



RAY KENTIE

Apart from many special monumental buildings, Amsterdam offers a number of quite special buildings that have a place in the history of international architecture. The importance of such buildings is not limited to their external design, the exterior, but also extends to the interior. In the case of the Scheepvaarthuis, even the furniture and other movable fixtures form part of the total design. The Scheepvaarthuis can therefore rightly be called an “icon”. In past years, the Scheepvaarthuis was converted into a 5-star hotel, the luxurious and attractive Grand Hotel Amrâth.

History

The Scheepvaarthuis was built as a business centre for six large Amsterdam Navigation Companies, the largest of which was KNSM. In itself, this business centre was a new phenomenon, developed in the United States. Apart from this function, the building had to act as a beacon in the city, situated close to the most important port activities. The Prins Hendrikkade was chosen.

The prestigious building had to be put up by talented architects. The van Gendt brothers were selected for the concrete structure, ultra-modern for its time. J.M. van der Mey (1878-1949), a young very promising architect from the Eduard Kuypers school, where he had been trained together with Michiel de Klerk and Piet Kramer, was chosen for the frontages and interior. Together, these three architects stood at the cradle of the so-called Amsterdam School of architecture.

The Scheepvaarthuis, built in two stages in 1913-1916 and 1926-1928, may be regarded as the first and perhaps also the most prestigious example of this Architectural School. Apart from the architects mentioned, de Klerk and Kramer, who assisted Van der Mey, many famous artists and designers worked on the “overall artistic creation” as the Scheepvaarthuis can rightly be called. We mention the sophisticated interior architect Theo van Nieuwenhuis who, for example, designed the famous conference room on the 3rd floor and for which he designed not only the panelling, carpet, lamps and wall covering but also the furniture, while several other rooms are by his hand. The glazier W. Bogtman for the glazing and lead work. The sculptors H.A. van den Eijnde, W.C. Brouwer and H. Krop were retained for both the exterior of the frontages and the interior. The result can be described as a mix of styles with the theme of “unity in multiplicity”.

Following the Second World War, the various navigation companies gradually left the Scheepvaarthuis. KNSM was the last to leave the building, in 1981. From that point, the building was to serve as accommodation for the Amsterdam municipal transport facility (GVB). In October 1995, the Municipality decided to dispose of the building on long-term lease. A telling argument was that the purchaser had to deal respectfully with the monumental character of the building and its interior. An agreement was eventually signed in 1998 with the one serious applicant, Mr. G. van Eijl, who wanted to turn the Scheepvaarthuis into an exclusive hotel.

The restoration process

Following restoration of the frontage, which was the first to be tackled, a plan was submitted for the Hotel in which the future use of the rooms on the monumental side was not yet initially decided, but were designated a function as hotel rooms in the course of construction. Apart from various uses as meeting rooms, wine bar, cafe, restaurant, fitness area and wellness centre and, of course, the bedrooms, the interiors were designed during construction. An important partner for the project as a whole was Amsterdam’s Ancient Monuments Office, which attended all site meetings.



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As a restoration architect, I have always sought inspiration from this approach as to both structure and interior, through the building and valuable elements that still remained. A number of architects and artists were also involved in the building, as when it was first built, and now again it was a joint work of art.

- Frontage restoration: Van Hoogevest Architecten
- Building shell: Rappange & Partners
- Restoration of interior and other conversions: Architectenbureau Kentie & Partners
- Works of art, paintings, etc.: Gerti Bierenbroodspot
- Upholstery: Christie van der Haak
- Interior construction: Koele Interieurbouw.

Various aspects of the interior are derived from existing details. The textile wall covering in the bedrooms is consequently based on a motif by Theo van Nieuwenhuis. Various carpets were specially made on the basis of the reconstruction that I prepared from old drawings and photos. Restoration was the aim with the monumental parts and rooms, while additions were made in the same style. For the newly created areas such as the wellness centre in the basement, a suitably bright modern approach was adopted.

The same applies to the bathrooms, especially the bathrooms in the monumental part, which have been placed freely in space as separate glass items, respecting the historic context. The furniture and lamps still present have also been restored and replaced in the original room where they belonged. New lamps for rooms, corridors and common areas were designed and installed specially for the hotel. Some special rooms such as the oriental room in the former housekeeper's flat on the roof and the bridal suite in the tower room (3rd floor) have a special character quite of their own.

The famous conference room on the 3rd floor has been restored throughout, the wall covering being specially made of a jacquard fabric with Theo van Nieuwenhuis's original sea horses pattern. Fire prevention equipment and domestic engineering have as far as possible been hidden from sight without encroaching on the historic spatial effect and detail, quite a challenge to the engineers and contractor. All in all, I found it a greatly inspiring commission, which I executed with great pleasure.

Ray Kentie

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Kentie en Partners Architecten bv