



interview

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The Rabobank office on Beneluxlaan, Utrecht

Innovative office concepts

interview

A new way of working: Activity Based Working. The world is changing. Information and knowledge is available anywhere, anyplace and anytime, and this has an influence on the way that people can and want to work. More and more Dutch companies and organisations are anticipating on this need and are implementing Activity Based Working (ABW), which focuses on appeal, efficiency and effectiveness. According to interior architect Eric Wezenberg of Zenber Interior Architecture, the Netherlands is leading when it comes to the development of innovative office concepts.

How long has this development been going on for?

“The first ideas originated in the 1990s. Erik Veldhoen, founder of the Activity Based Working concept, devised new ways of working in which he looked beyond the boundaries of housing. One of the largest modern office buildings from that time was the Interpolis office in the City of Tilburg. I was involved in the Shell EPI Centre project as an interior architect in 2002. This was the first innovative office I came across with an activity based work environment. That’s where I learned that dialogue is important to both the client and the user, and that ideas about the physical environment should be visualised quickly.”

When talking about innovative offices, the focus in the Netherlands mainly lies on Activity Based Working. What does this mean?

“Activity Based Working is an answer to the need for companies and organisations to be able to modernise the work process. Companies want to increase flexibility for employees, improve collaboration between employees and create the possibility to work independently anywhere, anytime and anyplace. Financial motives also play a part in this; you can save expenses when opting for less square metres. One of our clients has a lot of older employees. By switching over to a more open work environment, he wants to attract younger employees. At the same time, he wants to create loyalty amongst entrepreneurs and enter into collaborations with schools and universities. Sharing and increasing knowledge are important motives to take this step. However, Activity Based Working is not a ready-made concept. Every business is unique and requires a customised approach. It is necessary that organisations, technology and its physical environment are aligned optimally.”

What do such complex assignments mean to an interior architect?

“The interior architect used to be classed as an artist that almost worked autonomously. Nowadays, besides being the designer, he is also the director. To create a good office concept, the interior architect needs to know all the ins and outs. At Zenber, we start with identifying the work processes of an organisation and its employees. We ask a lot of questions, we listen and stimulate. What does the client want? What are his ambitions? Who are the users? What do they find important? What are their wishes? And what do they need to function well? By entering dialogue with both the tea lady and the manager, we can create a very broad support within the organisation.

Eric Wezenberg
ZENBER

Eric Wezenberg studied architectural design at the Constantijn Huygens School of the Arts in the town of Kampen, which has now merged with ArtEZ Institute of the Arts. He graduated as an interior architect in 1994 and started his career at Sander Architects in Amsterdam. In 1996, he moved to IAA Architects. In 2001, he started working at OIII Architects, where he worked as partner and co-owner for the last seven years, in charge of the interior department. In the spring of 2012, he, his team and his partner Ingrid Heijne continued under the name ZENBER interior | architecture BNI. Heijne is specialised in concept and product development for interior and architecture. Major and recent projects, which they acquired by means of competitions, include the District Court of Noord-Holland, Wigo4it ICT and Thales Group Nederland. For more information and projects, please check out www.zenber.nl.

At the same time, we try to determine the identity of the organisation and understand the corporate culture. While working in the investigative process, the vision of new housing gets more apparent. The interior architect is a specialist within this field and he is capable of delivering customised work and optimally facilitating the needs within that organisation.”

How does Activity Based Working translate into a design?

“The wide diversity of workplaces is characteristic of Activity Based Working; places to work quietly and places to work together, and everything in between. By choosing certain colours and materials, we try to strengthen differentiation and even control the behaviour of the user. Using subdued colours in silent train compartments and a library, for example, enhances calm and quiet, and stimulates concentration. Using more expressive colours in a lounge or work and meeting places, stimulates conversations. The Rabobank office on Beneluxlaan in the City of Utrecht is a great example of Activity Based Working. We spread out different work zones over three floors. By creating mezzanines and a continuous wooden staircase, a visual connection between the various departments was created. An appealing café is located on the top floor, with a view over the city. The café also features various lunch and workplaces. In addition, presentations can be held here as well.”

District Court of Noord-Holland, Leeuwarden



‘Activity Based Working is not a ready-made concept’

How do you make sure that employees feel comfortable in their new work environment?

“People are the most important for all our designs. They have to feel good in their environment. Work environments need to be comfortable, inspiring and most of all, have the right appearance. Employees need to be able to recognise themselves in the organisation, feel involved and preferably be proud of it too. For a new office concept to be successful, it’s crucial to pay attention to the identity of the organisation and the individual. We let that identity come back in tactility, special pieces of furniture and art. Especially for the Rabobank office, we designed felt room dividers that act as colourful eye catchers and provide for great acoustics.”



If there are no fixed workplaces at the office, how do you respond to the need for individual expression?

“Activity Based Working is about the uniqueness of the individual or the department reflected in the design. For example, we make sure that there are notice boards and niches for employees to share personal objects. A good example of this is the wall we created for the work café at the District Court of Noord-Holland in the City of Leeuwarden, which resembles an oversized wall case. Employees can place personal items in the wall, which often make for interesting conversations. In my opinion, work environments should not be too clean; employees should be able to make the space their own. We make sure they have the tools to do so.”



Is Activity Based Working a typical Dutch phenomenon?

“In the Netherlands, horizontal organisational structures are quite common. The step from a ‘flat’ structure to a new way of working, where employees are given more responsibility, is easier than taking that step from a hierarchical structure. In comparison, companies in the South of Europe generally operate in a more traditional way, while the new office concepts are booming in Scandinavia. If international companies like Microsoft were to implement Activity Based Working, it might be able to spread even further.”

What will the future way of working be like?

“I think that we’re in an intermediate phase at the moment. I have noticed that more and more like-minded people continue to meet at cafes and hotels with good coffee, and where the atmosphere refers more to an association or club than to an office. Small businesses or entrepreneurs share workplaces, equipment and materials in large open areas equipped with modern technology. These areas are at easy-to-reach locations with a great diversity of housing, offices and relax facilities, and can be found near buzzing train stations, for instance. There have been various developments that will have an impact on the way we will be working in the future and on the environment that comes with that. We want our interior and architecture to have character, identity, perception and most of all distinguishing features and able to make a difference. These qualities are essential in the designs of Zenber. Consequently, Zenber does not only create an increase in appreciation for existing and new buildings, but also for people who want to work in these buildings.”