



MARNIX VAN DER MEER.
PHOTO CORNBREAD WORKS

‘WE LIKE DOING STRANGE THINGS’

ZECC ARCHITECTS
PREACHES SUSTAINABILITY
IN AN UNORTHODOX WAY.

Text **David Keuning**



Deserted church buildings, empty factories and disused water towers. They make Zecc Architects' Marnix van der Meer's heart beat faster. He doesn't say that in so many words, but if you consider what he does with that type of building, it's impossible to draw any other conclusion. His interventions give them unexpected new qualities. But he does new-build too and that gives him just as much pleasure, he is quick to emphasize. 'That is the fate of many designers: you make many things, but you become known for just one. Reuse in my case. Our body of work is often reduced to two churches and a factory building.'

However, the volume of the young firm's production is impressive. Van der Meer founded Zecc in 2003 together with Rolf Bruggink, but Bruggink withdrew four years later. 'I don't like all the rules and regulations involved in architecture,' says Bruggink, who now makes furniture under the name Rolf.fr. 'He doesn't like the hidden agendas that are sometimes necessary to get a design realized,'

says Van der Meer. They still work together on a regular basis. They fraternally designed the façade of Bruggink's new house and workshop in Rotterdam and Bruggink is now Zecc's client for the renovation of a coach house in Utrecht.

It was the commission to renovate a water tower in Soest that led to the firm's start-up. 'I was working at Meyer & Van Schooten and to begin with, I did the water tower as an extra project in the evenings,' says Van der Meer. When it became clear he could complete a couple of projects for Meyer & Van Schooten on his own, the decision to start up his own firm was quickly made.

The water tower, which Zecc transformed into a house spread over nine floors, immediately became the firm's calling card. All the characteristics of the later work are already visible in this project: minimalist aesthetics with a lot of white and grey, a sculptural interpretation in which the straight lines contrast with the round shell of the existing structure

ENERGY-NEUTRAL MONUMENT, DRIEBERGEN, 2010.
PHOTO CORNBREAD WORKS

and the lack of an unduly awe-struck attitude to the monument that forms the starting point. A gigantic three-storey-high front was added to the water tower and in the churches Zecc renovated some holes appeared in the façade to provide the interiors with sufficient daylight and views. Do monuments committees never have problems with this? Van der Meer: 'For every monument, you have to ask yourself what is essential for the architectural value of the building and what is not. If you tell that story well, you will get far.'

After the water tower, the renovation of a loft in a monumental school building followed, also in Utrecht. Zecc would go on to develop a long-term working relationship with the clients, two people who both work in commercial property. In fact, they live in the properties they renovate for a short time only, before they sell them and start work on a bigger project. Van der Meer: 'It was an important requirement in the school building to avoid contact noise nuisance for the downstairs neighbours. That is why we installed a staircase that hangs from the mezzanine and therefore does not touch the floor.' In 2006, the clients bought the chapel of the Gregorius House in Utrecht, once the monastery of the monks of Mary of the Sacred Heart. Zecc left the 1922 chapel almost completely intact, and placed a loose element in the space containing the kitchen and a study corner (see *Mark* #11, page 36). The third project, the Old Catholic St Jacob's Church that was transformed into a house in 2010, also retained its spatial quality. 'The clients have a passion for reusing old buildings and they do not try to get as much as they can out of the project in financial terms. It is more profitable to split this type of building into apartments, which is what usually happens, but then the spatial impact is lost and they think that is a pity.' This church is also up for sale again.

By now, Zecc has acquired a great deal of experience with private clients and that comes in useful in dealing with professional clients. 'I like doing strange things and that is why I want as much freedom of movement as possible,' says Van der Meer. As an example, he picks up a photo of a 1930s' terraced house, which he renovated in 2006 for an artist and a theologian. The house has two gigantic glass doors on the garden side, each around 3 m wide and full-storey height. The ground floor is her studio, the theologian works in the loft. Zecc designed a dormer window for him with the windows on the top instead of at the front. 'In this way he works without any outside contact, only with the light of the heavens,' explains Van der Meer. He shows the photo to potential clients if he has the feeling that they are open to this type of idea. 'There is no point in suggesting this type of door to a professional developer.'

I decide that it is time for a brief confession.

I once stopped practising the profession of architect because our private clients drove me crazy. I longed for professionalism. At the moment that I came to the conclusion: 'that's enough now', I had been working for three weeks on a 1:1 drawing of a tile floor with a very complicated pattern. The external dimensions of the house were aligned with the tiles so that no cutting would be necessary. When the design was almost completed, the client's wife rang: she wanted another tile after all.

'Yes, that is the danger if you hermetically shut yourself up in your own design,' says Van der Meer. 'If you listen closely to your client, you will notice that you can stretch the boundaries of the design, instead of allowing his wishes to limit you. I try to gauge that accurately during the first conversation. Are you someone who is going to phone me every fortnight to look over my shoulder, or are you the kind of person who says: "I am prepared to grant you the space you need and I will see how it turns out when it is delivered." I prefer a client who keeps his distance, but of course you are not always so fortunate.'

'Potential clients have often been looking at our website for days when they ring us for the first time. I always conduct the first conversation on the phone and that sometimes takes an hour. If it looks promising, I invite them to come to our office. I would rather not go to their house because they tend to point out all sorts of walls they would like to remove, or talk about other insignificant details. Afterwards I make a quote and only after that is settled do I visit the client at home.'

'Some clients think this is a strange way to go about things. You also have architects who turn up to the first meeting with a preliminary design and many clients come to expect that from every architect. Those types of designers cause us real problems.'

The interior projects you are known for are often very sculptural. You seem to model with space there. What do your new-build projects have in common with these interiors?

'It's true, the water tower is a sculpture on the inside. But in the case of new-build it can also be on the outside. Take the villa in Vriezenveen, for instance.' This house, built in 2007, really does form an expressive three-dimensional model of linked volumes (see *Mark* #7, page 35). 'Even terraced houses are suitable for an approach like this: we moulded the façade in the houses in Groningen, too.' Van der Meer picks up a few examples from a row of concrete, self-cast miniature houses. Every house is slightly different. 'They are actually sculptures, too. And in a residential project in Amersfoort, we have made deep days and rounded corners. In this way, a row of houses becomes a free-standing object.'

'Although for us it is not just about making a sculpture,' says Van der Meer. 'We want to make buildings that appeal to the senses at many different levels. Not just at the level of spatial quality, but also in the area of material and

detailing.' The architect says that he is trying to achieve 'robustness'. What exactly does he mean by that? To illustrate his point, he picks up some photos of a villa in Soest. The house is massive and angular and has attractive wood details. 'For instance, we made the façades of this building from rough stone. Tactile and repellent at the same time.'

Zecc has clearly achieved more in this building than in the housing project in Amersfoort, where the freedom to do something out of the ordinary seems to have been much more limited. So is working for a private client not ultimately more enjoyable? 'No,' says Van der Meer. 'We have just as much pleasure in both types of assignments. This is our third villa, so we produce one every two years on average. We would prefer not to build too many villas. Before you know it, you've turned into a designer of catalogue houses.'

It is quiet for a moment. We are sitting at a large table behind the window of a former shop building in Utrecht, where Zecc is located. While I take a sip of coffee and look outside, I see that the office has added a tagline under its name. 'Grounded Architecture' is written on the window. What does that stand for?

Van der Meer: 'When we had to think up a name for our firm seven years ago, we started with Sec. That word has associations with minimalistic and pure, but in the end we thought it was too boring. Besides, it has an association with the design collective Droog Design and we wanted to avoid that. We wanted something more sensory. So it became Zecc. We added Grounded Architecture last year. You can make all sorts of associations with it and I like that. It has to do with back to basics, both feet on the ground and with sustainability.' Oh help. The 's' word. 'That's how we let people know we are in touch with the spirit of the times. It's quite possible that there will be something else ten years from now.'

What is sustainability?

'Reuse of an existing building is at any rate sustainable. Good architecture is also sustainable, because then clients have a connection with a building and continue to make use of it for a long time,' answers Van der Meer.

That is certainly a very free interpretation of sustainability, I remark.

'That's true. But we do all the rest as well. In Driebergen we have just delivered the first energy-neutral monument in the Netherlands.' He adds drily: 'Energy-neutral and monument are two concepts that don't relate to each other very well.'

'The question we asked ourselves in this assignment was: What can you do with the energy issue, architecturally speaking? Although building and energy use are inextricably linked to each other, architecture and climate change are almost completely separate. Saving energy is about insulation material, heat pumps and solar water heaters. That's not something you make architecture with.'

'In Driebergen we've taken all the usual measures, but they are hardly visible. Visibility is important, because a good design tells a story. That is why we have applied the insulation at the back of the building, on the outside of the façade. We ground up the bricks from a demolished building and incorporated the result into the new plasterwork. We gave the secondary windows smooth details and a minimalist design. They are slightly larger than the original windows behind, so you can still see the old brick-on-edge coping in the masonry. It is a monument in a glass case now.'

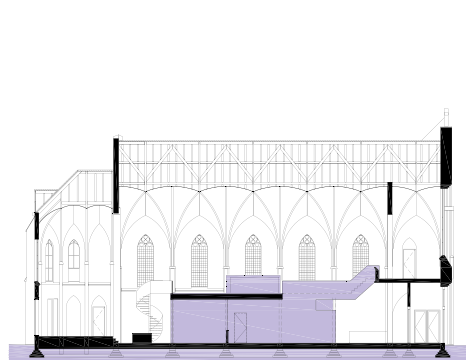
'Another form of sustainability is multiple use of space. We designed an office with desks that can be raised up for Studio Heldergroen, a communications bureau in Haarlem that often organizes events outside working hours. So in the evenings they can throw parties, promote a new product or hold a lecture in the same space. It is also important for security. There are a lot of expensive Apples and the desks are hoisted up in the evening, computer and all, so they disappear out of sight. The plan was that it would be cheaper than installing roll-down shutters in front of the glass façade, but that was ultimately not the case, of course. The idea was conceived to avoid using ugly and expensive shutters, but evolved into something else.'

'Whether or not you are successful as an architect depends on the narrative you relate, and the sequence in which you place the paragraphs. Communications advisers call that storytelling. Showing people that you are committed to sustainability is just as important as sustainability itself. In this way, attention is drawn to the topic and your work gets other people thinking.' «

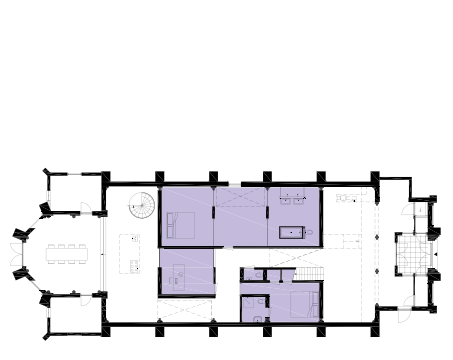
www.zecc.nl



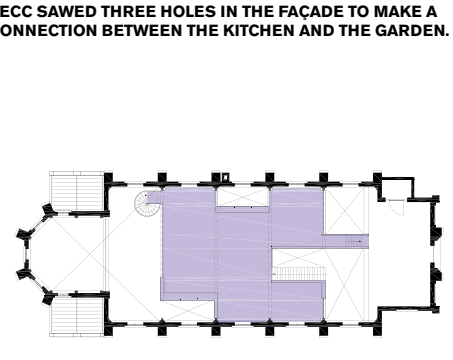
HOUSE FOR AN ARTIST AND A THEOLOGIAN, AMERSFOORT, 2006.
PHOTO CORNBREAD WORKS



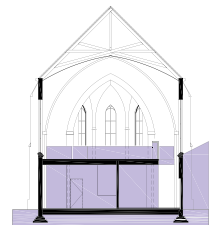
LONG SECTION.



GROUND FLOOR.



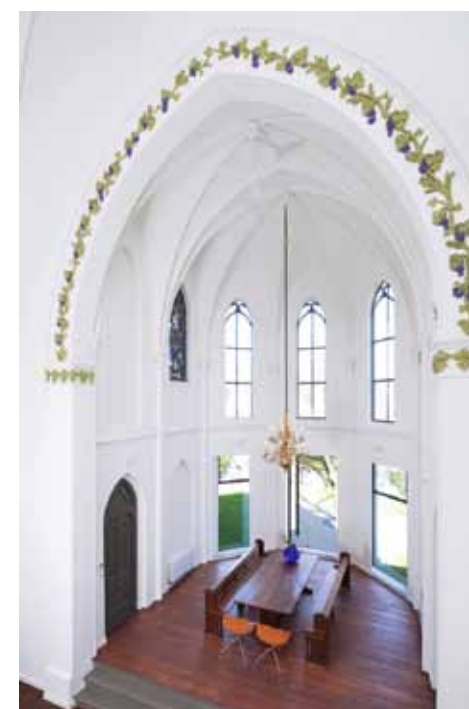
FIRST FLOOR.



CROSS SECTION.

ZECC SAWED THREE HOLES IN THE FAÇADE TO MAKE A CONNECTION BETWEEN THE KITCHEN AND THE GARDEN.

NEWLY INTRODUCED VOIDS BRING DAYLIGHT INTO THE SPACES UNDER THE PARTY FLOOR.



THE KITCHEN HAS BEEN INCORPORATED INTO THE FORMER SANCTUARY. OLD CHURCH PEWS HAVE BEEN REUSED FOR THE DINING TABLE.

Church of Living XL
 Utrecht / Netherlands
 2010
 Photos Frank Hanswijk

After mass was celebrated for the last time in the Old Catholic St Jacob's Church in 1991, the building was used as a showroom until 2007 and as a storage space for antique furniture. In the 1990s, a large mezzanine level was built for this purpose on eight columns. Zecc removed parts of the mezzanine to emphasize sight lines and to allow light to penetrate to the ground floor better, and in doing so turned the object into a spatial sculpture. Zecc also introduced three new openings in the rear façade. The slender window frames stand out from the other windows in the façades and have sometimes been positioned at a slant to strengthen the distinction with the existing windows.



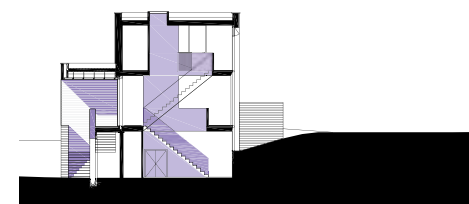
THE EXISTING WOODEN FLOOR, THE STAINED GLASS WINDOWS AND THE OLD DOORS HAVE BEEN RETAINED AND WERE RESTORED LOCALLY.



THE FORMER OLD CATHOLIC ST JACOB'S CHURCH STANDS UNOBTUSIVELY IN THE STREET FRONTAGE IN THE CENTRE OF UTRECHT.



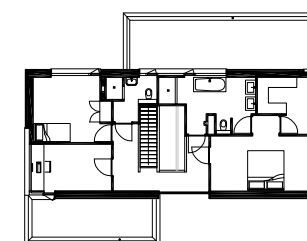
THE EXISTING MEZZANINE FLOOR HAS BEEN TURNED INTO A SPATIAL SCULPTURE.



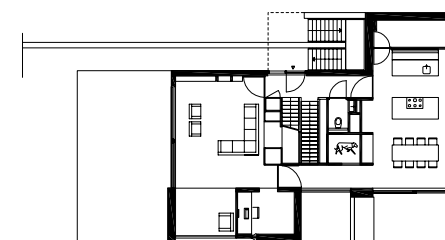
CROSS SECTION.



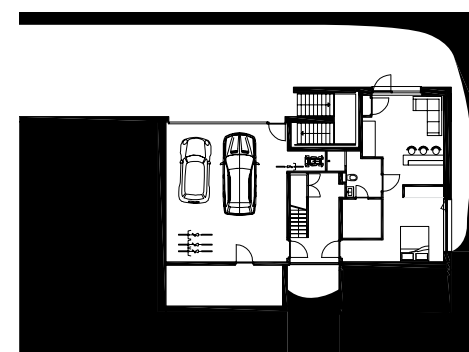
LONG SECTION.



FIRST FLOOR.



GROUND FLOOR.



BASEMENT.

ON THE GARDEN SIDE, THE HOUSE LOOKS LIKE A MONOLITHIC ROCK RISING UP OUT OF THE ROLLING LANDSCAPE.



A LONG CONCRETE RETAINING WALL DIVIDES THE GROUND FLOOR FROM THE SLOPING RAMP DOWN TO THE SUNKEN GARAGE.

‘YOUR SUCCESS AS AN ARCHITECT DEPENDS ON THE NARRATIVE YOU RELATE’

— Marnix van der Meer —



THE STAIRCASE IS A SPATIAL SCULPTURE CONNECTING THE THREE STOREYS.

Villa in the Woods

Soest / Netherlands
2009
Photos Cornbread Works

Situated among coarse pine trees in a transitional area from woods to dune landscape stands a sculptural villa. A stone-like façade anchors the villa to the ground; pine wood refers to the trees in the woods. Zecc reinforced the sloping nature at ground level, so that daylight can enter right down to basement level. A void connects the three storeys with each other. Sight lines from the front door reinforce the relationship of the house with the garden. Functions such as the toilet, cloakroom and cupboards are positioned on the void. The parapet walls and the stairs flow smoothly over into these functions so that a sculptural unity is created.

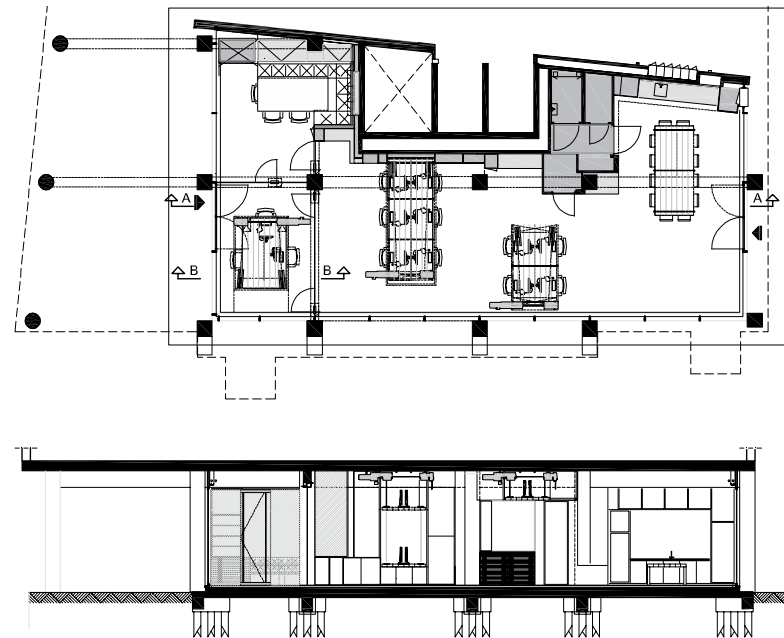


THE DESKS ARE HOISTED UP IN THE EVENINGS.



THE ROBUST DESKS ARE MADE OF REUSED TELEGRAPH POLES.

THE DESKS ARE HOISTED UP IN THE EVENINGS, COMPUTERS AND ALL.



FLOOR PLAN AND LONG SECTION.

Communications bureau Helder groen

Haarlem / Netherlands
2009
Photos Cornbread Works

Zecc designed an office for communications bureau Helder groen where three large tables can be individually hoisted up, computers and all. It means that the space can be used in the evenings for a lecture, a dinner, a party, the promotion of a new product, an exhibition or an evening yoga class. In this way, the office space can enjoy multiple use. Besides offering new functional possibilities, the winchable tables are also ideal for preventing burglary. The hoist installation was supplied by experts from the theatre world. The tables disappear into large bins, which have been equipped with LED lighting and acoustic facilities. The cabling for the computers runs through white 'cable caterpillars', originating from the medical industry.

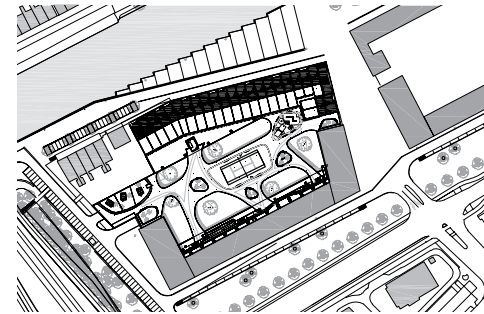
‘SHOWING THAT YOU ARE COMMITTED TO SUSTAINABILITY IS JUST AS IMPORTANT AS SUSTAINABILITY ITSELF’

— Marnix van der Meer —

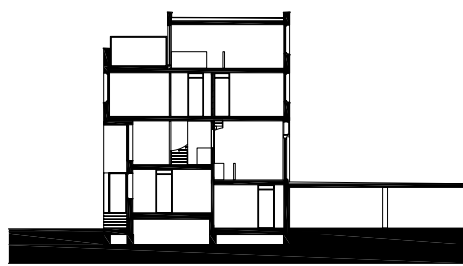




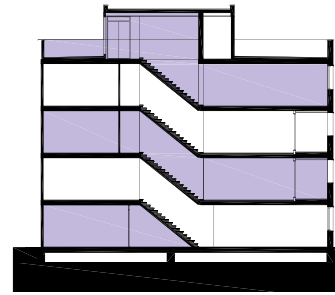
THERE IS A SIGNIFICANT LEAP IN SCALE BETWEEN THE APARTMENTS (MECANOO) AND THE GROUND-BASED HOUSES ON THE QUAY (ZECC ARCHITECTEN).



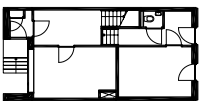
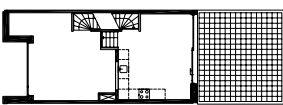
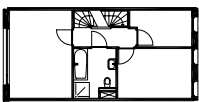
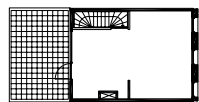
SITE PLAN.



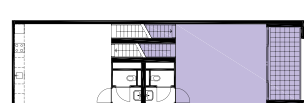
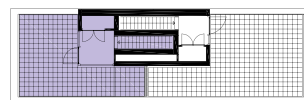
CROSS SECTION QUAY HOUSES.



CROSS SECTION CORNER HOUSES.



FLOOR PLANS QUAY HOUSES.



FLOOR PLANS CORNER HOUSES.

Quay Houses

Groningen / Netherlands
2009
Photos Rob de Jong

On the south-east side of the centre of Groningen, an industrial area fell into disuse, so a large-scale housebuilding location became available. Zecc designed a row of four-storey quay houses there. The individual houses are expressed in the design of the entrance stairs, the vertical section and the colour assortment of the brick façades. The lower two levels have been executed as split-level to provide the quay side with privacy and to create a raised kitchen on the terrace side. On the corner of the block there are two houses that are ingeniously intertwined.

THE QUAY HOUSES HAVE DEEP DAYS AND A CONSTANTLY CHANGING FAÇADE LAYOUT.



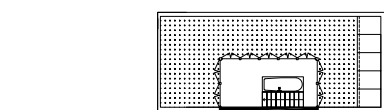


ITS BLACK FAÇADE MAKES ROLF.FR'S HOUSE AND STUDIO A STRIKING PRESENCE IN THE SOUTH ROTTERDAM STREET.

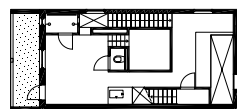
House and studio Rolf.fr

Rotterdam / Netherlands
2010
Photos Frank Hanswijk

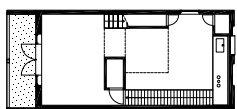
Zecc was indirectly involved in the design of this house. Rolf.fr was responsible for the interior, but designed the façade in collaboration with Zecc. The house is part of a programme introduced by the Municipality of Rotterdam to revitalize underprivileged neighbourhoods, by selling so-called DIY houses to individuals for an extremely low price, with the obligation to renovate them. The hundred-year-old façade has been painted entirely black. Masonry, window frames and windows have been covered with a black, shiny oil. In a few places, new transparent windows poke through the historic façade to the outside. All the storey floors and rooms behind the old windows have been broken through to create a continuous unified space.



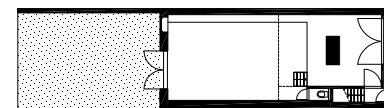
THIRD FLOOR.



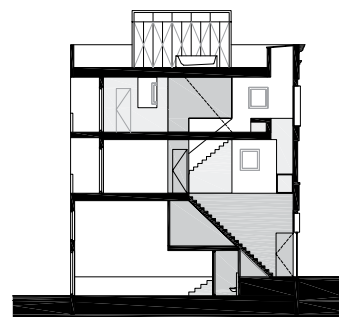
SECOND FLOOR.



FIRST FLOOR.



GROUND FLOOR.



LONG SECTION.



THE ROOF CONSERVATORY PROVIDES SPACE FOR A JACUZZI. TWO NEIGHBOURS ARE PORTRAYED ON THE PHOTO.



THE OLD WINDOWS HAVE BEEN CLOSED UP AND PAINTED BLACK. NEW WINDOWS POKE THROUGH THE FAÇADE IN A STEEL CASING.

INSIDE, ALMOST ALL THE FLOORS AND PARTITION WALLS HAVE BEEN DEMOLISHED. AN ENORMOUS CONSTRUCTION OF SMALL WOODEN SLATS CREATES A SCULPTURAL ELEMENT THAT ORGANIZES THE OPEN SPACE. ALL THE UNNECESSARY STAIR GATES, BANISTERS AND DOORS HAVE BEEN OMITTED, SO THAT A LARGE AMOUNT OF SPATIAL ABSTRACTION HAS BEEN CREATED.

