

The realisation of the present-day Groninger Museum had a lengthy and intensive history before a start was actually made on the spectacular design that still evokes much discussion on modern museum architecture. After years of formulating plans and drawing up sketches, after endless discussions and consultations, the ultimate design by the Italian Alessandro Mendini and the three guest architects Philippe Starck, Michele de Lucchi, and Coop Himmelblau was completed in 1994. This brochure covers the design, the wishes of the commissioning party, and the ideas of the architects.

HISTORY

Impulse

The direct opportunity for this large-scale building project arrived on 28 September 1987 when the N.V. Nederlandse Gas Unie donated 25 million guilders (approx. 11.5 million Euro) for the construction of a new Groninger Museum. This was a godsend to the Museum. The old premises on the Praediniussingel, which had accommodated the Groningen Museum for exactly 100 years, had become far too small. The donation, to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Gas Company (in 1988), was greeted with delight. This was the beginning of a project that would last 7 years and would finally be rounded off with the opening of the new Groningen Museum by Queen Beatrix on 29 October 1994.

Location

Having examined all kinds of possible locations, a preparatory committee finally decided in favour of the 'Zwaaiikom', a broader part of the Verbindings Canal on the southern edge of the inner city. It is a historical location, adjoining the stately 19th-century avenues with the mansions that were built on the site of the old city fortifications. The Verbindings Canal, linking other waterways as the name suggests, occupies the place where the city moat once lay. The main railway station and a ribbon of office blocks dating from the last few decades line the other side of the water. It is a unique location, connecting the station area to the inner city.

Mendini

The decision to appoint Alessandro Mendini, an Italian designer/architect whose work also appears in the Groningen Museum collection, was taken almost immediately. The spirit of the 1980s, a period that is strongly represented in the collection of Modern Art, radiates from his work. With regard to the new building, his vision and working method found a perfect match in the ideas of Frans Haks, the erstwhile Director of the Museum. There was one element in particular that was certain: it had to be an extraordinary building, both inviting and accessible – the Museum's visiting card.

Mendini, born in 1931, is a versatile man. Besides being an architect, he is also a designer, artist, theorist, and poet. In 1988, the Groninger Museum presented a large-scale retrospective of his activities in which his multifaceted artistry was expressed. Mendini also publishes a great deal, writing columns in international magazines, thus reinforcing his reputation as a theorist of new design.

Starting points

In 1987, the point of departure for the new Museum was the nature and the character of the various collections that constitute the Groninger Museum: Archaeology and History of Groningen; Applied Art, with the collection of Chinese and Japanese porcelain as an important subcollection; Traditional Painting (from approx. 1500 to 1950); and Modern Art (from 1950 until the present). These four completely different collections form the identity of the Museum and, as such, should all be visible in the building, each in its own domain. At the same time, the new building had to be an archetype of developments in art and architecture in the 1980s. As a result, initiating a co-operative effort by various architects and/or designers seemed to be a logical step, so that diverse perspectives could be combined and the separate collections could be appropriately expressed.

Demands and desires

Mendini was bound by a number of demands from the Municipality. A direct link between the station and the inner city (a bridge for pedestrians and cyclists) had to be included in the design, inland shipping had to be able to pass through the canal, and one had to be able to see the one shore from the other (the so-called 'transparency' of the design). Taking these requirements into account, there followed a lengthy planning process in which all kinds of ideas and designs were investigated. The definitive design was approved in November 1990. However, due to an appeal to the Council of State lodged by opponents of the Groninger Museum, it took until April 1992 before construction could actually begin.

MENDINI'S PHILOSOPHY

Design

To what principles does Mendini adhere in this kind of design? He believes that the use of decoration is deeply rooted in humankind and, accordingly, decoration must be the starting point of design. Functionalists dismiss decoration because it draws attention away from the true issue, the function of the building. Their work is sober, with full attention being given to the efficiency of the design. This leads to impersonal mass production, according to opponents. In Mendini's opinion, people no longer want mass products. People are individuals and need something personal rather than the anonymity of the functional environment. 'Everyone is different,' says Mendini, 'so why shouldn't an object also be different?'

No established norm

Mendini's work has a number of striking features. Mendini rejects traditional hierarchies (such as painting being on a higher level than applied art, for example) and a historical division into time and place. In his view, art-historical styles, exotic cultures and kitsch are all equally important.

Interaction of disciplines

This standpoint gives rise to a second characteristic feature of his work, the interweaving of disciplines. Mendini holds the opinion that there are no boundaries between the various activities in which he is engaged. Theatre, painting, sculpture, architecture, and science can all be used freely and interchangeably. He thinks that any distinction between these disciplines is nonsense. He also believes that everything has already been conceived and applied. As a result, the only way of acting is to employ things in new combinations – it is merely a matter of redesign. Existing designs are subsequently given a new decoration, often originating in a different discipline. Painting is a particularly important source of decoration.

Co-operation

A third distinctive feature of Mendini's work consists of co-operation with others. He works with contemporary artists, architects and designers in creating furniture, objects, clothes, décors, paintings, theatre performances, ceramics, and jewellery. The yearning to transgress the boundaries of the traditional disciplines tends to mean that Mendini is more engaged as a director and deviser of ideas than as an executor.

Director

One of the joint efforts in which Mendini acted as a supervisor was the creation of the series of tea and coffee services for Alessi. In 1980-83, eleven silver tea services were created by the Italian firm Alessi in a very limited edition. Mendini commissioned ten of the most important modern architects, each of whom designed one of the sets. They included Hans Hollein (who also designed the Abteiberg Museum in Mönchengladbach) and Aldo Rossi (the architect of the new Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht). The assignment was to design a service in which the teapot, milk jug and sugar pot were small buildings on a plaza. Thus arose a series of eleven tea services that belong to

both the history of tea and coffee sets and also to modern design and architecture. In fact, the service project can be regarded as a precursor of the Groninger Museum. Since the beginning of 2002, the Groninger Museum has owned a complete series of these currently famous sets. A later project by Alessi encompassed 100 porcelain vases. Mendini designed the basic shape and 99 artists and designers from all over the world added decoration. The Groninger Museum has work by many of these artists in its collection. In another project, 33 mirrors for the Glas Company, Mendini supplied the decoration and different designers repeatedly determined the form. The decoration here is a Signac motif, borrowed from a pointillist painting by Paul Signac (end 19th century). This motif, first applied to Proust's chair (1979) recurs in all kinds of variations in the *Interno di un Interno* installation, and again in a Swatch watch (Lots of Dots, 1991), the staircase of the Groninger Museum, and on the exterior of the east pavilions. All the above-mentioned designs by Mendini and the guest designers are part of the Groninger Museum collection.

Guest architects

A number of guest architects were invited to design sections, pavilions, of the new Museum: the Italian designer Michele de Lucchi, Philippe Starck from Paris, and, at a rather late date, the Coop Himmelb(l)au group which has offices in Vienna and Los Angeles. There was also co-operation with Dutch architects and designers, such as the Groningen architects' office Team 4 (project architect), Albert Geertjes and Geert Koster.

The building

Mendini's basic design consists of three separate, simple and austere building units lying longitudinally in the Verbindings Canal, connected by passageways. These passageways also serve as bridges. A sky-blue lift bridge for cyclists and pedestrians traverses the complex. It not only links the two shores, it is also a section of the route between the station and the inner city. Thus, the Museum has become an entrance gate to the centre.

Each building block has several sections: pavilions that are superposed or juxtaposed. Each pavilion has its own special function and, consistent with this, its own shape, colour and material.

Relationship between outside and in

The exterior gives a direct indication that this is a building presenting various forms of art and design. The bridge, marked by a blue, arched gate, also conceals a surprise. When the bridge has been lifted to allow ships to pass, a work of art by Wim Delvoye can be seen on the underside. Magnified Delftware tiles, with apparently 17th-century emblems, refer to the collections of applied art and traditional painting. In contrast, the form is completely modern. The games depicted are not genuine representations but are cartoons thought up by Delvoye and the tiles are actually large stickers.

A sculpture by Mendini graces the centre of the piazza, in front of the entrance. It is an autonomous work, a sofa and also a guide: the ground plan of the Museum is expressed in a vertical form, thus producing a hominoid figure. Looking from the doorway, the red neon ceiling by François Morellet can be seen in the entrance hall. The oval lines of this artwork, specially created for this location, continue the lines of the exterior architecture.

THE CENTRAL PAVILION

The first eye-catcher is, of course, the gold-coloured central tower, which is over 30 metres tall. This tower accommodates the repositories and also the entrance to the Museum. In Mendini's opinion, the repository, often muffled away in cellars or inconspicuous auxiliary buildings, is the heart of a museum, the treasure chamber in which the most valuable possession, the Museum collection, is kept. For this reason, it has been given a central position and a gold-coloured laminate coating. The tower dazzles in the sunshine and no longer resembles a ship but evokes notions of a church. Mutually identical blocks flank the tower. One is clad in pink concrete slabs, the other in pastel green. The repetition of the squares emphasises the symmetry: laminate, concrete slabs,

small square mosaic stones, and the office windows on the upper floors.

The green part on the south side has large windows. This section accommodates the café-restaurant with its splendid view of the water and passing ships.

The entrance hall

The entrance hall was radically renewed in 2002. On the left-hand side is a large counter with cash registers and a plasma information screen, showing prices and information on current exhibitions. Adjoining this is the entrance to the Museum shop. On the right-hand section of the hall are two smaller counters with screens that provide information on activities in the Museum and cultural-historical information on Groningen, furnished by the Tourist Information Office. The entrance to the café-restaurant lies between these two information points. The hall is open public space and entrance during opening hours is free. The renovation has made the hall more of a meeting place and an information area.

The central stairway

The spiral stairway is the actual entrance to the Museum and its treasures and is also the central point of orientation. Furthermore, it is also an autonomous work of art. The characteristics of Mendini's work are again expressed here. The visitor must descend rather than climb the staircase as in almost all other museums (to the 'higher' arts). The mosaic stones, applied by Italian craftsmen, are reminiscent of Byzantine mosaics from Ravenna, while the form of the spiral stairway recalls Moorish structures.

Via the stairway, the visitor enters the passages to the exhibition pavilions. Oval exhibition areas, supporting small plazas on the outside, lie between the central section and the exhibition pavilions. The semicircular windows in the passageways evoke the ambience of a cloister. The dominant colour of the windows, light blue, refers to the water outside and is reflected in the exterior coating where capricious water channels have been applied to the material.

WEST SECTION

West of the central section are two pavilions, one above the other. The lower one, a square slightly tapering towards the top, was originally constructed to house the *Archaeology and History of the Town and Province of Groningen* collection. This is clearly evident on the exterior of the building: it is clad in red brick, traditionally the most common building material in Groningen. Furthermore, it gives the impression of a fort and calls to mind the roundels of the strongholds that were constructed on this site in the middle of the 17th century. Two lions from the collection, which originated from the Farnsum estate house, guard the fort.

This layout has been consigned to the annals of Groningen history since 1998. The historical layout could no longer satisfy expectations. The recently renovated pavilion currently bears the name 'Beringer-Hazewinkel Ploeg pavilion', referring to its new content: a safe home for the Groningen artists' association De Ploeg and other North European Expressionists. The pavilion was also called after the family Beringer-Hazewinkel that funded the pavilion. The new layout was also made by the Italian Michele de Lucchi (1951), who designed the original pavilion.

Beringer-Hazewinkel Ploeg pavilion

The Beringer-Hazewinkel Ploeg pavilion consists of a central part, presenting objects from Groningen cultural history, and six rooms for temporary exhibitions of De Ploeg and other expressionists, three on either side, with a connecting zone behind the central area. Through a window, the visitor can gain a glimpse of the Villa Heymans, now a part of Groningen's architectural history, designed by Berlage and built in the same red brick as the De Ploeg pavilion. Berlage was also the first to formulate a plan to connect the central station with the inner city and, as such, anticipated the function of the present Museum. A striking feature is the vividly coloured walls of the exhibition areas, whose intensity is reinforced by the application of coloured light.

Starck pavilion

Above the brick section lies a circular pavilion displaying objects in the *Applied Art* category. The exterior is clad with aluminium plates upon which vase shapes can be seen in the embossment.

Thus, here is also a direct reference to the contents. The building was designed by the French designer Philippe Starck (1949), in close conjunction with Albert Geertjes.

Starck created an illuminated circular showcase for this area, entirely girdling the diagonal interior wall. This showcase presents the internationally renowned collection of porcelain from the Far East, in which the emphasis lies on East-West relations. With the Rijks Museum in Amsterdam, the Princessehof in Leeuwarden and the Gemeente Museum in The Hague, the Groninger Museum has one of the richest collections of Asian ceramics.

The round hall is divided by means of winding curtains. Exceptional arrangements are presented in the spaces that are thus created, where the visitor can concentrate on the porcelain or on other user items such as furniture and Japanese lacquer ware.

The method of presentation is attuned to the nature and special features of the objects. Large artificial fissures have been applied to the concrete floors and walls, resembling the craquelé of porcelain. The lift is bell-shaped and thus refers to applied art and also to Starck's own designs, such as the cheese rasp/container Mister MeuMeu, dating from 1992, which is a stylised cow's head. Starck combines form and content in a light-hearted and humorous way. On opening, one of the horns of Mister MeuMeu turns out to be a spoon. A playful element in the applied art pavilion is the aquarium filled with porcelain. It contains some of the famous collection of 'Geldermalsen porcelain', Chinese porcelain from the middle of the 18th century which lay at the bottom of the South China Sea for centuries after the wreck of the VOC ship 'De Geldermalsen'. Many important pieces were donated to the Groninger Museum after the porcelain had been recovered by Captain Michael Hatcher in 1986. These pieces have again 'put to sea' in this pavilion.

The curtains, the splendidly designed showcases, and the remarkable lighting effects collectively produce elegant and alluring spaces that do full justice to the objects. In addition, the curtains have a useful soundproofing effect. A visit to this pavilion resembles a voyage of discovery with all kinds of surprising effects.

The theatrical layout by Philippe Starck is exceptional and original, and commands the attention of the visitor. It is an excellent example of the latest ideas on exhibition layout, where traditional methods of display in a neutral area alternate with exciting arrangements that fire the imagination.

EAST SECTION

Mellini pavilions

'Classical' museum architecture is also represented in the Museum, on the east side of the complex. The lower pavilion (*Mellini 0*), which is trapeziform, consists of two storeys and was designed entirely – both the interior and the exterior – by Mellini. The pointillist Signac motif on the exterior refers to the interior containing the visual arts. The seven consecutive halls on the ground floor are devoted to *temporary exhibitions*. Expositions of all kinds and composition are presented here, as long as they fit in with the policy and collection of the Groninger Museum. Recent exhibitions have included Jozef Israëls (1999), Anton Corbijn (2000), 'Hell and Heaven, the Middle Ages in the North' by Peter Greenaway (2001), and Ilja Repin (2002).

The spaces on the first floor (*Mellini 1*) display ever-changing selections from the Museum's own collection, including objects at the interface of art, architecture and design (Pattern and Decoration, Memphis, Mellini) and, since the end of the 1990s, a sizeable collection of fashion and of staged and documentary photographs. Art from the Museums abundant historical collection is also regularly shown.

Classical layout

The largest rectangular area is situated in the middle of the square ground plan, with smaller areas

surrounding it. These, too, are rectangular and differ in size. The various dimensions are necessary because all kinds of art, large and small, must be able to be shown here. The areas are austere and simple and, as a result, have a rather classical appearance. The broad portals, whose metal framing becomes wider towards the bottom, accentuate this. Mendini did not apply the enfilade system, frequently deployed in many museums in the 19th century, in which the portals of consecutive areas lie in line. The further décor of the areas on the ground floor, used for the temporary exhibitions, is dependent on the type of exhibition organised. The colours of the walls, and even of the floors and ceilings, are repeatedly altered.

On the first floor, used for the presentation of Modern Visual Art, each space has its own particular colour, following a colour scheme developed by the Dutch artist Peter Struycken.

Just as in the west pavilions, where 'traditional' art objects are displayed in a renewed environment, the classical areas here on the first floor contrast with the modern, often innovative art presented. In Mendini 0, a refuge has been installed where the visitor can relax and look out of the window. As with the other pavilions, there is no daylight here. Mendini 1 accommodates a print gallery, constructed with financial support from the Beringer-Hazewinkel Foundation.

Coop Himmelb(l)au pavilion

The *vide* with the broad staircase connects the two floors of the Mendini pavilion. The staircase also takes the visitor to the top pavilion, the much-discussed section of the Museum. It was designed by the architects Wolfgang Prix (Vienna, 1942) and the Pole Helmut Swiczinsky (1944), jointly known as Coop Himmelb(l)au. 'It was as if a bomb had exploded', said one city resident when the design was published. The capricious pavilion contrasts markedly with the rest of the building, designed by Mendini, with its austere and simple forms.

The first impression of the Coop Himmelb(l)au pavilion is one of randomness and chaos. The structure is comprised of large, double-walled steel plates that alternate with hardened glass at the points where they do not quite meet. The plates, to which the first sketch and a photograph of the design have been applied using tar, are topsy-turvy and even hang over the pavilion underneath at some points.

Deconstructivism

The design is a typical example of the most recent architectural movement, *Deconstructivism*, in which all architectural traditions are thrown overboard. Traditional constructive elements, such as the wall, floor, window or ceiling, have been torn out of their normal coherence. Thus, a wall can also be a ceiling and a window a floor. According to Prix, the spaces that are created in this way are a result of force fields and movement. 'Many of the techniques that we use originate from art, such as the adherence to the first sketch and automatic drawing,' he says. 'We wish to make use of the subconscious and develop new forms from there. We want to try to bring emotion back into architecture.'

He does not take established values and norms as his starting point but prefers to seize the spirit of the times: fragmentation, chaos, contrast, movement. Another example of deconstructivist architecture is the glass pavilion by Bernard Tschumi at the Hereplein, near the Museum, designed in 19.. for the *What a Wonderful World* exhibition – music videos in architecture.

Three exhibition areas have been created within the pavilion, separated by indentations and recesses. The walls are made of steel and glass so that daylight can enter at unexpected places. This also contrasts with Mendini's closed realm. Coop Himmelb(l)au aims to generate 'open architecture', an interaction between inside and out, so that the visitor is regularly surprised by sudden glimpses of the outside world. Paths at different levels ensure that the visitor can view the artworks from all sides: at ground level or from the gantry that cuts through the exhibition area a few metres above the floor. The original idea was to display paintings from the 16th-19th centuries here, to emphasise the contrast. Later, the pavilion came to be used primarily for three-dimensional work, such as exhibitions of the work of the British artist Mark Grinnigen and the American Rona Pondick. The areas here are extremely suitable for large receptions. Even dance parties are held here

occasionally at festive openings. The whole Coop Himmelb(l)au pavilion is a three-dimensional artwork, resting on the pedestal formed by the Mendini volume clad in colourful laminate.

The Museum as a work of art

The new Groninger Museum is not merely a shell to accommodate art, it is a work of art in itself – a principle that is increasingly being applied in modern (museum) architecture elsewhere. In fact, the Museum itself is the most valuable item in the Groninger Museum collection of art. It is a work of art at the heart of the city, traversed by public areas where passers-by are directly confronted by all kinds of artwork. Could it be more inviting?