



all photography by Cassander Eeftinck Schattenkerk

Creative Insight

# DOES ARCHITECTURE NEED MORE GRAPHIC DESIGN?

*Dutch designer Hansje van Halem is changing how we experience the buildings around us, using tiles, 3D installations and patterned facades to personalise churches and housing blocks. CR finds out if it's time to give graphic designers a chance at architecture*

By Emma Tucker 14/02/2019



Van Halem has been working on large scale architectural commissions for the last ten years, although she originally studied graphic design. After graduating she worked as a book cover designer, and spent time experimenting with precise line drawings of letters and alphabets. Her big break into the world of buildings came in 2013, when she released a 400-page book filled with her type and pattern experiments – which caught the eye of an Amsterdam architect.

“They asked if I could make it this small, if I could also make it really big to fit on a building,” she says. “It was never something I’d anticipated myself, but my clients saw that there was so much more potential in this drawing. They could see it being translated into laser cutting, water cutting, bricks and tiles. It was by publishing this very open document of unfinished work that triggered other people to interpret my work in a different way to what I’d imagined myself.”

Early projects included a sandblasted glass façade in her home city of Amsterdam, and then later a set of patterned sliding sun screens for a school building – the point at which she says she became hooked on making large scale work. But while van Halem says the technical nature of her drawings made them easy to imagine in other materials, the actual process required some adjustment.



*Top and above: Walking on Water, floor design for the St Bonifatius church in Zaandam*



*Perforated sun screens, for the Helderling School at Klaprovenweg in Amsterdam. Commissioned by Burgers Bureau, designed by Burgers Bureau Architects*



*Armadillo tent at Lowlands Festival*

"If I made posters at that size, I could make a very fine definition of the drawing," she explains. "But for the sunscreen collaboration with the architects, they kept saying the circles had to be bigger. The definition of the sunscreens was so big I actually thought we'd made a mistake. But I relied on their expertise, and in the end it was the right choice. If you stand on the other side of the street you can still see the drawing, and it doesn't become blurry. That was an eye-opener. It has to work on a different level to any other graphic design." While most designers are familiar with rough print costs, van Halem says understanding the technicalities and budget for architectural projects is an entirely new world. "If I make a choice I have no idea if it's really easy or complicated," she says. "I have to talk to people about it. That's also the nice part, because it's like a very complicated puzzle. It keeps my brain awake."

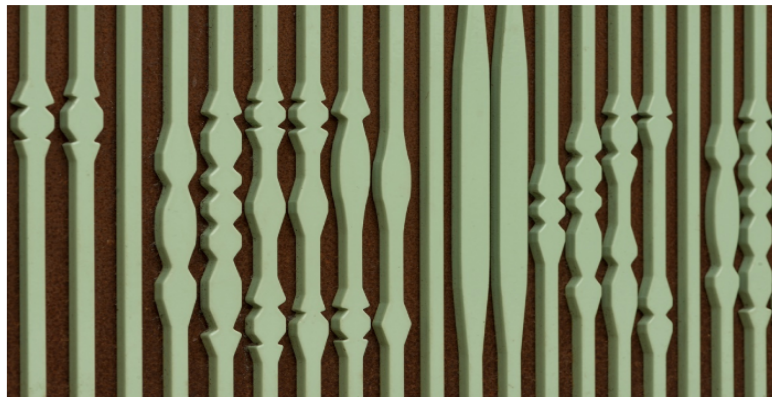


Van Halem still works on small scale design projects – including posters, covers, and the branding for Lowlands music festival – but has completed several architectural pieces over the years, including a steel fence for Schiphol airport which hides letters in its lace-like patterns.

Some of her work has been in partnership with Dutch housing organisation Ymere, which has a policy of incorporating art into its buildings. This means artists are involved at the start of projects, while the architect is still designing the building, and are invited to create anything from a piece for the entrance to a part of the pavement. Van Halem is currently designing tiles for a new housing block that she hopes will be used in various parts of the building, becoming “part of the architecture and not just a layer you put on at the end of the process”.



*350-metre-long monument remembering the old Jewish area of Amsterdam before WWII*



*Monument detail, showing lasercut letters*

In some cases, van Halem’s work is supported by city governments, which often fund and oversee local art projects, such as the tiled floor the designer created for St Bonifatius church in Zaandam. In these instances, she says, the city government helps guide the design process and communication, acting as an ‘art lawyer’ to protect the designer’s original intentions from a client’s whims. It’s hard to imagine the UK’s local councils showing equal consideration for design.

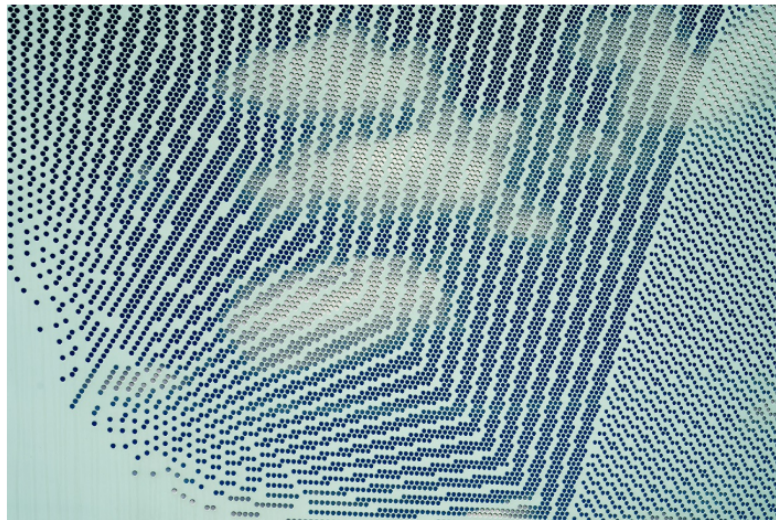
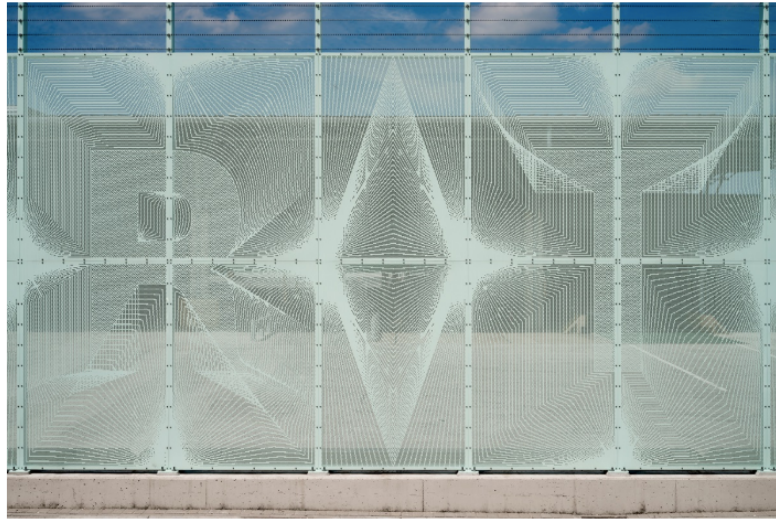
Architects working with designers isn’t new, however. Van Halem says that it dates back to the Amsterdamse School – an architectural style of the early 20th Century that saw small elements of buildings such as doorknobs or tiles created by artists.

“I really like that approach,” she says. “A building needs doorknobs anyway, so why not have them made very special? I’m not sure where it’s going, but I see that the human size is getting back into architecture. Façades are getting more tactile, and there’s more brickwork. If there’s so much attention on the details like the skin of the building, then there’s also more attention on other details – like a nice floor. It become parts of your knowledge of home. It starts to belong to someone. You lose anonymity of a building material when you customise it in such a way, and that’s what the architects I’ve encountered are looking for. It’s about making something more personal and more separated from the other grey buildings.

While graphic designers and architects might seem like an obvious fit, it’s not something that is necessarily being borne out. Van Halem might be used to incorporating her work into buildings, but she says it’s still an unusual partnership.



*SmartGate fence for Schiphol Airport*



“Not too long ago I was invited by a big architecture practice in Amsterdam. They design buildings all over the world and had never spoken to a graphic designer before. I was completely flabbergasted, because I see so much graphic design work being done that could be better if they worked with someone who has experience on that level. I think architects are so used to doing a lot of it themselves that they don't get to the point where they invite a graphic designer in. There's so much potential. I think graphic designers should go out there and talk to architects.”

The benefits aren't all for the architects either. Graphic designers sick of staring at their screens might find some relief in reconsidering their work in 3D. “If I'm making posters I'm super proud, but I also realise a poster is disposable,” says van Halem. “You're lucky if someone saves it. When you make a fence or pavement, nobody's going to dispose of it. It needs to be there, and for me that's such a kick. It's such a upgrade, from a computer drawing to a steel fence. My brain explodes when something like that happens.”

*[hansje.net](http://hansje.net)*

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