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Mauritshuis Extension by Hans van Heeswijk Architects

An Invisible Reception Enlarges Monument



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Words David Keuning

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THE HAGUE – Home to paintings like Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (also known as ‘the Mona Lisa of the North’) and Fabritius’ *Goldfinch* (made famous by Donna Tartt’s eponymous novel), the Mauritshuis Royal Picture Gallery in the Dutch city of The Hague is about to re-open this coming Friday after an extensive 2-year renovation and extension.

‘Before the renovation, the museum’s entrance on the side of the building was rather cramped,’ says architect Hans van Heeswijk at the press preview. In order to create a more generous reception area, he decided to move the main entrance under the forecourt of the listed, seventeenth-century Dutch Classicist house, which had to remain exactly the way it was. The biggest problem: how do you indicate where to enter the building if nothing can be altered? The architect took to studying I.M. Pei’s 1989 Louvre renovation in Paris, which had to overcome a similar challenge.

Van Heeswijk came up with a very sleek and high-tech 9-m-tall lift shaft, built out of structural glass, which takes visitors down to a spacious reception in the basement. Daylight pours in through glass floor-plates above, and the lobby extends all the way under the adjacent street, connecting the museum to the premises of Sociëteit De Witte, a private club across the road. The willingness of the club’s owners to rent out part of their property to the Mauritshuis for a 75-year lease made it possible to build the underpass. (‘I banned the word “tunnel” for anyone who had anything to do with the project,’ says museum director Emilie Gordenker jokingly.) The extension now houses a café, library and space for temporary exhibitions, which the museum formerly lacked.

Given the nature of the project, Van Heeswijk had little opportunity for spatial design. ‘The fun of this project is in the detailing,’ he says. A source of pride in this respect is the elevator that takes visitors from the basement back up to the museum: when it reaches the ground floor of the historic house, it lifts up the marble floor, which then doubles as a roof for the lift shaft. ‘It took a lot of persuasion to convince the Department for the Conservation of Monuments that this was a good idea,’ says Van Heeswijk. ‘It’s things like this that I love working on.’

Photos [Ronald Tilleman](#), Ivo Hoekstra (where indicated), all photos courtesy of the Mauritshuis Royal Picture Gallery
Image Hans van Heeswijk Architects

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