Hella Jongerius assembled a force of the Netherlands’ top designers including Irma Boom and Rem Koolhaas for the prestigious renovation of the UN North Delegates Lounge in the UN Building in New York.

WORDS Oli Stratford
PHOTOS Frank Oudeman
During the summer of 1986, Hella Jongerius was backpacking across America. She was 23 years old, two years shy of enrolling at Design Academy Eindhoven, and picking her way from state to state. Three months in, she reached New York. She had a week in the city, but her money had run out. So, broke, Jongerius went to Turtle Bay, a Manhattan neighbourhood on the bank of the East River and the home of the UN Building, a steel and glass compound built in the 1950s to house the United Nations. “I’d gone down there to see the building and I was impressed of course,” says Jongerius. “It’s a beautiful building. But I couldn’t go in, because I couldn’t afford the tour. So I could only look at it from the outside.”

Jongerius was refurbishing one of the rooms in the UN Building and asked Jongerius whether she would lead the design. It was an unusual commission. Jongerius had made her name in the 1990s designing furniture and accessories for Vitra and Droog. The pieces established her sensitive treatment of colour and pattern, but she had limited experience in interior design. “But I’m easily bored and I love something that really puzzles me,” she says. “So I thought why not?”

The room was the North Delegates Lounge, a lofty meeting space built on the east edge of the UN’s Conference Building. It had been designed in the 1950s as a semi-informal gathering spot for UN delegates and, built in the international style, lent itself to hushed meetings. “It’s the place where all the real issues of the UN play out,” says Jongerius. Yet over time, the space had declined and small changes made throughout its lifespan had robbed it of its character.

Jongerius’ brief was simple: drag the lounge into the 21st century, tailoring its interior, furniture and floor plan to meet the demands of modern diplomacy. “The Dutch government delivered me a steak,” says Jongerius. “My job was to grill it.”

It was a prestigious commission. The UN Building had been completed in 1952 after a design process overseen by the American architect Wallace Harrison. Harrison led a fractious design team that was dominated by Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer, the architects dividing the site modernising edict of transforming the world from warring states into a global network. Its famous Secretariat Building is the quintessence of a skyscraper, a marble-edged oblong that shines green thanks to the Thermapane glass on its facade, while its General Assembly is a stone structure that houses the Security Council Chamber and meeting rooms, as well as the North Delegates Lounge.

“The UN project had about it something of the scope and generosity of the New Deal,” wrote Christopher Hitchens in 1994 and, at its unveiling, the complex was met with praise. The

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1 Hella Jongerius (b. 1963) is a Dutch product and furniture designer whose Jongeriuslab studio is based in Berlin. She is known for furniture and accessory design that combines industrial manufacture with craft sensibilities and techniques.
2 Design Academy Eindhoven is a Dutch university-founded in 1947 that provides education in art, architecture and design programmes.
3 The United Nations was founded in 1945 as a peace-keeping body, it is composed of 193 member states and two observer states.
4 Vitra was founded in Weil am Rhein in Germany by Willi Fehlbaum in 1950. The company is now based in Switzerland, manufacturing the works of designers including Charles and Ray Eames, Philippe Starck and Ron Arad.
5 Droog is a conceptual design company founded by Gijs Bakker and design historian Renny Ramakers in Amsterdam in 1993. The company works with a wide range of designers, including Marcel Wanders to Jurgen Bey and Piet Hein Eek.
6 Wallace Harrison (1895-1981) co-founded Harrison & Abramovitz in 1941. He is seen as one of the United States’ premier corporate architects of the mid-20th century.
architect Philip Johnson described it as “by far the best example of modern planning I have seen”, while even its fierce critic the writer Lewis Mumford exalted its “green, moonlight splendour”. Such hyperbole seemed apt. After the Second World War and the failure of the League of Nations, the UN was a new: a promise for a united world, with its modernist headquarters standing as its keystone symbol. Yet the promise would not last. As early as 1967, the US president candidate candidate Nixon dismissed the organisation as “obscure and inadequate”, and by the millennium, decades of perceived inaction had robbed it of its sheen.

Christopher Hitchens (1949-2011) was a British author, journalist and public speaker, known for his leftist politics, social criticism and strong advocacy of atheism.

Philip Johnson (1906-2005) was an American architect, who is best known for his works on skyscrapers, his iconic Glass House in New Canaan, and for his influence on the development of modern architecture.

Lewis Mumford (1895-1990) was an American sociologist, anthropologist, urbanist, and cultural critic who wrote on architecture and seascape.

The League of Nations was a forerunner to the UN. Founded in 1919 as an expression of the spirit of peace that had been undermined by Indochina and the absence of key countries like the US. It collapsed in 1946 following the end of the Second World War.

Richard Nixon (1913-1994) served as the 37th president of the US. He was in office between 1969 and 1974, resigning to avoid impeachment following the Watergate Scandal.

Louise Schouwenberg (b. 1954) is a Dutch design researcher, psychologist and writer. She is a director of Architecture and Design at the University of Modern Art in New York.

Laurie Olin (1928-2019) was an American landscape architect whose works included parks and public spaces.

The design of the UN North Delegates Lounge is a result of a collaboration between Jongerius and Rem Koolhaas, two of the most prestigious architects of the 21st century. Jongerius, a Dutch visual artist and film director, is known for his innovative use of materials and techniques, while Koolhaas, a Pritzker Prize winner, is renowned for his architectural vision and his work on cultural institutions.

The lounge was designed by Jongerius, who was consulted on the overall design. “We all had our own egos and characters, but during our design meetings we had one nose, one goal,” says Jongerius. It is a position supported by Lester. “Everyone tried to get to a point that would help the process advance other people’s ideas,” he says. “Unlike a team sport like football where everyone plays the same game, this was comparable to filmmaking. You have a director, a cameraman, a lighting man and actors, and all these disciplines have to find a harmony in one particular piece.”

Such an approach contrasted with the original design of the UN Building, where conflicts between the conceptual leanings of Le Corbusier – who wanted to use the structure as a testing ground for his Radiant City concept – and the pragmatism of Harriman and Max Abramovitz’s pragmatic floor lamps, and leather Barcelona-style chairs designed by Knoll – were retained. “We didn’t want it to look like you’d just opened up a magazine of Dutch design,” says Schouwenberg. “There’s a fairly large number of Dutch designers who do well in the world, which is strange for a very small country, and I think that’s because they look beyond our borders and adopt a very international, self-reflective approach. We wanted to embody that self-reflection, rather than necessarily any notion of ‘Dutchness’.

With this in mind, the team focused on how delegates might use the lounge. Discussions with politicians, historians and urban designers were an essential part of the process. Jongerius’ project was not only about the physical renovation of the space, but also about the broader context in which it was situated.

The seating consists of existing, Dutch and international classics and new designs. Here, cards with images of the chairs are placed on a foam board.

*The Pritzker Prize is an annual international award that is funded by the US. It was established in 1979 to recognize the life’s work of an architect. It is known for its status as one of the most prestigious and influential awards in the field.

Rem Koolhaas (b. 1944) is a Dutch architect, theorist and urbanist. He studied at the Architectural Association in London and The University of Illinois before founding OMA in 1975. He is known for projects such as the Seattle Central Library (2004) and the Pritzker Prize. The Pritzker Prize was won by Rem Koolhaas in 1995.

The lounge was designed for the UN in 2005 after a collaboration with the founders of De Stijl. His work is known for its clear, uncomplicated forms, which are often based on geometric shapes.

Joep van Lieshout (b. 1963) is a Dutch artist active from 1986 to 1990. His Trash bin was designed in 1993, and his collaboration with Atelier Van Lieshout in 2006 produced his first work for Vitra, the Vitra Workbench series for Vitra.

De Ploeg is a Dutch upholstery and furniture manufacturer that was founded in 1941. It is known for its use of traditional techniques and materials, such as the Seattle Central Library (2004) and the Pritzker Prize. The Pritzker Prize was won by Rem Koolhaas in 1995.

Jasper Morrison (b. 1959) is a British designer active in London, Paris and Tokyo. He is known for his minimalist style and has been involved in numerous projects for brands such as Vitra and Vitra. His work includes the Vitra Workbench series for Vitra, which was designed in 2006.

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The chairs are (left to right) Hans Wegner’s Peacock chair, the UN Lounge chair, Gerrit Rietveld’s Utrecht chair and leather Barcelona-style chair designed by Knoll. The carpet is designed by Jongerius and manufactured by Dutch brand Desso.
The brief was simple: drag the lounge into the 21st century, tailoring it to meet the demands of modern diplomacy. “The Dutch government delivered me a steak,” says Jongerius. “My job was to grill it.”

Yet the harmony that marked the early stages of the project was disrupted when the team presented the scheme to the CMP in New York. “You have to understand that the commissioning for this project was not straightforward,” says Saskia Simon, a senior architect at OMA studio and the project architect for the lounge. “We were commissioned by the Dutch government, who chose and judged the design, but only afterwards did we take it to New York to show the CMP.” Immediately, plans unravelled, with multiple aspects of the design questioned by the CMP. Screens designed by Lester to break up the space were removed, while furniture pieces such as Jurgen Bey’s Ear chair were also vetoed as it was felt that the seat’s wrap-around headrest might obscure delegates’ view of the room. “In Holland it was all OK, then we went to New York and they said, ‘You can’t have this and you can’t have this,’” says Jongerius.

“We were told that the delegates needed to be able to see the whole room quickly, so we weren’t allowed to have things rising over a certain horizon,” OMA’s plan for the bar was also amended. “We had created a bottle display and modelled the whole thing,” says Simon. “Then we came to New York and were told, ‘You can’t show bottles — that would promote alcohol.’ There were always reasons for the changes – the alcohol would be unsuitable for delegates from Muslim countries – but we never knew about them during the design process.”

Amid the hyperbole of the UN Building’s unveiling in 1952, Mumford had sounded a note of consumption of alcohol.

> that we should respect what was already there and respect the original design,” says Schouwenberg. “In many instances, this space is a tribute to the past.”

Disegno.
Similar problems to those faced with the aluminium wall also began to impact upon other members of the team. Jongerius had worked with the Dutch ceramicist Royal Tichelaar Makkum to create a curtain for the space’s east window that was made from semi-glazed porcelain beads hung on knotted yarn. The beads’ layout was random – albeit denser at the “...”

The idea of a curtain had itself been a safety concession. “They don’t want people to be able to look in at the delegates; you don’t want a sniper on the bridge to see who is in the space,” says Jongerius. But it was another curtain that provided Boom with a creative inlet to the project. “Originally I had proposed engraving text on the aluminium wall as a chance to work with Dutch-designed typefaces,” she says. “But the UN didn’t want text so I thought, ‘Well hey, what can I do now?’ So I took on the curtain.” Boom’s Knots & Grid curtain, developed with Knoll and Sefar, stretches to around 7m high and 35m long, hanging at an angle to cover the slanted glazed north wall of the lounge. An icy blue lino weave, the threads of the curtain conjoin in the rigidity of the New York grid system. Yet the design proved controversial. “The CMP would sit with safety guys in the design meeting and when I presented the bead curtain, the safety agent said, ‘If a bomb hits this window, those ceramic balls will explode into thousands of bullets,’” says Jongerius, who was asked to submit the design for safety testing. Yet the bead curtain, unlike the aluminium wall, made it into the lounge unscathed. “The management really liked the idea,” says Jongerius, “and that can make strict rules, even ones about safety, fluid.”

The simplicity of Boom’s grid is also evident in the most drastic change the team made to the space: the removal of the mezzanine above the east window. When the lounge opened in 1952, the window had been left clear, masked only by a world map that hung a few feet in front of it. Yet renovations to the lounge in 1979 had removed the map, replacing it with a mezzanine level that obliterated the window’s view over the East River. “When we began, we really questioned that mezzanine, but it’s a huge honour to contribute to a space like this and we didn’t feel like we could remove it,” says Simon. Throughout the competition phase, the mezzanine remained in OMA’s plans, growing more awkward as the design advanced. “Our first idea was to add >

> hand drawings over to the CMP, who would take over and that is what would be built,” says Simon. “There were a lot of factors we could not influence.”

The Sphere tables by Jongerius for Vitra are designed to shield delegates’ computer screens. The tapestry on the wall is a gift to the UN from the People’s Republic of China.
Knots & Grid curtains by Irma Boom hang along the north wall windows. Fauteuil Direction chairs by Jean Prouvé and AVL Workbench tables by Joep van Lieshout are used in the lounge’s central section. The floor lamps were designed by Harris & Abramovitz especially for the UN Building.
“The curtain became too decorative. I decided we only needed this very minimalist grid. From that north facade you see the sky, and all the clouds just slip into the grid.”

> a mezzanine over the entrance area and connect the two with a bridge, but that was fairly invasive,” says Simon. “So then we decided to take out the old one and say that we had moved it to the entrance area, but CMP said that we couldn’t add anything to the structure of the building. As this went on, we began to reflect on how good the space would look if we left it out all together.” The removal of the mezzanine opened up the lounge, restoring its views onto the East River and over to the neon 1930s Pepsi-Cola sign that sits atop a converted bottling plant in neighbouring Long Island City. “That was a real breakthrough. The light, the power, the view, even that old sign became visible again,” says Jongerius, whose Knots & Beads curtain is porous enough not to obscure the view. “It’s a cliché, but it’s a window onto the world.”

The mezzanine removal was another deviation from the original plan, yet it proved to be vital to the design. It is indicative of the project as a whole, one in which good ideas ran aground against the needs of the CMP, while others were elevated and transformed by the constraints of the project. Equally, it is reminiscent of the original creation of the UN Building, where the idealism of Le Corbusier was met by the realism of Harrison, resulting in a structure that Koolhaas once described as “a building that an American could never have thought and a European could never have built.” Yet as much as anything, it is emblematic of the UN itself, a peace-keeping organisation that fosters international cooperation, yet does so through a structure of competing nations, where interests are aggressively played off against each other, all in the name of the greater good.

“Right at the beginning I was reading about the UN and in the design meetings I focused on the discrepancies of what it stands for and all the compromises it has to make,” says Schouwenberg. “You quickly learn that everything is about compromising and working with the pride of governments. You look at something like the current situation in Syria and wonder why they don’t take action there. I think the UN might make a person very cynical, because all the ideals are perfect, but if you dive into the real projects you see it’s only compromises. I don’t know if those discussions influenced us, but I do believe that creative minds are affected by brainstorming, and thinking in that way is necessary to go beyond the usual clichés. The cliché would be that the UN is all about peace keeping. But in reality there is a lot of opposition. Frankly, if I worked for the UN I couldn’t keep up.”

The project completes in September; in spite of the tribulations, the lounge that looks out over the East River has been restored. “We had such a strict briefing and it’s such a complex project that you can’t measure it by your knowledge of anything else. It was a difficult project and of course when you’re in the shit, you can’t be creative with those issues on your plate the whole time,” says Jongerius. “But I was finally able to go back to the UN Building.”

Oli Stratford (see p. 10)

Frank Oudeman is a Dutch photographer working in New York. He has shot the work of SANAA, OMA and Issey Miyake.

READING LIST


The UN Building by Ben Murphy, Aaron Betsky and Kofi Annan, Thames & Hudson, 2005.
