

# Facing the City

TODD REISZ ON BENTHEM CROUWEL'S STEDELIJK MUSEUM EXPANSION

*For some reason, monumental buildings do not work in Amsterdam. . . . The monumentality of Amsterdam exists only in the heads of its inhabitants, not on the streets.*

—Geert Mak, *Amsterdam: A Brief Life of the City* (1994)

**GEERT MAK**, a popular Dutch history writer, is often criticized for ironing the wrinkles out of history, but his antimonumental gloss on Amsterdam's architecture has been affirmed twice in the past year. First, the shamelessly iconic Eye Film Institute opened to mixed reviews in April. Then in September came the new addition to the Stedelijk Museum, which houses Amsterdam's modern and contemporary art collection. Except for two brief reopenings in the old building, the museum had been closed since 2004, finally returning last fall after a series of increasingly unbearable delays, caused by circumstances such as structural miscalculations, a bankruptcy, and an out-of-control soccer celebration that damaged the construction site. During the institution's opening days, media coverage focused on the fact that the museum and its art were back, while the new building itself was often politely sidestepped. Given that the first renderings of the design had appeared almost a decade ago, in 2004, Amsterdammers had had time to become desensitized to the proposal, viewing it as more mundane than monumental. "They call it a bathtub," residents would say to visitors, and indeed the hulking, fibreglass-smooth form warrants little more description.

"They" turned out to be the building's designers, a team of architects led by Mels Crouwel (son of famed Dutch typographer and designer Wim Crouwel) of the Dutch firm Bentheim Crouwel. Crouwel's embrace of the bathtub moniker may have been an attempt to appropriate the nickname before someone else could turn it into a slur. His caution, however, was unnecessary, at least at home. While it might seem reasonable to ask an architect to take responsibility for imposing such an uncompromising form on the city, the Dutch press has not pushed Crouwel to do so. Architectural reviews from outside the Netherlands, such as those in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*, have been far more forthcoming (the latter branded the building's shape "ridiculous"). Foreign reviews have tended to describe the Stedelijk as the latest—and maybe last—victim of the febrile days of institutional icon-building.

But if at first it seems easy to dismiss Crouwel's design as an endnote to a closed book, it's difficult to make the accusation stick. To begin, the bathtub silhouette doesn't meet the expectations one might have of an icon. It's a strange form, yes, but it doesn't lend itself to rebranding as the museum's logo—its vexing whiteness reads more like an erasure than as a form, and there is no obvious vantage point from which it can be taken in entirety or reduced to a static image by the tourist's camera. Nor did Amsterdam need an iconic building to "turn itself around" or "get on the map." As a modest-

size city that attracts more than twelve million visitors a year, Amsterdam has trouble enough accommodating tourists already. In fact, planning for cultural institutions has recently been focused on spreading tourist attractions to the outer reaches of the city, beyond the famous canals. A visit to the Eye Film Institute requires a ferry ride, the new Hermitage satellite (a terrific renovation of a former nursing home) sits on the other side of the Amstel River, and the renovated National Maritime Museum can be accessed from the train station without entering the city center. If anything, commissioning an iconic addition to the Stedelijk seemed counter to the city's larger plan for shifting visitors away from the center.

It also seemed counter to the character of the institution itself. While some in the city's cultural elite wanted a *topmuseum*, implying that they envisioned the Stedelijk

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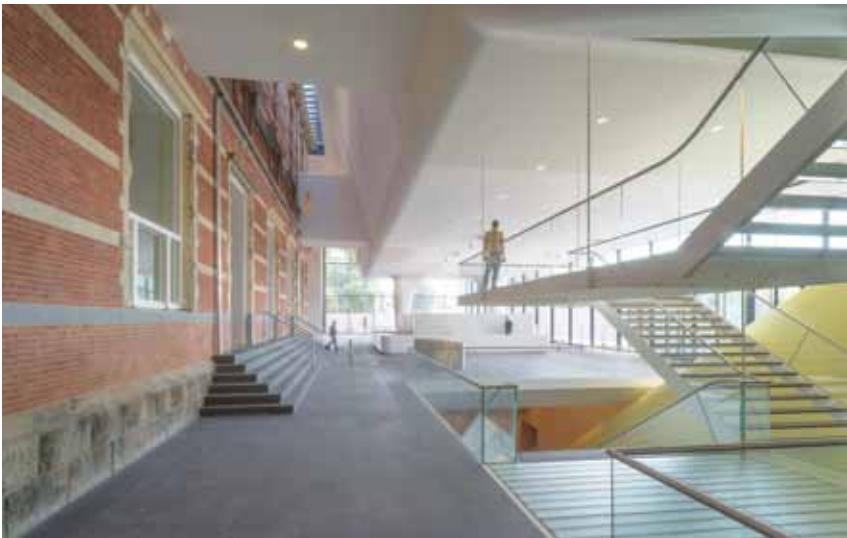
joining the ranks of the blockbuster museums, such a gambit would have required going up against the likes of the Pompidou, Tate Modern, and the Museum of Modern Art. Architecture alone could never have achieved that for the Stedelijk. Thankfully, it seems the museum's leadership knows that. The Stedelijk has historically been known for combining vanguard artistic and curatorial innovation with audience engagement; its famed director Willem Sandberg (1945–62) is credited with originating the white-cube gallery space itself and with introducing audio guides to viewing galleries, not to mention ushering in Pop and Conceptual art. This penchant for experimentation is well suited to a smaller-scale approach, one also more appropriate to the museum's resources and audience. The Stedelijk's annual acquisition budget is about a million euros, a couple percentage points of MOMA's or Tate Modern's, and its targeted annual visitor count is an optimistic five hundred thousand (MOMA's is three million; Tate Modern's, seven million). It would seem, then, that the museum would want to forgo icon games in favor of more practical design.

In this context, the selection of Bentheim Crouwel seemed logical. As lead architect, Mels Crouwel won the design competition for the museum's extension in 2004, the same year he was named the Netherlands' *Rijksbouwmeester*, an esteemed adviser to the national government on the built environment. In selecting Crouwel, the Stedelijk was considered to be playing it local and safe, having toyed with the stardom of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown and then Álvaro Siza, both of whose designs were rejected as too ambitious. The reasons for Crouwel's selection as *Rijksbouwmeester* also made him the ideal candidate for the project. As one observer wrote, Crouwel had already been "tested in the purgatory fires of what's known as a government contract."

Crouwel himself steers the conversation away from form toward function, asserting that he did not intend

Bentheim Crouwel Architects, Stedelijk Museum Expansion-Renovation Project, 2007–12, Amsterdam. Photo: Jannes Linders, 2012.





Bentham Crouwel Architects, Stedelijk Museum  
Expansion-Renovation Project, 2007–12, Amsterdam.  
Interior entrance hall. Photo: John Lewis, 2012.



Bentham Crouwel Architects, Stedelijk Museum  
Expansion-Renovation Project, 2007–12, Amsterdam.  
Interior escalators. Photo: Jannes Linders, 2012.

to create an icon, but rather a “super-organization.” He argues that the bathtub serves several functions. One example is that the tub’s folded-out lip provides protection from Amsterdam’s rain. But based on personal experience, the overhang is too high and shallow to protect anyone from a Dutch shower. Crouwel also claims that the light weight of the composite fiber shell made it possible to have a glassed-in foyer, which is hardly an architectural innovation. More substantially, he argues that the new extension provides seamless circulation for visitors. This last point fits the firm’s reputation as a specialist in large-scale infrastructural projects. Crouwel and his colleagues are known for using architecture to solve complex logistical problems in projects throughout the Netherlands. However, with the Stedelijk’s new face, Crouwel has traded in the smoothness of logistics for the smoothness of form, even if this translation is never explicitly justified and is not necessarily effective.

Already accustomed to directing the dense Dutch masses through their designs for the country’s main airport and many of its train stations, Bentham Crouwel was hired to design the Stedelijk more as a kind of cultural infrastructure, coordinating public access to a national treasure, than as an international attraction. Amsterdammers are by no means the only Dutch to take pride in the museum’s superlative collection. Unlike many other capital cities, Amsterdam is rarely more than a couple hours by train from anywhere in the country; that this is so affords a special relationship between the nation and its first city. *Culturele weekendjes* to Amsterdam are the norm, especially when the national trains offer seasonal discounts and the Netherlands has a peerless museum membership program. Part of the reason that the addition’s local reception has been largely positive may be that the museum’s community is simply happy to have the place back.

If the museum’s architecture was neither expected nor able to deliver a global art center, it does offer up some exceptional gallery spaces. The ABN AMRO Hall in the new and expensively excavated basement, which reopened last December with a landmark Mike Kelley exhibition, is perhaps the most essential element that the addition affords the Stedelijk: vast, white, column-free space. Walking in the twelve thousand square feet of space in the basement, one experiences a sophisticated exhibition site that Amsterdam couldn’t previously provide any artist or curator. Aboveground, floating over the museum’s new lobby, a second expansive exhibition space fills the body of the tub, alongside an auditorium and a multiuse space, both of which are lackluster. Walkways pierce the old building’s facade to bring you into the museum’s original gallery spaces. There, exceptionally detailed updates largely respect the older museum’s layout. One indemnity is a lighting system that other art institutions will surely envy. All the galleries feature a new, double-sided track system that allows strong, cold light to be cast upward onto the ceiling, giving the sense that each room has a skylight, while softer, warm light can simultaneously be directed downward at works on the walls without casting glare. This sort of perfected visual experience helps viewers forget unanswered questions about the outside.

The appealing scale of many of the building’s spaces helps, too. The museum is now larger, but it still feels grounded in its location. The Stedelijk officially increased its exhibition space by 50 percent, but its public spaces remain parsimoniously intimate. This is not a museum designed for the fantasies of globalized tourism that have guided other museums toward hangar-size entry spaces. Though larger than the previous one, the new lobby can accommodate a paltry eighty or so people waiting for tickets. It can feel busy even on a light day.

Here, the looming tub shape overhead and the sense of crowdedness urge visitors to go find art, whether by stepping into the old building or slipping underground to experience the new galleries.

Probably the most photographed element of the museum’s interior is a pair of escalators encased in yellowish polymer; riding them is like being conveyed through the giant tub’s oversize plumbing. The escalators are meant to offer a grand connection between the basement and the galleries and theaters in the belly of the tub. However, they make their pronounced arrival at an intermediary landing. Once there, you have to climb a set of stairs, surprisingly steep and in fact not dissimilar to those in old Dutch houses, to find the galleries. For all their dramatic looks, the escalators fail to do what circulation is fundamentally supposed to do.

The consolation for stopping at that intermediary landing is a viewing window that looks out over old Amsterdam and the adjacent Museumplein, a large green space in Amsterdam’s center. There you might realize you’re looking over this nonmonumental city from a hole in an enormous tub. This thought can be troubling, if you sense that the vista comes at the expense of the rest of the city, which gazes back at a form now as indelible on Amsterdam’s landscape as it is unexplained by its architect. From their international perspective, reviews from abroad have interpreted the inability of this idiosyncratic building to integrate into its city as the death knell of the icon era, but even the city’s most vocal critics are not ready to make the concession that this museum’s addition is a coda to an extravagant global phenomenon. And so, turning away from Amsterdam’s expanse, you take those steep stairs up to the world-class collection and do what the Dutch do: Focus on the art. □

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