

OMA's layout design trisects the central section of the UN North Delegates Lounge, with private seating along the edges and communal furniture in the middle.

# UN North Delegates Lounge

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

WORDS Oli Stratford  
PHOTOS Frank Oudeman



<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Design Academy Eindhoven is a Dutch university founded in 1947. It is world renowned for its art, architecture and design programmes.

<sup>3</sup> The United Nations was founded in 1945 as a peace-keeping body. It is composed of 193 member states and two observer states.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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, from Marcel Wanders to Jurgen Bey and Piet Hein Eek.

<sup>6</sup> Wallace Harrison (1895-1981) co-founded Harrison & Abramovitz in 1941. He is seen as one of the United States' premiere corporate architects of the mid-20th century.

During the summer of 1986, Hella Jongerius<sup>1</sup> was backpacking across America. She was 23 years old, two years shy of enrolling at Design Academy Eindhoven,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> “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.”

Twenty-five years later, Jongerius was telephoned by the Dutch foreign ministry. The ministry 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<sup>4</sup> and Droog.<sup>5</sup> 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 floorplan 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.<sup>6</sup> Harrison led a fractious design team that was dominated by Le Corbusier<sup>7</sup> and Oscar Niemeyer;<sup>8</sup> the architects dividing the site into three main buildings and using contemporary geometric forms to reflect the UN’s 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 bow tie that flips up to face a central plaza. To the east is the Conference Building, a three-storey 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<sup>9</sup> in 1994 and, at its unveiling, the complex was met with praise. The >

The east window is veiled by the Knots & Beads curtain by Hella Jongerius and Dutch ceramics company Royal Tichelaar Makkum. In front is the UN Lounge chair by Jongerius for Vitra.





<sup>7</sup> Le Corbusier (1887-1965), born Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris, was a Swiss French architect and one of the fathers of modern architecture and architecture theory. He was responsible for seminal buildings such as Villa Savoye (1928), Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles (1952), and multiple buildings in Chandigarh, India (1952-1959).

<sup>8</sup> Oscar Niemeyer (1907-2012) was a Brazilian architect, whose work favoured monumental curving forms cast in reinforced concrete. Highly influential in the development of modern architecture, Niemeyer was the chief architect for the creation of the Brazilian city of Brasília (1956-1960).

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Hitchens (1949-2011) was a British-American author, journalist and public speaker, known for his leftist politics, social criticism and strong advocacy of atheism.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Johnson (1906-2005) was an influential American architect who worked primarily with glass. Through his writings, Johnson was also an important architectural tastemaker and, in 1930, he founded the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis Mumford (1895-1990) was an American writer, sociologist and literary critic. He was also the foremost architecture writer in the US, serving as The New Yorker's architecture critic throughout the 1940s and 1950s.

<sup>12</sup> The League of Nations was a forerunner to the UN. Founded in 1919 as an assemblage of nations devoted to promoting peace, the League was undermined by indecision and the absence of key nations such as the US. It collapsed in 1946 following its failure to prevent the Second World War.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Nixon (1913-1994) was the 37th President of the US. He was in office between 1969 and 1974, ultimately resigning to avoid impeachment following the Watergate Scandal.

<sup>14</sup> Louise Schouwenberg (b. 1954) is a Dutch design theorist who studied psychology at Radboud University Nijmegen, before seeking further education in sculpture and philosophy. She has worked as a visual artist and was appointed head of the masters programme in contextual design at Design Academy Eindhoven in 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Irma Boom (b. 1960) is a Dutch graphic designer who trained at AKI Art Academy in Enschede, the Netherlands. She



Textile samples of the carpet by Desso.  
PHOTO Jongeriuslab

> architect Philip Johnson<sup>10</sup> described it as “by far the best example of modern planning I have seen”, while even its fierce critic the writer Lewis Mumford<sup>11</sup> exalted its “green, moonlight splendour”. Such hyperbole seemed apt. After the Second World War and the failure of the League of Nations,<sup>12</sup> the UN was a new broom: a promise for a united world, with its modernist headquarters standing as its keenest symbol. Yet the promise would not last. As early as 1967, the US presidential candidate Richard Nixon<sup>13</sup> dismissed the organisation as “obsolete and inadequate”, and by the millennium, decades of perceived inaction had robbed it of its sheen. What had originally been a symbol of modernity was now seen as creaky and blustering.

Such decline was echoed by the architecture. The complex had been designed to house delegates for 57 member states, yet by 2011 UN membership had swollen to 193 states, with maintenance costs of its ageing headquarters ballooning to \$19 million per year. Faced with this deterioration, the UN established the Office of the Capital Master Plan (CMP), a division charged with overseeing a \$1.9 billion renovation of the building. Expected to complete in 2014, the scheme is paid for by member states, with 10 nations also funding overhauls of select spaces within the complex. It is within this context that Jongerius came to be responsible for the North Delegates Lounge. Her task was a physical renovation, yet it also spread through to the symbolic: could design restore something of the UN and its headquarters’ original moonlight splendour?

Jongerius’ first move was to select collaborators, whom the foreign ministry specified had to be Dutch. Louise Schouwenberg,<sup>14</sup> a design professor at Design Academy Eindhoven and a long-term collaborator of Jongerius, was brought on board. The graphic designer Irma Boom<sup>15</sup> and visual artist Gabriel Lester<sup>16</sup> followed shortly afterwards. “Finally we knew that we needed an architect,” says Jongerius. “So we thought, ‘Why not ask the best one?’ We approached Rem Koolhaas.”<sup>17</sup> Koolhaas, a Pritzker Prize<sup>18</sup> winner whose 1978 book *Delirious New York* detailed his admiration for the UN Building, joined the team together with OMA. Having divided responsibilities according to expertise, the designers formed a proposal.

Early meetings were held in Boom’s studio in Amsterdam, where the bones of the renovation were agreed. The Dutch ministry wanted a showcase for Dutch design and this aim was translated into furniture choices for the room. Dutch classics such as Gerrit Rietveld’s Utrecht chair,<sup>19</sup> Jongerius’ Polder sofa<sup>20</sup> and Joep van Lieshout’s AVL Workbench table<sup>21</sup> were brought in, while seats were reupholstered in Jongerius’ take on Daphne, a green and blue multi-tone fabric woven by the Dutch brand De Ploeg<sup>22</sup> in 1962. Non-Dutch pieces were also introduced. Jasper Morrison’s Trash bin<sup>23</sup> was joined by the Eames’ swivelling Aluminium Group side chair<sup>24</sup> and Jean Prouvé’s Fauteuil Direction café chair.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, pieces original to the lounge – Hans Wegner’s Peacock chair,<sup>26</sup> Wallace Harrison and Max Abramovitz’s triptych floor lamps,<sup>27</sup> and leather Barcelona-style chairs designed by Knoll<sup>28</sup> – 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



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

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, historical photography and a research trip undertaken by Boom to visit the building – “I was told I had five minutes, but stayed for an hour; I’m a hard person to send away” – began to shape their understanding of how the UN works. Primarily, Koolhaas altered the room’s floorplan. Whereas previously the layout had been haphazard, Koolhaas and OMA imposed order. At the room’s entrance to the west, the team added a reception area and a bank of 231 e-paper<sup>29</sup> screens displaying meeting times from around the building. Café seating and a black, resin bar populate the lounge’s rear, while the room’s mid-section is trisected into private seating at the edges and communal furniture in the centre. The segregation of space is strengthened by carpeting developed by Jongerius and the Dutch brand Desso.<sup>30</sup> Shaded from brown to grey, the carpet changes colour as it moves through from reception to lounge to bar.

It is a layout informed by the peculiarities of the UN. “How that place works is not normal,” says Jongerius. “You can’t just come in and sit wherever you would like to. There are agendas everywhere and, if two people are sitting together, it’s a meeting arranged by lobbyists. If you enter the space as a delegate, in one second you need to be able to see who is in there and who’s talking with who.” To address this, Jongerius devised flexible seating that could adapt to the delegates’ needs. Working with Vitra, she created two new pieces for the lounge. The UN Lounge chair is a stitched fabric scoop seat with wheels on its legs, while the Sphere table is an oak table with a milky hood on one corner to shield a computer from view. “It goes without saying that in the UN you’re not allowed to look at anybody’s computer,” notes Jongerius.

The elements of the redesign are attributable to specific team members, yet everyone 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 certain 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<sup>31</sup> – and the pragmatism of Harrison made for an ill-tempered and tortured process. While the original process had been defined by the disparate aims of its protagonists, the Dutch team was allied behind a notion of restoration. Rather than radically alter the space, the team retained existing furniture pieces, and preserved and enhanced the blues, greens and browns of its original colour palette. “Very early on, we agreed >

opened her Irma Boom Office in Amsterdam in 1991, where she specialises in book design, having previously produced books in conjunction with Hella Jongerius and Rem Koolhaas.

<sup>16</sup> Gabriel Lester (b. 1972) is a Dutch visual artist and film director whose practice is split between Amsterdam and Shanghai. Lester is known for his spatial installations, video art and sculpture, with his work forming part of the collections of museums such as the Stedelijk in Amsterdam and the Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam.

<sup>17</sup> Rem Koolhaas (b. 1944) is a Dutch architect, theorist and urbanist. He studied at the Architectural Association in London and Cornell University in New York before founding his OMA studio in 1975. He is known for projects such as the Seattle Central Library (2004) and Porto’s Casa da Música (2005).

<sup>18</sup> The Pritzker Prize is an annual architecture award that is funded by the US’ wealthy Pritzker family. Awarded since 1979, the Pritzker is given to an architect for their entire body of work and is considered one of the most prestigious awards in the field.

<sup>19</sup> Gerrit Rietveld (1888-1964) was a Dutch furniture designer and architect who was one of the founders of De Stijl. His Utrecht armchair was designed in 1935 and is now made by Cassina | Maestri.

<sup>20</sup> The Polder is a low-slung sofa that was designed by Hella Jongerius for Vitra in 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Joep van Lieshout (b. 1963) is a Dutch designer and artist. Working predominantly with brightly coloured polyester, he founded his studio, Atelier Van Lieshout, in 1995. The studio produced its AVL Workbench series for Lensvelt in 2006.

<sup>22</sup> De Ploeg is a Dutch upholstery and curtain fabric manufacturer that was founded as a cooperative weaving mill in 1923.

<sup>23</sup> Jasper Morrison (b. 1959) is a British designer active in London, Paris, and Tokyo, known for his minimalism. His Trash bin was designed for Italian brand Magis in 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Charles (1907-1978) and Ray (1912-1988) Eames were American furniture designers and architects. Highly influential in the development of mid-century design, they were known for their long-term collaboration with the American office furniture brand Herman Miller. Their Aluminium Group furniture series was designed for the brand in 1958.



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.





<sup>25</sup> Jean Prouvé (1901-1984) was a French metalworker and a self-taught designer and architect. He founded his Atelier Jean Prouvé in 1931 and collaborated with architects and designers such as Le Corbusier and Charlotte Perriand. His Fauteuil Direction chair was designed in 1951 and is now manufactured by Vitra.

<sup>26</sup> Hans Wegner (1914-2007) was a Danish furniture designer known for his functional, modernist and highly hand-crafted furniture. His 1947 Peacock chair was based on a traditional Windsor chair and was produced by the Danish manufacturer Johannes Hansen.

<sup>27</sup> Max Abramovitz (1908-2004) was an American architect and the co-founder of Harrison & Abramovitz. The studio's floor lamps were designed specially for the UN Building.

<sup>28</sup> Knoll is an American furniture manufacturer that was founded in New York in 1938 by the German American manufacturer Hans G. Knoll. It produces designs by Eero Saarinen, Rem Koolhaas and Marcel Breuer, and holds the exclusive manufacturing rights for Mies van der Rohe's 1929 Barcelona chair.

<sup>29</sup> E-paper is a display technology that mimics the appearance of ink on paper. It is used in devices such as e-book readers and wristwatches and is intended to promote legibility.

<sup>30</sup> Desso is a producer of woven carpet. It was founded in Oss in the Netherlands in 1930.

<sup>31</sup> The Radiant City was an unrealised architectural project, envisaged by Le Corbusier in 1924, that presented a utopian city. Favouring abundant green spaces, the scheme proposed identical high-density skyscrapers arranged in a Cartesian grid.

<sup>32</sup> Jurgen Bey (b. 1965) is a Dutch designer. Bey, along with architect Rianne Makkink, founded Studio Makkink & Bey in 2002. His 2009 Ear chair was designed for the Dutch brand Proof.

<sup>33</sup> Islam prohibits the consumption of alcohol.

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> 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.”

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 Koolhaas’ 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<sup>32</sup> 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 scan 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<sup>33</sup> – 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 caution. “Functionally,” he wrote, “this building is an old-fashioned engine covered by a streamlined hood embellished with chromium,” and as the North Delegates Lounge progressed, something of this past inefficiency bled through to the present. Difficulties with the brief were compounded by the project’s €3 million budget, which dwindled in the face of labour costs and security concerns. In the early plans, Lester and OMA had developed a brushed aluminium covering for the south wall. The wall would act as a gallery space for the UN’s artwork, with individual pieces thrust forward on metal supports to reveal the backsides of the canvas, while the aluminium behind would shift to a highly polished finish. Yet the budget would not allow for multiple finishes and the CMP balked at the idea of a reflective surface. “They were afraid that the mirror would let you see what someone was looking at,” says Simon. “We proved that that was impossible, but they just said, ‘No reflective surfaces inside the UN Building.’”

While the projecting artworks and aluminium wall still went ahead, they were diluted from the original vision. The team were based in Europe and had limited scope to visit the construction site, so they hosted redesign meetings at Amsterdam’s Schiphol airport. Even email communication with the CMP became difficult. “In the beginning we weren’t allowed to contact the CMP directly with questions,” says Simon. “Everything had to go through the Dutch ministry, which was very inefficient. Eventually it changed, but it remained very formal. It was a very wobbly ride.” As construction dragged into 2012 and 2013, the team had few opportunities to engage with the design, which was now in the hands of the contractor in New York. “We would >



The semi-glazed porcelain beads for the east window's curtain, made by Royal Tichelaar Makkum. PHOTO Jongeriuslab





Polder sofa by Jongerius for Vitra, with her UN Lounge chairs for the same manufacturer. Behind is the e-paper wall by OMA and the reception desk. The entrance to the North Delegates Lounge is to the left.



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.



<sup>34</sup> Royal Tichelaar Makkum was founded in 1572 and is based in the village of Makkum. The company is renowned for its work with Dutch designers such as Studio Job, Jurgen Bey and Marcel Wanders.

<sup>35</sup> Sefar is a Swiss manufacturer of precision fabrics that was formed in 1995 by the merger of three existing companies.

<sup>36</sup> The Dutch West Indian Company was a chartered company active between the 17th and 18th centuries in West Africa and the Americas. Its merchants were influential in the establishment of New Amsterdam, a 17th-century Dutch colonial settlement in Manhattan that was renamed New York City in 1665 following the Second Anglo-Dutch War.

> 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.”

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<sup>34</sup> 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 bottom, and thinning out as the yarn ascended – producing an anarchic filter to contrast against 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 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,<sup>35</sup> 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 bright blue fisherman’s knots that build en masse to form a regimented grid. It is a frugal design, its fishing net lines referencing the maritime history of the merchants of the Dutch West Indian Company<sup>36</sup> who helped to establish New York. “At first there was a big sailing boat painted on it, but it became too decorative,” says Boom. “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.”

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 >



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.





Opposite page: Knots & Grid curtain by Irma Boom, developed with Knoll and Sefar.

READING LIST

International Territory: Official Utopia and the United Nations by Adam Bartos and Christopher Hitchens, VERSO, 1994.

The UN Building by Ben Murphy, Aaron Betsky and Kofi Annan, THAMES & HUDSON, 2005.

A Workshop for Peace: Designing the United Nations Headquarters by George Dudley, THE MIT PRESS, 1994.

Hella Jongerius: Misfit by Louise Schouwenberg, Hella Jongerius, Alice Rawsthorne and Paola Antonelli, PHAIDON, 2011.

“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.

