

Notes on a conversation with Joost Hovenier and Jan Peter Wingender.
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“We must read much, think much, always be concerned with style, and write as little as possible, simply to calm the irritation of the idea, which must needs take a form, and which turns and turns in us, till we have found it an exact, precise form.”

Gustave Flaubert, 1846*

Is it so far-fetched to compare the writing of a book to the designing of a building? The attitude of the 19th century realist author Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) bears remarkable similarities to that of the architects Jan Peter Wingender and Joost Hovenier. “Good things take time,” say Wingender and Hovenier. A good building is more than just a brilliant inspiration, an initial idea, a quick sketch or an instant solution thought up on the spot. It also requires unprejudiced observation, a thorough analysis of the programme in relation to the location and the establishment of basic departure points. Just as Flaubert sometimes took years to let an idea come to fruition, Wingender and Hovenier take their time to hone every aspect of a project. Only when all pieces of the puzzle have fallen naturally into place does the precisely appropriate solution for the assignment present itself. The author and the architects share another characteristic: both are at home with realism. Plain reality is of prime importance.

Over the course of their more than ten-year partnership, Wingender and Hovenier have developed a specific view of architecture and urban planning based on their own practice and the current discourse. They design authentic, authoritative buildings which go beyond and trends and the spirit of the times. For them, architecture is not art for its own sake, but a profession which must be taken seriously in all respects.

The buildings of Wingender Hovenier Architecten scarcely draw any attention to themselves – at least, not in the sense of causing traffic accidents. They stand on their locations with dignity, simple and solid, familiar and new at the same time. Yet despite these recognizable characteristics, they are also unmistakably contemporary. Wingender Hovenier Architecten aims for a sense of serenity and naturalness, of a building’s being there as a matter of course. The firm recognizes the worth of historical continuity and the knowledge which has been acquired over the centuries, the totality of which gives rise to new, original possibilities and solutions instead of newness simply for the sake of newness. Simplicity, naturalness and carefully designed unpretentiousness are qualities which are quite often nonchalantly brushed aside but which are highly valued by Wingender and Hovenier. Beautiful buildings are made out of simple ingredients, they feel. And the commonplace – in the sense of what is customary, not out of the ordinary – is of great worth.

This realistic, down-to-earth approach to design goes further than pragmatism alone. The deliberate slowness with which they have tamed the speed of the construction process, their resistance to the issues of the day, and their love of the commonplace are likewise means to an end. A good building lasts a long time. In response to market thinking with its timeframes of monetary depreciation, Wingender and Hovenier emphasize the value of cultural durability. Buildings are meant to be used, but they are also the essential parts of the urban fabric. Amidst the hustle and bustle of urban life Wingender Hovenier create stable, quiet buildings with which people can identify and which in a hundred years from now will have lost none of their significance.

From Dream to Deed

There is also an essential difference between the author Flaubert and the architects Wingender and Hovenier, however. An author creates, and if need be even produces, his book alone. An architect and his design are part of a greater whole. Just as a good design requires time, a building isn't constructed in a fortnight. It is a complex, expensive and lengthy affair. Wingender and Hovenier delight in that fact, are devoted to good craftsmanship on all fronts. They take the regulations and systematics of the construction process and everyone concerned extremely seriously and feel that their own worth is their ability to enthuse others. A design can change during construction, grow and improve. In closing the gap between dream and deed, the client is vitally important for the final result. Without a corresponding enthusiasm, involvement and viewpoint on the part of the client, a durable building hasn't a chance in the world. Without a good client, you cannot have a good brief. It must be cleverly put together and capable of serving for a long time. Just as a prospective owner judges a house in terms of its possibilities for use and expansion, the buildings of Wingender and Hovenier leave room for diversity and flexibility, for future changes of use and the unforeseen.

In addition to designing generic structures, another, essential, aspect has come to the fore over the course of the partners' ten-year practice: the nature of the location itself. Wingender Hovenier Architecten often operates on the boundary between architecture, urban planning and landscape architecture. To determine that nature one must understand a location's history, spirit, characteristics, and structure, including the buildings which are already there. A good building is inseparably, intricately interwoven with the urban fabric through its form, structure and expression and is exactly right for that particular spot. Another factor is positioning, and the space around and between the buildings. Whether a project involves residential buildings or other urban edifices such as schools or libraries, an analysis of the existing situation and a unique, contemporary interpretation will yield an authentic plan that strengthens the atmosphere of a location and leave room for future developments. This, too, is an aspect of good, smart professionalism.

A complex and richly variegated process of design and construction need not lead to a complex building. Wingender Hovenier Architecten makes simple and comprehensible edifices that stand solidly on the ground. A building is a building is a building. What's more, unambiguous, fundamental and logical designs contribute to lasting quality. The facade should be intelligent and commonplace, sophisticated and expressive, with limited, carefully chosen details. Wingender and Hovenier prefer sturdy materials, such as brick. Brick enhances the impression of mass, has proven its worth over the course of centuries, and is inseparably connected with the delta landscape of the Netherlands. As familiar as this material may seem at first, its application is invariably new and graceful, executed with great care and attention. Samples and scale-models are used to determine whether the desired sparkle, blend, tactility and liveliness have been achieved for that particular site. The use of refined relief and a sophisticated play of brick, grouting, recessed windows and fenestration creates a contemporary visual richness in a façade that changes with the light and continues to surprise on renewed acquaintance.

Thus the complexity of existing reality inspires buildings and plans which are good to be in, live in or work in and which also make a strong contribution to the identity, vitality and beauty of a city.

“What is ugly doesn't catch on. What is beautiful you don't soon get rid of.”

*From: Gustave Flaubert As Seen in His Works and Correspondence, by John Charles Tarver, Kessinger Publishing, Montana USA, 2005, page 67.