

## Back on the Map

### The Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

'The bathtub', it's called, the spectacular building which houses the recently reopened Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. The colossal white hulk on the Museumplein' was already nicknamed during the design phase. Architect Mels Crowwel came up with the idea, designing the museum extension with his team at Benthem Crowwel. It's no surprise that the name caught on with the people of Amsterdam. The building's streamlined volume could hardly be expressed more aptly. The form of the construction, with diagonally sloping walls, overhanging edge and legs immediately call to mind a gigantic bathtub. The association is confirmed by the rounded corners and the smooth white finish. The enormous, apparently floating bulk rests on a steel supporting structure. The outer walls are covered with a strong, ultra light synthetic fibre used in shipping and aviation. This high quality industrial composite produces smooth, seamlessly curved surfaces. The flamboyant modern entrance is a robust statement, which immediately dismisses the old nineteenth century museum building into the background.

The much talked about shape and white walls are reminiscent of the renowned interventions of Willem Sandberg (1897-1984), the legendary museum director who energetically went to work with whitewash on the somberly decorated brick interior in the fifties. Sandberg managed to put Amsterdam's Stedelijk on the map internationally. The modern art museum's rebellious white walls became as famous as the revolutionary works of art it served up to the public. It remains to be seen whether the Stedelijk will again achieve such a global position. The budget is probably too tight for that, but the bold architecture certainly has the allure and bravura.

In the nineties the Stedelijk Museum was much in need of renovation. The building was too small to house the illustrious and ever growing collection, let alone allow space for high-profile tempo-



The Museumplein in Amsterdam, host to the Stedelijk Museum, the Rijksmuseum, the Van Gogh Museum and the Concertgebouw © KLM - Carto

rary exhibitions. Architects from the Netherlands and around the world let their imaginations run wild. Dutch architect Mels Crowwel, son of graphic designer Wim Crowwel, stood out head and shoulders above the rest. In 2004 the museum closed to construct his proposal. The architect offered an intelligent and original solution to the problem of space in the museum in its tight urban location. His idea was as simple as it was brilliant: for visitor services, such as tickets, cloakroom, shop and restaurant, he placed a lively plaza on the ground floor. The inner courtyard, sheltered by the bathtub structure, is only separated from the outside space by glass, making it a visual extension of the Museumplein. Underground another 1100 m<sup>2</sup> are allocated to a large open plan gallery. Crowwel placed further galleries above the entrance hall, in the closed bulk of the bathtub. Above these, as if floating on the bubbling bath foam, came space for the curators and museum staff. Crowwel's revolutionary design drastically reverses the orientation of the familiar museum building, moving the entrance to the back, on the Museumplein.



Photo by J. Lewis Marshall

The change required a sacrifice: the role of the glorious staircase, famous as a stage for artistic presentations and performances, was lost to the new plan. The illustrious history of the renowned staircase was remembered at the grand reopening of the museum by Queen Beatrix in September 2012. Dancers from the Dutch National Ballet performed a farewell dance choreographed by Hans van Manen on the thirty-seven steps.

The gain was immediately clear at the opening. The sloping top of the building creates a platform for the museum and its artists, a forecourt where the museum can communicate with its visitors, as in the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Performances and presentations take place under the roof. Films and images can be projected on the bathtub's smooth white walls. The entrance is transparent and inspiring. The bathtub and glass wall serve to diffuse the edges of the museum building. The plaza is like a continuous extension of the public space, creating the illusion that the Museumplein runs up to the historical wall of the original building. The exterior makes the most of the exciting contrast between A.W. Weisman's 19<sup>th</sup> century bricks and the 21<sup>st</sup> century extension with its industrial synthetics. The clash of styles is beautifully displayed in the entrance hall, the trendy bathtub visually separated from the richly decorated wall, lit by daylight, that has been restored to its former glory. Inside it vanishes with-

out a trace. All galleries are fitted out the same way, to the same measurements; walls, floors and light filters identically fitted and finished. The transition from old to new, so striking on the outside, is barely perceptible inside. For those really paying attention, a small, inconspicuous peephole allows the visitor the pleasure of standing on the bridge peeking down at the lively inner courtyard. To avoid disturbing the art lover's concentration, the route runs straight from the bathtub at the top down to the cellar, by-passing the noisy entrance hall. An extensive, much talked about escalator in a closed yellow tunnel, a contemporary nod to the old staircase, brings visitors underground in the blink of an eye.

But what about the collection? It is more beautiful than ever, arranged in surprising combinations evoking interesting associations in its serene white environment. The Stedelijk's permanent collection has an immediately uplifting effect. Once you have stood eye to eye with Luc Tuymans' beautiful, vulnerable portrait *H.M.*<sup>2</sup>, Lawrence Weiner's intriguing piece of chalk on the table, Hans Arp's flowing bronze torso, Donald Judd's box sculpture and Karel Appel's frivolous wall paintings, there's no going back! This sparkling reception is followed by a historical voyage of discovery taking visitors past countless modern art icons. From Van Gogh's *Woman Rocking a Cradle* to Willem de Kooning's *Rosy Fingered Dawn*, from Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's