



Melding the old and the new

The transformation of Fort Hoofddorp by architect *Serge Schoemaker* and theatre producer *Femme Hammer* into a cultural and educational centre is truly exquisite. Schoemaker's personal interest has always been in environments which 'touch' people through their spatial quality, the play of light, the materialisation – the fundamental tools of architecture. This is masterfully reflected in his work on the fort.

A big financial risk

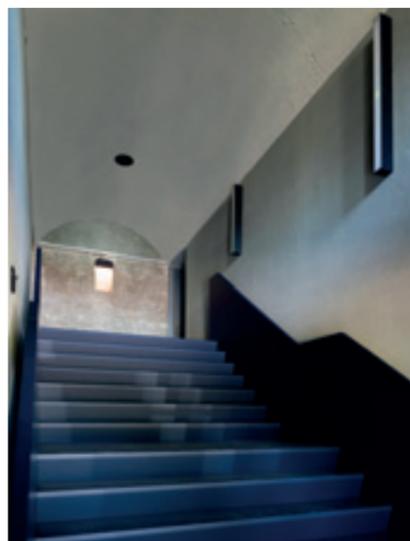
As a child, Femme Hammer cycled past the fort and its surrounding island but had never set foot there. She imagined the place would be a magnificent venue for an open-air theatre and invited her former college friend, Serge Schoemaker, to accompany her for a viewing. Walking on the island and entering the building was a love-at-first-sight encounter for both of them. They approached the owner of the fort, the municipality of Haarlemmermeer, with an ambitious redevelopment plan for the fort and its surroundings. The municipality agreed, under two conditions: the fort should be open to the public and they had to finance the project themselves. This was a big financial risk, as Schoemaker had just started his own practice in Amsterdam after working with *Peter Zumthor* in Switzerland for six years, where his top assignment was the magnificent restoration of Kolumba in Cologne. Schoemaker had returned to the Netherlands in the middle of the housing crisis in 2008, when there was no work. He turned this disadvantage into an advantage, developing his entrepreneurial skills and pondering how to blend architecture, interior, and landscape.

Fort Hoofddorp was constructed at the beginning of the 20th century. The Ministry of Defence had commissioned 40 forts to be built as a defensive ring around Amsterdam. Connected by dykes, the forts' outlying area could be flooded if the French or Germans attacked the city. The enemy would be bogged down in the water with their horses and cannons. The whole idea of defending terrain using water had actually become superfluous by the time the forts were completed, due to the invention of the fighter aeroplane. The forts were never used in a defence capacity, and now, 120 years later, Fort Hoofddorp has become a lively place featuring an open-air theatre, a public park, a restaurant, and exhibition space, in addition to housing a coaching company and a singing school.

Turning nothing into something is a challenge architects are willing to take



[above] A lobby brings visitors into the fort.
[below] The shape of the stairs is very wide, to emphasise the building's height and spatial quality, since there are very few two-storey forts in the Netherlands.



on (read more in *Rolf Bruggink's* story on page 44). What potential did Schoemaker see when he first encountered the fort? Schoemaker: I was very moved by the sculptural quality of the building, the lighting, the spaces, and the materials used, such as the hardwood, cast iron, natural stone, concrete, and of course the potential of the building. I was completely fascinated by this place and wondered how it was possible that no one had done anything with it before.

In what state did you first encounter the fort?

A lot of rooms were boarded up and closed off, and I had a desire to understand the fabric of the building. I wanted to take away all the stuff that didn't naturally belong there and see the building purely on its own, as it is. I wanted to see all the spaces and how they relate to each other. How many door openings are there? Where are the recesses for the oil lamps, how does the water and drainage system work?

What is the appeal for you as an architect of giving new life to an abandoned space?

The requirements for the creation of new work are even more strict when looking at the transformation of an existing building, and therefore architectural moves must be more decisive. I like to analyse the elements of an existing building: the construction method, the spaces, the quality of light. When you combine these existing elements with your own strategic interventions, something can be created that you hadn't expected. Something that you couldn't have imagined without this specific existing context. That is what makes working with existing buildings and spaces so appealing to me.

Do you think existing buildings provide greater architectural versatility and challenges, from which new works of architecture can be created?

In a way you could say that architects always work within specific boundaries. Even with new-build projects, you have to deal with the existing urban setting or a landscape in which you're operating. However,

[below] Before and after the transformation.
All photos of the fort by MWA Hart
[bottom of the page] Serge Schoemaker



existing buildings, and especially historic monuments, have something magical about them: the history, the stories of previous occupants, and the traces of their use give these places a distinct character and atmosphere. As an architect, a sensitivity is required to not erase the existing atmosphere but to appropriately engage with and use these characteristics. These projects also come with a certain sense of social responsibility: this heritage belongs to us all. This makes transformation projects challenging and multifaceted.

When it comes to the transformation of buildings, what have you learned from Zumthor?

In my studio the team describes our work as making architecture with a 'soul'. That is a quality that is difficult to define, but has to do with the use of the fundamental elements of architecture: using the history of a place, combining space and light in a moving way, or the use of specific materials and textures that evoke a certain feeling. This way of thinking comes very close to Zumthor's manner of conceiving architecture. Without a doubt, this fascination with atmosphere drove me to work for him, and all those years in Switzerland taught me this method of working, and especially an appreciation for the atmosphere of existing buildings.

What was your design vision for the interior of the fort?

I didn't want to put myself at the forefront as an architect, but I wanted to create a certain signature where unity and calmness would prevail on the whole island. I started with a location plan defining how to approach all the various facets of the building in a very coherent way. I made two radical decisions. The first was to eliminate all the electricity cables and install underfloor heating in the whole building, because I wanted the rooms and walls to remain open. We had to drill for a period of three months in hard concrete. The second decision was adding two staircases to the fort for accessibility and fire safety.

It was important to me that visitors would understand that those stairs were not an original part of the building and a dialogue can occur between the new and the old. That's why I chose this striking dark blue colour and clean design. The shape of the stairs is very wide, to emphasise the height and spatial quality

I wanted to create a unity and calmness that would prevail on the fort and the whole island.



of the fort, since we don't have many two-storey forts in the Netherlands.

I imagine you had to consult with heritage conservation experts in making these decisions.

Yes, the fort is on the UNESCO World Heritage list, so it's represented by the municipality of Haarlemmermeer and the province of North Holland. Some of the things I wanted to do with the building were difficult to show on paper. I had to take them by the hand in showing my ideas of how to meld the old and new. For example, how the lighting plays with the rhythm of the planks in the reception area, or why the walls should be sandblasted. In the past, the walls of the fort were painted white, but I envisioned a brutalist look and feel and wanted to see the concrete itself. They saw the beauty of it at the end of the process.

Was dealing with a conservation committee sometimes difficult?

There are always people in the committee who don't want to change anything. The first time we met with the local residents, a group of 30 people submitted a collection of signatures in protest to our plans. They thought it was outrageous that a person coming from Amsterdam was going to touch their fort. By showing that we know what we're talking about and our love for the building, we created confidence with the council, the neighbourhood, and several committees and were able to convince them of our plans.

A fort isn't necessarily a place full of charm, but the atmosphere here feels warm and welcoming. How were you able to create that?

I think that's because of the choice of materials and colour such as the fraké wood, the dark blue of the staircase, the warm grey on the floor and the doors. I think the contrast between the rawness, the unpolished nature of the building, and the warm colours and materials creates a certain intimacy. People describe the atmosphere as cosy.

What do you find to be most successful architecturally in the building?

I think the atmosphere of the materials, colours, and lighting. When I walk through these hallways, I feel this is what I had in mind. You notice the building has been renovated, but you still feel the old atmosphere of the fort, which makes me very happy. [TS]