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Susan Brown

Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, brownsu@si.edu

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Claudy Jongstra: Transmitting Craft Heritage through Contemporary Architecture

Susan Brown

brownsu@si.edu

Felt has a unique history as both a craft medium and an industrial material. Recently, it has become a material of intense interest to architects and designers. Felt is a very ancient and primitive material, made by simply matting together wool fibers with moisture and friction. It is a manufactured product, yet it shares many properties with purely natural materials. As a raw material for design, felt has incredible range — it can be made thin and translucent, or very dense and thick, even hard. Its plasticity is inviting a shift in the relationship of textiles to architecture and design.

Claudy Jongstra is a Dutch designer and felt-maker who is known for her particularly raw-looking felt fabrics. Through intense experimentation with the wool fleece and the felting process, she has developed a completely unique style which is highly refined in its craftsmanship, yet feels primal, with the gravitas of a natural material like wood or stone. Early in her career, Jongstra made a very active decision to produce felt on an architectural scale. When Anni Albers wrote “The Pliable Plane” in 1957, she expressed a vision for an integrated, rather than decorative, role for textiles in architecture, and Claudy Jongstra has come very close to realizing that goal. In the past five years, she has created works for some of Holland’s most important public buildings - the prime minister’s residence, The Hague, the Kunsthall in Rotterdam, the new Central Library in Amsterdam — and all of these buildings prominently feature her felts not as works of art commissioned to adorn public spaces, but rather as architectural materials which serve specific technical, as well as aesthetic, functions.

Jongstra’s home and studio are on an acre of land north of Amsterdam, in a village called Spannum. She keeps a flock of 200 sheep, mostly Drenthe Heath, an endangered species indigenous to The Netherlands. She practices non-invasive farming techniques, and her herd is used as part of a managed grazing system designed to maintain the delicate moor ecology of Friesland. She uses only natural dyes, and has begun growing her own dyestuffs. She employs a shepherd and shearer, four to six felters, two dyers, three design assistants, and a business manager. The humbleness and charm of the farm environment belie the scale she is working on. Jongstra has collaborated on many architectural projects in Europe requiring literally tens of thousands of square feet of felt.

A set of felt hangings for the prime minister’s residence (Het Catshuis) in The Hague, completed in 2003, is not only a wonderfully modern interpretation of the type of medieval tapestry suite which might once have adorned this home, which was built in 1651, but it also serves a similar function. One of wool’s unique characteristics is its ability to absorb large amounts of moisture without feeling damp, providing a tempering effect on the interior environment. In this collaboration with architect Jo Coenen, Jongstra displayed sensitivity to the architectural space. Her work has the unique quality of receding into the architectural framework, yet at the same time altering the space in a significant way. There is nothing hesitating in her approach.

Her ceiling treatment for a private home in Amersfoort from 2002 is a stunning example of this phenomenon. At first glance the felt is so well integrated into the environment it is invisible. Yet once you see it, covering the ceiling and upper wall, its presence is nearly overwhelming. An unnerving combination of the primitive and the elegant, the dark, fur-like material brings a sense of intimacy to the conversation area of this home.

The Utrecht Medical center, completed in 2004, is the typical case of a textile artist being called in after the fact to soften a problematic space. In this case the waiting room for the radiology department was lined entirely in ceramic tile, glass, and copper. Not surprisingly, cancer patients waiting for treatments found the interior to be cold and acoustically harsh. Jongstra called for the removal of some of the ceramic tile work and replaced it with felt in rectangular panels of varying sizes which worked in counterpoint with the strong visual grid created by the tile. On one hand Jongstra boldly interrupted the architectural space, but on the other worked very much within the framework created by it. Significant acoustic improvement was required, so she produced felts in varying thickness — some panels are flush with the wall, others are raised off the surface. Felt is not rated as an acoustic material, but in independent testing by Jaffe Holden Acoustic Engineers, who are consulting Diller, Scofidio & Renfro Architects on the use of felt in the renovation of Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center in New York, a 1” thick sheet of industrial felt has a Noise Reduction Coefficient of .5 to .65 — significantly more than a heavy carpet (if 0 is perfect reflection and 1 is perfect absorption). This is a hand-made product, so it is impossible to obtain precisely repeatable results, but there is clear acoustic benefit. Most acoustic materials are very unattractive and have to be hidden behind another material, whereas felt provides both a technical and aesthetic solution — very much in keeping with the modernist ideal of truth in materials.

Jongstra also created a felt wall for touching in the hallway on the way to the radiology treatment room. She speaks very movingly about the healing quality of touching the felt, and the positive response she has had from patients. This is a compelling paradox within the textile field - on the one hand the intense research being devoted to antimicrobial fibers and finishes, contrasted with a renewed appreciation for the beneficial qualities of natural materials. Jongstra is working on two upcoming projects in therapeutic environments — the AVL Hospital in Amsterdam and the Commujon Children’s Behavioral Facility in Almelo, The Netherlands.

In the case of the Lloyd Hotel and Cultural Embassy in Amsterdam, Jongstra was brought in by the owners even before the architects MVRDV were hired for the renovation. The hotel was built in 1921 as a way-station for emigrants waiting to board ships headed to South America. During WWII, the Nazis took advantage of its isolated harbor location to create a prison for members of the resistance, and it remained a prison until 1989. The building’s exterior has been preserved as a national monument, but overcoming the building’s gloomy history was the challenge of a competition to redevelop the Lloyd, as part of a larger redevelopment of the Eastern Harbor Docklands area. The competition was won by a group of artists, who proposed to transform the building into a hotel and cultural meeting spot, and was completed in 2004. Jongstra designed double-fold shutters inspired by Japanese screens, delicately patterned with cherry blossoms. There are thirteen double-height windows in the open meeting/ lounge/ café space, so it is a very strong visual statement, and yet a very modest one, because when the shutters are in their folded position, the works are almost entirely hidden from view.

For the interior refurbishment Rem Koolhaas' Kunsthal in Rotterdam, sound damping was again a priority. For the interior refurbishment by Merckx + Girod, completed in 2005, Jongstra made a particularly thick, dense felt from yak hair, with a graphic design of white lines. Jongstra's work complements the modern interior, with its emphasis on unadorned materials like wood, concrete, glass and metal. The felt proved a good match for the sturdy, honest materials used by Koolhaas. The Kunsthal gets 300,000 visitors a year, and the yak hair was a durable choice for this high-traffic location. But the felt also carried connotations of luxury in the sheer density of raw material used.

The House for Culture and Administration in Nijverdal was a true collaboration — Claus en Kahn architects brought Jongstra on before the beginning of design. The building unites the municipal governments of six villages under one roof, and is a multifunctional space — including a theater, library, café, and offices as well as the council chambers. The Nijverdal project, completed in 2007, required 22,000 square feet of felt. Some areas had more traditional hangings, such as the multipurpose room. The theater was fully upholstered in stripes of madder-dyed felts. But the most interesting component is the council chamber. Resembling an igloo or yurt, the structure is entirely covered in unruly blue felt on the outside and pearly white wool and silk felts on the inside. Placed in the middle of the busy indoor plaza, the room provides an accessible yet private, quiet space for meetings. The room is also used for civil-ceremony weddings, and transitions very successfully from a conference room into a non-religious, yet somehow sacred, space.

Triodos Bank, a sustainable investment firm founded in The Netherlands in 1980, lends money only to companies which benefit people or the planet, like fair trade initiatives or green energy alternatives — and offers the first sustainable real estate fund in Europe. This fund invests exclusively in properties built by sustainable construction methods, and in buildings and monuments renovated and managed using sustainable methods. When they needed to expand their own offices in 2007, of course they wanted an energy efficient and carbon-neutral building, so they engaged Rau and Partners, who specialize in sustainable architecture, and Jongstra, whose production method is environmentally sensitive. With felt, there is such a short trajectory from fiber to fabric, there is little opportunity for waste, and very little is added to the raw material — usually just water and olive oil soap. Jongstra used a felting technique in which wool and silk fibers are felted through sheer silk cloth, enabling her to control opacity very specifically. She applied the fibers selectively to provide customized privacy while maintaining the sense of openness and light originally planned for this glass interior.

The new Central Library in Amsterdam, which opened in November 2007, is one of Europe's largest libraries, with 94,000 square feet of floor space, and 1.5 million books, CDs and DVDs. It is one of three large new buildings on the recently re-developed waterfront behind the Central Station. The architect, Jo Coenen, said, "The design of a library is an outstanding example of an assignment which is not primarily focused on the creation of an exterior composition, a compilation of facades, but one which is primarily concerned with designing the inner world." He wanted to make places for people, and he succeeded very well. Reading nooks and study areas have spectacular harbor views and large comfortable chairs. There are private spaces as well as areas for collaborative work, a children's reading room, and a very pleasant restaurant at the top.

Coenen was familiar with Jongstra's work from their collaboration on the prime minister's residence, and engaged her immediately to create the library's entrance area. As with that previous project, Coenen wanted to connect the massive new library to the city's 17th century architecture and history, so Jongstra started researching guipure, a 17th century Dutch trimming technique. She collaborated with some local passementerie workers, but in lieu of the glossy braids and tassels they normally make, the artist convinced them to deconstruct their work into irregular, over-twisted masses of silk floss that she felted into her panels. The result is a wall of white wool and silk with horizontal bands resembling bold, dripping brushstrokes of yellow-green. A wall at the entrance stair allows visitors to touch the material, acknowledging both the public ownership of the space and the irresistibility of the texture.

In conclusion, felt's technical properties — its ability to absorb sound and temper fluctuations in humidity, which have long been exploited in industry, are being appreciated in a new way by architects. The fact that felt is so close to its animal source gives a feeling of authenticity which complements modern architecture's approach to materials. Furthermore, felt is a sustainable material. Many textiles are global products — with fiber production happening on one continent, fiber processing and spinning on another, dyeing and weaving in yet different locales. The simplicity of felt makes it manageable in regards to controlling each step and creating a wholly sustainable product. Finally, across design disciplines, the past decade has seen a growing demand for the human touch despite the relentless dispersion of technology. Claudy Jongstra both draws on and expands the rich textile heritage of The Netherlands through the successful integration of handcraft with contemporary design, giving deep cultural resonance to these important public works.