‘A New Building inside the Walls of the Old One’
Some 50 years ago, after the renovation of the Rijksmuseum had been completed, managing director Arthur van Schendel triumphantly commented:

In the summer of 1962, the Rijksmuseum became the focus of attention when it opened its complex of 30 new galleries and an auditorium with almost 400 seats, a new building inside the walls of the old. This was not the end of the process, but it was a high point in a long series of activities undertaken since the liberation of the Netherlands to create a fitting, modern accommodation that does justice to the country’s world-famous art collection.¹

Later, architecture critic Max van Rooy called this renovation ‘an assault of the most violent nature’ on the building.² The new intervention by Cruz y Ortiz architects has wiped away almost every trace of these post-war-era modifications. In the years separating Pierre Cuypers from Cruz y Ortiz, the Rijksmuseum underwent alterations inspired by various motives and concepts. There were a few recurring themes: the central passageway, the grandeur of the building’s backbone (the Great Hall, Gallery of Honour and Night Watch Gallery), the confusing walking routes, the continual shortage of space, and the question of what to do with Cuypers’ decorations. These were also the major themes in Hans Ruijssenaars’s masterplan (from 1996), which formed the backdrop to the recent renovation.

Lack of Space and Changing Perspectives
The exterior of the Rijksmuseum has remained almost unchanged since it was first built. The main reason for changes inside the building has been a lack of space. Cuypers’ original conception of the Rijksmuseum was as a gathering place for art objects. He did not include any storage space in his design for the building; the entire art collection was on display. Unsurprisingly, the first storage space was set up just one year after the opening ceremony in 1885, in one of the larger exhibition rooms on the ground floor.¹ Other responses to the shortage of space included the installation of false ceilings (which began as early as 1898) and the use of partitions to increase hanging space in the galleries.³ The museum collection was growing all the time, and the directors had to keep raising the bar for inclusion. Consequently, more and more space was used for storage, at the cost of exhibition space and facilities for staff and the public. In the 1920s, concrete floors were poured in the two courtyards, so that storage basements could be dug underneath them. From 1967 to 1974, several towers were also used for storage (2.01, 2.04).

The changes to the building were made by Cuypers himself in the early years, but over time his health declined and his son Joseph (or Jos) Cuypers took over his responsibilities.⁴ In 1893, Jos Cuypers became the official deputy Rijksmuseum architect. So much construction and restoration took place that it kept the museum’s ‘Building Office’ continually occupied. Jos Cuypers’ own architecture firm also received assignments for the Rijksmuseum, such as the enlargement of the Rijksnormaalschool voor Teekenonderwijzers (State Training College for Teachers of Drawing, now known as the Teakenschool, or Drawing School) in 1923–1924.
In 1922, a year after the death of Pierre Cuypers, the appointment of Frederik Schmidt-Degener led to a complete reorganization of the permanent exhibition and the museum building. After an experiment with displaying fifteenth- and sixteenth-century paintings in the five east galleries of the main building, the other galleries were redecorated between 1924 and 1927, and as a result many objects were sent to storage once again (2.05). In 1924, the walls were painted a hue that Schmidt-Degener believed was better suited to the nature of the works on display. The floors were covered with linoleum, the galleries were lined with jute, and the polychrome decorative scheme was toned down. That same year, overhead lights were installed in the Night Watch Gallery and the Carolingian Chapel.  

Particularly radical changes were made to the main central axis of the museum building—the Great Hall, Gallery of Honour and Night Watch Gallery. Cuypers had built an extension on the south side of this axis because of problems with lighting the Night Watch (2.02, 2.03). But this Night Watch extension was off the main route through the museum and on a different level from the rest of the building, and so the painting was returned to its original gallery in 1926. This time it was exhibited on the west wall. In 1925, in preparation for its return, the Night Watch Gallery had been panelled and painted, the curtains had been removed, and the decorative paintings on the walls and ceilings had been covered with whitewash. The floor of the Gallery of Honour had been raised so that it was at the same level as the side galleries. The floors were carpeted and the vaulting was overpainted. Display cases of Delftware covered the length of the Gallery of Honour. In 1958, the floor of the Gallery of Honour would be lowered again, reinstating the difference in elevation between the main gallery and the side galleries. The visual unity of the Gallery of Honour and Night Watch Gallery was not restored until 1983, when the Night Watch was returned to its former place.
Eschauzier and Röell

The second period of thorough renovation at the Rijksmuseum was the work of a smoothly functioning duo: the museum director and the architect. Frits Eschauzier, the architect in question, was a friend of Willem Sandberg, who worked at the Stedelijk Museum. Sandberg had put Eschauzier in touch with David Röell before the Second World War. When Röell was appointed director of the Rijksmuseum, he asked Eschauzier to make whatever plans he saw fit for the redesign of the building’s interior. By 1948, the galleries had already been stripped of the very unsightly multicoloured friezes and black panelling and repainted in colours befitting the works of art.7 In 1949 new display cases, pedestals and parquet floors were installed. New levels were added in the courtyards for extra exhibition space.

A year later, in 1950, the decorations in the Night Watch Gallery were toned down, and in 1951 Eschauzier redecorated the Gallery of Honour and the eight adjoining side galleries. Röell had the walls of the Rijksmuseum whitewashed, like those in the Stedelijk, for an aesthetic display of a selection of highlights. He aspired to improve public taste and made a sharp distinction between painting, sculpture and applied arts.

The first 60 galleries redecorated by Eschauzier met with public enthusiasm. Eschauzier collaborated with architect Bart van Kasteele on this project. The bright light in the new, white-stuccoed galleries, which provided a clearer view of the art objects, was felt to be ‘supernatural’, a kind of revelation. At last, the Rijksmuseum’s interior met the standards for museums of the day. In the interior, Eschauzier used low, arched passages at angles to one another. Here, a sculpture along the axis of a passage tempts the visitor to continue to the next gallery; elsewhere, a partition hides the entrance to tempt curiously.8

Eschauzier installed a muslin canopy to filter the light, softening contrasts; in combination with the lowered ceilings, this lent greater intimacy to the spaces.9 He manipulated light that entered from above and to the sides ‘to the extent that by using various shades of white, he could adapt the reflectivity of the walls to the type of object’.10 In 1957 the high ceilings were lowered and pre-walls were installed, along with parquet and marble floors and block-shaped, freestanding display cases. Windows and doors were closed off wherever possible. Not all of Eschauzier’s measures were favourable. One of the great architects of the Modern Movement, J. J. P. Oud, made his displeasure known in a letter to the National Commission for Conservation. He offered an admission: ‘Removing ornament with the intention of possibly restoring it later strikes me as such a peculiar procedure, when applied to a recognised piece of “great” architecture, that I shall say no more about it’.

Oud argued that Eschauzier’s approach was detrimental to Cuypers’ ‘masterpiece’, and he argued against imposing changing fashions in exhibition design on buildings that ‘cannot endure’ such measures. Oud contended that the integrity of Cuypers’ building deserved the same respect as that of a historic work of art. He wrote that he had always very much enjoyed his visits to the museum until Schmidt-Degener had begun his alterations.11

When Eschauzier died unexpectedly, former Chief Government Architect Gisbert Friedhoff briefly managed the Rijksmuseum. During his tenure, the Great Hall, the Gallery of Honour, the Night Watch Gallery and the other galleries in the east wing were redecorated once again.12

2.06 Frans Eschauzier’s interior decoration of the galleries, 1953

2.07 Trail arrangement in the west courtyard for the Meissen porcelain exhibition, 1957
Filing in the Courtyards
Just prior to his death in 1956, Eschauzier had made proposals for alterations in the west courtyard. In 1957, RÖSt had persuaded the Dutch authorities to allocate funds for this renovation. To achieve this he had set up a provisional display in the courtyards, with partitions on which art objects were exhibited (2.07).

Eschauzier’s successors moved forward with this project. Visual artist Dick Effers began working for the Rijksmuseum in 1956, a relationship that would continue for 25 years. His work for the museum included both graphic and exhibition design; his first project was to devise a new letterhead and posters. Later, he started up an agency with architect Thijs Wijnaldum, which handled the design of temporary Rijksmuseum exhibitions, as well as a few major renovations, such as the filing-in of the two courtyards. In 1962, the Sculpture and Applied Arts Departments opened in the 30 new galleries in the west courtyard; for this purpose, Effers and Wijnaldum had designed two new levels. With acoustical assistance from the National Theatre Building Committee, they also designed an auditorium, the Rooldaal, with 384 seats. The infill in the west courtyard was a steel structure with concrete floors (2.08). The new passages had an aluminium finish. Marble was used in transition areas between old and new sections.

To speed up the renovation process, the Rijksmuseum was placed under the authority of the Rijkgebouwendienst’s (Government Buildings Agency, Rgd) department for new building projects, starting in 1964. This gave an additional impetus to the renovation of the east courtyard. The old walls and floors were demolished, and concrete walls were erected with a slip forming construction technique that was innovative for its time. The floors were made of pre-assessed concrete beams. This technique made it possible to create large spaces without intermediate columns, spaces that could be divided and used in various ways. In 1969, the east courtyard was completed and the Dutch History Department moved there. The artfully worked iron trusses designed by Cuypers to span the courtyards were now entirely concealed from view. The transition between the courtyards and the building was invisible, the original outer walls of the courtyards were hidden behind new walls. The arcades on either side of the central passageway had been closed, a measure that blocked all visual contact between the passageway and the courtyards (2.09).

Cuypers himself had been unhappy with how the passageway cut through the ground floor of the Rijksmuseum. He called it an “obstacle to the interconnectedness of the building.” In later years, many directors dreamed of closing the passageway. One minor victory in this respect had been won before the Second World War, in 1931, when the passageway had been declared off-limits to automobiles, buses and trolleys. In 1967, Effers and Wijnaldum designed three sections on an entrance hall in the passageway. In one version the whole passageway area was incorporated into the museum and therefore became unavailable to cyclists and pedestrians (2.10). None of these proposals was carried out.

Wim Quist: ‘A Calvinist in the Catholic Church’
In 1969 the museum submitted an expansion plan to the Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work describing its departments’ urgent need for space. Five years later, a working group was formed to identify the challenges facing the museum, such as improving accessibility, housing the National Print Room and restaurants, expanding its office and storage space, improving the paintings department, creating separate exhibition spaces, improving the Asian Art Department, and adding a canteen and staff area. In 1975 the art connoisseur F.J. Duparc wrote:
The many interruptions in the reorganization project have made heavy demands on the patience and perseverance of the management and the many other staff members at the Rijksmuseum, and they have undeniably cost the Dutch treasury tremendous amounts, which could have been saved if the work had been performed at a regular pace and without interruption.  

In 1976, the safety glass in the display case in gallery 170 spontaneously shattered, destroying some of the glassware on show. This prompted the management to proceed with the major renovation. In 1980, Chief Government Architect Wim Quist (a member of the above-mentioned working group) was asked to design the renovation. Quist initiated the first steps towards the restoration of the spatial quality of the building.

During his 15 years as Rijksmuseum architect, Quist made many structural changes, regarding climate control, for instance, or security measures against fire and theft. Quist’s moves to restore the clear spatial organization of the building mark the beginning of the rehabilitation of Cuypers’ original architecture. Nevertheless, Quist did give priority to user needs and the aesthetic standards of his day over the reinstatement of the historical situation. In some places where they did not distract from the art on display, such as on the steel architraves of the side galleries and the Gallery of Honour, Cuypers’ decorations were left in place and restored, or returned to their place in a modified form.

Between 1981 and 1990, Quist removed ‘the elements that concealed parts of Cuypers’ architecture from view and, here and there, restored the old spatial and architectural accents — without, it should be said, adding any imitations’. In reorganizing the museum’s most prestigious galleries, Quist made the vaulting visible again. In the Gallery of Honour and the Night Watch Gallery, a few of Cuypers’ decorations were restored, or else adapted and toned down (2.11, 2.12). In other areas, plasterwork was partly or wholly removed from the vaulting, revealing the masonry. Museum director Henk van Os described Quist as ‘a Calvinist in the Catholic Church’. The walls of the painting galleries in the wings around the east courtyard were decorated with pastel linings. Quist used stainless steel for the door frames and the bases of the columns. His glass doors with asymmetrically placed hinges created a contrast.

From 1992 to 1995, Quist also renovated the South Wing. This wing had several sections: the Fragment Building from 1898, the first Drucker extension, completed in 1909, with an eighteenth-century Rotterdam staircase added in 1922, and the second Drucker extension, completed in 1916. Quist forged spatial connections between a number of galleries with varying dimensions and lighting. ‘The chambers already present in the galleries inspired the design of the passages, which created an intriguing interplay of diagonal sight lines straight through the galleries in various directions, offering a new perspective on the unity of the collection.’ The streamlined surfaces of Quist’s architecture entered into dialogue with the historical building (2.13-2.15). Particularly successful examples included the new stairwell, as well as the juxtaposition of the new draught lobby and a historical building fragment. The relationship between inside and outside was also held up for examination, for example in the spot where a tall glass wall afforded a view of landscape architect Jan Boon’s pool and the main building.

Hans Ruijssenaars’s Master Plan: Towards the Clear Layout of the Original Complex

In 1995, Hans Ruijssenaars succeeded Quist as Rijksmuseum architect. Two years earlier, he had converted Amsterdam’s former main post office on Nieuwzijds
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2.13-15 Interior of the South Wing renovated by Willem peel (1900-1905).

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Building History

2.13
Voorburgwal into the shopping centre Magna Plaza, demonstrating that he could adapt a historic building to a new purpose. In his analysis of the Rijksmuseum, Ruijsenaars laid a firm foundation for a thorough, comprehensive approach to the building. Two major problems that he identified were the central passageway, which had once offered a view of the heart of the museum but had degenerated into a dark tunnel, and the lack of opportunities for ‘not looking, relaxing, the silence between the notes’. Ruijsenaars concluded that there was no longer any point in half measures. He proposed a comprehensive plan with a total solution: integrating the museum’s different collections into a ‘mixed exhibition’. His findings and proposals were summarized in his master plan for the museum, first presented in 1996 and later published in book form.

At the core of Ruijsenaars’ plan was the restoration of the building’s basic structure and the reinstatement of its ‘monumental spaces’. Ruijsenaars believed that the passageway should become the museum’s lobby, its ‘antechamber’. He recommended that daylight be readmitted to the courtyards and that they be used for public services (2.16). This would involve partly reopening them. Ruijsenaars’ plan required the elimination of all bicycle and pedestrian traffic in the passageway. The entire area was to be incorporated into the museum proper, and entrance doors were to be installed in the archways. The ground and main floors could then be used entirely for exhibition purposes, as Cuypers had originally intended.

In his master plan, Ruijsenaars devoted a great deal of attention to ‘orientation towards the outside world and the courtyards in corner galleries and stairwells where the direction of the routing changes’. In the Gallery of Honour, he suggested reinstating the original contrast between the dim lighting in the central area (the ‘nave’) and the more well lit side galleries (the ‘aisles’) (2.17).

Ruijsenaars had the opportunity to turn some of his ideas into reality. In the northwest part of the souterrain, the structure of the original vaulting became visible again in 1998-1999 when the building infrastructure was moved beneath a raised floor. The construction of the tunnel building (1997-2000) greatly alleviated the need for storage space in the complex. According to architecture critic Max van Rooy, Ruijsenaars did not ‘cramp’ his plan with grandiloquent novelties but ‘largely’ proposed ‘old ideas that he merged into a practical whole’. The message was simple: back to the roots. Strikingly, Ruijsenaars utterly ignored the work of his predecessors in his master plan. He was convinced that the only way to restore the clear spatial organization of the original complex was by adhering to the principle ‘Onwards to Cuypers’. Using Ruijsenaars’ master plan and the accompanying budget as a basis, the Rijksmuseum applied for government financing for a major renovation. Ronald de Leeuw had replaced Henk van Os as director in December 1996. The working relationship between De Leeuw and Ruijsenaars was strained and would come to an end in October 1999. The new director announced his preference for ‘a more

Policy Document and Strategic Plan

In The Rijksmuseum in the 21st Century, a policy document laying out a master plan for long-term development, the Rijksmuseum set out its wishes for exhibitions, public services, and the historic complex. This document comes out clearly in favour of an integrated permanent exhibition in which the previously separate collections – painting, sculpture, Dutch history and applied arts – are shown together in a chronological arrangement. The Rijksmuseum also wanted opportunities for a more in-depth approach, ‘spark spots’ linked to the main route where the same subject matter could be addressed in greater detail. A need was observed for a larger reception area that would be directly linked to public services, such as the museum shop, restaurant, cloakroom, screening rooms and lecture halls, and that would offer direct access to the exhibition areas. The absence of a large central space from which visitors could orient themselves and find their way to the collections or public services was seen as a major shortcoming: ‘It is proposed that the filed-in courtyards therefore be reopened, so that [the Rijksmuseum] once again becomes a building organized around two courtyards and selectively brings Cuypers’ decorative scheme back into view.’12 One result of the reopening of the courtyards was to readmit daylight into the central passageway, providing an impetus for better use of what had been a very dark space.

Of course, the partial or complete removal of the additional levels in the courtyards reduced the available surface area. The museum directors decided to solve this problem ‘by situating all the “excess” storage spaces, offices, studios and the like elsewhere, outside the building. This amounted to “giving back” Cuypers’ Rijksmuseum to the public, as it were.’13 The millennium gift from the national government under Prime Minister Wim Kok in 1999 was a first financial step towards the realization of the planned refurbishment. The decision had been made ‘to renovate the 115-year-old building in a manner respectful of its architectural and historic value and in keeping with the museum’s international renown’.14

The Rgd took responsibility for developing terms of reference for the renovation project, based on the Rijksmuseum policy document. These terms were set out in the structural plan 2000. Before then, the agency ordered a study of seven scenarios for the courtyards, varying from leaving them much the same to clearing them out entirely. Thence of these scenarios were then selected, and the most expensive one (clearing out the courtyards entirely) was adopted as a point of departure. The strategic plan was intended as a framework for the museum’s new architects, to be selected in 2001. Interestingly, it was not yet clear at that point what prior conditions would have to be met in the domain of urban planning. Furthermore, the planned building archaeological research of the museum building’s historic value had not yet been carried out. The strategic plan included this noteworthy remark: ‘In any future restoration, it will be important to retain valuable additions and eliminate disruptive alterations.’15

Intellectual Debate and Essays

Before the invited competition for the renovation of the Rijksmuseum took place in 2000, State Secretary for Culture Rick van der Ploeg initiated an intellectual debate about the new Rijksmuseum. The idea was to build support for the project and provide inspiration for the designers.16 This led to a variety of cultural and social reflections on the purpose of the Rijksmuseum in relation to the building. Filmmakers, journalists and scholars described their personal connections to or visions for the Rijksmuseum and its collection. For instance, Professor Marita Mathijsen described the museum from the perspective of a painting. Wies van Leeuwen, former president of the Cuypers Society, called the Rijksmuseum ‘one of the highlights’ of the museum collection. The most outspoken opinion was voiced by architecture historian Auke van der Woud:

It was only after Cuypers’s death in 1921 that the museum management gained the legal power to alter the interior of the Rijksmuseum as they wished. All the attempts made since then have added up to a situation sometimes described as a crazy quilt, which has led some people to long for the restoration of ‘Cuypers’ clarity’. But there can be little doubt that if this came to pass, we would run up against the same problems all over again. Cuypers’ ‘clarity’ offers no conceptual unity with regard to the essential issues; the buildings is a gorilla in an expensive tutu. This is not a case of ambiguity at the interface between illusion and reality, but of brutal confrontation between one reality and another. This hybrid is composed of oppositions, of conflicts that remained visible in the design, that were built into its fabric and have thus been creating problems for more than a hundred years.17

The essays were meant to provide inspiration for the architects, but in retrospect it is difficult to say how much influence they may or may not have had on the principles and choices in the design.
Cruz y Ortiz architects

In the proposal by Cruz y Ortiz, the main entrance is located in the middle of the building. This is accomplished by clearing out the courtyards, excavating them and connecting them. From the heart of the passageway through the main building, ramps lead visitors into the new atrium, which contains all the visitor services that do not fit into the old building. On the Stadhouderkade side, Cruz y Ortiz suspend an 18-m-long glass expanse from the exterior wall to guide visitors to the entrance. A sub-basement under the atrium holds the auditorium and other facilities. The design does not involve any other spectacular additions, other than a modest Asian Pavilion half-hidden between the main building and the South Wing.

Paul Chemetov

Like the Cruz y Ortiz design, Paul Chemetov’s involves clearing out the courtyards and creating an underground connection between them. The entrance is in the passageway through the main building, near the western courtyard. Chemetov also adds a vertical element: a glass extension, or ‘active wall’, next to the west wing, with stairs, lifts and a shortcut to the South Wing. Chemetov separates the floor of the entrance hall from the existing courtyard walls, thus admitting light to the new basement level beneath the courtyards. Finally, he tries to integrate the Rijksmuseum more firmly into its surroundings with a garden that extends as far as Museumplein.

The judges greatly admired the clarity of the idea, but there were numerous objections to opening the blind recesses in the courtyard. The proposed underground level also proved technically unfeasible.

Dam & Partners Architects

The design by the father-and-son firm of Dam & Partners endeavours to strengthen the connection between the museum and the city, in part by creating a large square that bridges the differences in elevation between the Stadhouderkade side of the building, the surrounding courtyards and the passageway through the museum. Above the north entrance, the architects propose an immense glass roof. For the towers on either side of the Museumplein end of the passageway they also envisage glass roofs that can be illuminated at night. The entrance leads from the passageway to the lowered courtyards, which are connected to each other underground. The design allows museum visitors to move freely between different sections of the museum on aerial walkways and escalators in the courtyards. The ‘butoh’ character of the courtyards remedied the assessment committee of a railway station concourse.

Henkel Architects

In the Henkel Architects plan, the city side of the Rijksmuseum is still clearly the front of the building. Staircases lead to a lowered atrium 3m under street level with two glass roofs. A new passageway leads from the atrium under the main building to the courtyard, which remains open to the public. There is a large café on one courtyard and an egg-shaped structure for the Asian art collection.

This solution leaves the passageway intact; the open recesses give cyclists a view of the courtyard. There is also a striking proposal to reinvent the Gallery of Honour, with curvatures in a modern style for the side galleries. The judging committee admired the architects’ analytical skills and their respect for Cuypers but had reservations about the entrance and the proposal for the museum galleries.

Erik KnoppERS, Bureau Voids

Like Hubert-Jan Henkel, Erik Knoppers proposed a new underground entrance in front of the museum. He re-imagined the passageway through the building as a steel bridge extending all the way to Museumplein. In his design, visitors pass under the bridge on their way to the museum entrance in the east courtyard. Steel walkways and staircases in the courtyards give access to the different floors, and there are also aerial walkways in the exhibition galleries. The judging committee was especially critical of the ‘hidden entrance’ in this proposal, and the many additions to the courtyards and galleries failed to impress them.

Francesco Venzia

Francesco Venzia’s design, by any measure, the most radical proposal submitted to the competition. It involves a new Grand Palais for Dutch history and art on Museumplein, alongside the existing complex. This creates optimal conditions for restoring the old building. In this proposal, the passageway through the museum remains in place, and the Asian art remains on display in the South Wing. The new trapzoidal building is located above water features on Museumplein, which the architect regarded as a ‘weerd’. The heart of this labyrinthine building is to hold the new ‘treasure house’ of Dutch art. The judging committee decided that Venzia’s proposal fell outside the terms of reference and was therefore inconclusive.
Competition design by Paul Chemetov

B.4 Longitudinal section with the ‘active wall’ in the west courtyard.

B.7 Cross-sections with the proposed underground extension.

Competition design by Davis & Partners Architects

B.05-06 Impressions of the museum entrance areas on the north and south sides.

B.09-11 Designs for the courtyards with escalators and internal walkways.
Competition design by Heliz Tsar

B.20 Model of the west courtyard.

B.29-30 Variations on the concept of adding a museum to the museum in Museumpark.

B.21-22 Entrance in the middle of the central passageway, with vertical structural elements in the two courtyards on either side.