Curating Identity: a new Rijksmuseum

by

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ABSTRACT

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The traditional role of national museums for cultural history (particularly within the recently formed EU) is of question as these institutions operate increasingly within a blurred cultural landscape. The future success and potential of the 'new national museum' will depend on how the institution reinvents itself. This thesis considers the role of the national museum today by proposing renewal strategies (exhibition, organizational, and spatial) to reinvent and reorganize the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. The project considers the way in which its collection is curated as well as the way in which its curation and organization communicates identity.
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introduction

The traditional role of national museums for cultural history (particularly within the recently formed EU) is of question as these institutions operate increasingly within a blurred cultural landscape. While the 'national museum' holds great potential among people to discover a cultural heritage, most national museums remain 19th c. museums, reflecting the architecture, organization, exhibition concepts, public exposure and image of that time. European national museums were founded or rebuilt more or less simultaneously at the end of the 19th c., all with a similar size and typology: Netherlands, 1885; Czech Republic, 1891; Finland, 1893; Germany, 1897; Switzerland, 1898 (Guller, Euroscales 61).

During the past century, many national museums have undergone alterations, expansions, and reorganizations in order to enlarge their space for exhibitions, maintenance and storage. Inadequate space, lack of orientation and poor accessibility only weakens these original institutions that are also troubled by an outdated image. An expansion of these national houses no longer suffices as the
only strategy to renovate these institutions. Their status as symbols and guardians of a nation's cultural heritage is not enough to guarantee their relevance. Instead, the future success of the 'new national museum' will depend on whether the existing building can regain its functionality by redefining its role through a contemporary idea of national museum.

The end of the 20th century has already seen an awakening amongst national museums: the Schweizersches Landmuseum in Zurich, the Hessisches Landesmuseum in Darmstadt, the British Museum in London, and the recent competition for the 'New Rijksmuseum' in Amsterdam. What is of interest in these projects are the design strategies towards transforming an 'old house' into a 'new house'. A strategic renewal (physical, spatial, and institutional) rather than an expansion plan, aims to turn these museums into dynamic, updated institutions (Guller, Euroscapes 64).

What is the role of the national museum today? How can this institution be repositioned in the public domain? What is the role of the national museum in establish-
ing (and remembering) national identity and its role in the city? How can these institutions be reinvented as a tool for urban renewal— a place for public life— and house of both cultural preservation and innovation? How can these institutions reposition themselves and rethink how to communicate their cultural-historical objecthood to the public?

This thesis proposes to renovate and reorganize the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam [the National Museum of the Netherlands] as part of an investigation into the role of the national museum today. The project proposes renewal strategies (exhibition, organizational, and spatial) and considers the way in which its collection is curated as well as the way in which its curation and organization communicates identity.
precedents

*British Museum* [national museum redoing itself] 1993. British Museum announced a competition for the development of the central courtyard because galleries were being used as circulation routes. The goal of development would be to provide new and expanded visitor facilities, including an education center, reception and orientation area, shops and restaurant. In addition, there was a requirement for galleries to house temporary exhibitions together with elements of the ethnographic collection. Foster’s winning scheme envisaged the Great Court to be a new center for the museum- removing all public circulation from the galleries and opening up a new public route through the building.

*Tate London* [conversion of existing powerstation into a museum]. In late 1992, the Tate decided to separate Tate Britain from Tate Modern due to belief that there would never be sufficient space at the Milbank site to accommodate the needs of rapidly growing modern collections. Bankside power station in Southwark had been shut down in 1981; in 1994 the Tate acquired the land and most of the building, with the exception of an area on the south side that remains in the leasehold possession of London Electricity. Herzog and de Meuron’s winning scheme was chosen because of the blurring of existing building and new architecture and their creation of different gallery types- to account for different types of art.

*MAK Vienna* [restructure and remodel of existing building in 1986 to include exhibition design for presentation of objects determined by interventions of contemporary artists]. The development of new display strategies for the permanent
collections reorganized formal modes of representation, allowing for new inter-play of historicism and contemporary intervention. Peter Noever, Director of MAK Vienna, noted that: "If a museum does not recognize contemporary art's modes of perception and viewpoints as a challenge to its own position, it deprives itself of its very raison d'être.... This made it clear that the Museum can no longer remain an isolated institution consecrated to the historical past if it is to realize its potential and fulfill its responsibility to provide an active setting for the production of art and the provision of art education. The incessant change affecting artistic, cultural, and cultural-political values is the criterion here, the actual challenge."

(Noever, MAK: Austrian Museum of Applied Arts Vienna 4)

*Victoria and Albert Museum* [current renewal of 150-year old museum, bringing it into the 21st century while retaining history and quality of original building]. The future plan will open up the museum by creating new circulation, a new suite of galleries, new signage system, education programme, new café and restaurant and update existing galleries.
the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

Since 1885, numerous small-scale renovations have turned the Rijksmuseum into a labyrinth of circulation and collection. Moreover, reflecting 19th c. exhibition strategies, the collection [which currently does not include any 20th c., contemporary, or pre-15th c. work] is contained in a series of rooms, with little relation amongst circuits of rooms. The museum’s current image is outdated - the display of culture is embedded in 19th c. ideas about national identity and nation building. What is not reflected in the collection, or the building itself, are contemporary ideas about national identity and the contemporary role of the national museum. This proposal seeks to reconsider the role of the national museum by suggesting that the Rijksmuseum’s responsibility is not limited to historical remembrance. Instead, its renewal must shift the focus of the institution by using exhibition, organizational and spatial strategies that reflect the present and future of its nation and its city.

A lack of space for exhibition and amenities, a dramatic increase in the number of visitors, poor circulation and an outdated image make a strategic renewal of the Rijksmuseum necessary.
history: Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

As a National Art Gallery, the Rijksmuseum opened to the public for the first time in 1800 at the Hague. In 1808, the collection moved to Amsterdam, first in the Palace on Dam Square and later in the Trippenhuis on Kloveniersburgwal. In 1885, the collection moved to the present building, designed by Pierre Cuypers. At the same time, the collection for the Netherlands Museum of History and Art, formerly in the Hague, was added to the Rijksmuseum.

The Rijksmuseum has undergone numerous renovations over the years, since so many people left their complete collections to the museum. In 1906-1909 and again in 1913-1916, a new wing was added for the collection of 19th-century art (now known as the South wing). In the 1950s and 1960s, the two courtyards were filled with exhibition rooms. And recently in 2003, the Rijksmuseum invited architects to submit proposals to renovate the museum, making it “a museum for the 21st century”- “ready for the 21st-century visitor.” This thesis is a response to the competition.
facts: Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

- Like a gateway from one side of the city to the other, the Rijksmuseum opens to the north and south. (When it was built, it was designed as a grand entrance to the city, like Centraal Station, as there were only fields beyond it.)
- Museumplein district includes Rijksmuseum, Van Gogh Museum, Stedelijk Museum as well as Vondelpark.
- Museumplein neighborhood boasts diamond and designer clothing shops- some of Amsterdam’s more chic shopping streets.
- P.J.H. Cuypers designed the building in 1885 as neo-Renaissance palace suitable for “housing the creative genius of a Protestant nation.”
- Collection includes some 7,000,000 items: 5,000 paintings, 30,000 sculptures and works of applied art, 17,000 historical objects, 3,000 works of Asiatic art and a million prints and drawings.
- At present, Museum has 260 rooms encompassing five departments- Painting, Print Room, Dutch History, Asiatic Art, Sculpture and Decorative Arts.
- Rijksmuseum contains 14th-20th c. Dutch paintings, sculpture, applied art and artefacts, including the classics of Golden Age painting. Stedelijk Museum contains international modern art. (Of note: exhibition space is limited at Stedelijk as only a small portion of the collection can be shown at any given time.)
museum and city
I amsterdam

No longer just the symbol of the nation, the national museum holds a new relationship and identity for the city. The "I amsterdam" campaign, captured in Figure 11.1, suggests this new relationship between the city and national museum, as the Rijksmuseum beyond so neatly frames the "I amsterdam" in the foreground.

Originally conceived of as a grand entrance to the city (when it was built in 1885 there were only fields beyond it), the Rijksmuseum now acts as a destination, threshold, and passage within the city. Opening to the north and south, an un-
conditioned walkway through the ground floor of the building physically connects these zones. Figures 14.1, 14.2, 15.1, and 15.2 consider the museum's position and relationships within the city.

12.1 passage through Rijksmuseum as seen from northern facade
12.2 Rijksmuseum from above
12.3 Philips Wing, Rijksmuseum as seen from Museumplein
12.4 Museumplein, Rijksmuseum on right
13.1 central Amsterdam
15.1 permeability: through museum into city

15.2 Rijksmusea
site strategies
history of site

site plan 1891

site plan 1902

site plan 1990

site plan 1993
site 2004

Rijksmuseum

Van Gogh Museum

Stedelijk Contemporary Art Museum

18.1 aerial photo of Museumplein. 2005
By 2005, the site already set up a different set of relationships between the Rijksmuseum, the Museumplein, and the city to the north and south. The recent addition to the Van Gogh Museum, as well as the proposed addition to the Stedelijk Museum, reorient these institutions away from the surrounding streets and towards the Museumplein, suggesting an opportunity to reorient the Rijksmuseum and rethink the notion of entry and passage, as well as its relationship to the other institutions.
existing curation
the place of history

The Rijksmuseum's collection (which boasts some 7,000,000 items: 5,000 paintings, 30,000 sculptures and works of applied art, 17,000 historical objects, 3,000 works of Asiatic art and a million prints and drawings) includes Dutch art from the 15th c. through the 19th c. Across 260 discreet rooms, the collection is divided and displayed according to the type of artefact. Paintings, sculpture, decorative art and applied art and sculpture are separated and exhibited independently. Moreover, the collection seems stuffed into the museum's shell, a labyrinth of tiny rooms, with no clear relationship between the objects on display, the exhibition strategies, the museum building itself, and the city.

The existing collection and exhibition privileges the art of the Golden Age, the one hundred years of prosperity enjoyed by the Netherlands in the 17th c. Boasting the East and West India Companies, Amsterdam grew as the center of a "world economy" and essentially built itself in 100 years based on a criteria of modernity that was unparalleled at the time. This economic prosperity allowed the arts to
flourish—particularly the most famous painters of the Golden Age: Rembrandt, Frans Hals, and Vermeer.

The current exhibition, as it did in its original state in 1885, positions the Golden Age not only as the greatest period of Dutch artistic production, but also at the end of Dutch history. That is to say, The Golden Age is remembered in order to frame and inform the idea of “nation” and the purpose of the “national museum” as it was originally conceived of as a 19th c. project.

**circuits**

Accordingly, the painting of the Golden Age is prominently exhibited on the second floor, above the open passage through the museum. The art of the 18th and 19th c. are hidden in the basement and first floors of the Phillips Wing, as is the museum’s impressive collection of Asiatic art (which in itself suggests interesting and difficult questions about what is part of a national collection of art). The idea of a circuit exists as an isolated moment through a collection of objects related by the period of time and the medium in which they were created.
existing organization of collection
curatorial + spatial strategies
curation, organization and perception

Rethinking the organization and contents of the collection concurrently with the design of new exhibition space for the collection allows for new possibilities for both the art and the exhibition space. Curatorial, organizational and spatial strategies are conceived of as one.

Not negating its own history, the existing collection could be reimagined as part of a larger collection that tells the story of the Netherlands' history, as well as addressing its current state and what it means for it to be a nation today. The exhibition itself would combine art of different mediums together to tell a more complete story of artistic production at a given point in time.

The spatial reorganization of the building, then, would allow for new relationships across and between works of art and moments in history, allowing for multiple ways to move through the exhibition. Unlike the 19th c. conception of the national museum, where history ends in the 17th c., a new conception of the national museum would privilege contemporary artistic production and the contemporary state of the nation—repositioning the 17th c. at the middle and not end of Dutch history.
A process of erasure imagines the design of the building and recuration of the collection informing each other and working together.
existing plan

proposed plan and curation
reinventing the museum
Reorienting and opening to the Museumsplein, the front and back of the original design is reversed.

The original logic of the building is extended to create a banded historical sequence or narrative. Openings along the bands allow for relationships across work and time periods.
New categories of art (before the 15th c. and after the 19th c.) are introduced into the main building, allowing the main building to be dedicated to the permanent collection and the Phillips Wing to be dedicated to rotating temporary exhibits. Asian Art finds its own place within the Rijksmuseum as part of a new building.

Formerly a passage that was never part of the museum, the main entry into the museum becomes an integral part of the organization of the museum as well as a destination within the city. This entry space conveys a clear sense of the institution and its mission. The prominence of contemporary Dutch art in this space is a literal refocusing of the institution towards the present and is suggestive of the museum's new role.

The organizational stair, fostering both activity, relaxation and contemplation, organizes all exhibits and spaces and allows visitors to easily return to other parts of the building. From the stair and within the exhibition, spaces layer and a narrative can be seen (and constructed) from multiple vantage points or frames.
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