

# GETTING IT ALK

IN AN ARCHITECTURAL TRANSFORMATION THAT HAS TAKEN SOME 10 YEARS, THE NATIONAL TREASURE THAT IS THE NETHERLAND'S **RIJKSMUSEUM** IN AMSTERDAM HAS REOPENED. *HERBERT WRIGHT* STEPS INSIDE TO WITNESS FIRSTHAND THE AMAZING WORK THAT HAS BEEN CARRIED OUT IN THE PIERRE CUYPERS' BUILDING BY PRACTICES **CRUZ Y ORTIZ ARQUITECTOS** AND **WILMOTTE & ASSOCIÉS**





**Not since the Peace of Münster in 1648**, when King Felipe IV conceded the independence of the Netherlands after an 80-year war of national liberation, have the Spanish offered so much to the Dutch. This time, the Spanish practice Cruz y Ortiz Arquitectos (CyO) has delivered a complete architectural transformation of the national treasure trove, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, in a huge project that restores, reconfigures and extends a controversial masterpiece of 19th-century Dutch architecture, ready for an anticipated tide of two million visitors a year.

It's been a long time coming – the Rijksmuseum almost completely closed for renovation in 2003, and it has taken until this April to reopen. It's been even longer still since CyO's 2000 competition win, and it has consumed its co-founder Antonio Ortiz. As it reopened, he confessed with a look and dryness reminiscent of Walter Matthau: 'I'm going to have an empty nest feeling'.

The Rijksmuseum, opened in 1885, was designed by Pierre Cuypers, a Catholic architect who specialised in churches. It is a full-on exercise in 19th-century eclecticism, its interior stuffed with a rich weave of intricate mosaics, stained glass, golden lettering, banded masonry and iconographic wall frescos. Its exterior is adorned with tableaux, reliefs and sculptures honouring great Dutchmen. Often described as neo-gothic but, like Centraal Station, Cuypers' other mammoth Amsterdam building, it is defined by a French-style neo-Renaissance roof profile.

The building was controversial because Dutch Protestants were suspicious of its ornateness. It was too Catholic – the king himself dismissed it as 'an archbishop's palace'. Gradually, the building decayed and became leaky, the dazzle of its polychromatic interior decoration either faded or was whitewashed, and in the Sixties walls were punched through to access extra floors

in box-in-box structures built in the void of two central courtyards.

'The building we found here was dark, dim, sad,' recalls Ortiz. Now, he says, 'I like the fact that people can get through the building without getting overwhelmed.' CyO's transformation comprises three elements. First, restoration of the Cuypers building. Second, creating a 21st-century environment for display, which involved collaboration with Wilmotte & Associés, the architecture practice for the museum's 'scenography', as well as new plant machinery works, including an aquifer thermal energy storage system (ATES) with two bores 142m deep that tap into geothermal energy. And third, new architectural interventions.

The most dramatic of these are the two courtyards, either side of the museum's north-south axis and each framed by Cuypers' rectangular-plan gallery wings and the internal spine that carries the richly detailed Great Hall upstairs. Here, CyO has cleared >>

*Previous page and below left: Seville-based practice Cruz y Ortiz has cleared out the clutter accumulated in the original Rijksmuseum courtyards to create two great lined atria, hung with 'chandelier' structures*

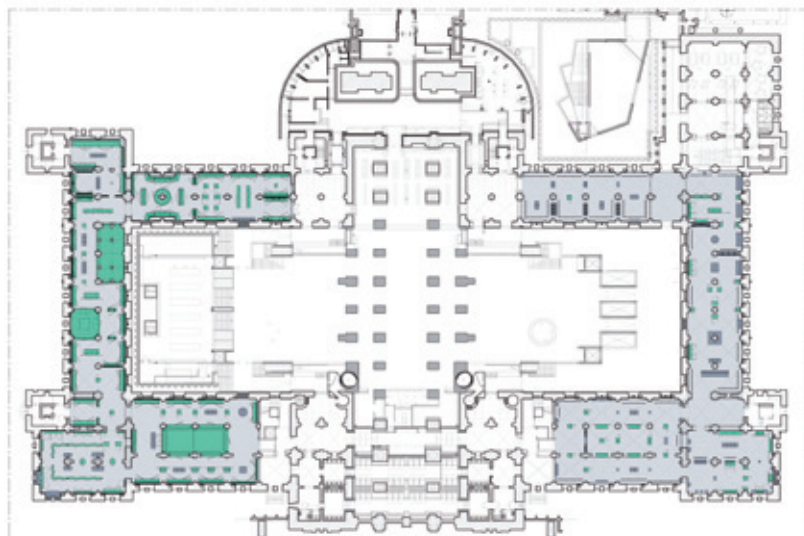
*Below right: The Cuypers Library, with an iron frame supporting stairs and walkways, has been faithfully restored*

*Bottom: Plan of Rijksmuseum lower level, with Special Collection and Middle Ages/Renaissance Galleries either side of double atrium, with entrance gates in the western space*



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JEAN-MICHEL WILMOTTE / WILMOTTE & ASSOCIÉS





PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIEN LANOO. COURTESY WILMOTTE &amp; ASSOCIÉS.



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COURTESY OF CRUZ Y ORTIZ



PHOTOGRAPH BY PEDRO PEGNAUTE. IMAGE COURTESY OF RDM MUSEUM

Top left: Wilmotte & Associés used a palette of greys throughout museum, and designed vitrines that use an especially clear glass

Top right: Antonio Cruz (left) and Antonio Ortiz before Rembrandt's celebrated masterpiece, *The Night Watch* (1642)

Above left: The Special Collections galleries have the darkest colours from the palette deployed by Wilmotte & Associés

Above right: Cuypers' vaulted passageway is now glazed and serves as a bicycle path for the city, as well as providing access to the reception lobby and atria

out so much infill that, relieved of its weight, the whole building is said to have physically risen by centimetres. The result is two airy atria. In each, the pitched glass roof's metalwork has been strengthened for the additional load of three concentric, suspended, square structures with acoustic baffling properties. They look like white fencing a storey high, and give the odd feeling that they might be dropped to pen you in on the marble floor. They are called chandeliers because they have embedded lights, further enhanced by a suspended beam with spots.

One courtyard has minimalist, monumental arches that serve as entrances to the museum proper around it. The courtyard floors are below the ground level. CyO's master stroke was to connect with a gentle slope the two courtyards into a continuous marble field under the ground-floor axis, not only creating an exciting dual-volume continuum but also allowing the restoration of the old ground-level

shortcut for people cycling between central and south Amsterdam above. Cyclists can again pass through cavernous vaulted gothic Cuypers' spaces that are glazed off from the atria either side of them. (Wim Pijbes, general director of the museum, is stern about the cyclists, threatening to pull the plug on the path if it hinders visitor flow. But if he tries, he'll face the wrath of the feisty Fietzersbond, a cyclist's organisation that Dutch politicians fear to mess with.)

Paris-based international practice Wilmotte & Associés, whose current projects include an office block in King's Cross Central in London, was charged with presenting the museum's historic collections in a contemporary way. The practice's head, Jean-Michel Wilmotte, says that 'the main problem was a lot of presence of the building; it was maybe too much. It was difficult to keep all the Cuypers' vocabulary and make it work in the 21st century'. He decided that adding to it would be

impossible, so his approach 'was to make the architecture [of Cuypers] disappear'.

Colour was the main tool to do this, using a palette from an almost-white grey for the Twentieth Century Galleries to the virtual black of the Special Collections ones. These colours unify galleries organised chronologically, but do not compete visually with the exhibits. Wilmotte describes the work as a 'trilogy' of not just colour, but also of lighting and vitrines. He respectfully calls the latter 'showcases' in English, and more than 220 of them were designed and arranged, along with 75 podiums and some 45 plinths.

There is no lighting within the vitrines, and 3,000 DALI spots and 98 light tracks are deployed. Skylights provide natural light for works from the 17th century, the Netherlands' Golden Age, on either side of the Great Hall, which leads to Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*. Pijbes decreed that there would be no electronic/ >>

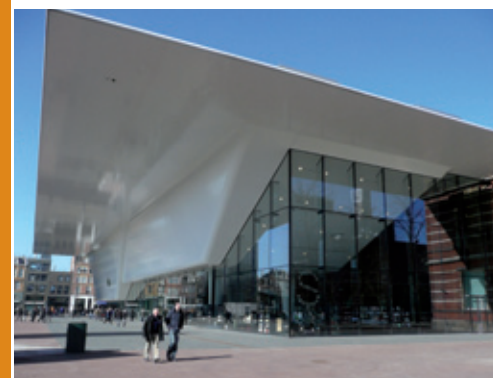




PHOTOGRAPHY BY IWAN BAAN. COURTESY OF RIJKSMUSEUM



THE TRANSFORMATION PROJECT HAS COST SOME £300M, WHICH COULD HAVE BOUGHT A SHOWY NEW BUILDING SOMEWHERE ELSE...BUT A RIJKSMUSEUM ELSEWHERE WOULD HAVE RIPPED THE HEART OUT OF AMSTERDAM'S MUSEUM QUARTER...



HERBERT WRIGHT

Top: The Rijksmuseum, opened in 1885, faces the city centre across the water of the Singelgracht

Above: The new Asiatic Gallery defies the geometry of Cuypers' Rijksmuseum plan. Note the restored skylights that bring natural light into the old building's upper galleries

Right: Bentham Crouwel's 2012 extension to the Stedelijk Museum represents a completely different approach to CyO's works at the Rijksmuseum, across the Museumplein

interactive wizardry anywhere, except in a couple of special cases.

Cuypers himself added various satellite buildings, such as a Vermeer wing and the Teekenschool, but the main building's mass and symmetry still dominates the museum plan. Nevertheless, CyO has added three new buildings outside of the main volume. The Atelier Building, where restoration takes place, is marked by a serrated roofline and angled window columns. A small entrance building on the site's western edge, which connects underground to the atria and conceals plant machinery, has a sloping, angular metal roof that leads the eye to the Cuypers' mass behind it. Most significantly, an Asian Pavilion, which houses artefacts that did not fit into the main Dutch collection, has been tucked into a corner of the main building. This angled white-stone volume defies the symmetry, lines and materiality of Cuypers' layout. 'We came to fill up one of the worst parts of the garden –

it was a cul-de-sac, secluded', says Ortiz, noting that 'if it had been parallel, it would have been dim and very narrow'. Here, free of Cuypers' constraints within the main building, Ortiz says 'I felt relief', adding, 'it's kind of a folly'.

Pijbes trumpets that 'everything is new', but that's a bit of an exaggeration – the Cuypers' building is still there, better than it's been for at least a century, and so is the national collection of a million artefacts, 8,000 of which are on display (including 100 new acquisitions). The transformation project has cost €375m (some £300m), which could have bought a showy new building elsewhere. But apart from the need to restore one of Amsterdam's most iconic historic buildings, whatever its use, a Rijksmuseum elsewhere would have ripped the heart of Amsterdam's own South Kensington – a museum quarter where the van Gogh Museum, Stedelijk Museum and Concertgebouw all lie within a few hundred metres on Museumplein. The

Stedelijk now sports Bentham Crouwel's spectacular sculptural extension (popularly called the bath tub) – Ortiz comments, 'Crouwel had a higher level of freedom than we had here.' With the van Gogh Museum set to reopen in the summer after a less-ambitious restoration, the area has a cultural critical mass, and further diversifies the city's tourism offer beyond its incomparable canal cruises and coffee shops.

To architecturally refresh a great museum for the 21st century, whether with intervention in existing structure or new extensions, can take two approaches – contrast the old and new, or discretely find a synergy between them. The Rijksmuseum does the latter. Ortiz says 'the building is so pompous, the choice we had was to make the architecture very silent'. While retaining Cuypers' grandeur and monumentality, CyO has silenced its eclectic clatter with light and openness. This time, the Spanish came to the Netherlands as liberators. ■