

GEM

Birmingham & Solihull
Magazine

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140 Years
of History**

What's good about
Birmingham?

**In Conversation
with...
Roy G Hemmings**

*Meet
Francine Houben,
Architect*



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Francine Houben with her husband Hans Andersson at their home in Rotterdam, which Francine designed herself.

Francine Houben —

the woman behind the design of the Library of Birmingham

The architect of the Library of Birmingham, Francine Houben, has flown in from her office in Delft, Netherlands, to meet Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, who will be unveiling a plaque in the new building. She wants to be sure everything is shipshape.

Before Prince William unveils the plaque there is a reading by Stephen Morrison-Burke, Birmingham Poet Laureate, of his poem 'Family'. He addresses the crowd from a balcony projecting into the airy space. Stephen delivers his poem impressively. I later ask him what he thinks of the new building. "It is amazing," he replies with a radiant smile. "My favourite bit is this book rotunda; everything feels so connected and you can see a sense of wonder on people's faces."

A jewel box of a library

I make my way up to the seventh floor, where the offices are located. Francine looks stylish in a black trouser suit, red shoes, and chunky red necklace. She confesses when she first came to Birmingham in 2008 she knew a lot about libraries but very little about Birmingham; she spent several days walking the streets, doing research. Now here we are, five years later, with a finished library and the heir to the throne is chatting with young readers a few floors below.

Francine says when she discovered Birmingham's rich industrial and artistic heritage, she decided the new library should be like a jewel box, that the city's valuable archives should be given pride of place, and that the Shakespeare Memorial Room should be its crowning glory. Francine invites me to look out of the window. My eyes scan over the public roof terrace, the 'secret garden', to undulating hills on the horizon. "Birmingham is a green city," she says earnestly. "It is also a hilly city."

The landscape reminds her of the Limburg Hills where she was born. Later, when she was a child, on her way to school in The Hague, Francine would daily run up the steps to a viewing platform on top of a sand dune, from where she would look over her city. This is what she has given

to Birmingham, a public place with a panoramic view.

Nature and landscape are important to Francine and so is intuition. "The more experience, skill and expertise you gain, the more space is freed up in your head for intuition," she says.

Designing and building Europe's largest public library in just five years, during a major recession, is a remarkable achievement. I ask Francine about her leadership style. She sees herself as the conductor of an orchestra consisting of architects, engineers, landscape architects, planners, interior designers, restoration experts and a multitude of consultants. As creative director of Mecanoo, she carries the vision and guides its direction. The result is a library completed on time and within budget. Francine is also quick to acknowledge the roles played by Brian Gambles, the library's chief executive; Lord Whitby, the former Leader of the Council; and Clive Dutton, the former Director of Planning.

Growing up in post war Netherlands Francine is one of five children and she was born just ten years after World War II, when there was a housing shortage in the Netherlands. The family lived in a flat within a converted railway hotel. Her parents were the only ones fortunate enough to own a fridge and this treasured possession was shared with their neighbours. Her mother once put some breast milk in the fridge, just for a moment, but it was taken and used in the coffees of the other residents!

At eighteen, Francine still did not know what she wanted to do. However, when her elder brother took her to see the Technical University in Delft, she entered the model making room of the Faculty of Architecture and immediately knew she would be an architect. Twenty years later she was building the university a new library.

Mecanoo

A week following the interview, I had the opportunity to visit Mecanoo in Delft. Mecanoo is based in a converted hospital, fronting a canal, beside the ancient church where the Dutch artist Vermeer is

buried. Around 120 people work in this friendly studio, not just architects, but multidisciplinary teams and support sta

In the garden, I see prototypes for two of their commissions: a façade of a cultural centre in Kongsberg, Norway and brick samples for a new quad at the University of Cambridge. Jarno Koenen, a young architect, commandeers two bicycles and we head off across the stunning city of Delft to see the library that Francine designed for the Technical University. The library is impressive, as much a landscaping project as an architectural one. The timber and Mecanoo Blue interiors are delightful. I can see how Francine and her team gained the expertise needed to win the international competition for the Library of Birmingham.

Jarno points out a brutal 1960s concrete viaduct supporting a busy railway line that Francine, when she was a student, lived less than 15 metres from. It cuts the city in two but is now being relocated in an underground tunnel. A new park and canal will be created over it. New development sites will offset the enormous cost. Mecanoo has won the commission to design the new railway station and city hall which are currently under construction.

Back at the Mecanoo studio, I am introduced to their large communal fridge stacked with beers and wine for Friday afternoons. It strikes me that Francine's early experience of communal life continues in her workplace.

Francine has received numerous invitations to speak at international conferences about the Library of Birmingham and the new knowledge economy. I ask her what advice she would give to Birmingham for the future. She responds without hesitation. "The public realm needs to be coherent, so invest in a strategy for public space." She looks wistfully out of the window and I am reminded of the young girl who climbed the sand dune every morning to check on the well being of her city.

Nick Corbett
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