



↑ Two staircases on either side of the school give access to the playground on the roof.

School, Hardenberg

Marlies Rohmer designed a futuristic-looking school with a classic structure.

🇳🇱 NETHERLANDS — TEXT: KIRSTEN HANNEMA, PHOTOGRAPHY: JEROEN MUSCH & ALEXANDER VAN DER MEER

In her recent book, *Building for the next generation*, Marlies Rohmer argues the case for an urbanism and architecture that is more attuned to the needs of the young. The fact is that in cities across the nation, more and more playing areas are making way for car parking, the design of the public domain is increasingly determined by security considerations and it is becoming more and more difficult for young families to find affordable housing.

Rohmer seeks the solution in what she calls 'space a la carte': 'clip-on' houses with an optional extra attic or sun-room for messing around in or working; an extended front doorstep where children can play and their parents can chat to the neighbours; a field with a metallic curtain around it that can be closed for a game of football and opened to cre-

ate an outdoor stage. In short, spaces that break through our increasingly regulated existence because they stimulate the imagination and can be used in a number of different ways. The schools Rohmer has built – all with rooftop playgrounds – are the most eloquent examples of this approach.

The Matrix is one of these 'broad schools' as they are known in Dutch. The word 'broad' refers to the bringing together of one or more schools plus some community facilities in a single building, in this case two primary schools, a pre-school playgroup, a day care centre and a physiotherapy practice. This type of 'community school' is becoming ever more popular because all parties save money by sharing a roof and because it can provide a positive social stimulus in new neighbourhoods and in districts undergoing urban regeneration.

The school stands in the middle of the brand-new district of Marslanden in Hardenberg, close to the German border. Among the retro-architecture of the new houses, the school building is impossible to overlook. Its pure white plastic facades make it look rather futuristic, just the right school for the 'next generation'. Yet it is classically structured; both the facades and the floor plans are based on the figure of the square.

The central hall, topped by two gyms and the roof-playground, is the largest volume. Encroaching on each of the four corners is a smaller volume: two double-height ones for the schools, and two single-storey boxes, one for the pre-school playgroup and the other for the day care centre and physiotherapist. Each of these 'clusters', internally differentiated →

↓ The main entrance is located in between the pre-school (left) and the physiotherapy practice and day care centre (right).





(School, Hardenberg)

by its own accent colour, is arranged around a square space from where the various rooms are accessed.

The solid facade sections are made up of square polyester blocks with a deep geometric relief, which Rohmer had made specially for this project. Looking like an assemblage of giant Lego blocks, they form horizontal bands that alternate with recessed bands of glazing. The rooms, including the gyms, all enjoy plenty of daylight and, for the time being, unimpeded views out. The drawback is that, despite the recessed windows, it gets very hot inside. Fortunately for the architect and her building, it is not possible to attach awnings to the outside of the facade elements, as the users had planned to do. Instead, internal solar shading will be installed in the near future.

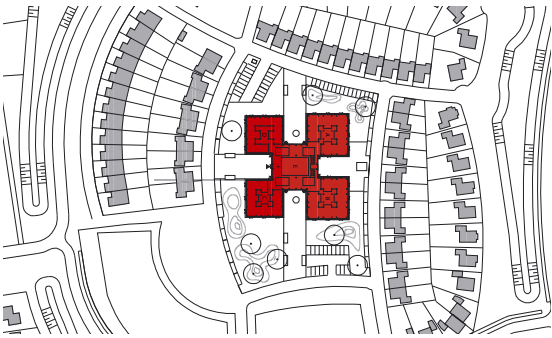
The bays between the four clusters are a good example of 'space a la carte'. They form natural entrance areas and act as enclosed play areas for the youngest children. The deep window ledges offer children and waiting parents a dry place to sit outdoors, and if the covers were to be removed, the low plinth could be filled with soil to create mini-gardens. The only pity is that the storage spaces the architect designed for outdoor play equipment fell victim to cost-cutting; the two bright red containers that now occupy each little play area are completely out of keeping with the elegant building.

Most of the internal spaces are functionally flexible as well. A lot of the classrooms have sliding walls that allow them to be joined together, or opened up to the cluster's central space. In the schools this functions as a study centre and is used by all the pupils for computer work, for reading or for private study. To prevent these areas from looking like a hall rather than a classroom, alcoves were created for storing coats and bags. Such strategies can be found throughout the building. For example, in no time at all, the hall can be divided in two by a transparent plastic curtain while the pattern on the floor is a further invitation to play games.

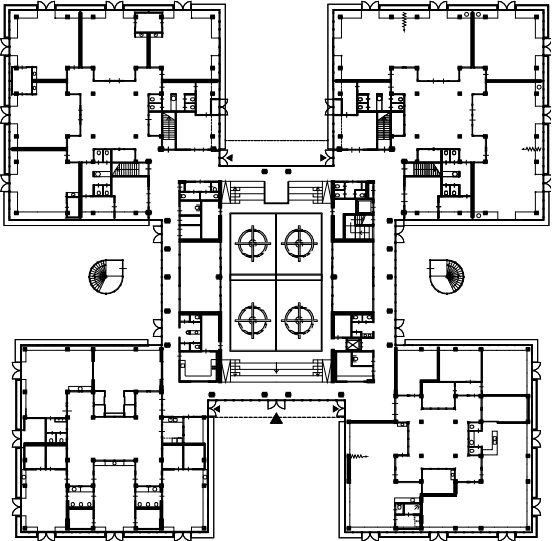
Simple or not, everyone knows that the budgets available for school construction in the Netherlands leave little scope for extras. So a detail like the architect-designed facade elements commands respect for the architect concerned. It is also a cause for optimism: such things are actually possible. And if it is possible, it is the least one can do for the next generation. ←

DE MATRIX, 2004–2007

Architect: Marlies Rohmer
Client: Community of Hardenberg
Address: Erve Odinck 3, Hardenberg
Info: www.marliesrohmer.nl



↓ Ground floor



↑ Rooftop playground ↓ Central multipurpose hall



↑ School cluster's central space

↓ Detail of classroom

