

ARCHITECTURE | DESIGN | ART

BLUEPRINT 330

MECANOO'S BIRMINGHAM LIBRARY

IT ALL STACKS UP



30 YEARS OF BLUEPRINT CELEBRATED INSIDE BY **CONRAN | FOSTER | ROGERS | HADID | HEATHERWICK
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ROBE AND CROWN

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Words Herbert Wright
Photography Paul Raftery

Its brutalist predecessor divided opinion in the city, but the new, £189m Library of Birmingham triumphs as a building of the 21st century. It should also be a building for the next century, hopes architect Mecanoo's Francine Houben





‘Oooooo...’ read the busy lines of 5,357 overlapping aluminium circles, zinging across the hypnotic filigree frieze mounted around the £189m Library of Birmingham. ‘Ooh!’ visitors will surely react, encountering the electric exhilaration it offers outside and in. But don’t say an ‘ooh’ when speaking the name of new library’s Dutch architect Mecanoo – it is pronounced like the hobby kit Meccano, which inspired its founding group of architecture students at Delft’s University of Technology (TUDelft) in 1984.

Francine Houben is the last of the gang still there, and now leads a 115-strong practice. The Mecanoo office in Delft occupies a converted canalside convent hospital. In its airy gothic-arched meeting room, the surprisingly soft-spoken Houben declares: ‘I like to create unforgettable spaces.’ She has nothing of the dark intensity of OMA’s Rem Koolhaas, or the mischievous hints of MVRDV’s Winy Maas, but like her fellow Netherlanders from those nearby Rotterdam-based practices, she talks with a considered earnestness, and she too commands a global portfolio. Around the room are models of key projects such as Arnhem’s National Heritage Museum (2000), walled by a 143m-long quilt of different brick and stoneworks facing a metallic boulder-shaped hall; the 139m-high Montevideo (2005), a distinctive exercise in stack architecture among Rotterdam towers by the likes of Foster, OMA and Siza; and the Wei-Wu-Ying Arts Center in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, under a great 225m x 160m undulating magic carpet-like roof, now under construction. Miesian rectlinearity and millennial fluidity, transparency and organic materiality, villas and towers – is there a common thread? Houben claims there is no Mecanoo style, but rather ‘you recognise our work, its more an attitude that a form-style...

it’s tactile, it’s multidisciplinary, it’s human.’ Does being a woman make a difference as an architect? ‘After 50, I started thinking I’m different,’ she replies. ‘I think more intuitively, more personally. Sometimes the men don’t like it.’

She quoted John Lennon’s line ‘intuition takes me everywhere’ in one of her books, but from what starting point? Houben cites Max Risselade, a ‘very humanistic’ Delft professor known for his research on modernism, as ‘a very good teacher’. He worked with the legendary Brazilian humanist-modernist Lina Bo Bardi, an inspiration for Houben, and he also introduced Houben to Charles and Ray Eames. She met them in Los Angeles, shortly before Charles died in 1978. ‘It was like coming home, seeing such a free way of working,’ she recalls, ‘this humanity and friendliness and timelessness’.

If any project put Mecanoo on the map, it was TUDelft’s Library, completed in 1997. There, a white cone thrusts upwards through a lawn which slopes, like the soft hills of the southern Netherlands where she was brought up, to form a green roof. She explains that ‘the cone fixes it and is a symbol of the rationality of the university’. Inside, natural light floods through both inclined glazed curtain walls reaching to the sweeping arc of the roof, and a skylight around the cone. There’s a sensuous curviness there, like Saarinen’s TWA Terminal, JFK (1962). The cone floats above the floor, revealing from underneath rings of internal workspaces, connected via angled gangways (perhaps recalling Bo Bardi’s SESC Pompéia, 1977) to a great plane of books, floating before a wall of vibrant blue. Houben refers to the colour as Mecanoo blue, and reveals that it’s a stage paint she first used in a theatre set design.

Natural light, curved voids, paths reaching through open

1 (previous page) – The Library of Birmingham from Centenary Square

2 – The filigree metalwork screen honours the crafts and industrial legacy of Birmingham

3 – The Library of Delft’s University of Technology is green-roofed and naturally lit with skylight and glazing

4 – Francine Houben, founding partner and creative director of Mecanoo

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5 - Bookshelves radiate from the Book Rotunda across the massive floorplates

6 - A glass lift rises towards the skylight

7 - The Book Rotunda





8 (previous page) – Stacked and staggered rotundas create dramatic spatial revelations

9 – The William Shakespeare Memorial Room

10 – North-south section

11 – East-west section illustrating Buro Happold's airflow simulation

space and that Mecanoo blue are among design touches shared between the 15,000sq m TUDelft and 29,000sq m Birmingham library. Billed as a People's Palace and engineered by Buro Happold, the latter sits between T Cecil Howitt's imposing stone office building, the grade II Baskerville House (1938), and the RIBA Award-winning Birmingham Repertory Theatre (Rep) by Graham Winteringham (1971). The new project has connected the library and Rep, which has been partially remodelled inside. Houben comments, 'we kept the Rep as its own architectonic statement.' Like three graces, they face Centenary Square, but the Library dominates, rising in three layered rectilinear volumes, clad in bands of blue and gold. The window strips are behind a filigree screen of circles, whose perhaps feminine effect is not unlike Louis Vuitton's 'broderie anglaise'. The library is topped at 60m with a gold drum (Houben's 'pièce de résistance'), which now houses the relocated, wood-lined Shakespeare Memorial Room (1882) by John Henry Chamberlain. The composition is like a stack of giant fancy-wrapped gift boxes, with a golden hatbox on top.

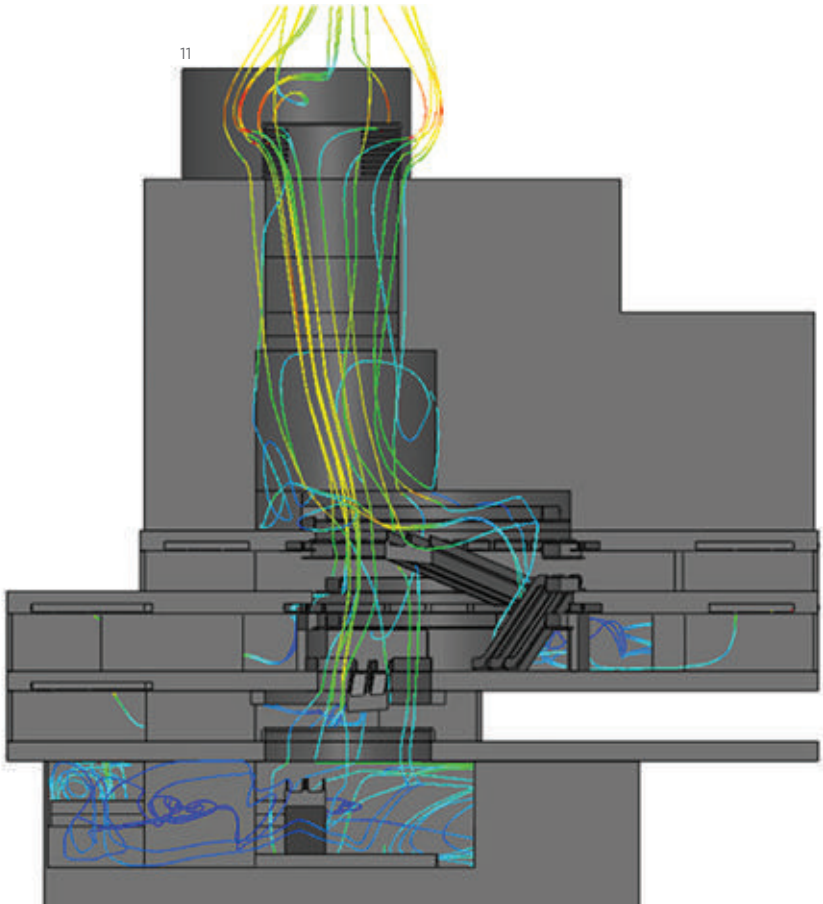
The filigree honours Birmingham's long tradition of craftsmanship, particularly that of its Jewellery Quarter. Mounted 90cm from the cladding, its structure is overlapping black circles 5.8m across, overlaying shiny circles of 1.8m.

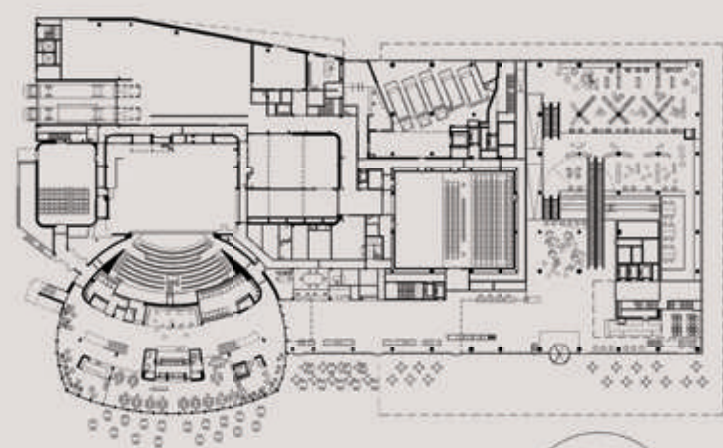
A concrete frame rises from bedrock on circular columns on a 7.2m square grid and two service cores. The double-height Mecanoo blue foyer is entered under an 11m-cantilever. Immediately, the Library's internal spatial drama lifts the eye upwards, following unfeasibly long escalators – strip-lit in blue. The first escalators rise into clear space over the Children's Library and above them is a series of stacked and staggered

contiguous circular voids. Together they make an astonishing space of cathedral-like scale, with clear yet displaced geometries. It's also a vertical funnel providing natural ventilation to supplement HVAC. 'I wanted to seduce people with the sequence of rotundas,' says Houben.

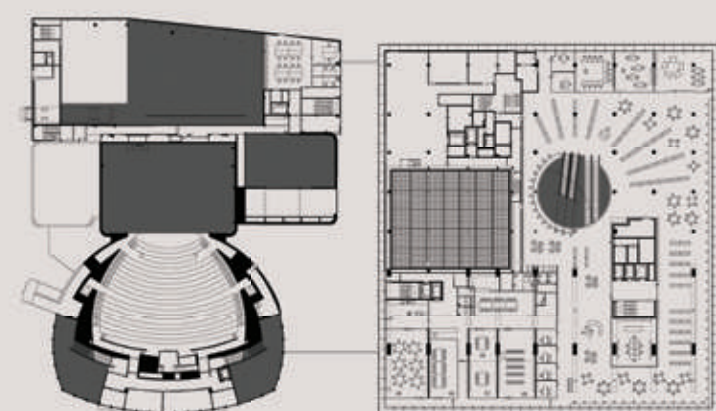
The first escalators reach the business and learning floor, where skills like using computers and making CVs are on offer, and meeting rooms hang over Centenary Square. Look up and behold: the great Book Rotunda. The 24m-wide, three-storey drum lined with books is as majestic as Sydney Stirke's 1857 British Museum Reading Room (which Houben confesses she never saw). A second escalator pair reaches its base, and from it the expanse of Reader Services stretches into the cantilever. On this floor, the ceiling lights are halos. Bookshelves radiate from the Book Rotunda, which is crossed by yet another escalator pair to the Discovery Floor, with a cafe and gallery. A great L-shaped public Discovery Terrace hangs over Centenary Square, commanding views across the city dominated by Seifert's 100m-high Alpha House (1973). Arcs of wooden benches sit among garden islands containing 3500 plants, landscaped by Mecanoo. Here, Houben picks a succulent raspberry for Blueprint, commenting 'Birmingham is a very green city, just not in the city centre, not yet.'

Sloping travelers cross to the highest level of the Book Rotunda, which opens into a narrower rotunda penetrating two levels of enclosed archive spaces. Renderings show its surface as a grid of photo portraits, but for now, it is white, with a lift in a clear tube climbing to offices on the seventh level. Outside that is the Secret Garden, facing north and east, with 5500 plants, some planted for the crisis-stricken bees of Birmingham.

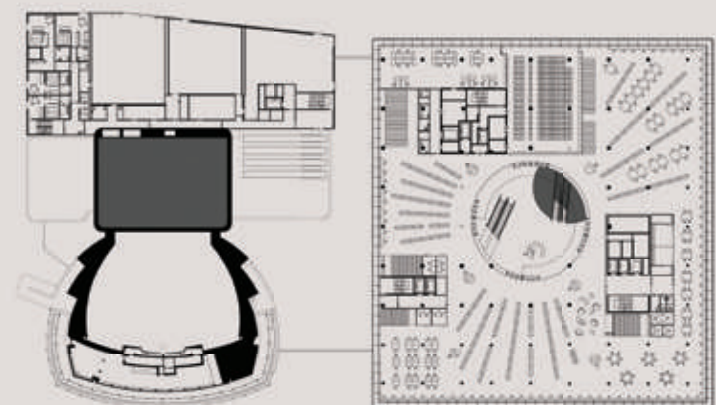




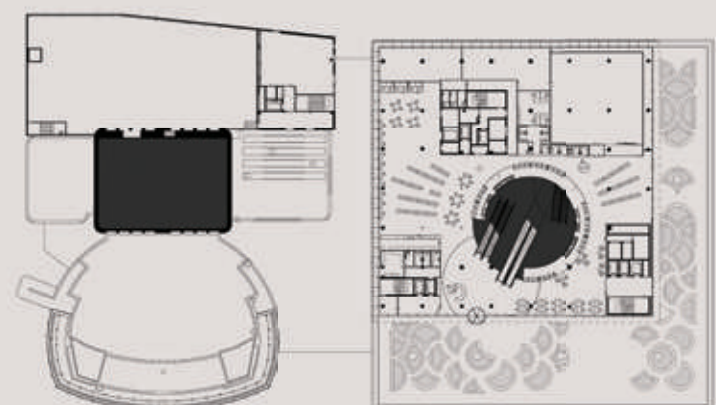
Ground floor



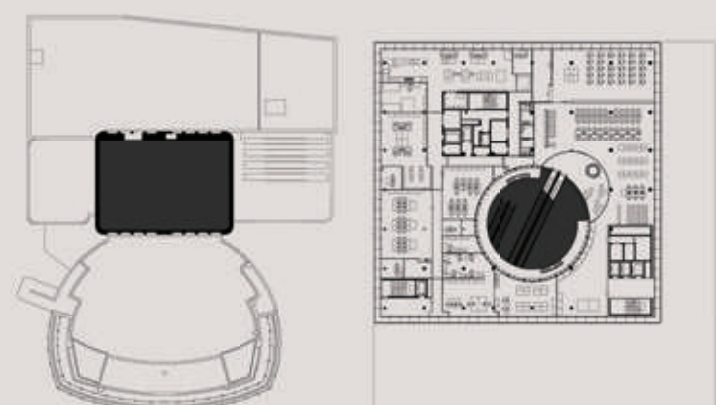
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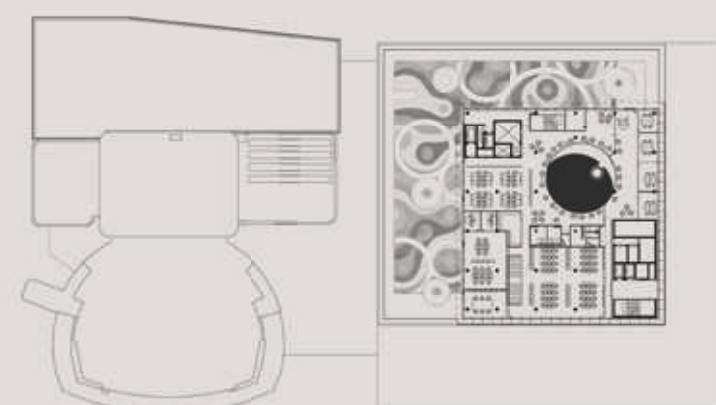
Level 2



Level 3



Level 4



Level 7

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12 - The floorplans

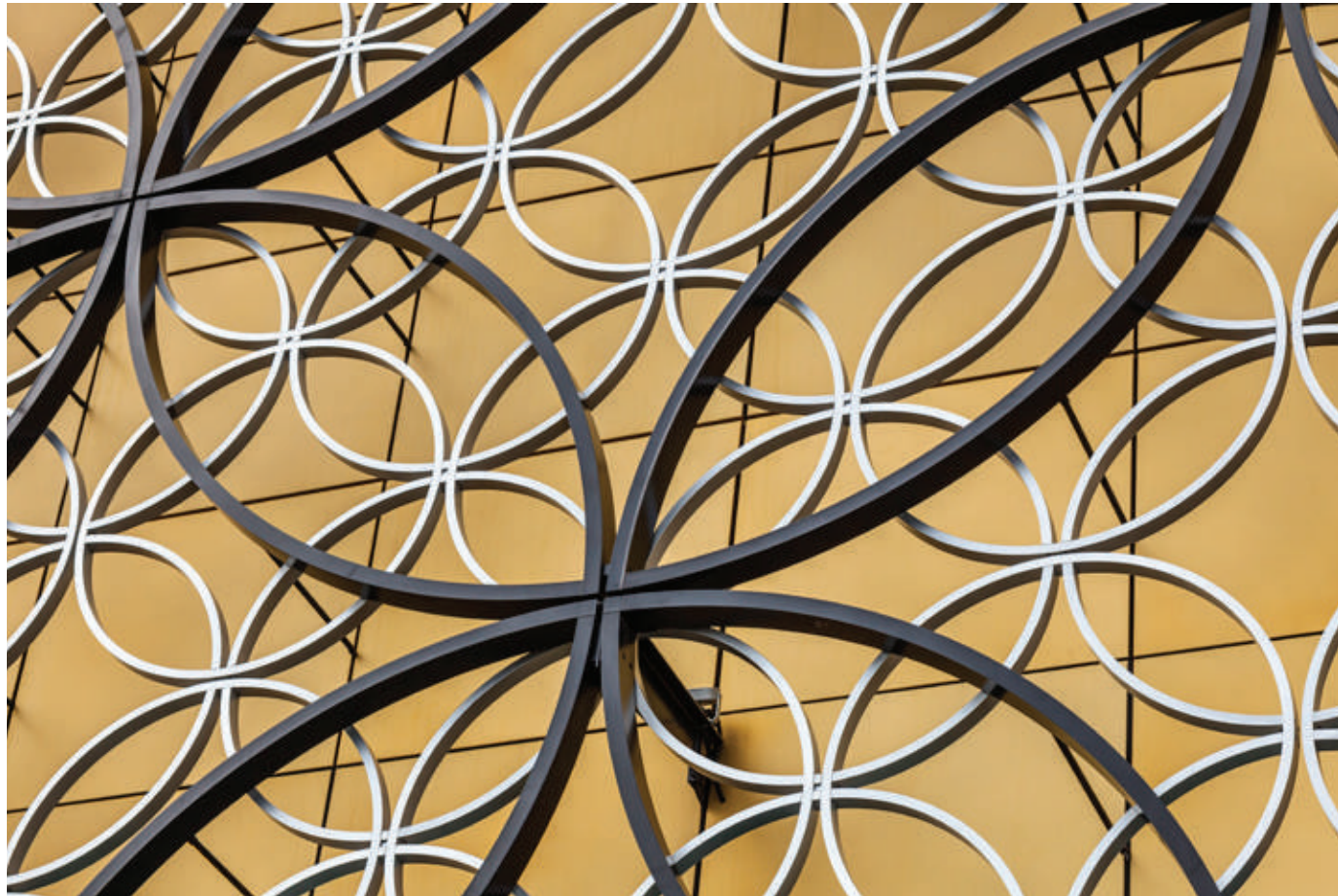
13 - The REP to the left of the library

14 - Baskerville House to the right of the library

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15 - Discovery Terrace extends some 11m out over Centenary Square

16 - The 5,357 filigree screen circles are aluminium

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17 - The filigree screen viewed from within



Above both green terraces, 160 species were selected jointly with Buro Happold. The uppermost and narrowest rotunda rises two storeys through office and mechanical levels, to the circular skylight set in a smaller roof cylinder, next to the Shakespeare room. On the lower ground, a bank of giant yellow steps for events faces the Children's Library, which extends to an 18m-wide circular 'amphitheatre' for musical performances, sunk into the central one of three palazzos laid by Mecanoo across Centenary Square. It is reminiscent of Kisho Kurokawa's van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam (1999). The stainless steel circles inlaid in its floor echo those of the building's filigree above.

Acoustics were a key consideration, but Houben says, 'we didn't want to make it a silent library.' She adds mercurially, 'It's essential to have a piano in the building,' although I didn't spot it. Rod Manson, regional director of Buro Happold, highlights the challenge of reverberation in the open-plan areas: 'A lot of acoustic modelling was done.' The solution is surface finishes and absorbent materials incorporated in ceilings.

Delft's sustainable green roof was ahead of its time. Birmingham's library, too, is highly sustainable, earning a BREEAM Excellent rating, which Mason says is 'down to a lot of things', including grey-water reuse and biodiversity. Low-energy lighting, a CHP unit, part-natural ventilation and drawing on an aquifer for cooling make energy demands 40 per cent less than those required by regulations.

What of the old Central Library at nearby Paradise Circus by John Madin (Blueprint 314, May 2012)? The manly inverted brutalist ziggurat, completed in 1972, has dramatically divided opinion, and thrice been refused heritage listing. Before it shut, its interiors were claustrophobic and dilapidated, natural light

through its central atrium ineffective, and its toilets graced with discarded beer cans. Nevertheless, an internal excitement cut through its heavy massings, and bright eateries animated its atrium. Demolition is imminent. Asked not to comment by Birmingham City, Houben nevertheless notes its similarity to Kallman, McKinnell and Knowles' Boston City Hall (1968). She went in many times, she reports, and admits 'of course it's special, but it's very complicated with the public space around it.' She adds that 'people need daylight. It's not good for a library to be dark inside.' One Birmingham librarian went a little further, saying: 'It was like a coffin.'

Shakespeare wrote in *The Tempest*, 'What's past is prologue,' and Mecanoo's libraries are about the future. At the new library, Houben remarks: 'People say it's a building of the 21st century. It should be a building for the 22nd century!' Many of the expected 10,000 daily visitors will be the young, who are the city's future. Observing building users' behaviour is inherent in Houben's methodology, and she appeals to the young with spaces they will want to be in. 'Libraries are the cathedrals of these times,' declares Houben, contrasting them with less socially inclusive Bilbao-effect art galleries.

'Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have immortal longings in me,' commanded Shakespeare's Cleopatra. The words could be Birmingham's. Robed in its delicate, fine filigree and crowned in gold, the Library is visible for miles, robust and regal. Internally, it is a masterpiece of flow and openness. The city that has played fast and loose with its past has already been redefined by Houben's creation. While the Library cannot offer Birmingham immortality, it should at least fulfil its longing for a future of culture and learning. ■