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## THE SENSUAL WORLD

MUSEUMS — THE NEW WONDER ROOMS  
EUROPEAN DESIGN FAIR DISCOVERIES  
THE GREAT INDOORS AWARD 2009



A SUMPTUOUS METALLIC BACKDROP INGENUOUSLY LINKED THE MODERN ARCHITECTURE WITH THE ORNATE, HISTORICAL EXHIBITS.



## RUSSIAN EVOLUTION

The transformation of the 17th-century Amstelhof into a satellite of the HERMITAGE restored the building's original beauty – while taking it into the 21st century.

WORDS JANE SZITA  
PHOTOS ROOS ALDERSHOFF

Perhaps it's the frothy ball gowns on display at the Hermitage on the Amstel's inaugural exhibition, but the words 'Cinderella-like transformation' keep springing to mind. After all, until recently this building was quite possibly the world's oldest old folks' home, a function it had retained for well over 300 years. Now, however, the stately but sober Amstelhof has been reborn as a serenely appointed satellite of the glittering Hermitage Museum. Old photos on show around the place remind you of the cramped, dingy labyrinth it used to be – in total contrast to its newfound airy elegance.

Although this new Hermitage in Amsterdam could fit into its St Petersburg parent many times over, by Dutch standards it's a palatial building. But there the resemblance to the baroque Russian building ends.

Architecturally, the Amstelhof is an imposing example of Dutch classicism at its most austere: high on symmetry and order, devoid of decoration. But by 2007, when the last elderly resident departed, the building's interior was a sad mishmash of aesthetically challenged alterations. For architect Hans van Heeswijk, called in to renovate the building for its new rôle, the only solution was to strip the Amstelhof down to its shell.

'Restoring the building to its classical floor plan was the answer to our biggest problem – the conversion of the Amstelhof into a public venue,' says Van Heeswijk. 'The fact is that every day thousands of people visit the museum for the first time, and they need to feel at home quickly if they're going to want to come back.' The building has four wings, arranged around

an expansive main courtyard. Van Heeswijk switched the main entrance to the waterfront side of the building on the Amstel, thus leading visitors across the courtyard and into the lobby. 'The view across the courtyard allows them to see the whole building at a glance, and to understand its scale and how it works,' says the architect. 'And it means the museum faces the city, has a relationship with it.'

Inside the entrance lobby, the whole axis is visible. Clear sightlines entice visitors into the north and south wings, where the main exhibition spaces are. These lofty double-height galleries, measuring 34 by 10 m, were originally open rectangular courtyards flanking the main courtyard of the 17th-century building. They had been filled in with two floors of boxy rooms by later builders, but sweeping these >>>



MERKX+GIROD, THE AMSTERDAM HERMITAGE'S INTERIOR DESIGNERS, CREATED THE OPENING EXHIBITION ON THE RUSSIAN COURT – COMPLETE WITH REVOLVING GLASS CASES FOR THE BALLGOWNS.



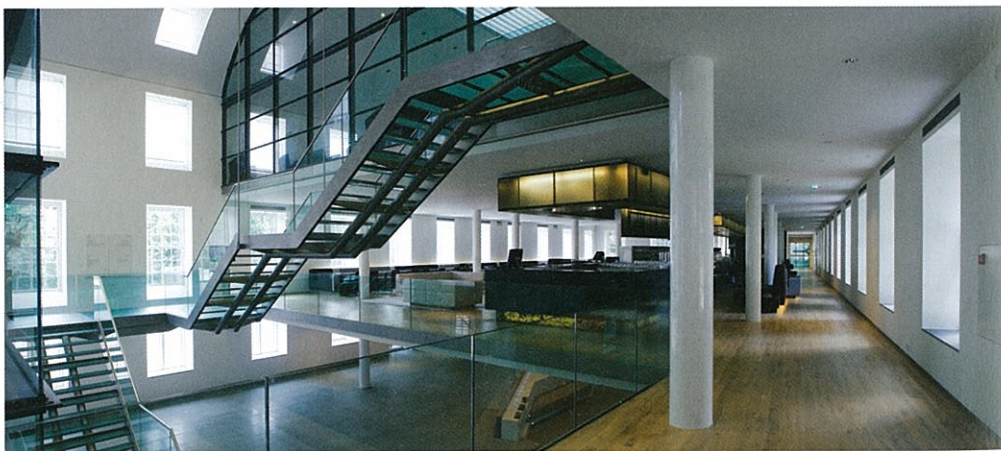


THE DOUBLE HEIGHT OF THE TWO MAIN EXHIBITION HALLS CREATES LONG VIEWS AND INTERESTING PERSPECTIVES.



'We wanted to avoid filling the whole space with function'  
HANS VAN HEESWIJK

THE STAIRS WITH A VIEW OF NEVA, THE RESTAURANT, WITH ITS GLOWING BAR DESIGNED BY MERKX+GIROD.  
PHOTO LUUK KRAMER



interventions away revealed the clean lines and harmonious proportions that are now enhanced by curved glass ceilings that drench the galleries in daylight. 'Light is very important in a museum,' says Van Heeswijk. 'People instinctively walk towards it.' His interior uses light to flood the corners of the building, encouraging the flow of traffic throughout the entire space. The staircases – broad, open replacements for the dark, narrow originals – are sited in these light-filled corners, where all three floors are clearly visible; next to them, lift shafts in glass and steel continue the theme of transparency. Materials were used to differentiate between the building as monument and its function as museum. Classical materials – stucco walls, oak flooring, grey pietra serena – are used in what might be called the structure's 'historical fabric', while

glass and steel make the modern interventions – lifts, stairs, reception desk – visually distinct. The interior design, by Merckx+Girod, matches the lyrical simplicity of the original structure.

'It was one of our aims to avoid filling the entire space with function, while creating as much light and space as possible,' explains Van Heeswijk. 'The idea was to separate the modern functions and use them rather like big furniture elements, in order to generate a more spatial quality and to make the structure clearly visible.' This approach allows the building – and its exhibitions – to shine together but separately, rather than privileging one at the expense of the other. Voids, long views through the building and transparent elements lighten and update the Amstelhof's classical formalism. The huge volumes of the main exhibition spaces are

contrasted with the more intimate atmosphere of the small 'cabinet' rooms, each with its own window. All this was achieved on budget (€40 million) and on time, with work taking just two years to complete. 'It was a huge advantage that the museum is run by a private foundation rather than a government body,' says Van Heeswijk. 'It meant we had no red tape to deal with and work could proceed fast.' Funding came in equal parts from national and local government agencies and private sponsors. The City of Amsterdam donated the building. Running costs are covered by sponsorship and ticket sales, with the St Petersburg Hermitage getting €1 of every ticket sold. Cultural entrepreneur Ernst Veen, who initiated and oversaw the project, is now the museum's director. It has to be said that the opening



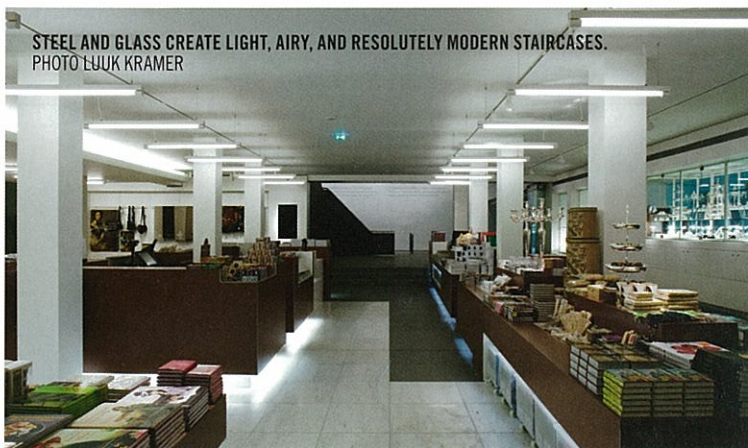
MERKX+GIROD'S SEEMINGLY HAND-DRAWN METALLIC GRAPHICS ADDED A PLAYFUL TOUCH TO THE FORMAL OBJECTS ON SHOW.



PHOTO LUUK KRAMER



STEEL AND GLASS CREATE LIGHT, AIRY, AND RESOLUTELY MODERN STAIRCASES.  
PHOTO LUUK KRAMER



exhibition, devoted to the stuffy Russian court and packing 1800 pieces into the space, does not show off the museum to its best advantage. Windows have been blocked and daylight banished to prevent the costumes on display from fading. But the space still sings. And the next exhibition, *Pioneers of Modern Art*, devoted to Matisse and designed by Wim Crowel, promises a better match with the qualities of the interior.

'A museum is a public building. It has to be neutral and abstract, and it has to let the collection or exhibition stand out,' says Hans van Heeswijk. 'Architects invariably think that a museum has to be an ambitious project in which to show off their architectural skills. But I think you need to be modest and aware – and to avoid putting too much of yourself into a building. ■■■'

**PROJECT NAME** Hermitage Amsterdam  
**ARCHITECT** Hans van Heeswijk  
**WEBSITE** heeswijk.nl  
**INTERIOR DESIGN** Merckx+Girod  
**WEBSITE** merckx-girod.nl  
**LANDSCAPE DESIGN** Michael van Gessel  
**LOCATION** Amsterdam  
**CLIENT** Stichting Hermitage aan de Amstel  
**MATERIALS** Various  
**CONSTRUCTION** Bouwbedrijf MJ De Nijs en Zonen, and others  
**TOTAL FLOOR AREA** 9000m<sup>2</sup>  
**STAR PIECE** depends on exhibition  
**TYPICAL VISITOR** depends on exhibition  
**NUMBER OF VISITORS PER YEAR** Estimated 300,000/year.  
 In 2009, between the opening of 19 June until October 360,000 visitors.  
**UPCOMING EXHIBITION** *Pioneers of Modern Art* (March 2010)  
**PERMANENT EXHIBITION** The Amstelhof Room and Russia Room are used for permanent exhibitions on the History of Amstelhof, and the history between the St Petersburg Hermitage and Amsterdam Hermitage Museum.  
**SPECIALISATION** Loans from the collection of the Russian State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg.



MERKX+GIROD FURNISHED THE FUNCTIONAL AREAS, LIKE THE MUSEUM ENTRANCE, TO HIGHLIGHT THE CONTRAST BETWEEN THE BUILDING'S ANCIENT STRUCTURE AND ITS MODERN FUNCTION.  
PHOTO LUUK KRAMER