Kanal: How careful coordination made the dream a reality

Tim Janssens · 24 November 2026



© Sander Loockx - Johan Cordonnier and Francesca Crosby: ‘Effective communication was crucial. Finding the right balance in how much information to share was one of our biggest challenges.’

A strong concept is one thing. Making it a reality is another, especially when a project involves a host of technical challenges, a large international design team and particularly ambitious goals for architectural character, heritage conservation and sustainability. Atelier Kanal turned to Bureau Bouwtechniek to help take the project from design to construction. Bureau Bouwtechniek took on a coordination role alongside the architects. It helped structure the construction process, streamline collaboration between all parties and resolve potential issues early. This went beyond a conventional brief for a delivery architect or project manager. Project architects Johan Cordonnier and Francesca Crosby look back on an unusual and engaging commission. ‘It was a matter of providing both direction and support.’

Kanal was an exceptional project. The large-scale conversion of the former Citroën garage on Square Sainctelette in Brussels called for advanced technical expertise and highly effective collaboration between the client, the international design consortium, the engineering consultancies and the contractors.

That was why Atelier Kanal approached Bureau Bouwtechniek in spring 2021. The practice already had extensive experience of major public commissions and complex museum projects through its

work on the MAS and KMSKA in Antwerp and the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, among others.

‘The request came through noAarchitecten, one of the three practices behind Atelier Kanal,’ says Johan Cordonnier. ‘The contractors’ tenders had already come in, and most of the technical design work was complete. Our brief was therefore very different from the work we usually do as delivery architects. Developing the technical design or preparing tender documents would usually be part of that work. Our main role was to guide collaboration through the next stages and make sure the design was faithfully realised on site.’

A coordination role alongside the architects

Bureau Bouwtechniek described its remit as ‘supporting the architects through the construction process’. That wording was deliberate. According to Johan Cordonnier, project management would only have partly captured the scope. ‘Our brief was to coordinate alongside the architects. Overall project administration fell outside that brief. Atelier Kanal had an ambitious, relatively young team of architects who wanted to retain responsibility for their work. We were there to support and guide them so they could carry out the technical and design aspects of their brief as effectively as possible.’

That relationship called for a tailored approach. ‘Every commission like this needs a different approach,’ adds Francesca Crosby. ‘Much depends on the experience, skills and personalities of the people you work with. Where does someone need extra support? Which responsibilities will the team handle itself? How can we make those contributions fit together as smoothly as possible? Our role took shape over time through ongoing discussions with Atelier Kanal.’

Bureau Bouwtechniek could draw on its extensive construction expertise while leaving responsibility for the technical design with the architects. ‘That background was essential for asking the right questions, assessing risks accurately and spotting potential problems early,’ says Cordonnier. ‘We sometimes compared our role to that of a conductor. The musicians are the ones who make the music, and the quality of the performance depends to a large extent on how their individual contributions come together.’

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Decision-making at three levels

To give the collaboration a clear and efficient structure, Bureau Bouwtechniek and Atelier Kanal organised meetings at three levels. The first covered day-to-day site monitoring, including preparing and chairing site meetings, taking minutes and following up on agreed actions. This made it possible to track progress closely and address operational issues early.

The second level focused on strategic matters. ‘On average, a steering committee met once a month, bringing together the project leads and senior representatives of the different parties,’ explains Johan Cordonnier. ‘It dealt with matters that went beyond day-to-day site operations and

required decisions at a higher level. We prepared these meetings carefully so that everyone knew in advance which issues would be on the agenda and where the parties stood. People came to the meetings ready to make decisions about issues they already understood.'

The third level consisted of meetings on specific topics, informally known as 'kitchen table' meetings. They brought together the people responsible for particular parts of the project, such as the building envelope or building services. 'These smaller groups reviewed the contractor's technical development daily and checked it against the original design intent,' says Crosby. 'The structure made it clear where to deal with operational, technical and strategic issues, so each could be handled efficiently.'

Anticipating problems before they arise

Alongside organising decision-making, Bureau Bouwtechniek played an important role in tracking the programme and setting priorities. 'Every week we reviewed with the team what needed immediate attention, what had to be finished within two weeks and what needed preparation further ahead, sometimes up to six months in advance,' says Francesca Crosby. 'We based those discussions on the contractor's construction programme and the project's critical path. We even used sticky notes and moved them around as the works progressed. It sounds simple, but it helped us keep track of the whole project and focus everyone's attention where it was needed.'

Spotting potential problems early was another important contribution. 'On complex projects, some difficulties build up over time,' explains Johan Cordonnier. 'There are often early signs that something may go wrong. Our experience on large construction projects usually helps us recognise those signs quite quickly. You can make an important contribution to resolving a technical issue by raising it early and bringing the right people together before it escalates and affects the programme or budget.'

For Crosby, that proactive approach was essential. 'By the time a contractor raises an issue at a site meeting, it's often already too late to act effectively. That's why we kept stressing the importance of preparation, clear communication and sharing the right information at the right time.'

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Working across languages and building trust

Sharing information was far from straightforward. The project brought together many organisations, disciplines and nationalities. Atelier Kanal united Belgian, Swiss and British architects. The client, contractors and specialist partners also worked in different languages and brought different working cultures to the project. 'It helped that Francesca and I both grew up and trained in multilingual environments,' says Johan Cordonnier. 'You have to convey technical information accurately and be aware of the sensitivities and expectations of the people you're speaking to. Sometimes it makes a real difference to speak to someone in their own language.'

The sheer scale of the site also made it essential to divide responsibilities carefully. ‘In effect, several major construction projects were running in parallel. New construction, renovation and restoration works overlapped constantly,’ explains Francesca Crosby. ‘No one person could hold all the knowledge and information about the entire project. We had to share responsibilities and trust other people’s expertise. At the same time, everyone needed enough information to do their job well. Effective communication was crucial. Finding the right balance in how much information to share was one of our biggest challenges.’

Collaboration as the key to success

Future visitors to Kanal would see little of Bureau Bouwtechniek’s contribution, even though it was closely tied to the project’s ambitions. The former garage had to retain as much of its original industrial character as possible, while its new museum functions imposed stringent requirements for building physics, safety and technical installations.

Meeting those requirements called for specific technical solutions and a careful assessment of how each one would affect the programme, budget and construction work.

‘Converting a functional industrial building into a museum that houses exceptionally valuable artworks is a huge challenge in itself,’ says Johan Cordonnier. ‘It becomes even more complex when you want to keep as much of the existing architecture intact as possible. Take the historic façades. They were completely dismantled and restored, then fitted with high-performance vacuum glazing. Interventions like these often call for decisions that go beyond standard procedures.’

For Francesca Crosby, Kanal’s strength lies in the combination of architectural restraint and technical rigour. ‘The building still feels remarkably authentic and has kept its industrial character. At the same time, it is more refined and performs much better. The building still reads as a careful conversion. The original architecture has been given room to speak for itself.’

Crosby and Cordonnier look back on the project with satisfaction and stress that the achievement belongs to everyone involved. ‘When you consider what was achieved in around ten years, from the initial project brief to the opening, it was an exceptional accomplishment. Ten years may seem a long time from the outside, but given the scale and ambitions of the project, the programme was extremely tight. We’re particularly proud that, together, we managed to make this complex design a reality. The project also confirmed how much good collaboration matters. Even when you bring together the best architects, engineers and contractors, making a project like this work takes trust, mutual understanding and careful coordination.’