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It's loud, it's funky, 'it's a museum

With a distance of eighteen months now separating me and the Groninger Museum, I find it difficult not simply to romanticize my time of five years working in the Netherlands, in particular my period as curator there. My impression of this period is dominated by a single building – a museum building at that.

The Groninger Museum moved premises in 1995, exactly 100 years after its foundation as a fairly typical nineteenth century purpose-built environment. Very few aspects of the original building's design, apart from purely operational components, were taken into the new one. In fact, there are few precedents for the complex to be found anywhere in the museum world. Inspiration was probably derived more from Disneyland and Alessi's tea and coffee sets, than from existing museum models. The results are truly inspired and inspirational complex of buildings that challenges accepted museum norms. The high visitor numbers confirm the experiment has worked.

My opinion is not necessarily one that all visitors, or museum professionals, would agree with. In fact the confrontational nature of the architecture forces one to react, to take a stand, and the responses are essentially polarized. One either loves or hates it. There is undoubtedly a danger in an institution, that by its very nature exists within the public arena, taking such a bold stance, but it must be applauded for its ability to force its visitors to wake up and respond, however that might be.

Unlike most museums, where the built environment primarily serves as a neutral yet flexible backdrop (Nationalgalerie Berlin, National Gallery of Australia), or as palace-cum-temple that precludes all but those of serious intent (National Gallery in London, the new Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht), the Groninger Museum clearly declares its intention of being considered an artwork in itself.

The building has few neutral spaces, regular or square rooms, and the colour white as a design feature was outlawed by both the chief architect, Alessandro Mendini, and the director, Frans Haks. For curators the building is a tough opponent or faithful ally, and it keeps you on your toes.

Essentially, there are five main large pavilions, each with various subspaces. The design of each component reflects the core part of the collection it was intended to house – roughly old art, new art, decorative arts, history/archaeology and temporary exhibitions. Additionally, there are a number of smaller spaces in between that are intended for all presentations.

The toughest pavilion for both curator and visitor has always been that designed by the Austrian team Coop Himmelblau

(not dissimilar to their Austrian pavilion at the Venice Biennale). It is pure architectural form, with few compromises. In the first six months after the museum's opening, no objects were installed in this area for a variety of reasons, and it proved one of the most popular areas for visitors. An explosion of steel plates and glass shards, it is pure aesthetic delight. As a fine example of deconstructivist architecture, it enables the visitor to explore the juxtapositions of materials, of light and dark, of inside and outside. The old art collection was intended for this area, but the spaces are too cavernous and the building materials too brutal, thus overwhelming even the most determined of artworks. I imagine that Cleopatra's Banquet by Tiepolo or one of Anselm Kiefer's constructions would be better equipped to fight it out with the architecture and be enhanced by it, but the small mediaeval icons and the paintings by Rubens were lost, overwhelmed by the environment intended to extend them.

In contrast, though, the other spaces, in all their variety, are fabulous in which to present objects and exhibitions. The new art pavilion is painted all manner of colours, frequently with more than one to a room, and it matters not whether the works displayed in them are contemporary design, Dürer woodcuts, Expressionist or Aboriginal paintings.

The pavilion clearly enjoyed the most by visitors is that by Philippe Starck, housing the decorative arts. As one might expect from this designer, it is sleek, sophisticated and witty and provides a contemplative, yet energising, environment for the appreciation of a significant collection of ceramics. The Michelle De Lucchi designed history and archaeology pavilion provides yet another completely different backdrop, more akin to theatre than museum.

One of the Groninger Museum's strengths is the variety of architectural styles in a single complex. The every-changing ambience experienced by visitors reinvigorates them on their journey, thus delaying the onset of museum fatigue. For the curator it provides a never-ending source of inspiration and challenge, as areas originally dedicated to specific object types begin to be explored for others.

The promotional mantra for the museum, roughly translated, is that you continue to be amazed at the Groninger Museum. On your next trip to Europe, take the train to Groningen and judge for yourself.

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