

# Flying high in Antwerp

Good things come to those who wait and Carl Depauw has been very patient; after 13 years of committed research the Museum Aan de Stroom is now open to visitors



Carl Depauw may have a twinkle in his eye when he describes himself as “a very beloved person in Antwerp, especially in the cultural sector... the sympathetic guy that closed down four museums”, but the jovial Belgian’s good humour cannot disguise the fact that a fair few local feathers must have been ruffled by the creation of Antwerp’s shiny new Museum Aan de Stroom, or MAS, as it will be known.

The museum, which opened its doors last year, has been 13 years in the planning. It was dreamt up in the period immediately following Antwerp’s tenure as European Capital of Culture in 1993 as a new landmark to unite the city’s historical and cultural resources and link Antwerp to the world.

Dreams are all well and good of course,

but if they are to become realities, upheavals must be made and the genesis of MAS meant the demise of Antwerp’s Museum of Regional Ethnology, National Maritime Museum, Folklore Museum and Vleeshuis Museum. For Depauw, who came on board as director in 2004, it has been worth the trouble. The new museum holds 470,000 precious artifacts in its collection, 800 of which are “unidentified objects” that appeared out of nowhere during the enormous task of making an inventory of the four museums’ treasures.

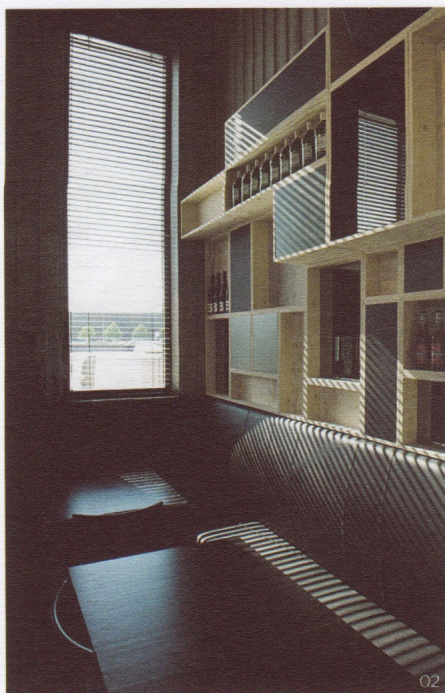
Only around three percent of the collection will ever be on display at a time at MAS and although Depauw acknowledges that this is not a very high figure, he feels that the selection process has been a useful

exercise for him and his team, who can “show only the objects most beloved to us and which we believe are most satisfying to the audience”. Also significant, says the director, is that “we never speak about permanent exhibitions, we talk about semi-permanent”. MAS’s ever-changing exhibition programme is designed to reflect the dynamism of the city it calls home, as well as the fantastic diversity of the museum’s collections themselves.

“The main ambition of the museum,” says Depauw, “is to combine all these objects in a new mission, a new combined, integrated story”. Fundamental to that story are MAS’s bricks and mortar, the extraordinary 10-storey tower that stands resplendent on the quay-side in Eilandje, Antwerp’s shipping district.



- 01 View of the Museum from Bonaparte Dock, Photo Sarah Blee © Neutelings Riedijk Architecten
- 02 The Museum's Café; an example of art being incorporated into the fabric of the building
- 03 The open access areas are designed to allow for maximum interaction between visitors



Designed by Dutch architects Neutelings Riedijk following an international competition launched in 1999, the structure was inspired by Antwerp's box-like 16th-century warehouses. As well as being "a new icon for the skyline of Antwerp", the building's location is a reminder of the crucial role that the port and the river once played in the economic, social and cultural development of the city.

The building is also of vital importance in terms of its interaction with the collections it holds. In Depauw's vision, "the whole Museum Aan de Stroom is actually a huge theatre... We have these 470,000 actors and we put them on stage and they play a very specific role: sometimes it's a romantic piece, sometimes it's a piece about life and death, sometimes it's a

piece about power and the display of power, but always the actors are in connection with the scenography and with the story".

MAS is "not an art museum", but Depauw is cognisant of the power of images when it comes to broadening understanding of the past, and the museum's first temporary exhibition, 'Masterpieces in the MAS: Five Centuries of Images in Antwerp', explores precisely this issue. The show brings together around 160 pieces, from Old Masters (and native Antwerpers) Sir Anthony Van Dyck and Peter Paul Rubens to contemporary artists, with works on loan from the city's Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Museum of Contemporary Art and Plantin-Moretus Museum.

Art is also built into the very fabric of

MAS in the form of a 1,600 square metre mosaic that adorns the floor of the piazza in front of the building. The mosaic, entitled *Dead Skull*, is the work of Luc Tuymans, arguably Belgium's best known living artist. Based on a Tuymans painting of the same name from 2002, it references a plaque dedicated to the 16th-century Flemish painter Quentin Matsys on Antwerp's Cathedral of Our Lady. Depauw points out that the mosaic neatly connects the new "story tower" of the museum with the cathedral's ancient spire, bringing together old and modern and in the process "honouring" both aspects of the city.

Open to all, the MAS Square is just one of several areas of the museum that Depauw and his team hope will act as draws to "seduce" the public into the collections proper. Visitors must purchase tickets to enter the temporary and semi-permanent exhibition galleries on levels three to eight, but access to the Storm Café on the ground floor, the two Michelin star restaurant 'T Zilte on the ninth floor and the 360 degree panorama roof terrace on the tenth floor is free. Also open access is the 'viewing depot', a second floor gallery designed to give visitors a taste of the museum's collections before asking them to commit to buying tickets to the other floors. This depot, says Depauw excitedly, "is the beating heart of the collection".

"Maybe it's impolite to make the comparison," the director explains, "but you could compare [the museum] with a cultural shopping mall. That's what we try to be. People come here, they can shop, they can touch things, they can look at things, but they do not necessarily have to buy something, which makes it very attractive".

While the museum's ticketed spaces are open from 10 am-5 pm, the open access areas, connected by a moving stairway – or 'walking boulevard' – that allows visitors to peek into every gallery, are open from 09.30 to midnight. Depauw wants the boulevard to "become a hot spot for people to meet, talk, read books or have a romantic evening watching the sunset". The idea is that MAS will be not just a cultural space, but also a community space, an essential part of Antwerp life.

It's still early days of course, but so striking is the new addition to Antwerp's skyline and so enthusiastic is the museum's director about the opportunities his building will provide for locals and visitors alike, that it's hard to imagine that MAS will be anything other than a roaring success. Sometimes it's necessary to ruffle some feathers if you're going to fly high. ■