



Entrance hall to the library at Eemhuis Amersfoort, designed by Neutelings Riedijk. Photo: Scagliola Brakkee

## Steps, meeting point, theatre: the staircase as social medium

From the bright orange grandstand in TU Delft's Faculty of Architecture to the Eemhuis in Amersfoort, designed like a wooden terrace landscape, it is impossible to imagine interior architecture without the 'social' staircase and its spacious landings that encourage users to hang out and relax. How can its success be explained?

How can a building give something back to the city? That was the premise of the grandstand staircase. – Michiel Riedijk

That a connecting space intended for traffic between floors emerged as the social hub of the building is the (success) story of the grandstand staircase. Since its sudden appearance some 20 years ago, it has become a staple of the interior. What are its origins?

Museum Naturalis in Leiden, which specialises in evolution, is an appropriate place for interpreting this development. "The idea was that visitors would take the lift to the top and then descend the stairs past the exhibition spaces, like in the Guggenheim Museum in New York," explains architect *Michiel Riedijk* of Neutelings Riedijk about the design for the (renovated) building, which is organised around a high atrium. But the 'mountain of stairs' the firm designed is so attractive to visitors that most walk up the 226 steps. Children slide over the railings, play on the landings, and from there climb the flower-shaped facade elements. The way the stairs are used exceeded Riedijk's expectations.

The staircase at Naturalis is one in a series of monumental "social stairs" designed by Neutelings Riedijk over the past three decades. "It started with design competitions for concert halls in Bruges, Ghent, and Almere – which we lost – and the design for STUK, a cultural centre in Leuven, where we inserted an outdoor stage-staircase into an inner courtyard," Riedijk explains. "The common thread running through those plans was searching for ways to make connections among many people across different floors and to soften the separation between auditorium and foyers. This stems from a broader question: How can a building give something back to the city? That was the premise of the grandstand staircase."

### Tradition of city stairs

The idea of a publicly accessible set of stairs such as this is not new. Riedijk cites the Spanish Steps in Rome and the Theatre of Epidaurus as examples. "There, the

staircase was a hollowing out in the valley with a grand view over the surroundings. In our case, this served a kind of double purpose; the staircase as auditorium and urban space, to which we added the idea of a large hall as a counterpart to those stairs. After all, we're not in warm Greece here."

Neutelings Riedijk designed the Rozet cultural complexes in Arnhem and the Eemhuis in Amersfoort in the same manner. Conversely, in existing halls such as the locomotive hall transformed into a library in Tilburg, grandstand stairs function to open up and 'activate' the space.

The staircase has also appeared in today's offices as a social medium, observes architect *Laura Atsma* of Fokkema & Partners Architects. The firm specialises in office interiors, having designed numerous staircases in recent years, such as for Unilever's new building in Wageningen. "The building designed by *Paul de Ruiter* included a large, empty atrium, where the question became: How are you going to use that? You can place 200 chairs for events but a grandstand works a lot easier, offering flexibility without a flexible appearance."

### Informal working, open education

Atsma's colleague *Diederik Fokkema* sees the rise of the grandstand as part of a wider trend, from formal to informal working environment. "Many companies have a large room for gatherings, but in practice that space is used very infrequently; they prefer so-called town hall meetings. An impromptu feeling also comes into play – the staircase does not need a reservation, it is always available." Atsma: "And when not being used, it's also not empty space; rather, it evokes a sense of expectation, that something can always happen."

Generating spontaneous encounters which result in creative brainstorming, knowledge exchange, and collaboration – the staircase as a social medium fits seamlessly into the philosophy behind the New Ways of Working that emerged in the



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1990s, when office cubicles gave way to open office plans with flexible workspaces. A similar trend can be seen in educational buildings, where the grandstand staircase in the central hall/auditorium has become indispensable. A striking example is the bright orange staircase at Delft's Faculty of Architecture, which MVRDV designed in the building it renovated together with Fokkema & Partners in 2008.

"Even before we realised that project, we designed wide-open staircases with voids between floors for several offices, to connect users more with each other," says Fokkema. "The intervention is similar to the transition from the pantry, where you would get coffee from a vending machine, to a break space like a café. Atsma: "But it was less obvious to clients. We often hear: There is already a stairwell ten metres beyond that, isn't there? Then we have to explain that this kind of open staircase is actually something completely different."

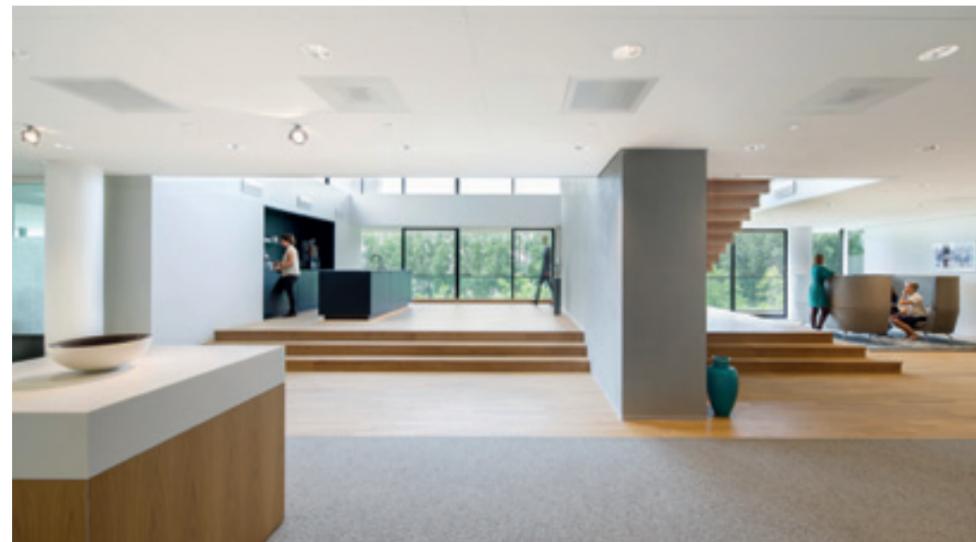
"Making a wide staircase requires a lot of pushing and pulling," says Riedijk. "Not that people don't believe in the social significance, but a staircase like this is not provided for in the square metres defined by the project managers. So you need to come up with a trick – include all the landings in the programming. We did that in the Eemhuis and Rozet by allocating those square metres to the library and to art education."

#### Post-Covid: staircase as meeting point

The increasing focus on health, where the design of public spaces and buildings can encourage physical activity, means that more companies are opting for a prominent staircase as an alternative to the lift – which was also not usable for certain groups during the pandemic period. At the same time, after two years of video calls and meetings, a renewed appreciation of the physical office and cultural buildings as a place for interaction and inspiration emerged; precisely the qualities inherent in the grandstand staircase.

The rise of the grandstand is part of a wider trend, from a formal to informal working environment.

– Diederik Fokkema



Riedijk: "The theme of communality is becoming increasingly important in our work, also because an increasing number of public buildings like post offices are disappearing, while public spaces are being privatised."

In the Stadhuiskwartier that Neutelings Riedijk designed around a public passage in Deventer, the architects placed two staircases at the ends of the hall, which then connect with elongated terraces. "For any official organisation today, where many people work part-time or partly from home, we felt it was important to create an experience of collectivity." The project inspired the architects to create terraces between the stairs in Naturalis as well, offering a direct overview of the space with all the visitors; a communal moment during the museum visit.

Riedijk cites American sociologist *Richard Sennett*, who argues that public space is the place where people (from a bridal couple to a new governing body) can be presented. "The staircase as a monumental gesture is a superb example of this. It is a conscious gesture we make." [KH]



[left page] Interior atrium of Naturalis Leiden designed by Neutelings Riedijk. Photo: Scagliola Brakkee

[left] Interior of Egon Zehnder designed by Fokkema & Partners Architects. Photo: Horizon Photoworks

[above] Ground-floor stairs in Rozet Arnhem by Neutelings Riedijk. Photo: Scagliola Brakkee

[below] BK City. Architect (transformation): Braaksma & Roos (coordinating architect), MVRDV, Fokkema & Partners Architects, Kossmann De Jong, Octatube Int. BV., Superuse Studios. Photo: MVRDV

