not be more luxurious and exuberant, but times are changing. People listen better to their inner desires. It's all about connecting with other people and with the world around us. We are more aware of the earth and do not want to harm our planet. These changes are also reflected on buildings. Naturally, we are working with sustainable materials, preferably produced regionally. We will be reusing more. Not everything needs to be demolished, we should examine the possibilities of existing buildings first. Interior architects play an important role in this. They share their knowledge and skills with other specialists such as architects, lighting designers and furniture manufacturers. It is important to see the bigger picture. In an ideal society, everything interlocks. Perhaps this is the idealist in me talking, but I truly believe this. Something beautiful is about to happen...!"

Odette Ex
Ex Interiors

Odette Ex studied Architectural Design at the Art Academy in Utrecht, and graduated in 1987. She received a scholarship which she used to study drawing at the renowned Rijksacademie van Beeldende Kunsten (National Academy of Fine Arts) in Amsterdam. At the end of 1994, she started her own firm called Ex Interiors. In 2006, Ex, architect Jaco Fisher and their two daughters moved to 'Huis de Wiers', a house that they designed themselves in the village of Vreeswijk/Nieuwegein. In the past eighteen years, Ex completed many projects including The Oval Tower in Amsterdam (2001), the Philips High-Tech Campus The Strip in Eindhoven (2003), the Royal Visio in Huizen (2006), the Hofpoort Hospital in Woerden (2008), the Faculty of Science and Technology of the HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht (2009), the Swunghouse in Nootdorp (2010), the TNT Green Head Office in Hoofddorp (2011), the Achmea Corporate Campus in Apeldoorn (2012/2013) and Goodman in Brussels (2013). Currently, Ex is working on projects for Triodos Driebergen, Enexis Zwolle and Enexis Den Bosch, amongst other things. More projects can be found at www.ex-interiors.nl.



'Train compartments' in the recently completed Goodman office, Brussels, Belgium.