

CRAFTING SPACES, SHAPING LIVES

Celebrating 30 years in architecture, **Bert Bulthuis, Founder and Principal Architect at Studio SITEC**, has designed a diverse array of projects. In this interview, we explore the integration of cultural influences, client collaboration and the balance between creativity and commerce.

■ By Zuba Adham-Bos



Bert Bulthuis

Please tell us a bit about yourself and what you do.

I'm a professional architect with three decades of experience. My career has spanned across two diverse cultures and locations. For the first 20 years, I practiced in the Netherlands, and the last decade in Hong Kong. My journey in architecture has always been centred around running an SME architectural office. This has allowed us to embrace a wide spectrum of projects without restricting ourselves to a particular specialism.

2023 marks a significant milestone for our office – our 30th anniversary. In celebration, we compiled an overview of our

projects, which astonishingly totals 365, so far. Our portfolio showcases incredible diversity, ranging from kindergartens and schools to residential houses, a cruise ship club, and even extending to unique structures like gas stations. It's this variety that continually inspires and challenges us, keeping our work fresh and exciting.

Our work doesn't conform to a singular architectural style or client demand. Instead, it reflects a more holistic approach to design, where the emphasis is placed on the relationship and trust established with clients. They often approach us not with a desire for a replica of an existing design but rather for something that resonates with the unique ethos of our practice.



Bird's eye view of Kembang Baru

Has the Dutch Design ethos influenced your architectural style?

I find myself pondering the very essence of what constitutes Dutch Design. Having been educated in Amsterdam and spending over two decades working in the Netherlands, I am undoubtedly ingrained in what one might call Dutch Design. However, the notion that Dutch Design possesses certain specific characteristics is something I don't wholly subscribe to. It's more a manner of approach, a way of doing things.

Reflecting on my education in Amsterdam, which was steeped in what one might label as Dutch Design, I realise it was a journey of exploration and experimentation. This approach, characterised by continuous exploration and a willingness to delve behind the surface, forms the bedrock of my architectural ethos.

Yet, this spirit of inquiry isn't unique to the Netherlands; it's a universal trait found in creative minds worldwide. Labeling it strictly as Dutch Design feels reductive. Our styles are shaped by a myriad of influences from the environments we inhabit. As designers, especially in today's interconnected world, we are constantly absorbing and integrating global ideas, which naturally seep into our work.

My Dutch upbringing and professional experience have certainly influenced my work. But since I've ventured beyond the Netherlands, my style has also been moulded by a multitude of other influences, blending into a unique personal style.

Can you discuss how you integrate client input while maintaining the integrity of your architectural vision?

I firmly believe that architecture inherently involves the client. Their brief is crucial, as I don't create in a vacuum. Clients often approach me with their dream visions, and some are hesitant, wondering if they might unduly influence my work. I encourage them to share their thoughts. I view myself



Courtyard of Kembang Baru



A socially-mixed housing model

as a sculptor, with the client's input serving as my clay. Architecture isn't a solitary art; it's a collaborative creation, shaped by the wishes and dreams of those we design for.

I make a point of being highly flexible with my clients, always ready to adapt, but within certain boundaries. For instance, I'm open to discussing changes in the feel or functionality of a space, such as altering a corridor to create a more expansive entrance or incorporating more natural light. But not to clients dictating specific designs.

It's also crucial to establish a clear understanding with clients about the role they wish me to play. I often say, "you get the clients you deserve." If a client seeks my expertise, they're not just hiring me to execute their ideas; they're engaging me to think, conceptualise, and bring a unique perspective to the project. If they're not interested in this collaborative, thought-driven approach, it calls into question the value of my involvement, especially considering the fees and the intensive nature of the design process. This alignment between client expectations and my role is essential to creating architecture that's both true to my vision and resonant with the client's aspirations.

How do you balance the creative and business sides of running an architectural studio?

Balancing the creative and commercial aspects of running an architectural studio is indeed a nuanced task. Aspiring architects are often driven by a passion for design, sometimes to the point where they are willing to work for minimal financial reward. However, it's crucial to understand the value of one's work. Charging appropriately is essential; it not only signifies the worth of the design but also allows for the creative process, which is both time-consuming and resource-intensive.

In my experience, creativity shouldn't be constrained by financial considerations. I often tell my peers that in the architectural business, one can be their own worst enemy. It's vital to secure enough fees to support the intensive nature of our work and is key to maintaining the necessary flexibility for creative exploration. This approach does sometimes mean that certain projects require more resources, but that is a natural part of our profession.

For instance, while working on a private house in the Netherlands, I created around 150 different detailed designs, each requiring about four hours of work. This extensive effort might not always be immediately evident to clients, but it's an integral part of delivering quality work.

Ultimately, architecture is a fulfilling business. It might not be the most lucrative industry, but it offers the opportunity to create meaningful products while ensuring a decent living. My primary goal has always been to make a good living, balancing my creative aspirations with the practicalities of running a successful business.



Carved entrance door

Has your Dutch background influenced your work on international projects?

My Dutch background has indeed shaped my approach to international projects, particularly through the lens of architectural practice in the Netherlands. This approach is deeply rooted in extensive dialogue. For instance, in my current project involving an urban plan with housing in the Netherlands, the contrast in processes between there and Asia is stark. In Asia, the pace is much faster; designs often progress with minimal discussion. Conversely, in the Netherlands, the process is interlaced with discussions across various departments, making it quite comprehensive and layered.

This difference in approaches has influenced my own evolution as an architect. While living in the Netherlands, I was fully immersed in this discussion-centric approach, which fundamentally moulded my thought process. Now, having stepped outside of this environment, I find myself thinking

more ambitiously, unshackled from the constraints of a familiar process. It allows me to envisage broader possibilities before inevitably engaging with the procedural aspects.

What has been your favourite project?

One of my most cherished projects has been 'Kembang Baru' in Zwolle, the Netherlands. This unique endeavour was designed for the elderly with Dutch-Indonesian heritage. What sets Kembang Baru apart is its diverse nature; it's a blend of social housing and luxury apartments available for rent or purchase. Each resident enjoys their private space, yet the complex fosters a sense of community through communal spaces.

What's truly heartwarming is the lasting impact this project has had. Even after 15 years, I often hear residents recounting fond memories from the time of its construction. It's very rewarding to realise the significant role your work plays in people's lives. These individuals have spent 15 to 20 years of their lives in a space I helped create. It's a testament to the enduring value of architecture – crafting spaces where people live and work for many years. The influence one can have through architecture is quite extraordinary - and humbling at the same time.

The photos in this article are from the project 'Kembang Baru' Housing for the Elderly, The Netherlands (Handellaan 237, Zwolle)

A SOCIALLY-MIXED MODEL

- Clients: Projectteam Holtenbroek, SZW, Deltawonen
- 35 apartments, a communal activity room and kitchen, a communal garden
- 50% social housing, 25% rental and 25% for sale
- Built gross 4,830m²
- Photos: Studio SITEC (1), Vulkers Fotografie (2, 4), TV Oost (3)

This building, to improve facilities for former Dutch Indies-elderly, is square-shaped around a shared courtyard garden, but actually consists of four connected buildings, one which has been raised to accommodate a semi-sunken parking garage and storerooms. All 35 apartments, (social-rental, rental or purchase) have their own terrace/veranda facing the sun. An expressive roof overhang on a wooden colonnade creates extra space between the interior and the exterior to walk, sit and garden. The exterior of each of the four blocks is finished with different materials. Enlarged batik elements (such as the tile tableau and Trespa vectogram) evoke the former Dutch Indies. The showpiece is the huge, carved entrance door, made in Bali.