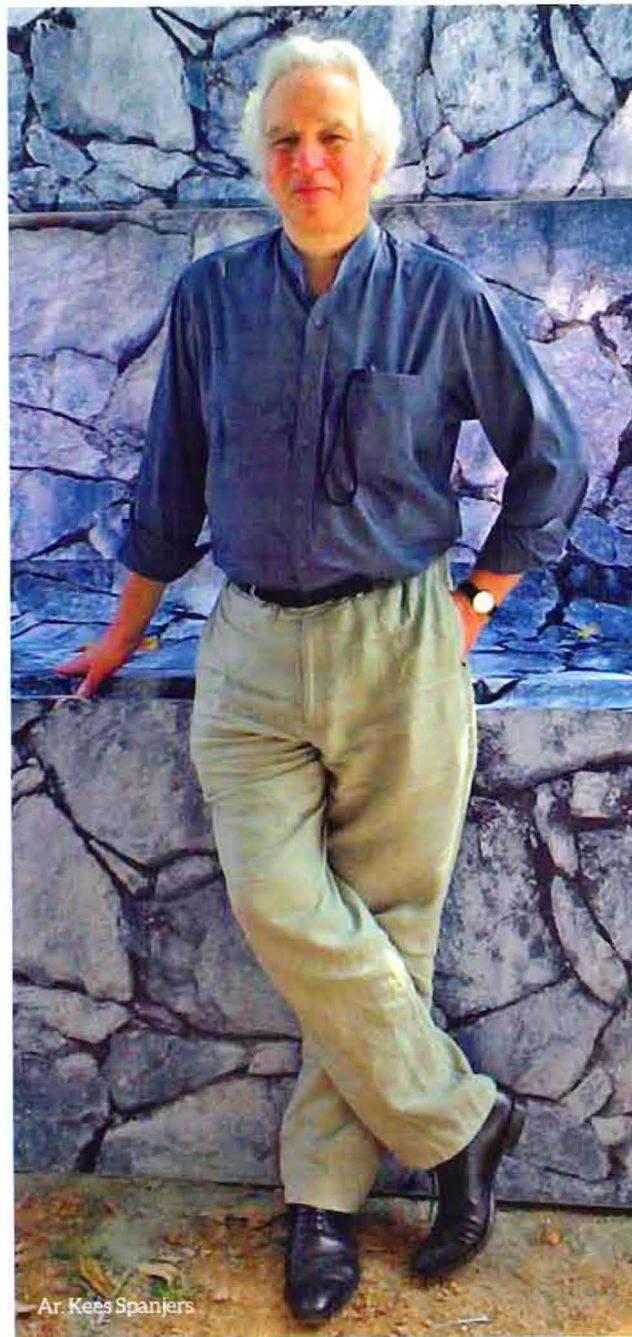


Breathing New Life into the Old



Ar. Kees Spanjers

Kees Spanjers is one of the Principal Architects at the Amsterdam based BV Zaanen Spanjers Architects, a firm responsible for some of the most successful and contextually relevant urban renewal projects in the Netherlands. In conversation with **Ar. Krishnapriya Rajshekar**, Spanjers shares his views on the challenges associated with adaptive re-use and the importance of inculcating respect towards the historic fabric of a city.

Why was your talk entitled "Transformation?"

In our practice, we look at re-use in a practical way, whereas Karan considers the more philosophical aspects of change. We found a meeting ground in the concept "Transformation."

How can one preserve the existing identity of a historic building while modifying it to suit present-day functions?

There is no single rule for that, no recipe that one can use for every building. We have to look at every project and what the specific qualities of that building are. So we have to go into the history of the building- why was it built, what was the original intent of its construction, what were the original constraints when it was built, why the architects choose that particular form, that particular layout, the materials, etc. We have to gain a clear idea about all that, and then go through it over time- what were the different uses or functions that it had, perhaps only one. Some buildings have a rich history and we have to know that. Then we must take a look at the cultural landscape where it is part of. A building never stands alone- it is always in an environment; it could be in a city, it could be in a field, but it is always somewhere. And that some-



Refurbishment of a post-WW II theatre

where mostly changes faster than the buildings do, because culture changes all the time- that's your hook-up to work on. So what I'm basically trying to say is that we have to get into the DNA of the building, which is all the more important if it's a historic or really meaningful building. What we do is only a moment in time- so we should think about making our intervention reversible so that it can be re-done, because the next generation might have different ideas & functions and they may want to go back to the original.

How does one learn to discern the fine line between an architectural intervention that adds to an existing structure and one that completely alters its character and makes people forget the context they are part of; between contextuality & functionality?

Exactly, it comes from the importance, context & quality of the building. So the DNA research that you've done is very important to draw that line.

For instance our cultural complex based in Leidseplein is quite different- a prison. A prison is a building that nobody really likes. It had a

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poor history, a bad history even, because during the war, that was the place where the Jews were gathered to be taken to Germany- it was not a very nice moment in history. You want to avoid people connecting to that part of the history. So we turned that building more or less around by turning it from an introverted building into an extroverted building. In this case, it was achieved by completely removing the interiors and directing the flow of people not through the building, but from the outside. In the project in Berlage, we just made small additions, like a surgeon works on body- fine incisions and that too as less as possible to achieve maximum effect.



Differentiated signage for commercial activity and way-finding at the Amsterdam Airport

What is the one project that you have enjoyed working on in particular?

I always say the next project is the best project.

As far as conservation & re-use in India is concerned, we do not see a lot of innovation beyond heritage structures being utilised by the hospitality industry. Why do you think it is that we don't see a lot of cultural re-use taking place- transformation of disused buildings into vibrant activity-based spaces that can be utilised by citizens throughout the day? Do you think it is an attitude that should be inculcated in the people?



Transformation of a church into a concert hall



A stock exchange building transformed into a home for the Dutch Philharmonic Orchestra

Yes, that is exactly what I wanted to say- it has to do with the mindset of the people. In the 10-15 years or more that we've been travelling to India, we've seen the country change for the better. But what we have seen and felt is that the personal space that people have is very less in India. They are very close to each other -it's almost intimate. I get the idea that this is gradually changing- people have more privacy now, and this affects how they use public space. 15 years ago in Bombay, shanties were all over the city. And what you see is that people even in the shanty towns keep their own houses perfectly clean. They are well-dressed and have clean clothes but they clean their houses by wiping everything out onto the street and it stays there. Nobody is concerned because that is public space. And we have seen that attitude not just in shanty towns but all over India. I've seen that attitude changing and that also has an effect on the way buildings are used, especially public & govt. owned buildings & the ones owned by large organisations. The upkeep of these buildings is very poor and people don't connect with them. And that is something that has to do with personal space. People do not take possession of what is community-based. That is something that I slowly see changing and that is for the better, because it means that people are really connected to their environments.

There is a huge advantage of volume in industrial spaces, which can be utilised to maximum advantage, don't you think?

Absolutely, and there are very nice examples of how that can be done, all over the world. We were in China a couple of weeks ago and we'd been to this art centre in Beijing- it's beautiful and now it's full of artists' lofts, ateliers, in-residence spaces, restaurants & bars.

Industrial buildings and warehouses hold a lot of space, and it is cheap space because it is found space. Especially for the arts, that's what you need because artists never have any money and they need space- they need huge space that they can bring to life. And people like to see the process of how art

develops, and bringing art to such spaces like what has been done with the Biennale here is a very good way to bring buildings alive. Neighbourhoods transform after artists come in. After them, young urban professionals come in- young people with money who want to have a connection with art. They bring in money and they bring in a whole different culture. And after them, another flow of people comes in. So a socio-cultural change can be ignited by re-using old places.

If we look at what's being done in Italy- the exterior of the historic core remains untouched- no advertising on the facades, regulations in the sizes of hoardings, etc., while the inside is actively re-used for various commercial functions, etc. A lot of old cities in India have a historic core and we see hawkers setting up stall right outside with any number of hoardings & banners hanging off old buildings. Do you think a stringent enforcing of rules is required?

Yes and no. I think India is a culture of small enterprises- that's something very deeply rooted and you can't change it. But you can bring in some simple rules on how to deal with that, because everybody wants their business to gain exposure. We have the same problem in Amsterdam- our main streets were lined with all these advertisements and once it's there, you never get it away. But in our airport, they had a very simple rule in place. The architectural design in the airport had two types of signage- the advertising on shops and the way-finding. All the way-finding should be in the walking direction and all the advertising should be on the facades opposite to the walking direction and that works wonderfully. So that's a very simple rule and if it's just followed, things are much less messy and it's very clear where to go, without ruining the structure or the view of the building. So I think some regulation must be in place, yes.

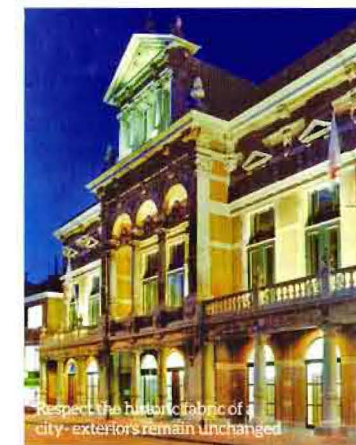
Have you ever considered taking up any project in India?

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I think India is a huge challenge. I've never had the opportunity to work here but it is a challenging country. Looking at the heritage, you have so much that is worthwhile, even too much, I would say. It's almost impossible, a huge task to maintain all that- to bring it to life. But it's absolutely inspiring to be here and look at all this work. Some great architectural work is being done already and this conference has some great examples of work that is world-quality. What I specifically like is that the work being practiced here is rooted in culture, much more that we see in our country where everything is more or less money-driven. Here we see that things have a deeper, philosophical background and I like that very much.



Refurbishment of a prison & courthouse complex



Respect the historic fabric of a city- exteriors remain unchanged

Your thoughts on our theme "Transcendence"?

As I mentioned earlier, I'm a practitioner. I'm a very practical person and even at the academy, I was out of touch with these big words & philosophical thoughts. I must say that has changed over the years. Transcendence is one of those words that could go in any direction. And in the end, architecture is about brick & mortar, so it always has to come back to how we create the best user-experience. And that's where our mission goes- to give the user the best building, the best quality they can get.

