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Delft, city of art: Herman Rosse's restoration plan for the seven-centuries- old Prinsenstad

In 1932, Herman Rosse (1887-1965) was appointed professor at the decorative arts department of Delft University of Technology. For most of his career, Rosse worked in the United States, and was successful as, among other things, a set designer for theatre and film. His professorship in Delft, from 1932 to 1948, was an intermezzo to his design career. In the field of education, his contribution was hardly remarkable; Rosse seems to have focused his creative energy on other matters, such as theatre set design.¹

In 1936, early on in his professorship, Rosse proposed setting up an architecture museum in Delft. During the remainder of his appointment, he expanded on this idea, developing a plan for the entire inner city of Delft, which he published in 1946. The plan presents Delft as an open-air museum, with an important role reserved for the craft industry. It contains detailed suggestions for the architectural fabric of the inner city, with facades adapted to the desired cityscape. At an urban planning level, the plan addresses modern traffic problems by constructing a ring road around the historic city's core. What is remarkable about this project is that, as a professor, Rosse was not responsible for restoration or urban planning, but rather for decorative art. His interest in an architecture museum therefore seems implausible, but it can be explained on the basis of the history of education in the department of decorative art.

After studying for some time at the Academy of Art in The Hague and continuing under Th. K. L. Sluyterman in Delft, Rosse attended the Royal College of Art in London, graduating in 1907. Rosse then travelled the world, studied in the USA at Stanford University, in California, and obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in architecture there in 1911. Back in the Netherlands, Rosse designed and decorated private homes and was commissioned to decorate the interior of the Peace Palace (1913), based on work he did for his degree in London.² After his work at the Peace Palace had been well received, Herman was commissioned to design the decoration for the Dutch pavilion at the world's fair in San Francisco in 1915, [the Panama-



FIG. 1 Set design for the film *King of Jazz* (1930) [<https://harvardfilmarchive.org/calendar/king-of-jazz-2016-12>]



FIG. 2 Set design for *Elizabeth, de vrouw zonder man* by Toneelgroep Het Masker, 1936 [Allard Pierson, University of Amsterdam, Theatre Collection, t004206]

Pacific International Exposition]. Rosse then stayed in the USA, where he taught at Stanford and taught summer courses at the University of California. In 1918, he was appointed head of the Department of Design at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In addition to his teaching positions, Rosse also made interior designs, textile designs for Marshall Field's department store, book illustrations and theatre designs.³

Rosse made a name for himself with his innovative theatre designs, and in 1923, he moved with his family to New York, where his involvement with the stage increased. In 1929, he was offered the position of art director for John Murray Anderson's film *King of Jazz* and moved to Hollywood. In 1930, he received the Academy Award for Art Direction for his work on the film. This made Herman Rosse the very first Oscar winner from the Netherlands, and to this day, Rosse remains the only Dutch professor to have won an Oscar. [1]

The Depression put a temporary halt to Rosse's successful career, because it was impossible for him to find work in the theatre and film industry in the United States. By that time, Rosse had nine children to support, so the opportunity to become a professor in Delft was just what he needed. The choice of Rosse as professor at the decorative arts department may seem surprising, but in the 1920s and 1930s, designers were often involved in set design as well as interior and industrial design. Prominent American designers, like Norman Bell Geddes, also combined interior and industrial design with set design.⁴ Queen Wilhelmina (who had opened the Peace Palace in 1913) reportedly had a hand in Rosse's appointment.

Judging from the 1933 and 1948 course catalogues of TH Delft [(or Technische Hogeschool van Delft, as Delft University of Technology was then known)], the course offerings did not change during Rosse's tenure. Drawing ornamentation for the interior and exterior of buildings remained an important subjects. The method that Le Comte had introduced as early as the 19th century, in which measuring and copying models were important educational activities, was still in use.

While Rosse does not seem to have been a radical innovator during his professorship, he did develop other activities while at Delft. In line with his work in the USA, and previously in the Netherlands, he designed stage sets, and Dutch pavilions for the Brussels International Exposition (1935) and New York World's Fair (1939). [2]

A striking new activity for Rosse was the development of a number of urban planning proposals. Rosse published the first, a redevelopment plan for The Hague, in 1935, in collaboration with the architect Jan Wils. A 100-metre-wide traffic

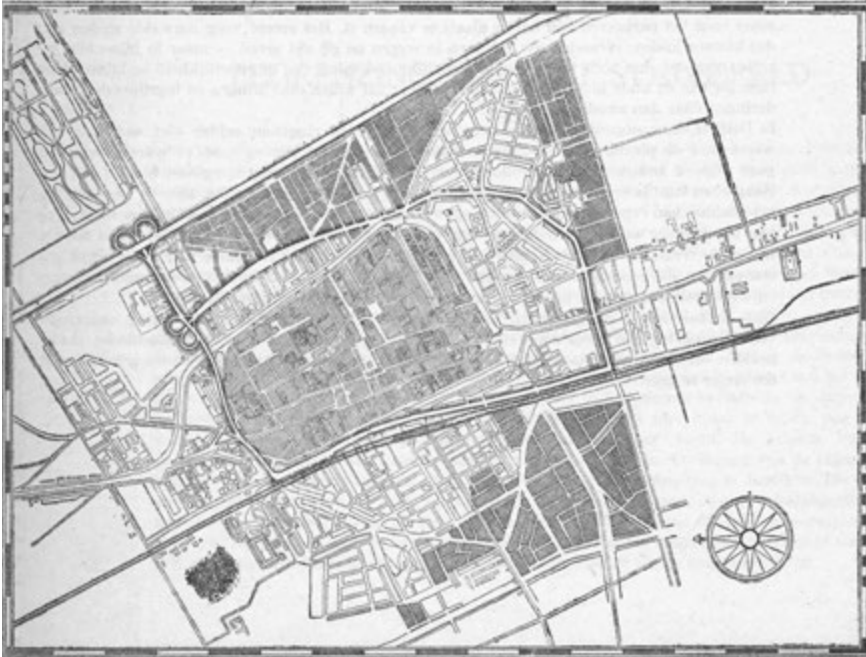


FIG. 3 Map of the plan for Delft, with the ring road for traffic, and adjustments to rail and canals [from: *Delft kunststad*, 99]



FIG. 4 The facades of the buildings along Wijnhaven from Boterbrug to Nieuwstraat; below, the existing situation; above, the proposed changes [from: *Delft kunststad*, 109]

artery, cutting through the city, from the Binckhorstlaan to the square in front of the Kurhaus in Scheveningen, is characteristic of the New Objectivity design.⁵ The Scheveningen reconstruction plan published by Rosse in 1945 shows a similar approach to urban planning.⁶ In contrast to the proposals for The Hague and Scheveningen, however, Rosse published a plan for Delft in 1946 focused primarily on maintaining and even enhancing the city's historic value.⁷

The essence of this plan was the transformation of the historic core of Delft into an open-air museum. In his introduction, Rosse writes that it was developed from a 1936 plan, on a much smaller scale, for an architecture museum in Delft. [3]

'Gradually, the plan has now been developed into a different plan, namely the preservation of an entire city as an urban development monument. So many cities have succumbed in recent years to modern traffic that the preservation of a single example from the days before combustion engines is beginning to take on historical and cultural importance.

In the case of the city of Delft, it would be possible to preserve an entire old city, since no major changes have taken place there over the last few hundred years. Maintaining the city in this form would place it over the next few years in a unique position as an urban monument. The city as a whole would thus become a kind of open-air museum of quite considerable dimensions, because according to the plan, the entire area within the old city walls would be included, and even a small area on the south side of the old city ring canal.⁸

The entire historic centre would be stripped of the majority of its inhabitants, who would be exiled to newly built suburbs. Around the old city centre, a ring road would have to deflect all motorised traffic. Buildings in the centre that did not fit in with the desired (late Gothic or early Renaissance) image would have to be rebuilt or even replaced by facades of houses demolished in other Dutch cities. [4]

The demolished historic city gates would need to be replaced by appropriate new buildings in order to close the canals visually. It constitutes a marriage of urban ideals; tradition in the centre, modernism outside. [5]

The interior of the buildings would have to harmonise with the exterior setting. In the historic centre, Rosse wanted small artisanal businesses, student accommodation and shops with historically designed shop windows. After sketching his physical plans for Delft, Rosse addressed the economy of the museum city. Tourism and the production and sale of industrial products would be the museum city's main sources of income. Rosse includes a long list of historic crafts important to Delft in

the past. On this basis, he compiled a list of crafts that could be practised in small workshops in the buildings of the city centre. Although Rosse realised these small-scale industries could never replace mass production, he pointed out their value both for the quality of the products and for the happiness of the craftsmen who worked there, in the spirit of William Morris.

An amusing observation is that time has proved Rosse partly right on a number of points, although his plan received little attention at the time.⁹ The current traffic plan is more in line with Rosse's ideas than with the 1956 *Kom* (or city centre) plan by Delft professor of urban design J.H. Froger and architect S.J. van Embden. Delft can still boast a relatively well-preserved historic city centre within its old walls. And, although the economic interpretation of Rosse's plans might seem rather naive, 'old Dutch' products are offered in abundance in Delft's tourist shops.

At first glance, it is difficult to understand why Rosse, so progressive in his other designs, made a historicising plan for Delft. The educational views of his predecessors at the decorative arts department seem to have influenced his views on Delft. Rosse's plan for Delft appears to be a return to older plans for an architectural museum in Delft, which have been recurring ever since Eugen Gugel served as the first professor of architecture in the Netherlands.



FIG. 5 In order to close off the streetscape and achieve '17th century urban planning effects', the Binnenwatersloot has been visually closed by building a new town clerk's office [from: *Delft kunststad*, 102]

Appointed to the Delft Polytechnic School in 1864, Gugel wanted to model his educational curriculum after the most progressive examples of his time, such as the South Kensington Institute, in London. According to the method used there, students had to learn design by studying good examples in an educational collection. For this educational method to be most effective, an arts and crafts museum was indispensable, because in such a museum a collection of sufficient quality and size could be built up. The museum would be a means of improving national design, not only by educating the designers of the future, but also by educating the general population. The first decorative art instructor, Adolf Le Comte, actually started to build up a collection of furniture, utensils and architectural fragments for his students, but was hindered in his endeavours by the constant lack of financial resources and space.¹⁰

An object was important not only in isolation but as part of an ensemble in its surroundings. Collections were preferably housed in period rooms: complete interiors in a comprehensively realised historical style. The period room did not function as an ethnographic document, but as an immersion bath, in which the student was permeated with 'the right ideas'. Once thoroughly permeated with healthy principles, the young designer could meet the challenges of shaping his or her own time. A well-preserved historical urban environment was also expected to have a beneficial effect on the development of taste. This also made the preservation of monuments relevant not only for the education of architecture students, but also for the education of the general population. Le Comte took a seat in the city council of Delft in order to have a say against the proposed filling in of the canals, and to advocate an inventory of monuments.

When the department moved to Huis Portugal, Sluyterman, Le Comte's successor, was given the opportunity to furnish a number of period rooms for instructional purposes with objects from the educational collection. In his speech at the opening of the house in 1917, Sluyterman expressed educational views largely corresponding with those of Le Comte. His teaching remained very much focused on examples from the past, with seventeenth-century Dutch interiors as the ideal image.¹¹

Rosse did not change this either; in his inaugural speech, he announced he would take good care of Sluyterman's department, but in fact he seems to have adapted himself to the collection and the setting of the department in Huis Portugal.¹² The teaching method that came into being around 1870 with Le Comte at the decorative arts department was passed on from teacher to teacher and lasted for about eighty years.

Notes

- 1 As can be seen in the entries on Rosse in the Dutch online theatre encyclopedia: <https://theaterencyclopedie.nl/w/index.php?search=herman+rosse&go=OK&fulltext=1> (Allard Pierson & Stichting TiN) (date of access 3 April 2020).
- 2 Christien Uringa, Marjan Groot, Anne Okkerse, Gradi Nitert, *Herman Rosse: design, art, love, architecture, film, theatre, history*, Den Haag 2017.
- 3 'Biographical Sketch of Herman Rosse', Herman & S. Helena Rosse Archive (date of access 30 May 2016).
- 4 Martin Battersby, *The Decorative Twenties*, London 1988, 21.
- 5 'Den Haag heeft geen behoefte aan een centralen verkeersweg' [The Hague does not need a central traffic artery], *Haagsche Courant* 2 April 1935.
- 6 Herman Rosse, *Plan voor den wederopbouw van de badplaats Scheveningen. Een ontwerp van Prof. Herman Rosse* [Plan for the reconstruction of the seaside resort of Scheveningen. A design by Prof. Herman Rosse], The Hague 1945.
- 7 Herman Rosse, *Delft kunststad. Restauratieplan voor de zeven eeuwen oude prinsstad. Een ontwerp van Prof. Herman Rosse* [Delft, art city. Restoration plan for the seven centuries old princely city. A design by Prof. Herman Rosse], Delft 1946.
- 8 Rosse, *Delft kunststad*, 7.
- 9 Willemijn Wilms Floet & Leen van Duin, 'Spoorzone Delft', *OverHolland* 5, 97-105.
- 10 Even today, artifacts are still used in education: the Faculty of Architecture has a chair collection of 387 pieces. However, teaching methods have changed. In 2020, Museum Paul Tetar van Elven organised an exhibition in which the development in the use of objects in education by Herman Rosse's predecessors was compared to current practice. The exhibition can still be seen online: <https://tetar.nl/lumos-delft-in-de-kijker/tentoonstelling-drawing-rooms-tekenenonderwijs-verbindt-tu-delft-tetar/>
- 11 Karel Sluyterman, *Het huis van ouds genaamd Portugal te Delft, ingericht voor het onderwijs in de decoratieve Kunst aan de Technische Hoogeschool, Delft 1917.*
- 13 Herman Rosse, *Decoratieve kunst en praktijk. Rede uitgesproken bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van hoogleeraar aan de Technische Hoogeschool te Delft op donderdag 28 september 1933 door H. Rosse*, Delft 1933.