

Only a crisis can stop the Wooden Age

Builders will have to work hard to meet the growing demand for wood. That's what Eric de Munck, who has been a timber advocate from the very beginning, says. An interview with a man who has propagated and adored wood for at least a quarter of a century: "Wood is like a warm blanket."



Foto: Christiaan Krouwels

Wood here, wood there, one tower is even higher than the other. Wood conquers Dutch hearts in construction. Eric de Munck of Centrum Hout [Dutch lobby organization for the use of timber in building & construction] can hardly believe it. He doesn't know any better than timber having been dismissed as an option. Both in the standard and in the workplace. What explains the wooden turnaround and then does wood finally set foot in Holland concrete land?

Can't miss. Are you a wood fanatic?

"I cannot deny that. My wife even says when we walk into a museum: dude, we come to see the paintings, don't look at the frames."

Where does that fascination come from?

"I wanted to become a biologist or do something with forestry. The forest ecosystem is so beautiful. If you do nothing, it will maintain itself and if you do something with it and stimulate growth, you can extract beautiful products that are useful for society. My mission? Telling and conveying that wood is the basis of the circular future."

That sounds fantastic of course. Yet critics continue to argue that there is not enough wood, that the Tropics are dying and that cutting wood is bad for Mother Earth.

"I would like to put that in perspective. Ninety percent of the imported wood comes from Europe. Six percent comes from our own forest. Then we still have 4 percent of what comes from the tropics. More than 50 percent of this is already demonstrably sustainable. In addition, even the environmental organizations recognize that the forests there are disappearing due to the plantation

of soy, oil palm and cocoa for a few years, and not due to the timber trade. Forest is converted into land, because it has more value for the local economy. We must provide better prices so that the forest can be preserved. ”

Is there enough wood?

“Scaling up to 10,000 timber-frame houses per year is now our goal. Invest NL [Dutch government investment fund] even described in the recent study "Building a wooden future" a scenario which mentions eighty percent of the required 80,000 wooden homes per year. If the demand actually arises, the industry can scale up. We have enough wood. ”

Eighty percent of the construction assignment? That equates to 64,000 wooden homes per year.

"Yes. I am not surprised by those numbers. You already see more and more parties who say that they will soon be able to build 2,000 to 4,000 modular homes per year. ”

Everyone loves wood now. What explains that rethinking? VPRO Tegenlicht [recent [program](#) on Dutch public TV about building with timber]?

“That indeed was the trigger where all kinds of needs from the market became clear at once. Which woke the people up and made them realize "oh yes, there is already a solution." We have been discussing the benefits of wood with parties in the construction world for years, but the pegs on which you could hang the wooden 'necessity' were just not there yet. Now it is. When it comes to CO2 reduction, when it comes to environmental impact, when it comes to speed to build, prefab and nitrogen was also added last year. Those are all things on which timber construction scores positively. ”

The Dutch standard for sustainable construction (MPG or MilieuPrestatie Gebouwen, in English: Environmental Performance Buildings) is being criticized. [Builders and architects](#) do not understand why temporary storage of CO2 is not included in the standard. Eric de Munck points out that it is not always possible to make fair agreements in (European) standards committees about, for example, "How should we calculate CO2". Hear about his experience with the European standard EN 15804, which is now the basis for our Dutch standard for sustainable buildings (MPG).

[Video](#): Eric de Munck about the criticized standard for sustainable construction



The breakthrough also seemed to come with the Groningen earthquake issue. However, the ultimate standard did not clearly show the advantages for light building structures.

“That's right. We always have to take these heavy building materials into account, because they have always left a considerable mark since the fifties. All regulations are actually inspired by those heavy building materials. However, the earthquakes in Groningen did show that structures made of lighter materials, such as wood, held up better. There was absolutely nothing wrong with timber-frame houses in the vicinity of Loppersum, while the houses of the neighbors all showed cracks. In Japan they have been building with flexible couplings for a long time, so we were already aware of those advantages, but now several parties are suddenly seeing them.”

To what extent does CLT contribute to the success?

“That certainly contributes to the image of wood. Clients and architects attach great importance to being different from others. CLT links one to the other. But when we talk about those 80,000 homes, it will not only be about CLT, but also about timber frame construction.”

About Eric de Munck

Eric de Munck is affiliated with Centrum Hout and the Association of Dutch Timber Entrepreneurs. Since 1998 he has been a formal "friend of wood". He studied forestry in Velp and subsequently studied forest management in Wageningen. After his studies, he actually wanted to go into the tropics - when there was still little attention for sustainable forest management - but it was a crisis, so the Ministry of Foreign Affairs dismantled all its projects. “Then I came to Centrum Hout. I entered into discussions with municipalities and other clients about certification as a result of the campaign "Kappen met kappen" [Cut cutting] of the Dutch environmental NGO Milieudefensie." In 2006 De Munck joined the Association of Dutch Timber Entrepreneurs, which he still works for. The current Centrum Hout was established in 2018.

Can the wooden boom be substantiated with figures?

“Not yet, but it is serious business. We are actually still mainly in planning. But corporations and investors are increasingly asking for wood. Prejudices and risks are more likely to be taken for granted. In the past when a project in wood was put out to tender, especially the schools, it was built with heavy building materials, just because contractors were used to it. That doesn't happen anymore. We receive many questions from the market. From municipalities, corporations and contractors to associations of developing contractors.”

So no numbers?

“No, but several timber frame builders are not scaling up just for the fun of it. They see demand growing and that parties such as de Volksbank and ASR are investing more and more in it. De Groot Vroomshoop is building a new location for [Finch Buildings](#). Lister, a Limburg modular concept based on CLT, will also scale up and there are a few more, such as the friends of TBI. Despite being a group of concrete builders, they build the prestigious [HAUT](#) project and now even come up with their own timber construction concept.”

Must be a crazy sensation. Suddenly you have all kinds of wood friends. Cozy?

“I find it very inspiring. It's great to help start-ups get started and answer their questions about fire, insulation and maintenance. Maintenance issues? If the construction is made of wood on the inside, it will last for three, four, five hundred years. So maintenance? What are we talking about.”

The shell does not have to be made of wood?

“In the past it often happened that a building was made of heavy building materials and that the outside was made of wood. Purely from an aesthetic point of view. Well, then you have to take care

of it to keep it beautiful. If you really want to have an impact, you make a construction of wood. Eighty percent of the environmental performance score of a building is determined by this. ”

The wooden tower plans are sprouting like mushrooms. Are you still counting?

“I think there are now about five, Haut, Sawa and a few more. Then we have a floating office for the UN. Which one do I find most special? Haut. I think its start in Amsterdam is a real milestone. It was very inspiring that the consortium with developer Lingotto and also the architects had the guts to submit that plan to the municipality. And now they have become completely wild about wood. ”

Wood is clearly hot. Yet the real upscaling is yet to come. What can be done differently?

“The training courses and their financing. Concrete studies even receive funding from the government, but wood training courses have to beg for money. In addition, there is a great need for knowledge throughout the construction chain and contractors who have relationships with concrete plants will have to adjust their cost models and infrastructure. But we shouldn't pretend that everything is completely new either. BAM used to have its own timber-frame factory, so they have plenty of experience there. Incidentally, I also live in such a house from that factory. ”

Are builders ready for the wooden revolution?

“It is clear that more builders need to join in to meet the increasing demand, the list of builders who build houses with wood is not inexhaustible, so to say. Builders know very well that in the near future eighty to one hundred thousand homes will have to be built per year. They also know that parties and municipalities around Amsterdam are talking about a Timber Agreement. The demand for wood is therefore increasing noticeably. Contractors will therefore have to have an answer to that. ”

Does that cause fear? Or is the wooden age unstoppable?

“If the upscaling gets traction between now and five years, we're home safe. But never say, never, because a crisis may occur, which will cause everything to collapse and we will soon have to start all over again. If you look at the government's targets with regard to CO2, they will not change quickly. Partly because Frans Timmermans (Vice-President of the European Commission, ed.) said that we should not go to a 40 percent CO2 reduction in order to achieve the final goals, but to 55 percent by 2030. That is in favor of biobased materials. ”

Back to your wooden house. How did you end up there?

“In 1999 we came into contact with a alderman in IJsselstein and an expansion district. It all had to be sustainable. Among other things, a block with solar collectors and wall heating in clay was built. We proposed to make a row of timber-frame houses. BPF financed it and BAM participated as builder. The architect wanted wood to the max and even proposed wooden tiles on the roof and hollowed-out tree trunks as a gutter. We (fortunately) managed to talk her out of that, haha. ”

Not moved yet?

“No, I still enjoy living in it, without noise nuisance, we don't even hear our neighbors who like hard rock. However, it is mainly the atmosphere, the speed of heating and the comfort that make wood so attractive as a building material. When you come into a new building it always echoes and it is cold. You don't have that in wooden houses. Wood is like a warm blanket. ”

Opportunities for biobased materials in construction

The opportunities for wood in construction and other biobased materials are described in various recently published reports. In the strategic study [Ruimte voor biobased bouwen](#) [Room for biobased construction], which was carried out on behalf of Minister Ollongren, the researchers concluded that numerous problems still stand in the way of a major roll-out of biobased construction. It mainly concerns correct perception, correct certification and true pricing. Laws and regulations also need to be adjusted and impulses must be provided for both agriculture and the construction sector. In another report from the NIBE "Biobased: a pillar for the circular construction economy", the researchers make a number of recommendations. According to the NIBE, biobased materials are badly needed to achieve the circular objectives of the government. "However, hardly any biobased material is being built yet, while the potential is great."

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