Learning from the transformation of Dutch museums

Lessons for the future

Roos, Job; Hoebink, Dorus; Kok, Arjen

Publication date
2025

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Metamorphosis

Citation (APA)
Roos, J., Hoebink, D., & Kok, A. (2025). Learning from the transformation of Dutch museums: Lessons for the future. In J. Roos, D. Hoebink, & A. Kok (Eds.), *Metamorphosis: The transformation of Dutch Museums* (pp. 51-62). TU Delft OPEN Publishing.

Metamorphosis

The transformation of Dutch Museums

Job Roos
Dorus Hoebink
Arjen Kok

7 – Learning from the transformation of Dutch museums: lessons for the future

Job Roos, Dorus Hoebink** and Arjen Kok****

* TU Delft and Braaksma & Roos Architects
** Erasmus University Rotterdam & the Willem de Kooning Art Academy
*** The Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE)

Introduction

One of the premises of this research is that museums are among the most complex building types in the architectural landscape today. Museum buildings contain a wide variety of functions (conservation, research, exhibition, education, etc.), they symbolise a wide variety of meanings (history, culture, art, community, science etc.), and their functioning is evaluated by a wide variety of stakeholders (the intelligentsia, policy makers, politicians, local visitors, tourists, etc.). As no other, the museum building must represent the complexity and diversity of our society. The study of the recent and current transformations of museum buildings can show both students and professionals what significant current social changes will mean for the field of architecture. This contribution presents the conclusions of the research, visualized in the data sheets containing the analysis of the museums. An answer to the following question will be given:

What are the lessons we can learn from this transformation history?

The transformation of Dutch museums shows the great political, architectural and museological ambitions following the implementation of the Deltaplan in 1990, or running parallel to it. The Deltaplan not only aimed at enhancing climatological aspects and the conditions for preserving the collection objects, but also at making the museum economically independent. Many cities gave political and

economic support to ambitious transformations, which led to an innovative and inspiring museum landscape in the Netherlands, which also stimulated the broader architectural world. A new museum experience was offered to visitors either interested in the collections, or merely in iconic architecture. The Dutch experience is strongly connected to the deeply changing museum world, expressed by the transformations of the Tate Modern in London, the Neues Museum in Berlin and the Louvre in Paris among many others.

The complexity of the research of the transformation of museum buildings called for a multidisciplinary approach. Architectural and museological expertise was augmented by the insights from performance studies and cultural sociology. By regarding the museum as a performance, we have been able to get a firm grasp of what a transformation of a museum building entails for the entirety of the museum experience and its backstage organization. This final essay reflects on the main trends in the museum transformations observed, complemented by the insights obtained by interviewing several museum directors and curators. We conclude by highlighting the most important bottlenecks in museum building transformation and offer some suggestions to prevent these from occurring.

A very short history of the contemporary museum

The birth of the modern museum took place at the end of the 18th century. The ideals and new political realities of the French Revolution encouraged European elites and new state governments to open up and expand already existing private Renaissance and early Enlightenment collections. Private collections were moved from their domestic surroundings – like the cabinets of curiosity and palace galleries – and made publically accessible in museums. Existing buildings were transformed into museum buildings, of which the Louvre is the most famous example. In other instances, new buildings were erected with the specific purpose of housing collections, as in the case of the Alte Pinakothek in München[72]

In the 19th century museum, the Enlightenment ideals of universal knowledge and systematic (scientific) collections were complemented by the attempts of states to construct national cultures and to educate the masses[73]. Inspired by classical architecture and Renaissance palaces, early museum buildings often had columned facades, grand staircases, domed central rotundas and routes of smaller inter-linked galleries[74]. In some cases styles that had a specific reference to the history of the nation were adopted, as in the case of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, with its mixture of Gothic and Dutch Renaissance.[75] Although these museum buildings consisted of a combination of older architectural forms or were located in already existing buildings, they represented something completely new. They offered access to science, art and history to a new large public: the rising middle-class. They re-interpreted the private art collections of the ancient regime as new national heritage. They expressed their public function and social importance through their outward appearance.

In the 20th century new buildings constructed in a more functionalist approach would enrich the museum landscape. The features of the monumental museum buildings of the 19th century were increasingly seen as obstructing the core functions of the museum, such as the proper display of the objects and the efficient circulation of the visitors.

72 Giebelhausen, M., *Museum Architecture: A Brief History*. in: Macdonald, S. (Ed.), 'A Companion to Museum Studies', Malden (MA) [etc.]: Blackwell Publishing. 2006, p. 225; Refer to earlier chapters including chapter 2 by Dorus Hoebink and chapter 3 by Sinem Cerrah

73 McClellan, A. *The Art Museum from Boullée to Bilbao*. Berkeley (CA): University of California Press, 2008, p. 9

74 Giebelhausen 2011, pp. 224–227

75 McClellan 2008, p. 67

Museum buildings were envisioned as machines or instruments that could adapt their offerings to the current needs of society. More open and neutral spaces had to ensure that the museum would be more flexible in educating the audience on the newest developments in the field of science, art or design. This more utilitarian approach is exemplified by Van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin and Goodwin & Stone's Museum of Modern Art in New York.[76] At the end of the 20th century the serene and serious qualities of modernism were replaced by the intertextual gestures of postmodern architecture. Museum buildings became distinctly sculptural, aiming to bring about aesthetic and spatial experiences with the visitors. This development was in line with social trends like city branding and the emerging experience economy.[77] Sculptural museum buildings like Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao or Mendini's Groninger Museum are the signatures of their cities, attracting tourists and offering high-end cultural consumption opportunities.

Now, at the start of the 21st century, museums are re-evaluating their social role, broadening their scope, while at the same time concentrating on their core focus and adopting and developing further themes relating to sustainability and global culture and ecology. These changes all place demands on the museum organisation, but also on the building.

Dutch Museums: A continuous opening up and closing off

Museums in the Netherlands have developed following a roughly similar chronology as that described above. More recently, the history of the Dutch museum is characterized by an interaction between two conflicting tendencies, that of opening up and that of closing off. It is an interaction, because we cannot speak of a longer period of closing off followed by a period of opening up; they alternate or even take place at the same time. We also cannot say that one invariably leads to the other. At one point, closing off seems to prevail, after which it withdraws and makes room for opening up, and then moves closer again.

The privatization of many Dutch museums in the 1990s and 2000s called for a more public-oriented policy to be pursued.[78] Museums were no longer a local, regional or national 'government service', but became independent cultural institutions with their own collection-, personnel- and public policies. To be eligible for subsidies, museums had to for example increase their visitor numbers and their own income base or broaden their audience composition and in so doing demonstrate that their organizations were capable of cultural entrepreneurship. This had – and still has – the consequence that museums started to focus more on the visitor, often at the expense of the collection. Marketing and education departments were expanded at the expense of both researching the collection and utilizing the collection as an instrument for wider research. In order to attract and retain the attention of the general and wide public, the number of exhibitions per year was increased and blockbusters exhibitions were introduced. Storage facilities became part of the museum experience.[79] A visit to a museum increasingly became a pleasant experience for the whole family and included the possibility of eating, drinking and shopping.

This form of opening up has also had an influence in the museum building. Museum buildings had to become more public-friendly on the inside and more visually striking on the outside.

76 McClellan 2008, pp. 71–75; Giebelhausen 2011, pp. 231–233

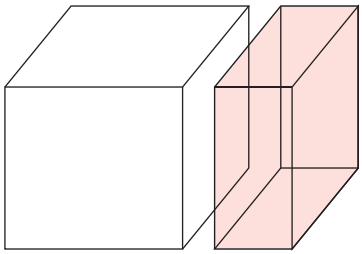
77 Pine, B. Joseph, & Gilmore, James, *The experience economy* (Updated ed.). Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business Review Press, 2011

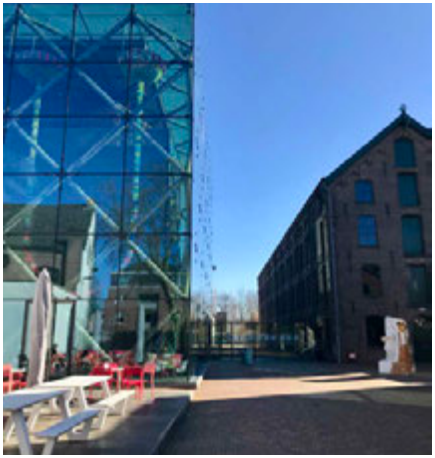
78 Refer to chapter 4 by Renate van Leijen and Marja Peek

79 Refer to chapter 6 by Marzia Loddo

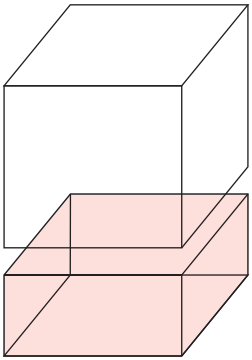
Ways of transformation

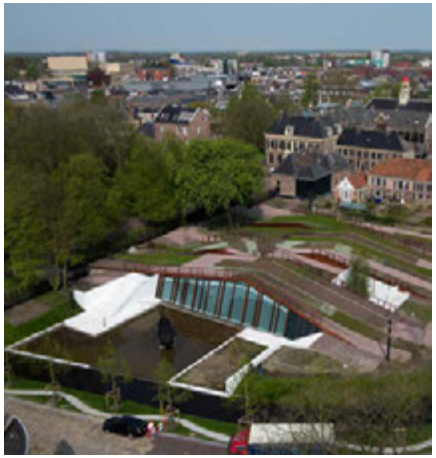
NEW IN ADDITION TO OLD



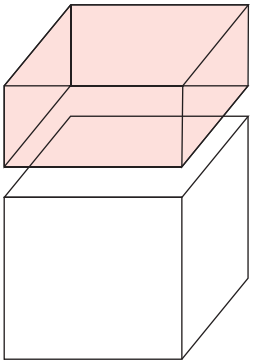


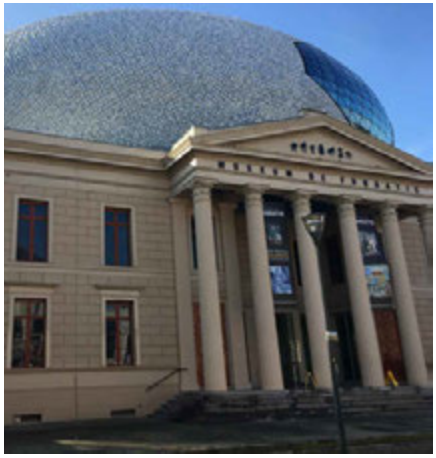
BELOW/ADJACENT



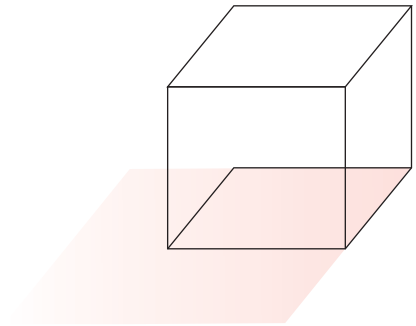


ON TOP

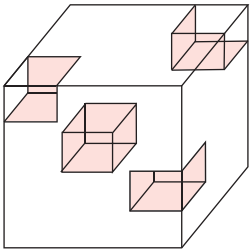




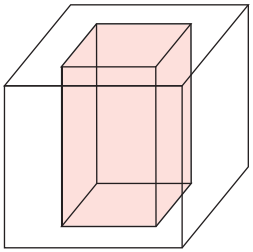
IN DIALOGUE WITH THE LANDSCAPE



RETROFITTING



COVERING OVER OF COURTYARD



The renovation of museum buildings offers the chance to add or enlarge the warming-up and cooling-down spaces - which means enlarging or adding to the building.[80] An example of this is the many canopies installed over museum courtyards and gardens to create comfortable entrance halls and/or cafes and shops there. In general, we see entrances and foyers being enlarged, so that entering museums becomes a more pleasant experience for larger groups of visitors. This is a signal that museums are focusing more on experience: these large spaces give visitors the time to enter a certain mind-set and quietly acclimatize to the museum environment.

This trend of opening up is complimentary to a trend of closing off, or autonomization. This was accompanied by a process of professionalization and specialization of the museum organization, which further stimulated the process of closing off.

Climatic autonomization serves as a good metaphor for the broader development of the closing off of the outside world from the museum building. From 1990 onwards, greater demands were made on the conservation of the collection and the regulation of the climatic conditions that the collection was stored and displayed in. The result of this is that museum buildings became increasingly climatically separated from the outside world in order to create an ideal microclimate within the museum walls.

Transformations have often led to buildings (or large parts thereof) being closed off not only in terms of climate, but also in terms of daylight. Extensions are often 'black boxes' with few or even no windows, whereby the architecture of the building disappears or is made subordinate.

In the case of renovations of existing buildings, we see the arrival of intrusive solar shading or box-in-box constructions. These interventions aim at ensuring that the lighting of the interior can be designed as desired. This not only benefits the conservation of the objects, but also contributes to the creation of a more intense visitor experience.

The introduction of spectacular, iconic extensions to museum buildings also led to the separation from their surroundings. Sculptural Post-modernist buildings for instance increase the contrast between the museum and its surroundings and emphasize the unusual nature of the performance.

With sophisticated spotlights, the visitor's gaze can be better controlled. Atmospheric lights, often coloured, evoke an ambience that makes the mise-en-scene of the performance more immersive. A consequence of this is that it is more difficult for visitors to make contact with the outside world during the museum visit and that the experience of the museum takes place removed everyday life and space. Again, the museum is presented as "special" or "extraordinary".

A new social relevance

A new emerging trend was observed during discussions held with the museum directors. Museums are starting to explore ways in which they can open up both their organizations and their buildings to the communities in which they are embedded. This objective stems from the awareness that the successful increase in activities, visibility and visitor numbers resultant from the cultural entrepreneurship and professionalization of the organization is largely based on the emergence of a middle-aged and highly educated museum audience. But this audience easily moves from one museum to the next. Although museums certainly want to retain this audience, there is also a growing desire to

80 Refer also to chapter 2 by Dorus Hoebink

strengthen relationships with the immediate environment and communities and to invest in attracting people who generally overlook the museum. This desire to reach new audience is accompanied by a renewed social commitment, with museums increasingly searching for a direct social relevance, taking in a political position, and trying to offer a podium for social conflicts and debates.

Polyphonic hybridity

A recurring aim in this regard is that museums want to further transform themselves over the coming years into multiform institutions that offer space for different, often conflicting voices and perspectives; a trend we call polyphonic hybridity.

Polyphonic, because conflicting perspectives may be voiced simultaneously, while museums too question their own assumptions and certainties. The collective representations of museum performances will therefore be subject to change over the coming years. Disparate social circumstances will have to be addressed more explicitly in these performances.

Hybrid, because museums are going to address fields beyond their own collections even more so than they are now. Museums will become meeting places for independent knowledge workers, be stages for debate and conflict, or become research centres on crosscutting themes such as climate and the city, to give just a few examples. What these examples have in common is that they can all be addressed by a collection, but that they are not necessarily bound by either medium or site. In other words, the symbolic means of production of the museum and the ways in which they are used will change in the coming years. This process will take place in collaboration with museum actors who will increasingly have to take centre-stage to enter into a more direct relationship with the public.

Polyphonic hybridity and transformation

Now the question remains: what does polyphonic hybridity look like when we talk about transformations of the museum building? Does it have an architectural form? Can we identify it when we enter a building, as we notice the impulse for openness and flexibility in a Modernist museum building? Can we see it in the same way as we can see the playful cultural entrepreneurship embodied in the sculptural nature of a Postmodernist museum building? Polyphonic hybridity can be a concrete guide in transformation processes? We cannot yet answer these questions at this time. However, what we do know is that the needs and uses of current museum buildings will change in the near future and that there must be room for rapidly changing programs, different uses and conflicting voices and views. And as the museum-as-performance model teaches us: if part of the performance changes fundamentally, then that will have an effect on the other elements, including the building.

Identifying the main issues

Although recent transformations have made Dutch museums to count among some of the best in the world and there are few other countries that can deliver such a level of quality per capita with a similar geographic spread, there are some recurring bottlenecks in the relationship between building, organization and public.

In the transformation cases examined for instance, there was often an imbalance in the input of the client, that of the architect and that of the user. The voice of the architect and the client (government) was often the strongest, which led to the museums organizations not having the opportunity to transform along with the building or to shape its transformation to their standards.

The consequence of such an imbalance is that outwardly impressive and interesting (autonomous) buildings were created that were of great iconic value to the creation of a new cultural landscape. However, these buildings often fail to fully accommodate the daily operation of the museum including changing exhibitions, visitor flows and preservation of the collection. As a result, curators and exhibition makers must work against the building rather than with the building. With the arrival of new working methods and insights, museum staff are forced to either tie themselves in knots or to 'hack' and disrupt their own building.

In the past, robust climate and security interventions were implemented, making museum buildings ideal crates for objects. Of course this approach is not sustainable because every object received the same treatment. Storage and exhibition spaces lacked flexibility to differentiate between the 'climate needs' of different materials.[81] Another consequence of the closed climate boxes was that buildings became too closed off from their immediate environment (black boxes), a situation that is undesirable in view of current developments towards more transparency.

A continuous cycle of change

The only constant is change and we need to learn to see the building in all its components as a cyclic whole; a (eco-) system with different circulation speeds, much like suggested by Steward Brand in his influential book 'How buildings learn'.[82]

In this process there are changes that lead to temporary synergies. The museum-as-performance model points out that museums nowadays consist of various theatrical elements (mise-en-scenes, scripts, objects) that are supported by backstage facilities and activities (climate control, security, personnel policy). This implies that the appearance of a museum is the result of the continuous interaction between all these elements. When one of these elements undergoes a substantial change, it means that this will affect the other components individually and the performance as a whole. When a museum building is renovated, rebuilt or expanded, this has consequences not only for the appearance of a museum, but also for its content.

Museum transformation are not only transient, they are also preceded and followed by other transformations. This calls for an urgently sustainable, cyclical (and cherishing) approach. Without thorough (foregoing) research and analysis, the chance is very real that a transformation does not rise above quick-wins and fashionable interventions. The rich and diverse museum landscape requires an individually tailored approach, rooted in expertise and strong commitment, global thinking and local roots.

Asking the right questions

How can the rich museum landscape that has emerged in recent decades be placed between durability and fashionable and sometimes superficial interventions? The museum performance must adapt a rapidly developing society. Often, already executed transformations cannot answer to calls for greater flexibility in programming for better cultural-social embedding. This often provokes new transformation(s).

It is therefore of great importance that intended changes to museum buildings (as one of the performance elements) are related to the institution's other performance elements and that the consequences of the intervention in part of the performance are examined as a whole.

81 Refer to chapter 4 by Bart Ankersmit.
82 Brand, S. *How buildings learn*. New York, Penguin, 1994

Important questions need to be asked at the outset of a transformation process:

— What do changes, as for instance a new extension, mean for the routing through the museum? To which spatial script does this lead? What consequences does it have for the narrative and the types of objects that can be placed in it?

— What is the relationship that the museum wants to build with its public over the next 15 to 20 years? Who is this public? What role does museum staff play in this relationship? Does this have consequences for the location of the offices and the depot? And what does this mean for the relationship between front stage and back stage?

— Which collective representations does the museum want to refer to in the future? Which exhibitions should shape this implicit message from the museum? What does this mean for the relationship between permanent and temporary installations?

The building: only a part of the whole

The museum is like a machine, with one gear connected to the other in an interdependent whole. The architect is the integrator and has to oversee the whole, ensuring that after a transformation the building does not become the proverbial spanner in the works. A transformation must therefore be approached as an integral assignment in which social circumstances, the political embedding, or the geographical context can be relevant in the transformation process. It is therefore important that architects and clients are aware that "their" transformation will not be the last, and aspire not to make the work of their successor unnecessarily complex. A transformation should aim to keep open further transformation options. However, it should not be so transient as to become superfluous after a short time, stimulating a rapid further transformation. This means that the architect will have stand at the intersection of flexibility and durability, which is a difficult task.

But here too the adage of *polyphonic hybridity* can be used as a source of inspiration. The architect can take a coordinating lead in a multi-voiced conversation about the future of a museum. A hybrid network of conversation partners will have to be heard, resulting in a transformation that starts from familiar ways of thinking and working, but grows towards a future situation that is desired by as many people as possible. The architect can choose to give conflicting visions among stakeholders a place in the design, instead of seeking a compromise or move it aside.

In essence, a good strategic vision is a requirement. It is therefore also the task of the architect to request such a vision from the client. In principle, an architect should not try to propose a transformation proposal if the assignment or question is not yet clearly formulated, or if there is no broad support for the intended transformation.

Conclusions on the transformation process

The transformation of museums entails a long process with many actors involved. The analysis of recent transformations has led to some conclusions on the transformation process:

Dialogue

The choice for the way of transforming (heritage-) museum buildings is often made through competitions that call for a grand vision or gesture. But a dialogue between the various stakeholders – museum director, commissioners, governments, museum users, other stakeholders – is of great importance for the success of a transformation. The existing

presents a discoverable reality. One danger of the competition process is that the complexity and the existing in all its tangible and intangible facets will not come into its own sufficiently through the competition process. After all, a broad contextual understanding is often required for the architect to develop a correct, authoritative and curative design. Recognizing the complexity of the assignment is crucial and the architect should be open to the input of other stakeholders and not take in an authoritarian attitude. Only in this way can a sustainable result be achieved.

Anticipate the unknown

Both the client or user and the architect must make every effort to anticipate possible future developments. Both the public and public interest are essential factors to consider. A broad orientation towards the context – cultural (-historical), social and economic – is desirable and we need to look beyond the scale of the building alone. A too narrow focus on the building in a functional, logistical and technical sense must be avoided. There must be a "dialogue" with the city, where the architect's task is an integral and an integrating one. The architect must also develop a vision of what the essence and role of a museum is in the dynamic, increasingly articulate 21st century society.

Of course a lot is unknown; this is however all the more reason for the architect to operate openly and transparently, and perhaps even to be cautious, but also to focus in particular on flexibility in steadfastness in the transformation process.

A paradigm shift

The findings and recommendations that emerge from this study can only lead to a deeper and better insight into the mechanism of museum transformation. Our era has within a few decades developed from modernism to postmodernism, even, perhaps to a period free of style, a form of broad contextualism that often leads to hybrid solutions. A paradigm shift in dealing with the existing already appears to be proclaiming itself. After all, many new museums (approximately 135) have been transformed in the Netherlands recent decades. Their incorporation into existing (heritage-) complexes with the necessary transformations took place on a considerable scale and pace. A major challenge was to develop a broad acceptance of the imperfection of the existing in combination with new programming.

As we have already explained, an excess of pragmatism (technical and functional requirements) seems to have dominated the transformations, coupled with ambitions of 'branding' often through a (too autonomous) design ambition. But there are also recent and inspiring examples in a national and international context that demonstrate an interesting, intimate and hybrid relationship with the existing. Examples include the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Neues Museum in Berlin, the Drents Museum in Assen, and the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague. In these examples you can read something about the indispensable attention to researching and testing of a design for a successful transformation. These examples project an authentic presence. The buildings have effectively been redesigned and they often exist within a larger ecological cyclical system of their built environment, the city. This realization therefore extends both the brief and the conclusions far beyond the scope of a building-scale investigation into museums.

From observation to an appeal

The approach at these successful museums seems to have been inspired by the principle of biophylic design, sourced from a love for the life that takes place within it. The somewhat broader application of this concept leads to an almost loving and natural integral interaction of building and art with the existing, which focused on experience and well-being while never losing the whole out of sight. It is about sensitivity and

often about embracing the beauty of imperfection. This new beauty is additional (collateral), and not imposed. To achieve it requires an extensive in-depth study of the multitude of facts and meanings by the architect. The architect also has to pay attention to the broader context and raise the burden of proof for the need for future transformations to a higher level. Finally, it is also about escaping from the existing through an original and imaginative creation that seems almost self-evident that at the same time can inspire. The existing must be addressed in this new creation as more than just an image. A new penetrating relationship must result. The architect must take core values, dilemmas and paradoxes into account, which will often lead to a hybrid form of architectural engineering.

Lessons learnt

The idea of what the museum is has evolved from its origins as an object with artefacts displayed inside (a curiosity cabinet) to being a multifaceted institution operating in a socio-economic ecosystem. The museum building – with all its inherent complexities and conflicting internal forces – is only a part of this institution, but it is also an important facilitating tool. The building should be seen to serve the institution and its goals, not the other way around. This is a leading perspective for any transformation that hopes for success.

In such a process architecture is a catalyst. It facilitates the transformation of the building, but can also stimulate the transformation of the institution. The architect integrates and has to master more than the fundamental pragmatics of the building alone. This cannot be achieved in isolation. The architect therefore has to collaborate with other known actors and even search for hitherto actors that could potentially enrich and illuminate the multifaceted transformation process. Collaboration is key.

The architect must remain open to all stakeholders' and specialists' perspective, delaying decision-making, allowing for the crystallisation of a transformation that is integrated with both the existing museum building as well as the institution in its built, social, economic and political contexts to achieve a durable transformation.

In learning from a veritable tsunami of transformations, we can now transition towards a process of natural metamorphosis with an intrinsic sustainable strength grounded in flexibility.

1985 Gallery of Honour - Rijksmuseum

Colophon

Metamorphosis | The transformation of Dutch Museums

Editors:
Job Roos[1], Dorus Hoebink[2], Arjen Kok[3]

[1] Department of Architectural Engineering + Technology, Faculty of Architecure and the Built Environment, Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands

[2] Department of Arts and Culture Studies, School of History, Culture and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

[3] Rijksdienst voor Cultureel Erfgoed, The Netherlands

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Dutch Museums, Museum Technology, Rondeltappe

Republished by:
TU Delft OPEN Publishing | Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands

DOI: https://doi.org/10.59490/mg.131
ISBN:978-94-6366-180-5

Electronic version of this book is available at:
https://books.open.tudelft.nl/

Book design made by Sirene Ontwerpers, Rotterdam.
Cover image: Chambers of Wonder (Wunderkammer), Gemeentemuseum The Hague, Kossmann.dejong Exhibition Architects / Wolzak T.

Photography: Gallery of Honour - Rijksmuseum, pages 04, 06, 10, 14, 19, 20, 26, 30, 38, 43, 44, 52, 64, 186, 188, 193: photos Rijksmuseum

This publication was made possible thanks to the support of the Rondeltappe Bernoster Kemmers Foundation.