Following in the footsteps of the legendary architect Herman Hertzberger takes some guts. When School-Concept from Doesburg, the Netherlands was asked to refurbish the de Vogels public school designed by Hertzberger, they were determined to do justice to his original vision - while still looking to the school's future. Sabine Smolders explains what happened.

A REFIT WORTHY OF A MASTER

Last year it was time to refurbish the famous de Vogels public school in Oegstgeest, near Leiden in the Netherlands.

But de Vogels is not any old school building.

Its beautiful architecture was created in 1998 by Herman Hertzberger, the legendary Dutch architect.

After a fierce competition, School-Concept was appointed to create the new interior, with Puur Sang Architects supporting in the design.

More than any other architect working in the field of school design, Hertzberger has had a remarkable impact on how we now plan the learning spaces in new buildings.

Indeed, his radical ideas from the 1960s and 1970s are seen as pretty much a given by today's architects working within the realm of educational buildings.

Among his most famous designs are his Montessori School in Delft and the Apollo schools in Amsterdam.

To match his concepts, the interior at De Vogels needed to be different, special, enabling children to play and explore. That is why we asked Puur Sang architects to join School-Concept and work with us on this amazing project.

Before the contract was awarded, we convinced school management that we had a different design philosophy to other suppliers. We presented our joint vision and made clear that before we can start drawing, we needed to get acquainted with the fundamentals of de Vogels.

In order to produce appropriate designs, we had to become familiar with the school, the teachers and learn about their way of teaching now and their plans for the future.

The main question to be answered was: How can we create a healthy school that will support the individual needs of the students and teachers?

To define the requirements, we had to reimagine the spaces with the teaching team. This exploration resulted in a clear insight into the future possibilities for growing and learning in safe and caring environments.

All the questions we had were discussed in an inspiring workshop in which all teachers contributed ideas and gave us tips and ideas. The wishes of the team can be summarised in the following core characteristics:

- Entrepreneurial learning
- Working in clusters
- Creating space
- Multifunctional spaces
- Adaptive & flexible furniture
- Healthy working and learning
- Variety inside and outside the classroom
- Storing
- Imagining

In line with these features, together with Puur Sang architects, we designed the rooms and chose colours. After that we made a spot plan and sketch of all 11 classrooms. Based on the proposed sketches, a 3D visualization for the team was created.

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For the furniture we chose One Wood from Denmark to produce the most beautiful FSC® plywood clear lack tables and cabinets with a lino desktop surface to give the building a little more warmth.

In consultation with Puur Sang, we developed a circular piece of furniture for four and five-year olds. Comprising a curved row of desks on the outside, it also creates its own cosy gathering space on the inside. Furnished with nice fluffy cushions, children can use it to read a book or just play and learn.

With this piece of custom-made furniture it becomes wonderfully visible how the space responds to and supports the core values of pedagogy. Hertzberger would call it “the power of unofficial space”.

For the school desks and chairs we chose Flötotto. Their PRO chair is designed by Konstantin Grcic and gives the children the perfect sitting position while also stimulating and allowing movement.

The tables are fitted with castors so can be moved easily. On the tabletops, we chose plywood for durability and because it echoed the style of the cabinets.

The niches for the classrooms and the hallway are now also in full use, so that children can also work and learn together outside the classrooms. The learners can easily take their own table to the floor and back without heavy lifting.

At the heart of the school is the central stage. For that, we provided the Spanish Punto seat cushions in bright colours on the tiered seating. Pupils can now sit on a comfortable seat, while looking at the grandstand, with a large playroom behind it where pre-schoolers receive gymnastics, music and drama lessons.

We wanted to invite the children to use this tiered seating because it helps them find their own way to develop thinking for themselves or in a small group, a key emphasis of the school.

When the learners feel autonomous and safe, it is more likely that they will explore their individual potential and creativity.

We are very proud that we have been able to place the learner in the centre and have shown that it can be done differently. ■