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13 Converting the Utrecht Post Office into the Neude Library

Abstract: In 2014, the city council of Utrecht decided not to proceed with building the new library that had been planned for sixteen years, arguing that reuse of an existing building would be the preferred option. Reuse of the privately owned main post office was the alternative presented, leading to the opening of the Neude Library in 2020. To implement the proposal successfully, the architects were obliged to connect the historic building into the fabric of the city. Another challenge was to create logical, navigable public spaces in a building designed originally for people who never went beyond the magnificent main hall. In the building, work and study places, the collection and rooms for activities competed for the available space. The Neude Library has not only a wonderful main hall for events and exhibitions but also a movie room, theatre, café, brasserie and lobby for the theatre and meeting rooms, and a lab for modern technology. The post office was built as a Gesamtkunstwerk (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gesamtkunstwerk>) with different forms of art added to the architecture. During the whole process the citizens of Utrecht were kept informed and engaged in the process through tours, think tanks and a series of 21 short movies on the building process.

Keywords: Public libraries – Netherlands; Library buildings; Post office buildings – Remodelling for other use; Citizen engagement; Sustainability

Introduction

In 1998 the city of Utrecht was growing quickly; the existing Central Library building lacked functionality; and other cities in the Netherlands were demonstrating how new libraries could boost services. While considering possible new locations for the library, the library director contacted the owner of the main post office. The space needed for telecommunications technology was reducing and large parts of the post office were empty. However, nothing came of the approach at the time.

Some time later, de Bibliotheek Utrecht/Public Library of Utrecht invited captains of industry, educational partners, politicians, representatives of cultural institutions and other stakeholders to discuss the need for a new central library. One of the key questions was whether building a new central library posed a risk similar to building a new cathedral. Would the city end up with a beautiful



Fig. 1: The main hall of the Neude Library. The library got its cathedral. © Kees Hummel.

Facts and Figures

Name: De Bibliotheek Neude de Bibliotheek Utrecht

Address: Neude 11 3512AE Utrecht, Netherlands

Website: <https://www.bibliotheekutrecht.nl/neude.html>

Opening: May 2020

Builder: 1920: unknown; 2019: Jurriens B.V.

Architect: 1920: J. Crouwel; 2020: Rijnboutt <https://rijnboutt.nl/> and Zecc <https://www.zecc.nl/nl/>

Gross floor area: 9,450 m²

Main floor space: 400 m²

Collection size: 163,000

Staff: Utrecht Public Library: 160; this branch 47

Workstations: 800

Building costs: n.a.; Finishing and interior €14,000,000

iconic building that might soon lose its original purpose? Were libraries here to stay?

The advice to the library from those gathered was clear; a better library was needed in Utrecht in the 21st century! Twenty-two years later, the new central library has finally arrived. It is not a new building but in the 95-year-old former main post office. Looking into the main hall, it can be seen that the library got its cathedral anyway (Figure 1).

A Very Long Journey

The process of acquiring the new library was a long and bumpy journey. The first step along the road was to plant the seed for a new library in the heads of those in charge. The next step was to ascertain the size that the new building should be. The accepted building standards of the time, written by the former director of the Public Library of the Hague, indicated a size of 21,000 m².

Presentations were made to the city council, including one by Deborah Jacobs and Joshua Prince Ramus, who were then involved in developing the new central library in Seattle. The library published a booklet, *A Dream of a Library*, which contained interviews with users, examples of leading libraries from around the world and a summary of the requirements.

Funding was an issue. The alderman responsible for libraries and some library staff visited the UK to find out about public private partnership (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public%E2%80%93private_partnership) as a possible way to raise the necessary resources. Prior to the local elections in 2006, the library staff intensively lobbied for the library, as far as civil servants can. As a result, some political parties included the building of a new library in their election programme. When the new city government was constituted after the elections, building the library was on the agenda. By 2007, the city government had made decisions about the budget and the site where the library would be built.

The process for the selection of the architect commenced. Five architects were selected to present proposals for the new library and citizens were encouraged to express preferences. A jury of experts made the final decision. The procurement department of the city, however, made an error in determining which architect would get the job, leading to a chain of events which brought the project to crisis point. In 2007 and 2008, valuable time was taken in court proceedings as architects disputed the outcome of the selection process. Momentum was further lost by the ensuing global financial crisis. There is an unwritten rule that plans for a

new library should be made in economic bad times in order to be ready when the economy recovers, but for Utrecht the opportunity was missed.

In 2010, the election for a new city council again took place and the political parties who had opposed the library building came into power. They then had to make the switch from opposing the library to being responsible for it and bringing it to a successful conclusion. The project lacked real support at the highest political level. The library staff as part of the city administration governed by the city council were not allowed to mobilise the support of partners and citizens in favour of the project. The new library project became a target for attacks and was framed in the media as a megalomaniac project that was too expensive in a time of very tight budgets. Still the process went on. A Gateway Process (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/639894/ogc_gateway__process_review_0_strategic_assessment.pdf) showed that the project was well thought out and that all risks had been assessed and managed. The city council, despite the debate, voted in favour of continuing the project a total of six times at key milestones during the process.

In 2013 the plan was ready, and building could begin (Figure 2). Behind the working title Bieb++, denoting a library with additional extras, there was an ambitious programme for the library of the future. The six-storey complex near the central railway station combined a new central library of 14,000 m² with an arthouse movie centre, space for other media partners, a car park and 90 apartments above the building. The creation of an accessible, unrestricted space for information, knowledge and development garnered attention. Smakkelaarsveld, an almost uninhabitable area near the railway station, would become an attractive place to live on the edge of the inner city. It would be a green space where people could meet and enjoy life outdoors and where a public building would include private apartments on the upper floors. The plan for the six lower floors of the building included a meeting place where people could come to study, borrow books, game, surf the web, go to the movies or attend a lecture.

The contract with the builder was signed with one last restriction: a final positive vote from the city council. However, the Greens withdrew their support and the number of votes in the city council in favour of the plan went down from 34 out of 45 votes to 23, a majority of one! At a special meeting of the city council in early January 2014 for a final vote on the project, one council member changed his mind. The project was voted down 23 to 22. It seemed to be the end of 16 years of work and the end of a plan that had cost 15 million Euro to prepare. The city of Utrecht later decided to make a documentary about the process as learning material for new civil servants.

The Green party's reason for withdrawing its support was that the city did not need new concrete buildings and that existing buildings should be reused more

often. The day after the plan had been voted down, a director of asr, an insurance company, tweeted that if the library was to be housed in an existing building, they had one on offer: the former main post office, right in the heart of the city (Figure 3). Within one week, contact was made; a viewing of the building was held to see if it was a realistic option; and within ten days library staff were sitting at the table of Rijnboutt architects in Amsterdam to prepare plans for a library in the post office.



Fig. 2: The proposed new library designed by Rapp+Rapp Architects. © Rapp+Rapp.

Two months later, in March 2014, the library staff and the owner of the building presented a plan to the city. Once again, elections for the city council were in train. The reception of the plans was positive but there was no commitment as parties awaited the formation of a new city government. Two months later the new city government presented its programme. Unfortunately, the budget available for the investment and operating costs of the new library was cut to pay for new ambitions. Only 6.1 million Euro remained for investing in the new library, a small sum for the creation of a modern library in the fourth city of the country. The plans were adjusted accordingly. The size, already decreased from the original 21,000 m² in the 2001 programme of requirements to 14,000 m² for the new building near the railway station, was further reduced to 9,500 m² in the old post office. Part of the post office would be developed as a shopping area and commercial rents would help pay for the building. The cost for the library, which would use commercially obsolete spaces such as the attic, arrived at an acceptable level.

In June 2015, the building owner and the library signed an agreement to commence development of the library in the post office. In 2016, the tender for builders took place. The long-lasting financial crisis was just over. Due to the crisis, there had been a drop in the building market in 2014 and 2015 and costs had been exceptionally low, which was when calculations and estimates for the library

building had been made. In 2016 the market was up again and costs for building were booming. Some prices were 50% above the calculations! It took considerable financial engineering and the support of the city, the building owner and

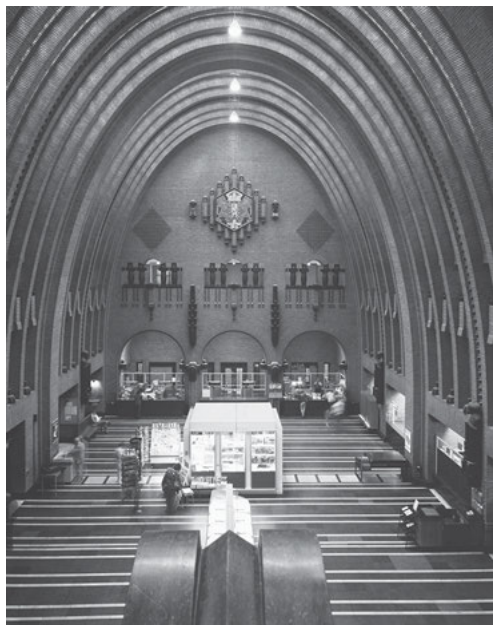


Fig. 3: The main post office was built as a Gesamtkunstwerk. © Utrecht Archives.

some twenty foundations sponsoring the library to increase the budget available from the initial 6.1 million Euro to the over 14 million finally spent.

Finally, in March 2018, the building process commenced. There was some delay while archaeologists carried out interesting excavations in the former courtyard. An old watercourse under the building kept flooding the pits for the elevators. After almost 22 years, the library finally opened in 2020 (Figure 4).



Fig. 4: The Neude Library 2020.
© Utrecht Public Library.

Conceiving a Library in a Historic Building

Immediately after the city council voted down a new building for the library, the staff made an inventory of possible alternatives. The former post office was a favourite but at the time too expensive. None of the 15 other possible locations had the space, the authenticity and the love of the citizens that the post office had. The 1924 building designed by architect J. Crouwel senior in the style of the Amsterdam School was situated in the central square in the city.

Although the location and the building were different in almost every aspect from the proposed new building near the railway station, the library in its role as client did not want to give up on its ambitions. Only if it could be demonstrated that the library of the future would fit fully into the existing building with guaranteed functionality could there be a match. Otherwise, the search for an alternative would continue. Rijnboutt in Amsterdam, the architectural practice founded by former government architect Kees Rijnboutt, was asked to carry out a design study. The architects knew the building and had already prepared plans for the owner to reuse the building for retail and hospitality. However, the design was not appropriate for a big library in the building. The total project was extended to include a café, a brasserie, a theatre, study rooms and more library functions in addition to shops.

A public library is a public building. It is not only public because of its function or because it is a destination with a recognised address in planning terms with its formal anchoring in the city but also, and most of all, when it connects with the people for whom it is intended. A building is public when it fulfils its most important goal: to be a vehicle for, and a destination of, a shared need for collectivity. That raises questions about the relationship of the building to the city. The brief to Rijnboutt architects was clear: the historic building must engage with the urban fabric of the city.

Originally the main post office had two different elevations: one with a main public entrance on the Neude square and a back elevation with a yard for logistics and business operations on the Oudegracht, the main canal. The approach was taken not only because of the building's function as a post office, but because it also aligned with the concept of urban planning made by the famous architect Hendrik Petrus Berlage in 1917 (Singelenberg 1972). The plan focused on limiting activities along the Oudegracht and transferring them to the Lange Viestraat, the main street passing over it, and passing the post office. For Berlage, Lange Viestraat was an important traffic vein with Neude square as a public link. Contrary to this vision, the Oudegracht developed into one of the more important shopping areas in Utrecht. The back elevation of the post office with the operations in the yard became a gap in the continuity of the street and city life, a dead

space amidst the shopping area. To give the historic building a place in the active life of the city, the library had to open on to the Neude square and it needed a second façade and a formal address at the former distribution yard (Figure 5).



Fig. 5: The new rear elevation of the Neude Library. © Utrecht Public Library.

Space Allocation and Connection

The first challenge was to sort out the functional adjacencies. Where in the building would the different activities be located? The monumental public hall and entrance on the Neude square was suitable for the newspaper and magazine collections as it provided a meeting point in an informal relaxed atmosphere. The attic was eminently suitable to house the City Study Room, for silent study and work. Other library requirements, including study carrels, training and function rooms and the collection of more than 160,000 books, were grouped around the main hall using the whole building from basement to attic.

The shops were located logically at the Oudegracht, on the main canal. Due to the limited space, there was only one possible location for the theatre: above the shops in the new part of the building in the former distribution yard. To make room for the brasserie, which is also the theatre lobby, the theatre was moved up one floor. The final layout, from the bottom to the top floor was shops, brasserie and lobby, and above that the theatre (Figure 7).

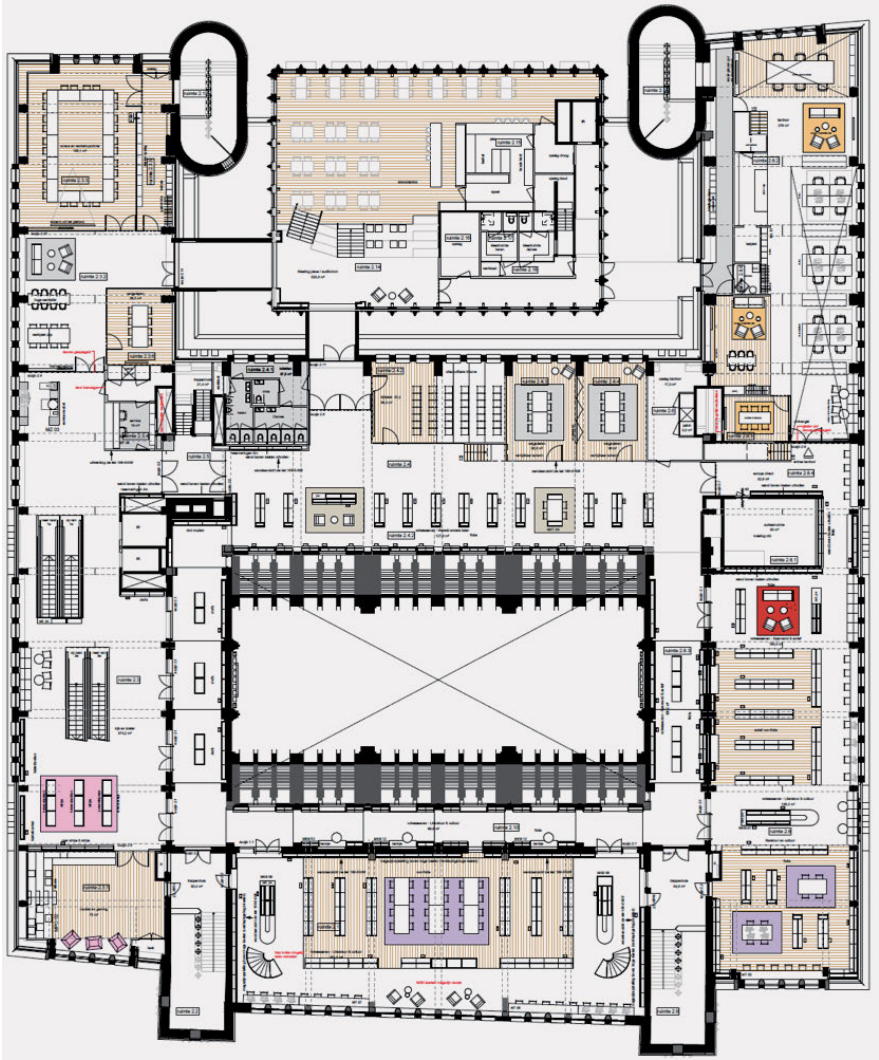


Fig. 6: Floor plan. © Rijnboutt and Zecc.



Fig. 7: Section through the building. © Rijnboutt.

A primary design question was how to create an appropriate relationship between the new building in the former yard and the surrounding historic construction. For the architects, the size and volume of the new building were such that a contrasting solution would have resulted in a fragmented scheme lacking coherence. Instead, they sought a solution where the new would have its own character but would have elements in common with the existing building. The connection between old and new was established through a respectful, but different, interpretation of the façade using vertical controlling lines, a similar ratio of solid to void, and an interplay of horizontal lines, ornamentation and relief work.

The new roof, designed to conform to the hierarchy of those of the existing building, created the most important connection between the two buildings. In collaboration with Royal Tichelaar, a Dutch pottery company, a modern glazed ceramic was developed for the new façade.

The Library and the City

How does the library work? Coming from the Neude square, visitors enter the main hall that serves as a living room for the city. Next to it is a waterfall of escalators which both visually and physically connects all the spaces right up to the City Study Room at the very top. At the other end of the building is the theatre with the brasserie and lobby providing an entrance.

Connection is the credo: all parts of the library flow seamlessly into one another, with breakthroughs in floors for escalators and stairs and in the walls to create a continuous visual relationship with the main hall as a central point of

orientation. The building has never been used so intensively. Elevators and escalators take care of the normal routing through the building. Additional stairs and corridors provide escape routes in the event of fire and address the required levels of safety. All naturally fit into the structure dictated by the building. The former main post office is in the heart of Utrecht and in the middle of the historic fabric of the city. The renewed building with its two façades addressing the Oudegracht canal and the Neude square can be seen from around the city.

But does the relationship also work the other way around? Does the library interior also connect with the city? Taking the theatre as an example, certain misconceptions can be dispelled. Theatres do not have to be dark. A lot of activities for the public take place in the theatre: reading poetry, storytelling for kids, book presentations or debates. What is taking place inside the library is also taking place in the heart of Utrecht. The theatre has a big window with a view onto the Oudegracht canal, the city castle Oudaen, and a former 1930s recently renovated department store. From the outside, walking along the canal or on the street, there are views into the theatre and library. Everywhere in the building there is a visual connection with the surrounding city and the converse is also true; the city is connected to the activities in the building. A virtual guided tour (in English) is available on the library website: <https://www.bibliotheekutrecht.nl/guidedtourtneude.html>.

Designing an Interior that Connects People

Rijnboutt Architects was responsible for the overall design of the building, and the library selected Zecc Architects to carry out the interior design. Zecc was a relatively small, young and promising practice in Utrecht with an excellent track record. They considered the reuse of one of the most striking buildings in Utrecht, and the transformation of the former post office into the new central library for the city, as a dream assignment. For the citizens of Utrecht and those from the region, the nationally listed building is one of the major icons of the city. It is not only the monumental exterior of the building with its special architectural significance as an example of the style of the Amsterdam School, but also the phenomenal character of the central hall (Figure 1). The former post office is of overwhelming beauty with a richness of light, form and craftsmanship in the use of materials. The Zecc architects felt a responsibility to produce work of great quality appropriate for such a building.

A new use such as a public library requires some radical changes while still respecting the integrity of the original building. Previously the main hall of 400 m²

was the only public space in the building. The library required about 9,000 m² public space so that most of the building would be accessible to the public. The vision for the reuse and orientation of the building had to include ways of making visual connections by creating openings and vertical accessibility with escalators (Figure 8). The core task of the architect was to design interventions that opened up the building and enhanced its character without destroying it.

A building characterised by a series of large individual rooms around a main hall is not the ideal layout for a modern public library where an overview of the spaces is important. The first thing the interior architects did was to maintain the simple layout of the original floor plan and where possible enhance it by removing unnecessary or insignificant elements. Every floor was organised in the same way around the central hall. A series of openings created views on to the main hall helping visitors in their orientation through the building. New openings were also created on the ground floor under the arcades and above the doors. The openings draw the eye to the light created and invite visitors to discover the building. By creating windows above the existing doors like skylights, a new transparency was created combining old and new and respecting the monumentality of the hall.

On the upper floors, the respective rooms were visually connected by creating new wide openings in the corners of the rooms and by adding large sidelights beside the doors, making the building more transparent. The spatial quality of the rooms was retained, and the orientation and accessibility were improved. Glass fire-resistant room dividers help to improve the readability of the building. The rooms were kept as spacious as possible to maintain flexibility for the future and to prevent further fragmentation.

For the old city centre the former post office has an exceptionally high floor to ceiling ratio which made it possible to insert floors, create stages and use built-in furniture. The additions provided more functionality and enhanced spatial experiences. The architects aimed to connect the design of the furniture with the existing building. The ambience of the room and the sightlines were maintained by placing low shelving in the middle and higher shelving along the walls. The colour of the wooden finish of the shelves changes from dark to light higher up the building. It relates to the historic detailing on the ground floor and changes gradually to pick up the colour of beams in the attic. Daylight penetrates the building as the shelves have been erected wherever possible perpendicular to the windows in the façade.

The height of the panelling in the historic part of the building was used as a standard to create human scale throughout the library. It is reflected in the height of the shelves and the painting. The aim was for the interior design to complement the architecture of the listed building.

In the transformation of a historic building, the way new interventions are designed is of great importance. Modern public buildings face strict requirements on climate and safety. The architects wanted to keep the interior space simple and uncluttered and stress the height of the rooms by avoiding false ceilings and making some of the installations visible. The new lighting in the building, for example, was used to create a visual ceiling with a feeling of restfulness and intimacy.

The escalators go all the way to the attic which had not been used by the post office. It has become one of the most surprising and dramatic spaces in the building with its distinctive original wooden beams and large roof windows that offer a great view over the historic inner city of Utrecht. Accessible by elevators and escalators, the attic has been transformed into a fully functioning part of the library.

The public library is all about connecting people, just like the post office was, in a different way. In the old days, the connection between people was made by the telephone exchange and the sorting and distribution of letters. Now the post office has become a special meeting place for the citizens of Utrecht where knowledge can be created and shared in one of the most iconic buildings of the city: the Neude Library.



Fig. 8: Openings and escalator.
© Kees Hummel.

A Library in a Historic Building

No matter how beautiful a building like the former post office might be, the architecture dictates the way the library is organised within its walls. The Seattle Public Library has a continuous collection winding up its famous spiral floors. The Neude Library has a fragmented collection with items in different rooms and corridors (Figure 9). It was a big challenge for the staff to create a logical

flow for the collection that made sense given all the different rooms, corridors and corners. Another challenge was the allocation of space for the competing demands of the collection and the increasing demand for study and workplaces, and activities and programme delivery.

The trend in the Netherlands is for libraries to be co-located with other partners to create a kind of village with complementary facilities resulting in the whole being greater than the sum of the individual parts. In Neude Library there is no room for other partners. The building is so deeply embedded in the heart of Utrecht and its citizens, that there are many groups and stakeholders who want to organise activities in the building as if they lived there.



Fig. 9: Collections in the corridors. © Utrecht Public Library.

Sustainability

Sustainable development is a priority for the library and the aim was to make the building as sustainable as possible. Some goals were easy to achieve such as good insulation, LED lighting, underfloor heating and effective waste management. Others were impossible. A ground source water-based system for heating and cooling the building was rejected because of archaeological considerations. Heating is provided by the district heating system. The National Board for Cultural Heritage at first did not approve solar panels on the roof of the historic building. Yet now they are planned to be installed in 2021. The furniture in the old library was worn out after more than 45 years intensive use and almost all the furniture in the library is new. The old furniture was recycled and some reused.

Citizen Engagement

From the beginning, the citizens of Utrecht were very much engaged in the project to locate the new library in the former post office. Even before the final decision was taken the interest of the general public was high. When the politicians hesitated about the plan, an action group called Library @ Neude collected more than 14,000 signatures in a couple of weeks. That helped!

Before the construction began, the library organised an open house for the city. In four hours more than 3,200 people visited the building and gave ideas for the new library on post-its, idea cards and in the video booth. The library organised five follow-up think tanks to develop the most promising ideas. The library also scheduled a series of round tables to talk with immigrants, as they were not well represented in the think tanks. Metropolis Film captured significant moments in the transformation process from post office to library from start to finish. Twenty-one short movies were posted on the website of the library to inform the public and keep them updated and are available on the library website. The first two have English subtitles.

Metropolis Film made two documentaries that were broadcast on local television to give updates on the process. At the end of the project, a longer documentary covering the whole process from the beginning to the opening of the library was produced. Most of the budget for the activity came from joint efforts to raise money from foundations.

At different times during the building process, the library organised on-site tours. The tours were free of charge, but people had to register, and they were sold out in minutes as many people were interested. When the time came to move the collection from the old building to the Neude Library, 500 children formed a long chain between the buildings and transferred the first part of the children's collection by hand (Figure 10). It was a rainy and stormy day, but the children remained motivated until the last book arrived at the Neude Library. The posts on social media put up by the parents and the library staff received many views and likes and much attention.

To make sure that the building would be inclusive, the library engaged the association representing people with disabilities at an early stage to discuss the plan. When the building process was coming to an end, tours for people in wheelchairs were carried out to test accessibility in the building.



Fig. 10: Great book movement by kids. © Anna van Kooij.

Works of Art

With its architecture, stained-glass window and statues in the main hall the building was created as a Gesamtkunstwerk/total artwork (Figure 3). The architects sought to create the building as a work of art that makes use of all or many art forms in harmonious interplay. The library created a consortium of six foundations that invest in art. Jointly they raised a budget of almost 300,000 Euro to commission five new works of art. An arts committee comprising practising artists, the director of the local museum and the director of the local art school was set up. A long, and then a short, list of promising local artists was drawn up, and three draft proposals for every one of the five works to be commissioned was received. All five were selected; one still awaits completion. The intention is to continue the approach in the years to come and add more artworks to the building (Figure 11). Temporary exhibitions will also be held in the main hall to contribute to the role of the library in bringing the arts closer to the general public.



Fig. 11: Artwork of Jop Visser
Vorstenbosch. © Utrecht Public
Library.

The Opening

The official opening for the Neude Library was planned for Friday, 13 March 2020, by her Royal Highness Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands. More than 70 trained volunteers were ready to guide people on tours of the building. In the two weeks following the opening, the library had planned an extensive programme with 150 events including workshops, lectures, presentations, interviews and talk shows. However, due to the Covid-19 crisis the grand opening did not take place. The Dutch government announced the closure of all public facilities one day prior to the official opening. The library remained closed until 11 May 2020 when book circulation started. By 1 July 2020, the library was fully operational with events, and reading and study spaces available albeit with limited visitation rates due to social distancing.

Conclusion

The case of the Neude Library in Utrecht demonstrates that building a library can be a long-term process, with a need for resilience and perseverance and a potentially quite different final outcome from that expected at the outset. It also shows that architects can be highly creative allies in difficult situations, including urban planning, the listed heritage status of a building and the challenges of working with a complex building. Creating a modern library with good sight-lines and orientation in a building that was designed as a series of rooms and corridors, is a considerable achievement (Shiell 2020; Van Vlimmeren 2020). The Utrecht Library had little experience in fundraising but managed to assemble the funds required to make the library happen, including additions such as a cinema, a book about the history of the area and the building, and new art. With a budget of around 14 million Euros, compared with the hundreds of millions some new libraries around the world have cost, it is still possible to do with less money something interesting and of value for a city. The library staff learned from the initial experience with the lack of support for the original new build library when communication and public engagement was restricted by the city fathers and made sure that information was available to the public throughout the project and afforded plenty of opportunities for engagement in various ways. There was a great vibe and excitement in the city when the library finally opened in May 2020.

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