

Dyvik Kahlen

Villa RuBa

In Practice

Harold Fallon, Benoît Vandenbulcke, Benoît Burquel, eds.

Dyvik Kahlen

In Practice

Villa RuBa

9 *L'action qui fait*
12 Washday

Villa RuBa
18 The Observer
24 In Progress
171 Unfinished

179 Annotation
181 House Party

188 Biographies

The fourth book in the *In Practice* series opens its pages to Dyvik Kahlen Architects. It follows the conference that the architects gave in Brussels in 2018. Located between London, Porto, Mallorca and Oslo and led by Max Kahlen and Christopher Dyvik, the practice focuses on simple forms and their rationality to create a widely shared imaginary. The multi-localised nature of the practice implies a particular use of graphic communication tools, which they explore without preconceived ideas within the design and construction phases.

In the central essay of this book, Fabrizio Ballabio, an architect, teacher and critic, and the architects Dyvik and Kahlen take us into the development of the Villa RuBa project in Klingelbeek near Arnhem in the Netherlands. Between answers to the clients' wishes and the development of their architectural practice, the book juxtaposes the unfolding of the project on paper or in other media, with its construction in the real world. This strong relationship between construction and design is also intimately linked to the circumstances that led to the creation of this book, which was written during the construction process and completed at the same time as the house in February 2023.

In addition to this central essay on the Villa RuBa project, the book was built in dialogue with other authors who bring transversal and multidisciplinary perspectives, not only on the process underlying the project, but also on the architectural themes it embodies. When constructing the project's narrative, they participated in discussions with the architects and had access to the black box of their work. These three contributions position themselves in very different ways: between theoretical essay, dialogue, and focused reflection on a document.

Introducing the house, Thomas Weaver reflects on the ambivalence of its design, playing with references and ambitions while celebrating the everyday. Referencing Mies' proposal for the Kröller-Müller house and a landscape painting by Jacob van Ruisdael, he questions the architects' verdict on the 'unfinished' character of the house.

Emma Letizia Jones' text "*Annotation*" takes us into the realm of reinterpretation and its graphic representation through Glenn Gould's experience of annotating Bach's scores. She draws a parallel with the process of an architectural project but also with the memory of an architect's or office's practice.



Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, design for the Ellenwoude estate, full-size model, 1912
© Kröller-Müller Museum

Washday

Jacob Dietmahler was not such a fool that he could not see that they had arrived at his friend's home on the washday. They should not have arrived anywhere, certainly not at this great house, the largest but two in Weissenfels, at such a time. Dietmahler's own mother supervised the washing three times a year, therefore the household had linen and white underwear for four months only. He himself possessed 89 shirts, no more. But here, at the Hardenberg house in Kloster Gasse, he could tell from the great dingy snowfall of sheets, pillow-cases, bolster-cases, vests, bodices, drawers, from the upper windows into the courtyard, where grave-looking servants, both men and women, were receiving them into giant baskets, that they washed only once a year. This might not mean wealth, in fact he knew that in this case it didn't, but it was certainly an indication of long standing. A numerous family, also. The underwear of children and young persons, as well as the larger sizes, fluttered through the blue air, as though the children themselves had taken to flight.

Fitzgerald, P., *The Blue Flower*, 1995

This is a book about a house. The story of this house is of an architectural practice founded by a German and a Norwegian, who met in England, subsequently developed a modern kind of office and now operate from separate outposts located in Portugal and the Spanish Balearic Islands. These architects are then approached to design a home for a Dutch couple and their large family of five children, on an almost impossibly romantic site on the outskirts of Arnhem, adjacent to the Rhine, not so far from the German border, which at various moments in its extended history has been cast as a French formal estate, an English garden, a laboratory for scientific farming, a monastery, an allotment, a natural pond and a picturesque ruin. This site forms the setting for a number of other residential projects by the same architects – some of which have already been built and others that are still to come – but this particular house, seemingly to a greater extent than the neighbouring projects on the site, does its very best to extend this palimpsest of associations, not least through its ability to maintain an allegiance to multiple architectural identities at the same time: brilliantly, but also quietly, undemonstratively, this house is somehow both classical *and* vernacular; both an exercise in a cerebral kind of rationalism *and* a looser response to an evolving set of family needs; both open to its enveloping site *and* in communion only with itself; both a fixed, finite and resolutely house-like brick house *and* a structure that denies any singular typology, its pale, almost ethereal render even challenging the idea that it is complete.

Such an interesting, ambivalent state means that the house resonates with the references provided by its architects, but it also seems to be in an unwitting dialogue with the ghost of a piece of architecture closer to home. This spectre is the design produced

in 1912 by a young Ludwig Mies (whose first architectural extension followed shortly after, appending his last name with 'van der Rohe')—another kind of classical but also not classical large house for another ambitious Dutch couple, within another rather grand, but unkempt landscape. More particularly, this is Mies' design to house the expanding but then still nascent art museum of Helene Kröller and her husband Anton Müller, originally located within the Ellenwoude Estate in Wassenaar, just outside The Hague. Mies' design might have drifted into obscurity, helped by the fact that it was never actually built, with the Kröller-Müllers choosing another architect for their museum and on another site altogether, if it were not for the fact that in hoping to get the commission Mies had constructed a 1:1 scale model of his design. And so in a sense his failed design *was* built. A handful of ghostly black-and-white photographs show the full-scale model, built using wood and sail-cloth, onto which Mies had drawn the outline of *trompe-l'oeil* brick courses by hand (another brick house that is not a brick house). One of these photographs even makes a very brief appearance in *S,M,L,XL*¹, alongside which Rem Koolhaas provides a typically elliptical but also very compelling commentary, describing the luminescent structure in the centre of the image as a 'fata morgana' (translated by Google as a 'superior kind of mirage'), and an 'epiphany of anti-matter', before ending with a question 'Was this canvas cathedral an acute flash-forward to *another* architecture?'

It would be unfair to anoint the house on the edge of Arnhem as the answer to this question, as the *other* kind of future architecture that Koolhaas was dreamily imagining. But then again, why not? The house carries all of its references and ambitions so lightly, with very little fuss or fanfare, and so why should it not also bear the weight of an architectural prophecy made nearly 30 years earlier? Perhaps it is at this point that we should even consider the architects' own verdict on the house as 'unfinished' more seriously, as an exercise in the repeating rituals of the everyday rather than as a grand, immutable architectural solution. Such an ambition might suggest that Mies' spooky canvas cathedral is not such an appropriate emblem after all, and that other more animated, more ordinary allusions might need to be found. One such alternative could even be retrieved from the walls of the Mauritshuis, in the form of Jacob van Ruisdael's painting, *View of Haarlem with Bleaching Grounds* (1670–75)—which depicts a house in a Dutch landscape underneath a scudding cloudy sky, and in which the architecture on display is less invested in the bricks and mortar of the buildings, than in the linen that stretches out in neat furrows over the fields, or more especially in the domestic washing line, totem to both abstraction and occupancy, repetition and change.

Thomas Weaver

¹ Koolhaas, R., Mau, B., *S,M,L,XL*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam, 1995



Jacob van Ruisdael, *View of Haarlem with Bleaching Grounds*, c. 1670–75
Courtesy Mauritshuis, The Hague

Villa RuBa

Introduce an observer into any field of forces, influences or communications and that field becomes distorted.

Reyner Banham, "The New Brutalism",
Architectural Review (December 1995) p. 354

The Observer

This book documents the construction of a family house in Klingelbeek, Arnhem, designed by Dyvik Kahlen between 2015 and 2020 and built between 2020 and 2023. It explores the events leading up to the commission; the brief that was originally given; its development during the design phase; and the adjustments which were made in preparation for and during its construction stage. It does so without wanting to persuade the reader with high-flown claims about the nature of architectural design or about the meaning or politics of practicing architecture in the present age. Put modestly, the book wishes to reflect on an experience—and it sets out to retrace how a specific practice, with a specific range of interests, succeeded in producing a building with specific qualities that is the result of a specific set of challenges and circumstances.



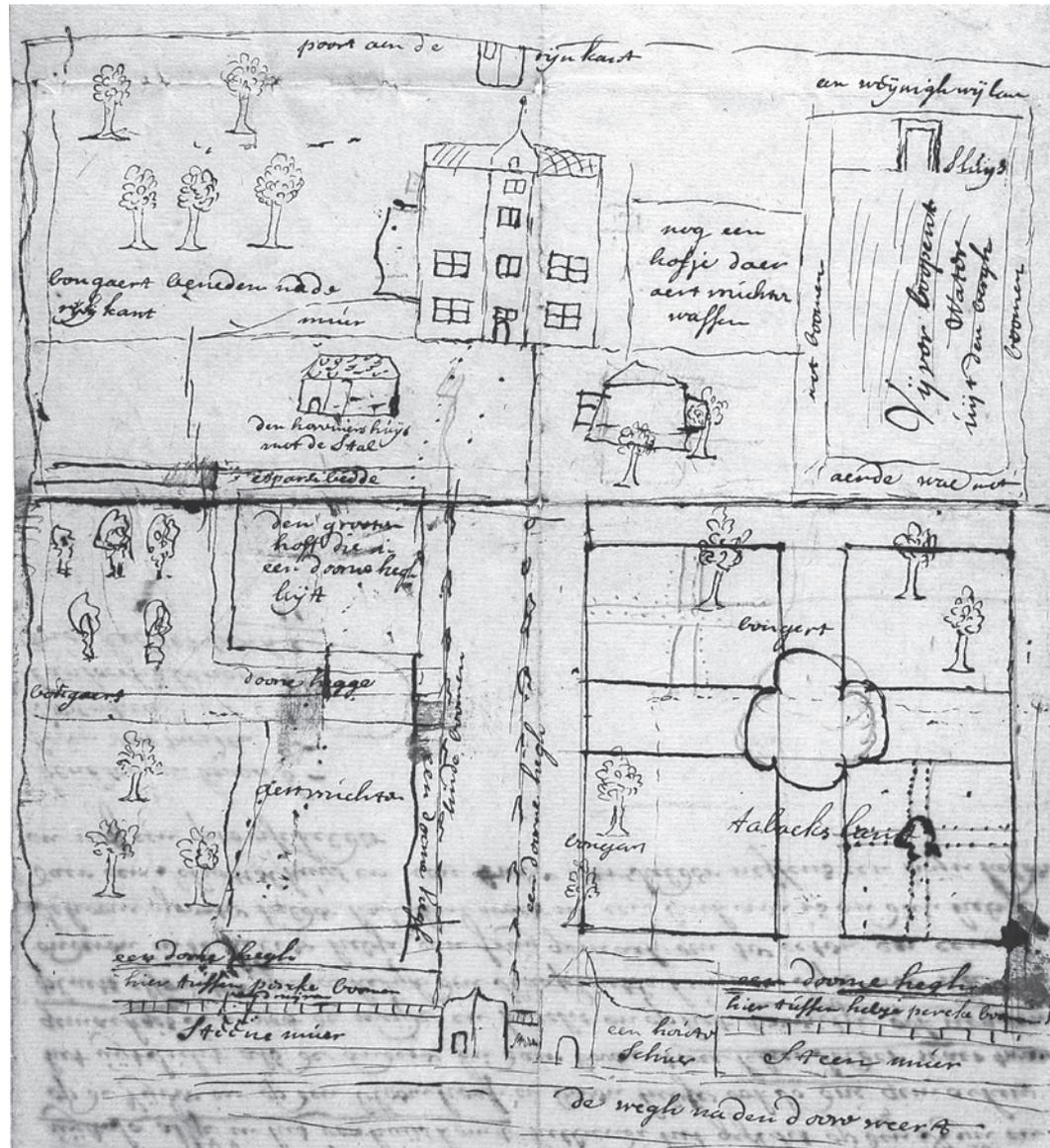
In Progress

It has only been minutes since we broke off from one of our weekly online site visits with Barry and Marinus from Karbouw. By now, Villa RuBa has been nearly 53 months in the making, 14 of which were marked by the pandemic with all its attending planning and organisational obstacles. In ways which have become customary nowadays, we see the building site from a Zoom window. The contractor sits in a small shed, with his own (real) window overlooking the works. From time to time, he tips his screen to show us the building's progress. Today, for example, he revealed part of the upper floors where the large Lego-like blockwork is piling up.

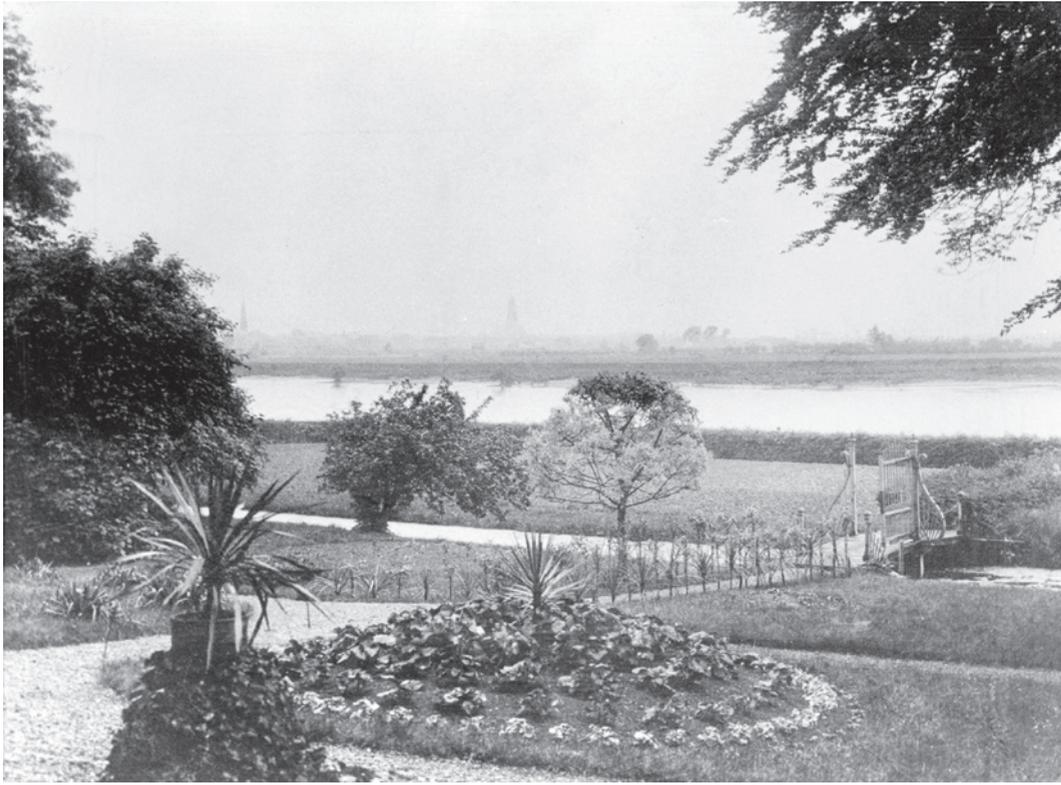


Our last visit to the site took place in March 2020, on the occasion of the completion of two other commissions. They are part, together with Villa RuBa, of an ensemble of seven new residential buildings currently being developed at Klingelbeek Park, all of which were designed by us, three of which have been completed and four of which are under construction as we write.





Dating back to the early 15th century, the site is one of the many agricultural estates formerly developing Klingelbeek—a ribbon village stretching along the road between Arnhem and Oosterbeek. Over the centuries, it has undergone many changes of ownership and various amendments to the manor house and its garden. It started as a country estate, after which the garden was reworked in the French manner in 1722. In the late 18th century, it was remodelled again according to the principles of romantic English landscape style, and in the 19th century, subtropical crops were introduced. Finally, after the Second World War ended in 1945, a vegetable garden and an orchard were laid out. The property was ultimately purchased by Schipper Bosch in 2015 with the idea of forming a large residential community and, possibly, of building a house for the developer and his family.



The setting is enchanting: a large manor house is set within a plot fronting the Rhine, with views of the canalboats floating by and of the nature reserve on the opposite side of the river. Around it, a natural and lush park develops, somewhat reminiscent of an English garden.

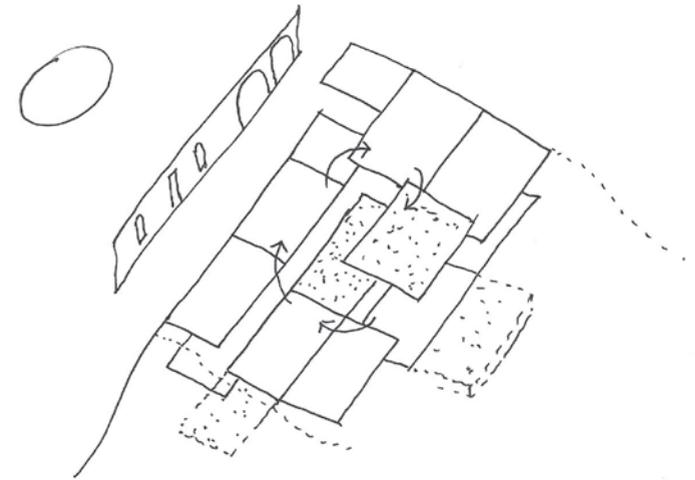




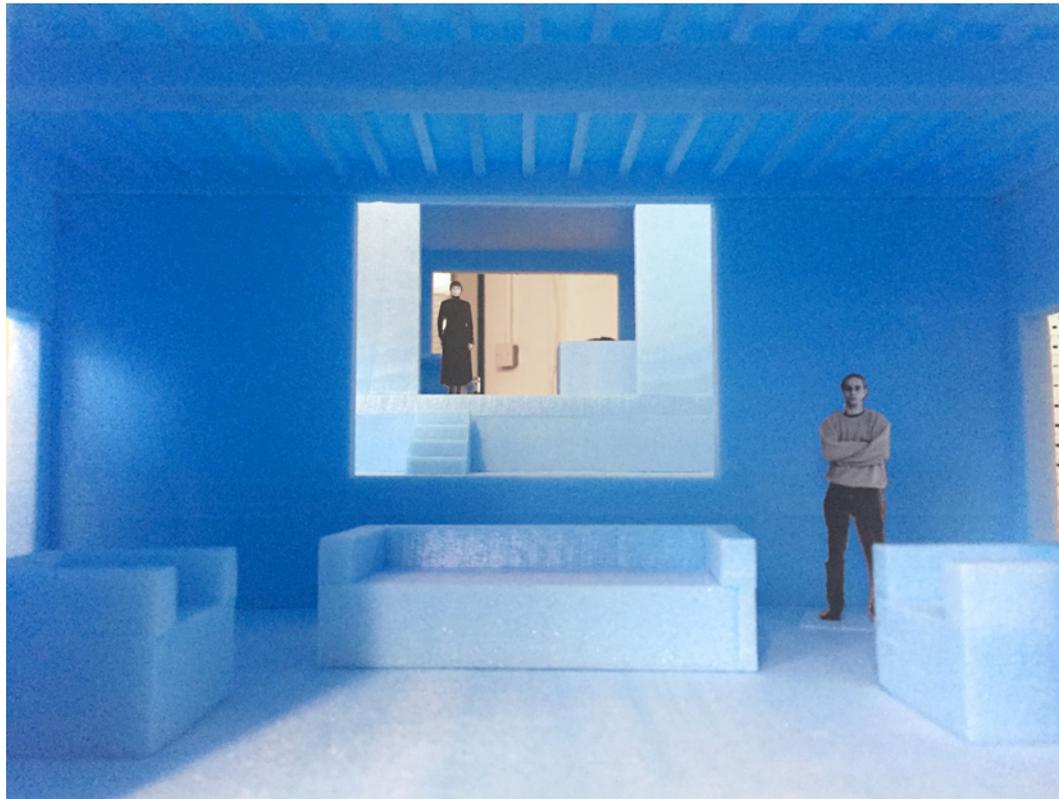
Other than the main villa, there are remnants of the estate's bygone era as a country home: an old vegetable garden, a pond and the ruins of an old barn. Large old trees are scattered around in slightly overgrown fashion, but one can tell that they were planted purposefully—both in terms of their placement and in terms of the types of species chosen.

Villa RuBa is being built to the north-east of the old manor house, tucked behind the ruined wall of an old stable building which it appropriates and behind which it hides. The wall faces a square and is pierced by arches of varying heights some of which reveal fragments of the construction site on the opposite side. Beyond the wall, the building is set back by 3.5 metres in order to create a buffer zone between the house and its more public surroundings. Today, this space is mostly used for storing building materials but it will soon be used as the villa's entrance patio.



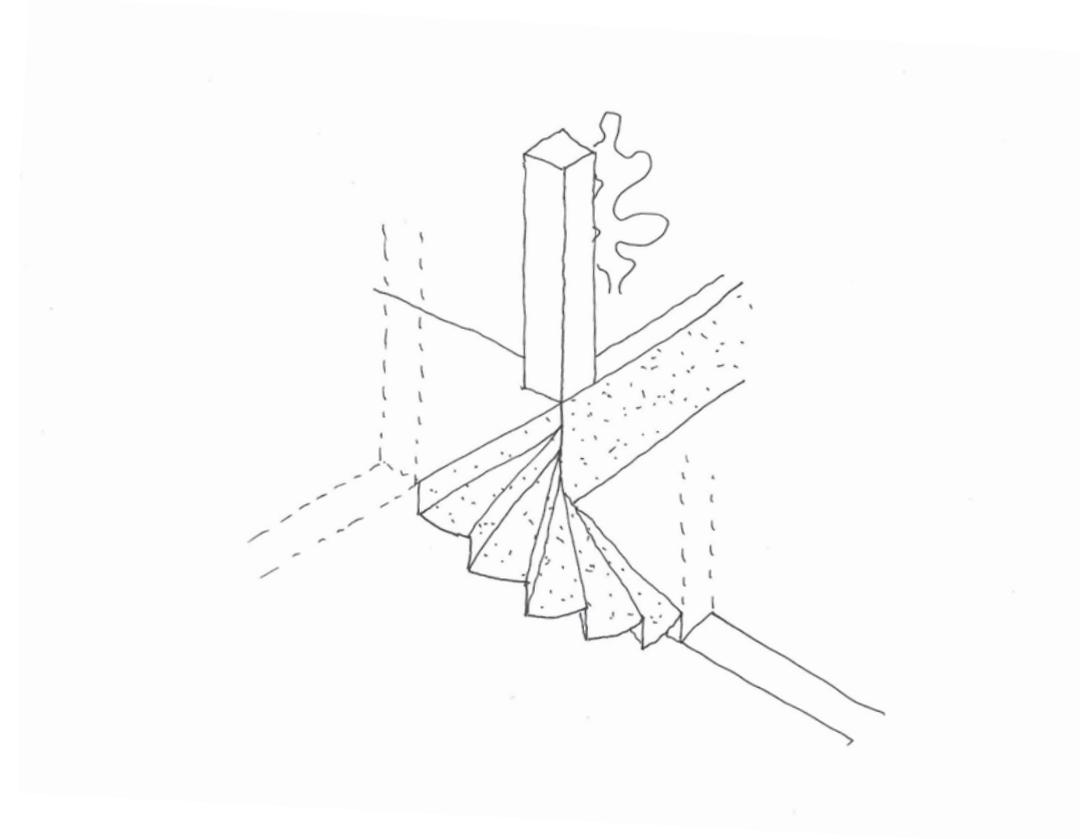


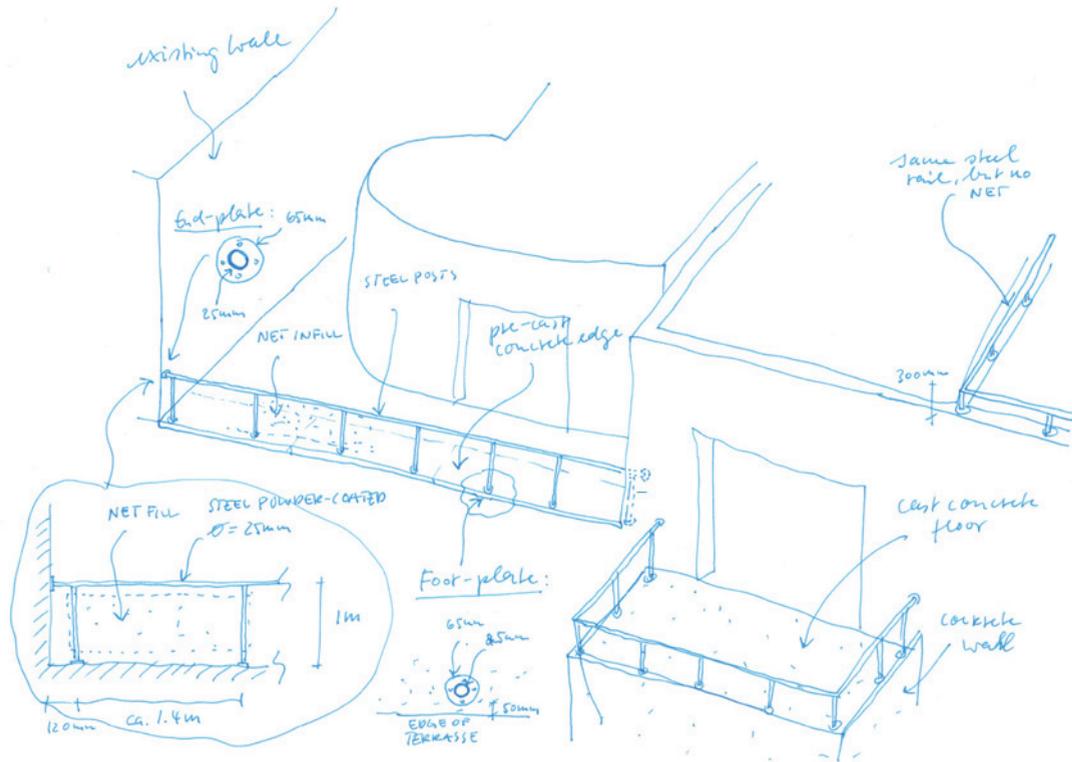
The project is (by far) one of our most elaborate designs. Despite being relatively simple—a box with rectangular openings—on the outside, the inside of the house takes the form of a complex interplay of rooms, regular in proportion and size, but all situated at different levels and characterised by a unique relationship to the topography of the site.



The whole system is governed by a series of principles: the plan is based on a nine-square grid on which the perimeter units descend and rise to form a stepped, three-dimensional spiral. But within this seemingly neat framework, exceptions are thick on the ground.

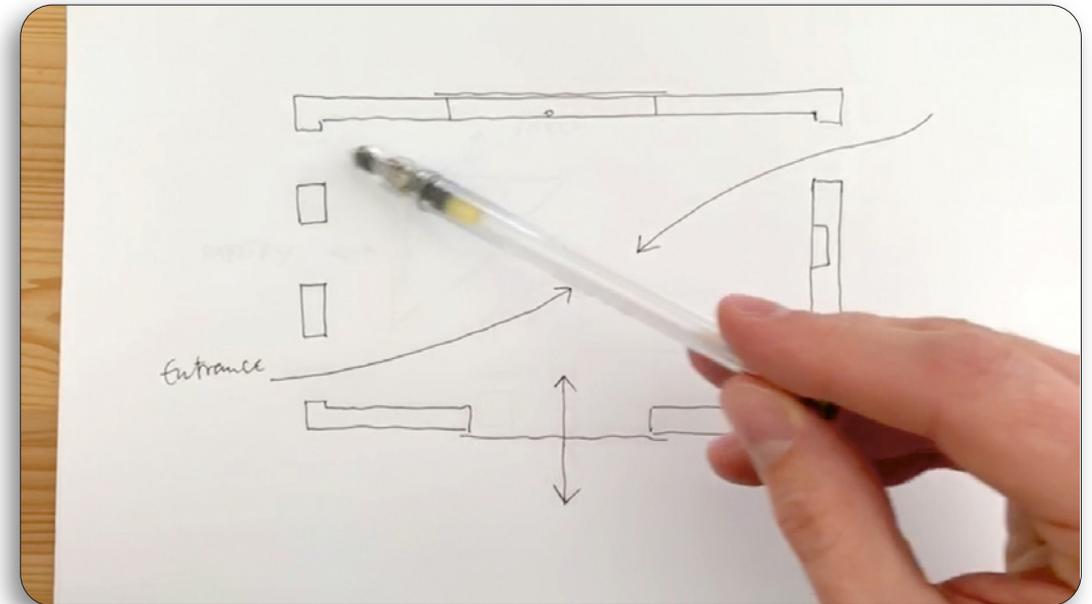
Some modules are oriented west-east, others north-south; some are used as individual rooms while others are subdivided; some are tilted while in others, windows are left out. Staircases are also interspersed throughout the system, thereby making it possible to shortcut between the different levels of the spiral.





This level of intricacy is partly the result of an unusually long project timeline. Commissioned in 2015, construction began in 2020, meaning that we had over 5 years to draw the building. During this time, the project was in constant evolution—and still is, in fact. Right now, we are revisiting the flooring strategy and adding new intricate detail to the external railings.

However, an even more decisive role was played by our clients Rune and Bart, both of whose ambitions for their new home steered our design in directions usually uncharted by us. Indeed, though this may be said of any architectural commission, Villa RuBa (Rune + Bart) is very much the result of an extended dialogue —sometimes in the form of WhatsApp messages, but at other times by means of phonecalls, Zoom meetings, recorded videos, e-mails and, more rarely perhaps, personal encounters.



In fact, the commission itself must be understood as part of an even larger dialogue. Not just because of our involvement in the broader Klingelbeek development but because, by the time we were asked to design the villa, our relationship with Rune and Bart was already several years strong. We first met the couple during our university studies at the AA and, since graduating, had the chance to collaborate on a number of different building operations—some built, others not, and some ongoing. These included a small house in north London (built in 2014); a project (unbuilt) for eleven terraced houses in the historic centre of Amersfoort (also from 2014); and a commission to design a reception space, offices and a seminar room for a large-scale development in Amersfoort. By the time Klingelbeek entered the picture, we were just about to inaugurate Jachthaven't Raboes—a new harbour building in Eemnes incorporating a workshop, an office for the harbour master, public facilities and a large covered external patio. Villa RuBa was, in this sense, just a relatively small piece in a much larger puzzle of collaborations.

