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# Immaculate Conception

As chapel conversions go, it doesn't get much more bold and dramatic than this in Utrecht, Netherlands, from an architectural practice that is developing something of a track record for such spectacles

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**SOME** architectural practices are destined to work on unusual projects. Dutch firm Zecc set the tempo with its quite remarkable conversion of an old water tower into a residential property.

The steel floor of the water tank was retained to divide the tower in two. The bottom half – one side of which was stripped away for a huge window to allow daylight to flood the building – is the traditional part of the house, with the kitchen, the living room and the kids bedroom. The top half (in what was previously the water tank) contains a bedroom, a sauna and a study.

What typifies the firm's work, is a highly visual desire to retain as much of the original buildings personality as possible without shying away from radical changes.

As project architects Rolf Bruggink and Marnix van der Meer showed by their work on the conversion of a former chapel in Utrecht, they're not afraid to take a bold approach to mixing new style with old character.

There are very real similarities in this sense between the Water Tower and the Utrecht Chapel projects, but what sets them apart perhaps is the far greater emotional sensitivity involved in converting a chapel, given the religious, spiritual – and for many quite personal – connotations that are attached. →

“THE REAL CHALLENGE WAS TO CHANGE AN OLD AND MYSTERIOUS CHAPEL WITH A GREAT HISTORY INTO A MODERN LIVING SPACE WITHOUT LOSING ITS MAGICAL CHARACTER”

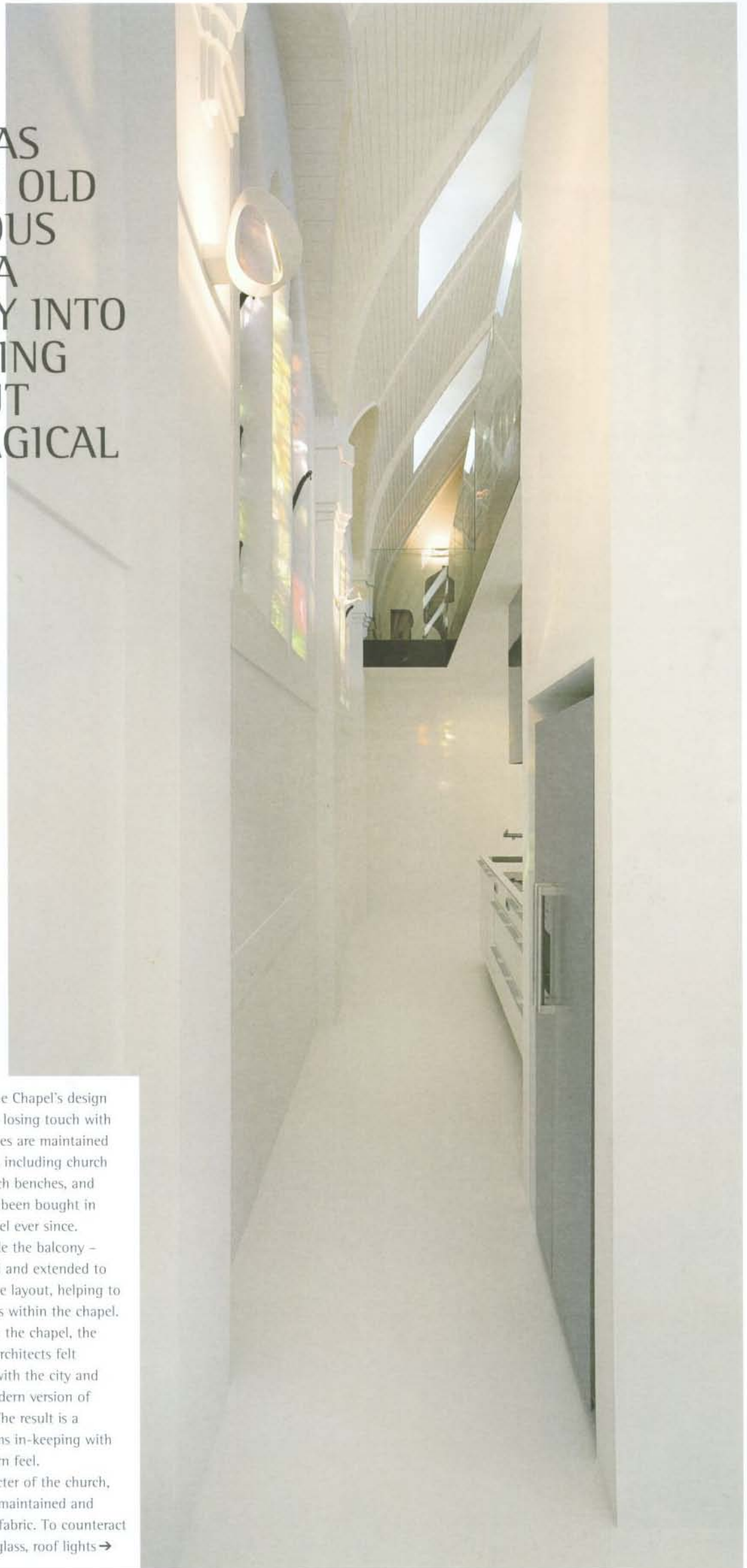


There are several significant inclusions in the Chapel's design that prevent such a radical overhaul completely losing touch with the building's former life. A number of references are maintained from original items that remain in the building, including church benches/pews, a table made from five old church benches, and a bathroom chandelier which is known to have been bought in Amsterdam in the 1950's and hung in the chapel ever since.

Other key 'character' devices by Zecc include the balcony – complete with organ – which has been retained and extended to become an important space-defining part of the layout, helping to mark out the living, cooking and studying areas within the chapel.

Because of the lack of eye level windows in the chapel, the building had quite a 'closed in' feel to it. The architects felt that there needed to be some kind of contact with the city and introduced a new, somewhat bold, abstract modern version of a leaded glass front to enable this to happen. The result is a Mondrian-inspired design which somehow seems in-keeping with the building's character despite it's more modern feel.

Despite its contribution to the 'dark' character of the church, the leaded glass on the side of the chapel was maintained and considered an important part of the building's fabric. To counteract the loss of light this entails compared to clear glass, roof lights →



were installed to allow diffused daylight to enter the chapel. In combination with the completely white surface finishes, the leaded glass is allowed to really come to life.

The overall intention was to create a minimalistic interior using abstract shapes designed to contrast with the original and altogether softer shapes of the chapel itself. The pure and simple styling was maintained in the kitchen thanks to a Bulthaup kitchen – again in white – to minimise the detail and maximise the sleek impact.

For the bathroom, a bath from the Duravit Starck X range was used in what is an altogether more darkly-themed space.

David Tinns of Zecc Architects explains: "The real challenge was to change what was an old and mysterious chapel with a great history into a modern living space without losing its magical character.

"It was even an issue to bring the chapel and its lead painted windows back to life, without destroying the windows, and bringing new daylight in the chapel by adding the new windows in the roof." designer

**Zecc Architects**  
[www.zecc.nl](http://www.zecc.nl)

Photography: CornbreadWorks

