



Laboratory, Groningen

The geometry of a virus provided inspiration for De Zwarte Hond's design for the laboratory for infectious diseases.

NETHERLANDS — TEXT: KIRSTEN HANNEMA, PHOTOGRAPHY: GERARD VAN BEEK

At which door must a lab assistant don a white coat and protective goggles? Where should the exhaust for the test cabinet be placed? And in which spaces are over- or under-pressure required? These are the kinds of questions, or rather protocols, that take precedence in the construction of a laboratory. A laboratory is a 'functional' space, pure and simple.

The multiplicity of practical requirements and the fact that the necessary building services consume a substantial part of the building budget often means that there is precious little scope – either physical or financial – for architectural ambitions. Most laboratories are consequently nondescript, introverted buildings on equally unremarkable peripheral locations.

With the new laboratory for infectious diseases that De Zwarte Hond has built in Groningen, project architect Henk Stadens shows that it doesn't have to be like this. The building is a simple box with a skin of dazzling white synthetic facade elements. The geometry of these elements is based on that of the viruses being investigated inside the building. The triangular shapes are carried through in the windows, in the glazed podium, even in the prints on the glazed fronts. The box presents as a powerful object, a logical system.

The laboratory is the first project on a re-development site opposite the Martini Hospital, one of the lab's main clients. The architect was asked to design a building that would act as a catalyst for the further development of the area. A difficult task in times of crisis, even though the health care sector is not so sensitive to economic trends, but this architecture is compelling in any case.

The reason that this exceptional facade, designed especially for this project, was able to be realized at all is that the architect explicitly budgeted for it from the outset (the total budget is comparable to that of a standard rental office block). To free up that money, the rest of the building needed to be very rationally designed. The elongated volume is spanned in two sections. In one structural bay – on the cool north side – are the laboratories, in the other, with central corridor, the south-facing offices. The ground floor contains the distribution areas which open on to the parking lot at the rear, the deep-freeze units containing the research samples and the centrally positioned entrance.

The structure is so basic and pragmatic (although everywhere well-proportioned and beautifully finished) that there was money left over for a second surprise, which greets the visitor upon entry: an atrium. The atrium extends the full height of the building and

apparently even further, thanks to a trompe l'oeuil on the ceiling. Located in this void, where a bright yellow stair-sculpture winds its way upwards, are the communal functions, the restaurant, conference room and lounge.

In the building where the laboratory technicians and analysts used to work – some for as long as thirty years – everyone sat all day long in their own little room. Now, finally, they have a space where they can socialize. And it works, as a walk through the building reveals. From the stair, which is not straight but deliberately changes direction and position, there are long vistas through the entire building. From behind the balustrades staff can wave to one another. Some of the conference suites have large expanses of glass so that they, too, are visually connected with the atrium. And the lounge is increasingly being used for informal meetings or working on one's laptop.

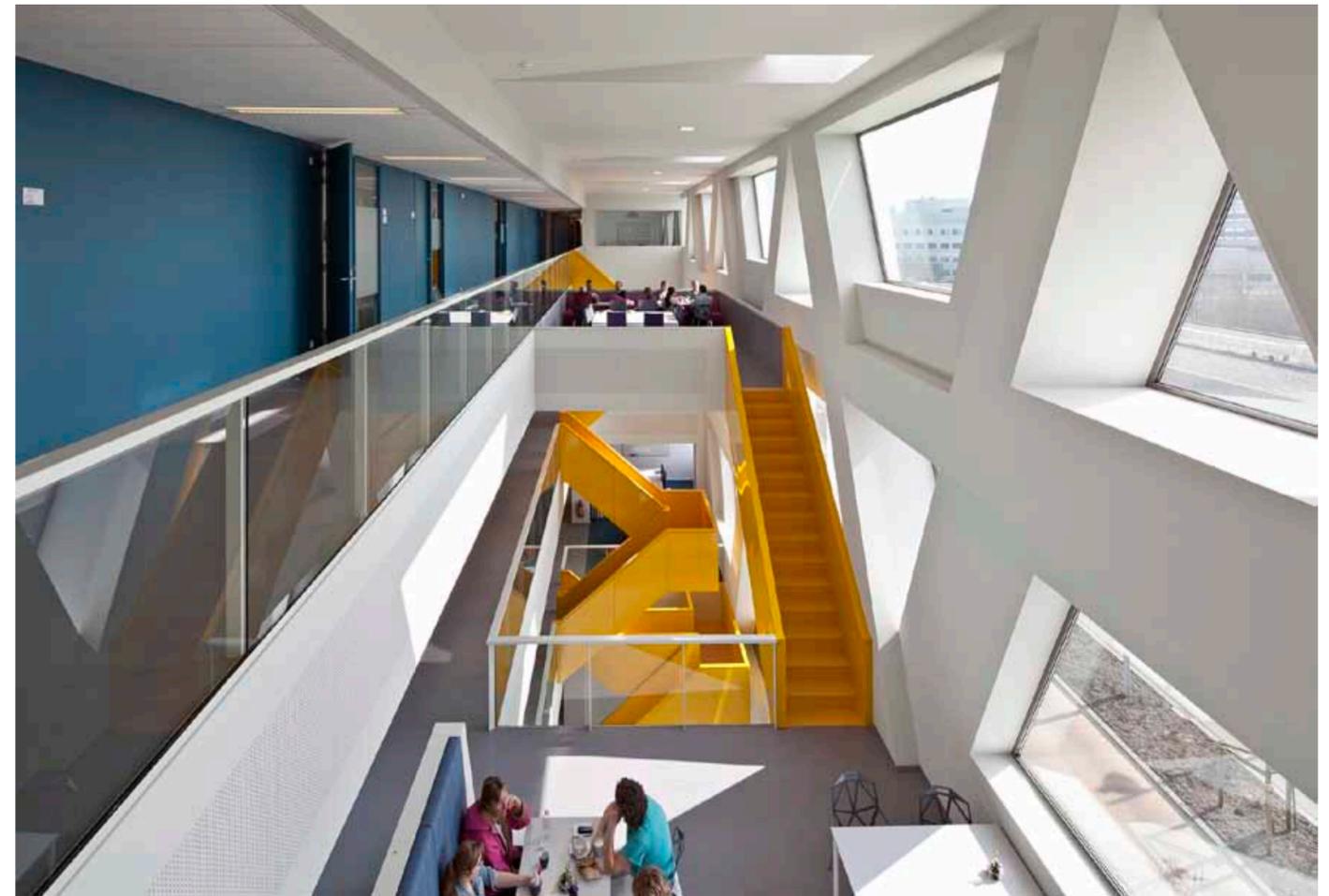
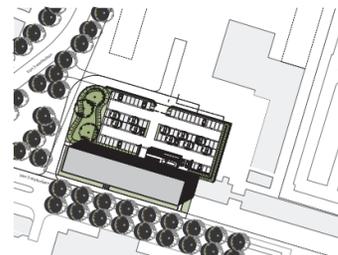
Here, limited means have been deployed to maximum spatial effect. In addition to the yellow stair, colourful accents are provided by the turquoise and fuchsia furnishings. The carpet, another specially designed element, combines three colours from the company's house style. The chairs in the restaurant reprise the triangular motif of the facade. And the timber frames of the (standard) rooflights speak the same language as the window

frames. The coordination at various levels of scale makes for a strong interior.

Fortunately, the indulgences the architect permitted himself in the facade and the atrium did not come at the expense of the quality of the offices and the laboratories, which are ultimately what the building is all about. Although the spaces are dominated by equipment, the large windows offer expansive views out, while small windows supplement the airconditioning system in the provision of fresh air. Extremely functional, but also beautiful and pleasant to work in. ←

LABORATORY FOR INFECTIOUS DISEASES 2008–2011

Architect: De Zwarte Hond
Client: Laboratory for infectious diseases
Address: Van Swietenlaan 2, Groningen
Info: www.dezwarte hond.nl



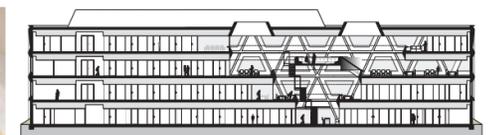
↑ Central atrium

↓ Longitudinal section



↓ Restaurant

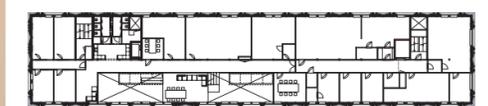
↓ Service area



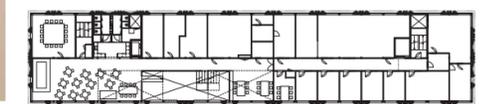
↓ Cross sections



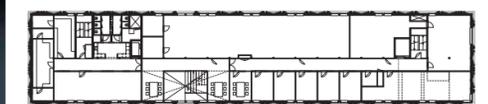
↓ Third floor



↓ Second floor



↓ First floor



↓ Ground floor

