

Do—ism

D/DOCK's Thomas van Leeuwen on taking risks, creating meaningful community and building a plane while flying it.

Words: Chloé Petersen Snell

It's quite hard to sum up in a few words just exactly what D/DOCK is – perhaps easiest to describe them rather abstractly, as director and partner Thomas van Leeuwen does. Made up of nine companies (so far) the Amsterdam-based D/DOCK launched in 2004, growing from design practice to what van Leeuwen calls 'design incubators' – a network organisation of architects, artists, designers, engineers, anthropologists and strategists focusing on, ultimately, change for good; working towards shared goals based around community and sustainability with a refreshingly honest and bold attitude that's still reminiscent of a start-up, even two decades later. "We tend to say that we're building a plane while flying it," says van Leeuwen. "We don't have all the answers. Yet."

Van Leeuwen studied architecture and then real estate – "I like to match design with reality, I guess" – joining D/DOCK

10 years ago and helping to grow the team in both numbers and possibilities. "The conceptual power of the team was always very big, but it was only applied to interiors, mainly offices. We knew we could do so much more – not just hotels, schools and residential, but much more than interior design." Now comprising more traditional design and design & build arms, a circularity studio (Furnify), a research lab, an experiential agency and even a tech start-up, it seems there really isn't much D/DOCK can't get its teeth into.

The collective is based at DB55, a blended-use venue in industrial docklands a short bus ride from Amsterdam's centre. As we arrive the space feels well and truly 'activated' – giant sculptures hang from the full height of the structure and a jovial team are preparing an art exhibition for an upcoming city-wide design festival. A former timber storage barn, DB55 is



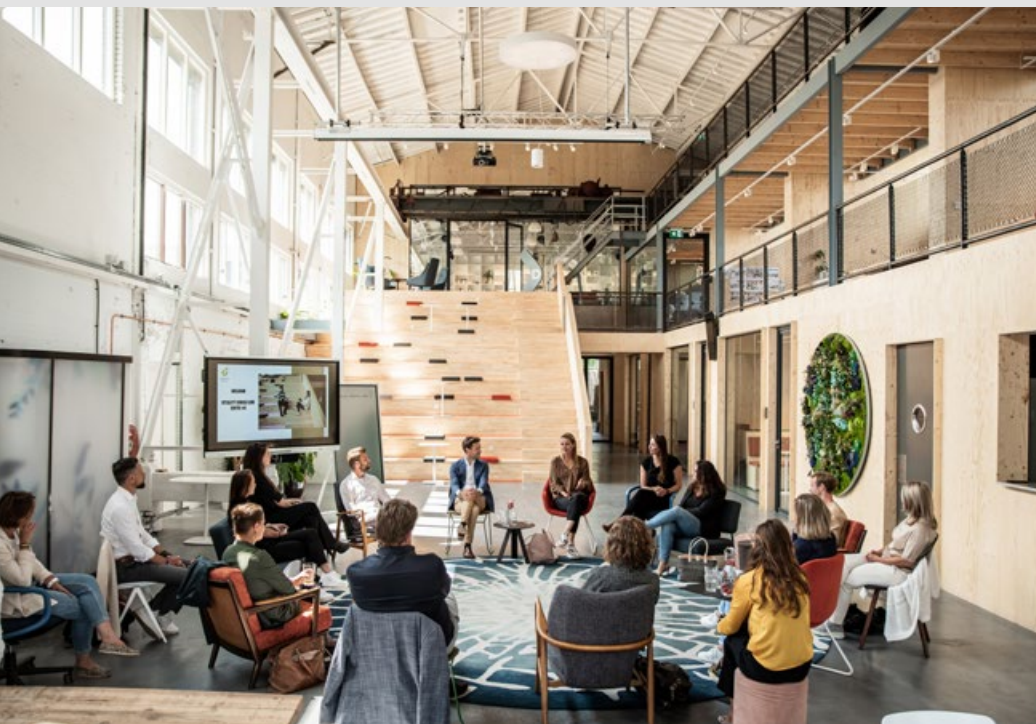
made up of event spaces, quieter office rooms, collaborative spots for meetings and even a health club. The building is above all adaptable, ready for whatever is required from it. This is a workplace, but so much more: D/DOCK partners with companies and organisations to keep the space active with programming for the community and new users. “For me personally, the most striking thing [about D/DOCK and DB55] is the lifestyle,” says van Leeuwen. “It’s an autonomous artist vibe, but the projects are very tangible.”

As with all D/DOCK projects, circularity is at the heart of DB55: wood sourced from roof boarding, floors from former trains and the concrete and glass walls that break up the space are all recycled. Even the AV and kitchen equipment is second-hand, as is 70% of the furniture. Designed from the inside out, windows and façade openings are placed where users’ needs most require them for best access to daylight and views of the docks, and the space is largely open plan – ensuring cross-pollination between the various teams.

“I just did a pitch last week and my first slide was: design doesn't matter. You don't go to the office because of the lunch, the coffee, the design, but you go to the office because of the other people that are there. Community is all about bringing people together, it's an inherently human thing. Of course, we can talk a lot about how we design from the inside out and on a human scale, and how we're always trying to make social impact in what we do, but deep down, and one thing that will never change, is a sense of meaningful community and the feeling you get when you enter a space.”

Having primarily worked on the ‘creating’, more recently D/DOCK has turned to ‘connecting’ – adding a new social enterprise arm to its portfolio, after working within the workplace industry uncovered gaps in the market. As such, D/DOCK’s latest venture UseSpace provides much-needed space for various groups and charities during underutilised hours – hoping to optimise the use of unoccupied locations around

Bottom image:
DB55



Amsterdam, elevate the functionality of underused spaces and, importantly, foster community and a sense of purpose on a local level.

“It’s a matchmaking company, basically,” says van Leeuwen. “Collecting people that need spaces in evenings and weekends and office spaces, because they’re not used in evenings and weekends. We try to connect those companies who best match. We now have about 40 connections, turning offices into destinations when they’re normally closed.”

The team expertly matches spaces and those who need them, from the likes of exhibitions, parties and workshops to facilities for packing crisis packages and orchestra rehearsals in the atrium of Amsterdam’s Edge Stadium. Every Wednesday, a big band rehearses (free of charge) at DB55.

The notion of connecting the social and environmental is a common thread that runs throughout D/DOCK’s work and has resulted in a blend of social impact-driven projects, initiatives and new ventures like UseSpace. More notably at Dr. Sarphatihuis, a nursing home designed by Abraham van der Hart in 1782, with a courtyard space between the



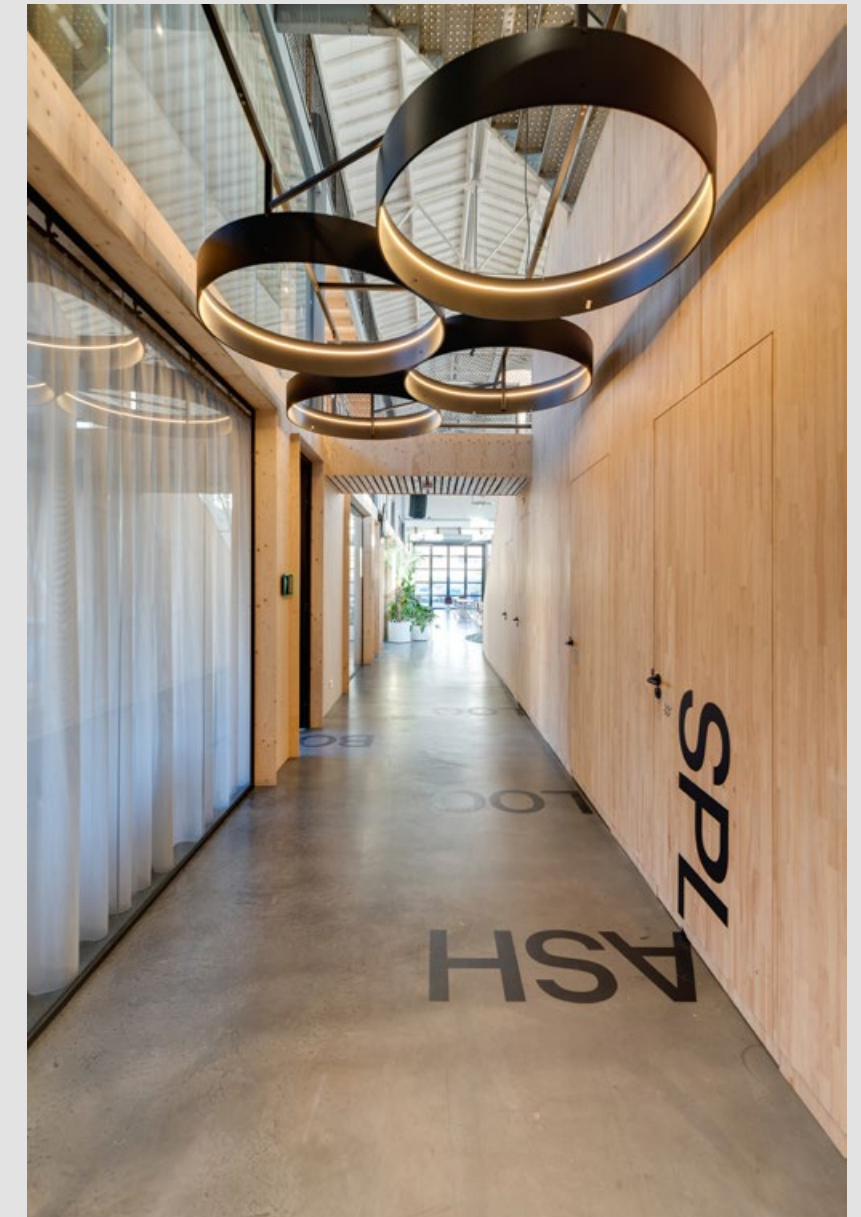
building that was unloved and unused by residents or staff. In collaboration with its in-house circularity experts Furnify and MOSS (Makers of Sustainable Spaces), D/DOCK developed the main atrium into a vibrant indoor ‘garden on wheels’ – capable of adopting over 30 configurations to cater to a diverse range of activities. MOSS curated the plant selection and Furnify implemented an environmentally responsible approach to the project’s furniture, using repurposed surplus materials from the wood industry to build the indoor garden – easy to repair with leftover materials.

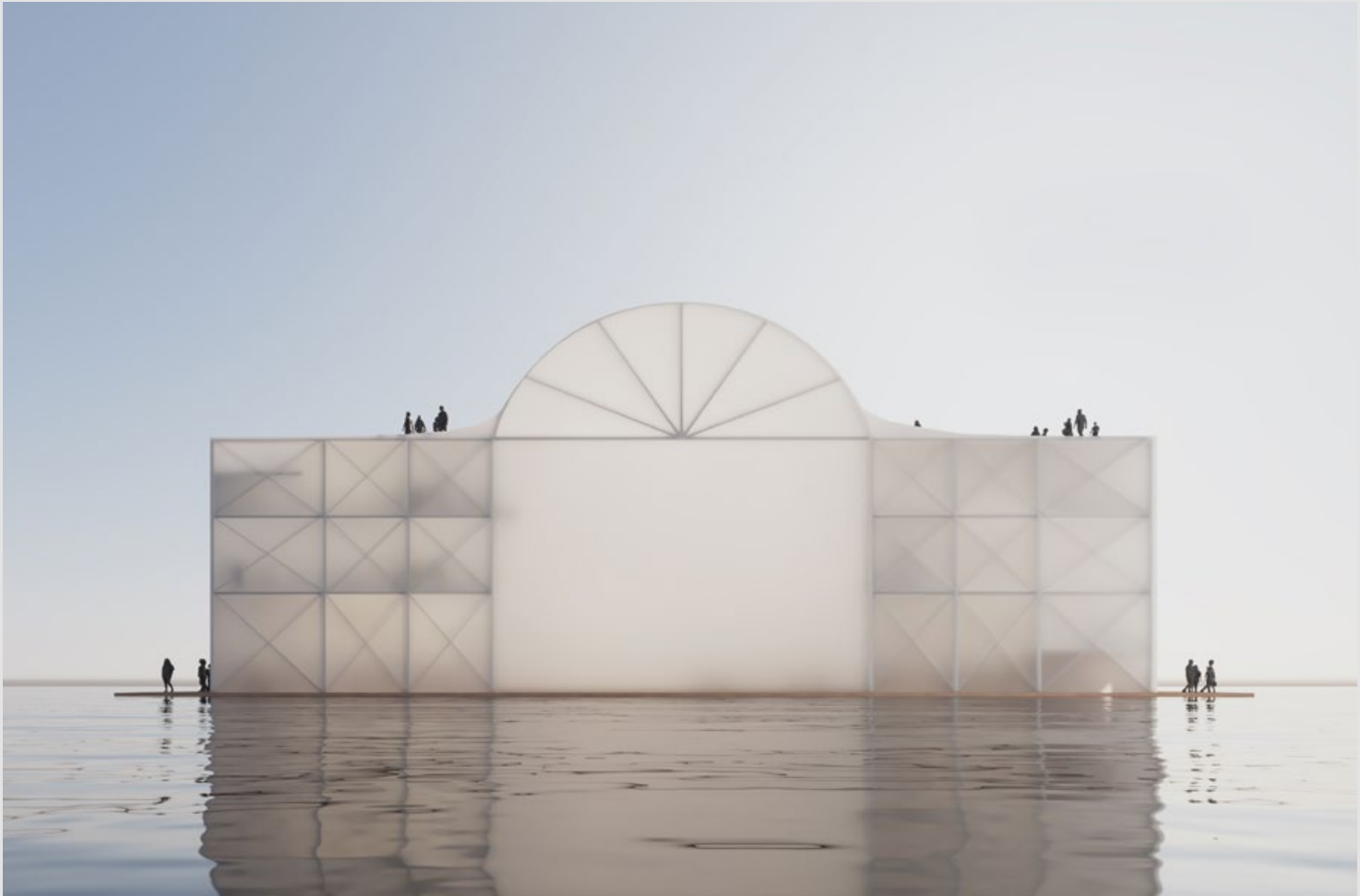
“This is one of the projects I’m most proud of,” van Leeuwen comments, who lives in a multi-generational building and confesses to preferring conversations with older people than those his age. “It was an atrium where nothing happened and then we put in big planters on wheels with couches that they can just roll around and reconfigure for a variety of events and daily needs. It’s easy to design for multigenerational spaces, just some small tweaks and then it works for all ages. I go there often just to check in, it’s always busy.” He laughs. “It’s selfish really, it’s very rewarding.”



Bottom image: DB55

“A lot of clients tend to say, ‘let’s not do it because something might go wrong.’ But, what if something went right?”





Above image:
Cathedrall, a
15-metre floating
structure

A more abstract adventure is ‘Cathedrall’ – an upcoming collaboration with Dutch social enterprise Plastic Whale and agency Max-G, set for launch in 2025. A beautiful, 15-metre-high floating structure made of urban waste materials fished from Amsterdam’s own canals, the project intends to act as a powerful message – engaging the community and serving as a multi-disciplinary hub with an education programme, lectures and even an exhibition.

“The whole point behind [Cathedrall] is working towards something with a clear, tangible goal and gathering the people to work on it. It’s like Lego, you take it apart once complete. Cathedrall is a similar process. To get there is the most important part and then there will be something that exists, but that’s not the end goal – it’s about the journey, the community and raising awareness.”

Cathedrall, DB55, the norm-challenging Dr. Sarphatihuis and upcoming plans for an entire resort concept in Italy are all a

product of what van Leeuwen refers to as ‘do-ism’ – D/DOCK’s superpower. “What we do is all about ‘less talk, just do’. We might fail, but that’s because at least we did something. It’s remarkable how many companies talk, meet, create another report, make another spreadsheet, another presentation – we start with a rough idea and then start doing. We find out what’s a good idea and what’s not on the way, it’s much more interesting.” A way of working that might leave most of us in a cold sweat, but one that van Leeuwen and his team believe is the only path forward to radical, challenging change.

“I think too easily often, people just tend to do whatever they know and are familiar with, because they are afraid or haven’t done it before,” says van Leeuwen. “You need to continuously put your energy into convincing people, as it’s very easy to kill an idea. A lot of clients tend to say, ‘let’s not do it because something might go wrong.’ But, what if something went right?”