Clear and solid, that is how a museum should be

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A museum is a public building that welcomes hundreds of visitors every day, many of them, including a large number from abroad, for the first time. It is important for them to feel welcome and to readily feel at home. Already when approaching the museum, visitors must be able to understand where the entrance is, what they can expect to see, and most importantly how it all works. The first condition for this is a clear and inviting building: a building that is well illuminated from all sides and with a clear layout that tells you where to go for information, tickets, the cloakroom, the audio tour, the toilets and the exhibitions. A museum's organisation can never be too clear and simple. At the same time the finish must be of a high and solid standard, not only because a collection of world status deserves a matching museum, but also because a museum is a building that is intensively used every day and must not quickly give the impression of being down at heel. So there is every reason to give it a top-quality building with a timeless, unobtrusive design.

In the last few decades the major museums have been faced with a steady rise in the number of visitors, and the Mauritshuis is no exception. This created the need above all to expand and improve the facilities for all those visitors. These had all been concentrated underground since the previous renovation in 1987. Visitors entered the building via the side entrance below ground level on the Korte Vijverberg. The main entrance in the forecourt gave direct access to the climate-controlled area on the first floor, which made it impossible to use this as an entrance for the general public. The forecourt gate remained closed, only opening for visits by high-ranking dignitaries.

Logistical analysis

Originally, the main reason for the renovation was to satisfy the need for more space. More room was needed to allow improvement of the public amenities, but you cannot just add a wing to a seventeenth-century Neo-Classical palatial house, a pinnacle in the history of Dutch architecture. Another solution was called for. Fortunately, the museum managed to secure premises for long-term rent on the other side of the street. This was Plein 26, now the Royal Dutch Shell Wing, the corner building belonging to the De Witte club, designed by the aforementioned Jo Limburg. The idea was to connect the two buildings, the Mauritshuis and Plein 26, by means of a corridor beneath the street. At the start of the design process and after a logistical analysis of other
public buildings and museums, it soon became clear that a corridor as an underground link would be unsatisfactory and not very inviting. It was doubtful whether visitors would be able to find their way to the new wing through a series of corridors in an underground tunnel.
A more drastic solution was necessary. A highly successful example of how it might be able to function smoothly is the Louvre in Paris. After the expansion and reorganisation by the Sino-American architect I.M. Pei, what used to be a labyrinth of wings and corridors was transformed into a complex that was easy to read. He completed this transformation in 1989. An eye-catching glass pyramid containing the main entrance takes up a central position between all the wings. This leads you down into a large, well-lit entrance hall in which all the public amenities are located. And because visitors enter it from above, they immediately have a clear picture of the layout. They can see where to go for tickets or information, how big it all is, and where the passages to the different wings are situated.

Apple

This logistical concept functions not only for museums, but also for many other public buildings such as stations, theatres and shops. A good example is the Apple flagship store on Fifth Avenue, Central Park, New York, from 2005. All you see at street level is a nine-metre high, large glass cube decorated with a big white illuminated Apple logo and with a glass door, lift and staircase. From here you descend into a spacious underground hall in which all the departments of the store are arranged. The layout of the shop is clear at a glance.

These examples provided the guidelines for the design of the Mauritshuis extension and the link with Plein 26: no tunnel beneath the street, but a very spacious and well-illuminated foyer in which it is immediately clear to the visitor how the museum functions. The new museum now consists of three volumes: a seventeenth-century town residence, designed in Dutch Renaissance style by Jacob van Campen and Pieter Post, dating from 1633; a twentieth-century Art Deco club building designed by the Hague architect Jo Limburg in 1930; and a twenty-first century foyer in contemporary architecture from 2014. All three differ in architectural style and use of material, but in terms of finish and detail they are identical and clearly belong together in their routeing and organisation. There is also a clear-cut distinction in terms of function. The historic palatial house exhibits, as it always has, the permanent collection of all its wonderful seventeenth-century paintings. The basement accommodates the paintings depot, while the restoration workshops are situated in the large space below the roof. All of the facilities for visitors and the offices are located at Plein 26. There the basement houses the shop, while a brasserie looks out at street level. There are rooms for temporary exhibitions and an education area on the first floor, rooms for events (the Nassau Hall and the Randstad Room) and the library on the second floor, and on the third floor, below the roof, the offices. The third volume, the new foyer, with an entrance in the forecourt and another from the street via the museum café, is the public area of the museum.

Logical connections
The most important intervention in the extension design was to connect the three volumes as logically as possible and to overcome the many differences in level. The addition of the large foyer was a first step; a clear and logical routeing with the location and construction of stairs and lifts on the right spot was an important subsequent step. Putting the basement areas of the different volumes below the street on a single level was also a complicated task in constructional terms.
There is a difference of two floors – 7.5 metres – between the new foyer and the first floor of the palatial house. So a lift was essential. The only place where that could be incorporated in the Mauritshuis was in the draught barrier behind the main entrance. A large glass showcase stands there now and functions every day as the lift shaft. For the reception of special, high-ranking guests, the shaft still functions as a draught barrier and they can make their entry through the main entrance. The introduction of this shaft through the foundations of the Mauritshuis was a complicated construction. The lift well is beneath ground water level. It could be excavated after injecting the ground with hard and soft gel to make it waterproof.

Several constructional problems also had to be overcome in the corridor leading from the foyer to Plein 26. The basement below those premises had to be made 1.5 metres deeper to bring it to the same level as the foyer.
For this purpose an excavation pit was dug beneath the building with the help of jet grouting walls and the front elevation of Plein 26 was raised so that work on deepening the basement could begin. Afterwards the lift and staircase were extended in that part of the building down to this underground level. The constructional problems of connecting the basement beneath the forecourt to that of Plein 26 were solved using an excavation pit of underwater concrete. Four different foundation structures were required to get one new foyer in place.

Forecourt
In the course of implementing the present extension, several unfortunate changes to Plein 26 during previous renovations could be corrected and brought back to the original state. The old door at the corner, which in 1930 gave access to the cycle rack in the basement before being bricked up during a renovation in 1989, has been restored and now forms the entrance to the museum café. A monumental marble staircase added in 1989 has been removed and the Art Deco main staircase restored to its former glory.
Visitors now approach the museum once again via the forecourt, as you would logically expect. The gate is open once more. Upon arriving there, a glass lift like a large urban lamp invites you to descend, or you can take the stairs. After the descent you arrive at the end of a spacious, well lit and clearly laid out foyer inside the museum building. It is immediately obvious that the hall provides access to two wings: the Mauritshuis

proper to the left, and Plein 26 straight ahead. The information desk, automated turnstiles, cloakroom, toilets and museum shop are all easy to find in the foyer. In the distance you can hear the clatter of coffee cups and the infectious hum of conversation in the brasserie. Visitors immediately feel at home. There are windows on all sides to facilitate orientation and to avoid the sense of being in a basement. They afford a view of the surrounding buildings and allow the daylight to flood in.

The extension of the Mauritshuis, with the new public amenities in Plein 26, now the Royal Dutch Shell Wing and the new underground foyer, has been a complex architectural project to carry out. In fact, it consists of three volumes atop and alongside each other. It took four distinct foundation structures beneath the foyer to unite the different volumes. The closure of the Korte Vijverberg for more than two years and the virtual absence of any room to build or to store building materials were a handicap during the building process. Nevertheless, the extension has been achieved within the prescribed limits and without allowing the planning to get out of hand. This extension has doubled the size of the museum. It will now be able to accommodate visitors generously in a sustainable and flexible way for decades to come.

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