

FORBO FLOORING SYSTEMS HIGHLIGHT

This section of ArchIdea features a selected project in which the floor is the hero of the issue. It demonstrates how Forbo Flooring Systems can complement the design of a building.



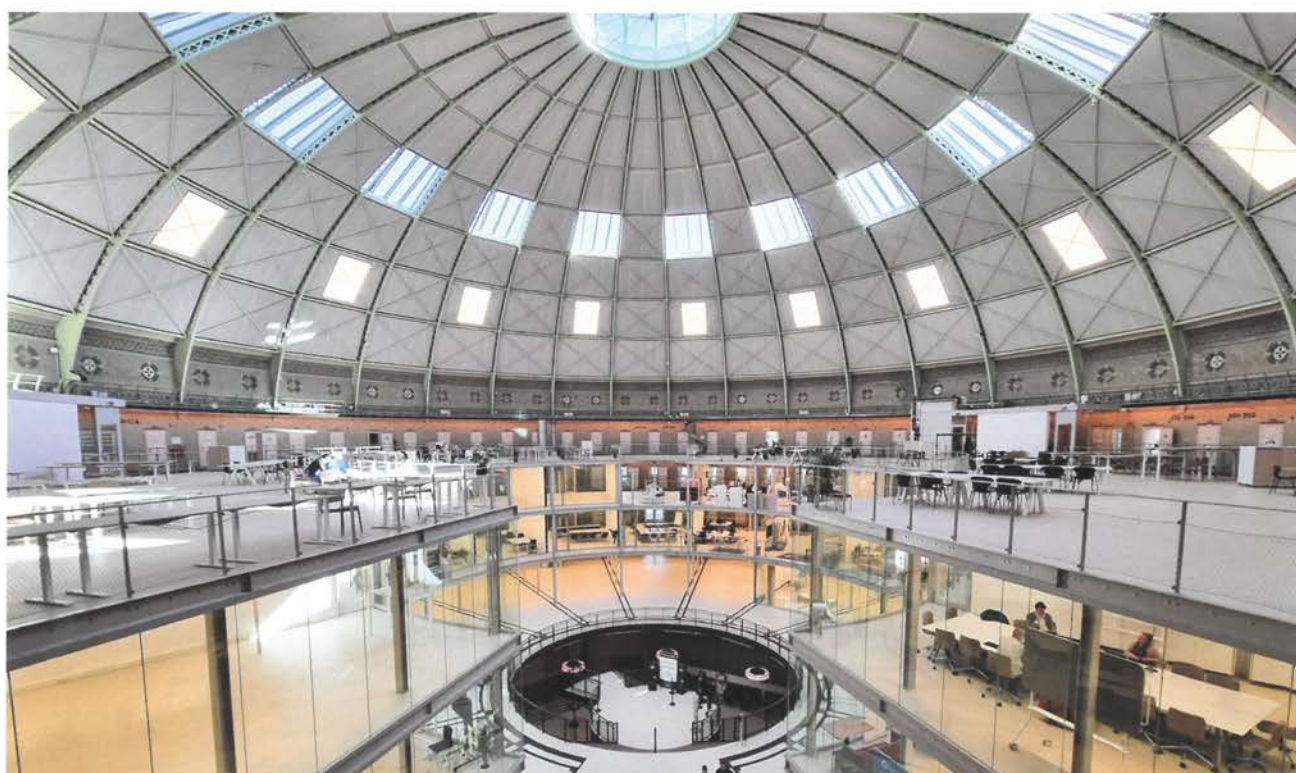
The circle is central

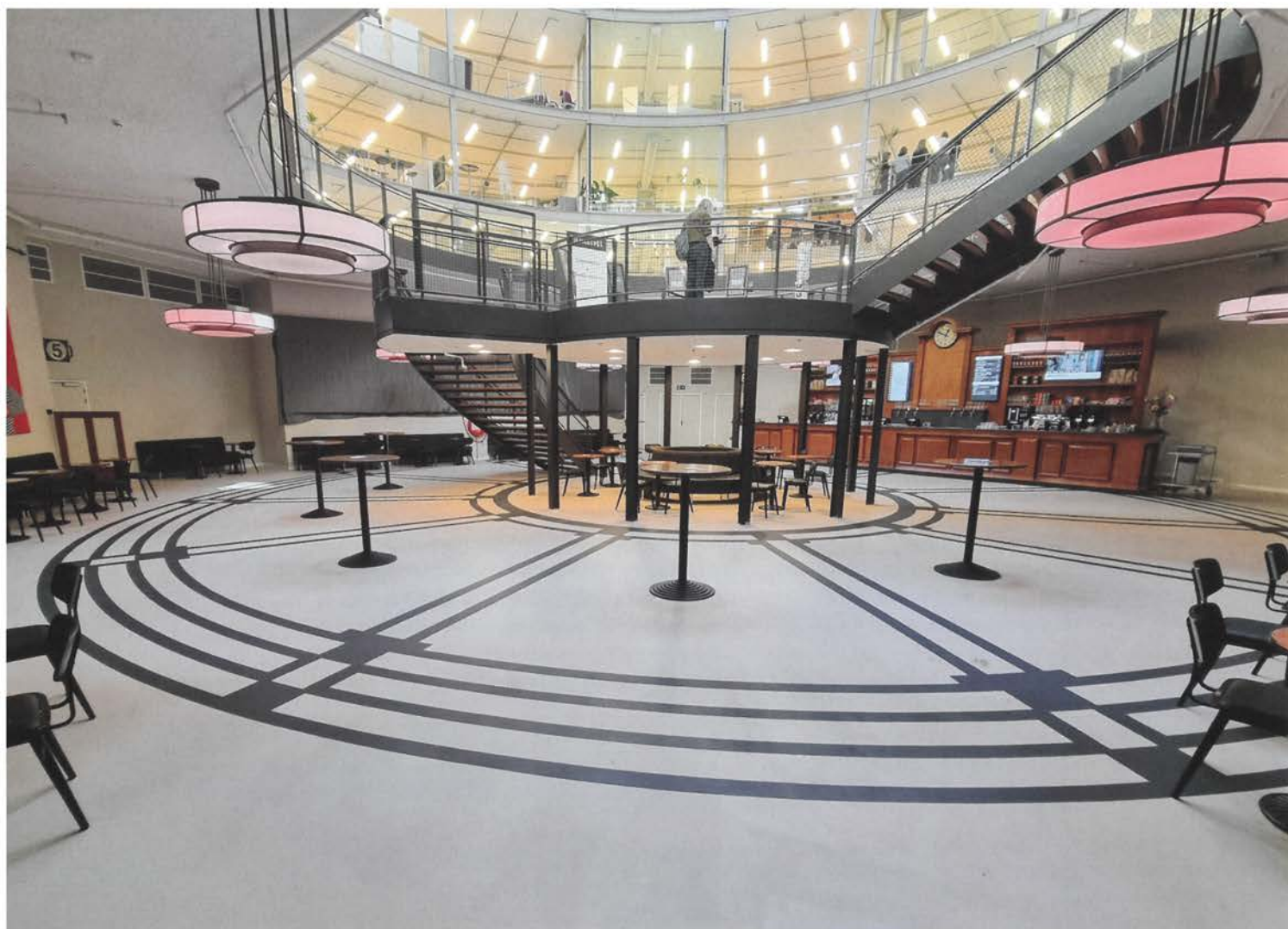
BY GOUGING OUT THE HUB OF A FORMER PANOPTICON-STYLE PRISON IN HAARLEM, THE ARCHITECT ANDRÉ VAN STIGT CREATED A SPLENDID CENTRAL OPEN SPACE.

Formerly a panopticon, the Koepel in Haarlem is now a multifunctional building where everyone is welcome. A breathtaking transformation has taken place from a circular prison to a venue for all city-dwellers. It is nowadays hard to envision how prisoners in the past would have been stripped of their name and clothing at the gatehouse, assigned a number and prison garb, and then left to languish in the cells ranged inside the circumference of the outer wall.

At first sight, the outside barely seems to have changed. Round, tall and monumental, with a diameter exceeding that of San Pietro in Rome, the Koepel used to be visible from anywhere in the city and is now only partly obscured by a scattering of taller buildings. Not only was it an icon of Haarlem, but a conspicuous warning for anyone with criminal activities in mind. The building's protected status has spurred every effort to preserve its essence and its details, or where necessary to repair them. Still, there is no mistaking that it was once a formidable jailhouse: the outer wall with its

grim little barred windows remains largely intact, and the bay windows overlooking the exercise ground have been restored, as have the rings of cells with galleries and spiral staircases, the steel cell doors with characteristic sliding hatches and cell numbers on the brickwork of the inner walls,





leaving no doubt about the former functions. For those who now succeed in infiltrating the outer walls through one of the entrances, however, a fantastic space opens up beneath the gigantic dome. It is an interior where everything is subject to the dogmas of modernity: spaciousness, accessibility and light. Nothing more urban could exist, for the space under the dome is an agora where everyone convenes.

The Koepel in Haarlem is one of three panopticons built in the Netherlands over a century ago. The circular prison in Arnhem has recently been transformed into a venue for meetings and events, and that in Breda is currently "up for sale" to commercial developers. It was a civic initiative that saved the Koepel from similar applications. Various parties joined forces to establish a foundation named Stichting Panopticum, in which the architect André van Stigt also participated. He already had ample experience in the repurposing and renovation of listed buildings in Amsterdam such as the famous red-brick Olympic Stadium built in 1928, and he knew that the panopticon could remain in communal hands only if there existed a viable alternative to profit-making exploitation. Rather than cramming a preconceived programme into the panopticon, the starting point was to define a programme that fits the building.

The entire financial risk was to be borne by Stichting Panopticum, so the municipality of Haarlem could entrust development of the former prison to the foundation. Confidence in this option

was bolstered by the fact that many private parties would be committed to the project for a period of ten years, in the form of a limited partnership. They could reckon on the feasibility of the project. The municipality correspondingly set store by the success of Stichting Panopticum's plans. They felt that the neighbourhood of the Koepel, on the opposite bank of the River Spaarne, ought to have closer ties to the city centre. The attractive functions arising from this "leap across the Spaarne" would be absorbed into the day-to-day activities of the area. These functions would eventually take the form of a university faculty of digital arts, a cinema cluster, a café, a games museum, a bookshop, and work and meeting rooms for startups. Another part of the plan was to build student accommodation and social housing in the grounds of the former prison. A well balanced exploitation that included non-profit tenants would entail an expansion of the site from 5,500 m² to 10,000 m². To assure an efficient utilization of this space, the functions of cinemas and lecture halls would be shared, while energy consumption would be drastically reduced by adequate insulation and geothermal heating.

The original idea of a panopticon was conceived by the 18th-century British social reformer Jeremy Bentham. This liberal philosopher saw the radial structure of a building as offering a humane solution to many situations in which people could be studied and disciplined. In particular, the concept found concrete applications for prisons. A gaoler

was able to observe all the cells from a squat central tower. Ideally, the panopticon was designed in such a way that the prisoners were not even aware that a guard was there to keep an eye on them. The inmates would become more conscious of how they behaved, even if nobody was looking at them, so that they would eventually re-educate themselves. The function of the Koepel as a prison was granted a relatively short lifespan, however. The observation post was decommissioned early on and the space was supplanted by a basketball court and other facilities. The noise must have been deafening, but at least it was locale for sporting activities.

André van Stigt has, so to speak, scooped out the centre of the panopticon. It has a liberating effect: the tension between those who observe and those who are observed is eliminated. Everyone can look at everyone else, and is consequently both guard and inmate – a free individual, in other words, who carries the whole responsibility for his or her behaviour. Gazing from above into the depth, you can see a wide staircase leading to a round platform from which you can descend further to the cinemas that double in the morning as lecture rooms.

That excavation of the centre was crucial to the success of the project. Additional floor space was created at one blow, by sinking a sealed concrete tank four metres below groundwater level and thereby exploiting the resulting upward thrust to reinforce the cell ring foundations. Submerging the six lecture rooms-cum-cinemas underground moreover saved having to accommodate them elsewhere under the dome, which would have played havoc with that splendid open space.

Just as all aspects of the Koepel are dominated by circularity, the newly built-in structure is circular. This structure – providing rooms for conferences, working groups and social meetings, a cafeteria, and in the near future a bookshop and a games museum – is located within the central space separately from the cells and other existing structures. Because it is largely transparent you can see the old brickwork behind it, stripped of its sooty surface and illuminated by LED lighting strips, as well as the old cell doors and spiral staircases. The new does not get in the way of the old; rather, the qualities of both are enhanced.

The acoustics of the building were so poor that the building was virtually unusable. Various modifications have been made to cut the reverberation time from seven seconds to lit-

tle more than a second. The building now has very pleasant acoustics which are nothing like those that must have prevailed earlier. Noise-damping textiles, printed with photographic images of the previously visible corrugated steel panels, are applied to the interior of the domed roof. Standing beneath it, you would see no difference and would swear that the original panels were still visible.

The LiquidDesign floor surface also contributes to noise reduction. A special radial pattern designed by André van Stigt conforms perfectly to the round floor space, and its cream colour is mixed to correspond to that of the cell doors. In this respect, too, the architect has shown himself as being utterly respectful to the original architecture of the Koepel.

ARCHITECT: BURO VAN STIGT

Floor surface: LiquidDesign TT1 Trans DG2, FORBO-EUROCOL



Photo: Marcel Israel Fotografie

