



THE TASTE OF DARKNESS

Kamiel Klaasse - NL Architects

GC Let's start with WOS 8, which I love particularly also because I published it at the beginning of my activity as a critic.

KK I remember showing the building to Rem Koolhaas. He liked it a lot and said: 'It is a great start, and it is going to be very hard to top this in your further career.' I guess he was right. Perhaps, it is still our most exciting and radical piece. The basketball window is a rare mind fuck.

GC It was an uncommon theme indeed: a station for the heating network, almost without openings. More a tomb than a house... Is it still working?

KK I've not been there for a while. It is falling apart. It was meant to become part of the public domain of a planned neighbourhood that, because of some issues with the highway nearby, has not been built yet. WOS 8 is sitting idle in the back of a farm and this absence of public use kind of killed it.

GC However, the portion visible on Street View seems in quite good shape. How did people react back then?

KK Opinions were wildly divergent. The occasional architectural tourist enjoyed the building. One neighbour was happy because he sold the ground, but the one next door claimed the value of his property decreased. He reportedly chased some fans with a pitchfork. This guy once asked me why we didn't build a traditional farm to hide the project.

GC Something like MVRDV's glass farm in Schijndel?

KK Sort of. But a traditional shape, however appealing, would have meant an automatic increase of volume and the zoning law didn't allow to make the building any bigger. We had to squeeze the envelope around the machinery so that there was no space left

←
NL Architects,
WOS 8, Heat
Transfer Station,
Utrecht, 1997-
98. Photo Daria
Scagliola.



NL Architects,
WOS 8, Heat
Transfer Station,
Utrecht, 1997-98.

in between the necessary interior space and the envelope. We couldn't make the pitched roof that the neighbour would have preferred. In retrospect, it would have been a funny idea as well putting these high tech installations within a fake barn: typical for the current timeframe, defined by increasing conservatism

GC We are getting older in Europe and conservatism is a side effect of an aging community.

KK You might be right. In the mid-1990s, when we were doing this project, baby boomers were still young. WOS 8 was a manifestation of a certain optimism and energy.

GC How did you come up with a black solution?

KK We considered giving the building our favourite colour: *grachten groen*, canal green, which is actually almost black. Many window frames in the Netherlands are painted in this colour so that the windows look as big as possible. Most of the glass you see from outside appears dark, unless there is a very light space behind it that makes the glass transparent. There is a beautiful similarity between *grachten groen* and the perceived colour of the glass in many light conditions. It is a fantastic colour because you never know if it is black or not. There is something both practical and mysterious in its darkness.

GC So you wanted to get both.

KK The WOS 8 could have been orange, blue, yellow... The sprayed polyurethane we used there is available in almost endless hues. The colour choice really became a question. How to decide? After long consideration, we arrived at an idea that is actually quite similar to the one of the angry neighbour we were talking about before, in the sense that we took inspiration from a local feature, only we took silage, an agricultural practice, as our starting point. Silage is the fodder farmers use to feed their cows in the winter. They obtain it by piling up the still wet grass. Then they cover it with black plastic sheets, often secured with car tyres. These black heaps are quite large, more or less the size of a barn. At the time, you could see them everywhere. We found their aesthetics very intriguing. We saw a possible poetical relationship with this vernacular, albeit contemporary, feature of the Dutch landscape, and we felt it was fitting.

- GC** And what about the problem of vandalism? I remember your first proposal was named after Loos' *Ornament und Vebrechen*.
- KK** There was an immense pressure on the project because it was the first building to be completed: WOS 8 had to provide the new residential area with warm water. This pressure was a blessing because there was no time to rethink the project. We were approached by the client even before the definitive site was chosen. So, we started without a specific context, although it was clear that vandalism was a relevant issue.
- GC** Therefore the barbed wire nest you first proposed was because of a not yet specified location.
- KK** We turned the impending destruction of this type of isolated, uninhabited building, without the perceived control provided by urban density into a theme. Could we deploy the armour used to protect property as a design tool? In a way, we pushed the security obsession to distil beauty.
However, as soon as we received the actual site and requirements, that idea appeared less logical. Instead of harnessing the building, we sought to address youth culture, wrapping the building with a playful interface: the one and only window is a transparent basketball backboard and climbing grips invite you to climb one of the walls. It was the opposite strategy to deal with the same problem. Hopefully, the blackness added 'coolness' to the building (even though it accumulates warmth...).
- GC** Probably this same feature accelerates the process of fermentation of the grass under the black plastic sheets. Are there similar techniques in the traditional rural architecture there? Black wooden barns or other examples?
- KK** This technique is relatively recent, let's say fifty years, and results from the availability of plastic. However, in our countryside even wooden architecture is often black. I grew up in a farm and this experience is still a source of inspiration for me. As a kid, I used to make a buck in the summer by painting the wooden stables with Carbolineum. It was a super poisonous oily mixture of coal tar, I guess forbidden by now – we had burn marks everywhere – but it made buildings very beautiful. Somehow, the fact that it hurt and burned sparked a sense of admiration and I am still incredibly fond of those old barns.
The blackness of WOS 8 could be traced back to that kind of

imagery, but also to other sources of inspiration. For instance, the black wooden floor filmed by Tarkovsky in *The Mirror*: a beautiful texture that reacted magnificently to light. It is a perfect example of the reflectiveness of this colour. We looked for this kind of effect in the WOS 8, with its seamless, waterproof, polyurethane finish. When it gets wet, it is engulfed by glossy, dazzling streaks of water. A super-interesting aspect of black is that it shifts from absorbing to reflecting according to humidity.

GC Yes, it is visually powerful. However, another very compelling feature of your project was the introduction, through that idea of relationship with the youth culture, of a tactile interaction, which adds a further layer to the mostly visual architectural aesthetics. I remember that those climbing holds are arranged in order to write something in braille on the wall. Blindness and blackness seem to reinforce each other, inviting to literally getting in touch with the building and its narrative.

KK The climbing grips added a new dimension to architecture, an inescapable tactility. The tactility of this object was so strong that the kids couldn't resist to caressing, hugging, even licking it. Some children saw in it a humongous *dropje*, a liquorice candy very popular among the Dutch. We grew up eating this black stuff, which nobody in his right mind would associate with an edible substance.

GC Black can trigger threatening sensations but mixes them with the promise of delicious rewards (as was the case with Carbolineum). This reminds me that character with huge boobs wearing a sort of thick black diving suit you used as an icon to support your project. Was the WOS 8 seamless envelope and its curvy shape also intended as an erotic message?

KK It is exactly what we tried to represent. The quite amazing quality of polyurethane is that it can be applied to virtually all shapes. It allows to get rid of the usual architectural details, either intended to cope with the weather or the building tectonics. This means the possibility to get an object completely detached from previous typologies, from the normal expectations associated with a building. Something like a blank blackboard on which any observer could project his or her own sensations, experiences, obsessions. Smooth surface, holes, wet streaks, curved angles and play facilities were aimed as inviting, empathic features for a closer relationship.

NL Architects,
Temporary Train
Station, Barneveld
Noord, 2011-13.
Photo Andreas
Secci.



- GC** Did you use some of these black tools, devices and effects in other occasions?
- KK** We have explored blackness a couple of times since WOS 8. One of these projects is a small temporary railway station in a village called Barneveld. It was part of a public campaign called 'Prettig Wachten', meant to make waiting for the train more comfortable. It is a small structure; more a bus stop than a station. Since it was intended as temporary, we built it from shipping containers. We took the liberty to propose a strong gesture, to increase visibility. The building forms an asymmetrical black cross, with transparent rooms under its horizontal arms made of three 20 ft containers. The fourth one, flipped to an upright position, contains a 40 ft high lavatory inside. It became a clock tower including a wind vane on top. Since Barneveld is the 'capital of eggs' the customary cock of the weathervane was replaced with a female chicken. The blackness reinforces the strong gesture and the graphic power of the building.
- GC** Did they remove it?
- KK** It is still there. You know, many temporary buildings become permanent.
Another black project of ours is the renovation of the gatehouse that controls the access to an industrial park in Arnhem. It is quite a beautiful area, along the river, completely closed by a fence. This sort of compounds of warehouses and production facilities are often subject to theft, especially at night, when almost nobody is there.
- GC** So, there's again the security issue at stake.
- KK** Definitely. This park accommodates all kinds of sustainable technologies. A company investigates improvements for solar panels, another works on impregnating wood...
- GC** With Carbolineum?
- KK** (Laughs) with something more healthy, hopefully... However, there was one main entrance: a small, you might call hideous, structure. What sparked the change wasn't the fact that the building was not that attractive, but the need to have an extra lane for the trucks to enter the compound. Traffic jams piled up in front of the gate.

It was not possible to just remove the existing building and replace it with something new because the upper floor was full of servers, switch panels and installations: the whole communication wiring between inside and outside the compound was interconnected here. Cutting this connection would have meant to jeopardize the operation of the entire compound. It had to keep running, also during the renovation. It was a 'black box', in the sense it mysteriously managed inputs and outputs, which after renovation became a literal black box...

GC It sounds appropriate.

KK We had a super intelligent client, who is also an architect. Eventually he decided to follow his father's steps, a big developer and landowner, and now he is doing incredible projects. We worked closely together on the solution of slicing off part of the existing building, to get the needed extra space for trucks, re-composing the new volume starting from its metal frame. Below the black box lies a fully glazed reception area with an unimpeded view in every direction. We could create a half climate for the waiting area and as such could use single glass. This makes the lobby exceptionally transparent. Boosting the contrast between top and bottom.

GC Yes, you can see through it. Therefore, no *grachten groen* but white for everything at the ground floor... What about the black matter above? It seems both matt and glossy.

KK When I was studying in Delft, I did a project about reflective materials. I came across so-called retro-reflective sheeting used for traffic signs. Many years later, this traffic-related material turned out to be very appropriate for the gatehouse.

Of course this sheeting is available in blue, red, white and yellow, but, counterintuitively, 3M also produces it in black. Which is weird. The decision was soon taken. It wasn't just a representational connection with the 'black box' above; we tried to pursue a sense of neutrality, a form of industrial rationality, modesty, inconspicuousness. At the same time, the material has two personalities, it is at the same time radiant, joyful. The foil is engineered to be reflective. It throws back light in exactly the same direction as the light source. This establishes what I like to call an intimate relation; the experience is profoundly personal, individual. When an approaching truck driver switches on those big lights they usually are equipped with, the building sudden-

ly becomes silver, although only the driver (or someone in the same light path) can perceive this effect. Blinkers will make the building vibrate in orange. If you leave the compound, you see the gatehouse in the rear mirror becoming green or red according to the traffic light. It is totally fascinating that a black object can do this. The paradox of being black and reflective is beautiful.



NL Architects,
Porters Lodge,
Industriepark
Kleefse Waard,
Arnhem 2010-11.
Photo Jeroen
Musch.

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Porters Lodge,
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Kamena.



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