

LIFE

DESIGN

SPIRAL STAIRCASE ADDS NEW TWIST IN MIGRANT STORY

Beijing architect Ma Yansong to help rebuild links between old Chinatown and Rotterdam in his atrium project for first migration museum

Tamara Thiessen
life@scmp.com

Why has a Chinese architect been chosen to put a spiral staircase in the Netherlands' first migration museum? Because the Fenix – a historic harbourside warehouse that will house the museum – stands in one of Europe's oldest Chinatowns.

Beijing-based Ma Yansong, founder of MAD Architects, will add a coup de théâtre to the Landverhuizersmuseum in Rotterdam with a "theatrical staircase" eddying through the centre of the building to a rooftop observation deck.

Today the old storehouse sits among the dockland cafes and bars of the Katendrecht, a hip post-industrial area on the southern banks of Rotterdam's harbour. Rehabilitation of the once desolate waterfront area – ravaged by fire and war – began in 2007, and will continue with the Fenix's restoration.

Having taken the West by storm with innovative buildings such as Toronto's gyrating Absolute Towers (nicknamed the Marilyn Monroe for their hourglass curves), and the in-construction Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, in Los Angeles, for film director George Lucas, MAD Architects will be undertaking its first public cultural project in Europe.

Ma describes his vision for the future museum, which will morph out of the Fenix over the next three years.

"The staircase draws on the formation of a tornado, and has several landings that provide access to the different gallery spaces. It gives visitors the opportunity to meander and explore the museum from different perspectives and concludes above the rooftop as a panoramic lookout point offering views of the riverside and city beyond."

Not only will he create the staircase and viewing platform, but also a public atrium connecting the ground and first floors of the museum with the rooftop.

Ma – China's "starchitect" and "the first to conquer the West" as one Dutch paper recently

reported – says the commission came out of a chance meeting in Berlin last year with Dutch art historian, Wim Pijbes.

For Pijbes, managing director of the Droom en Daad (Dream & Do) foundation behind the renovation, Ma was the natural choice because of Katendrecht's Chinese migration history.

The sprawling 12,000 square metre red brick building was inaugurated in 1923 as the largest warehouse in the world. Remarkably, two railway lines cut through the original 360 metre-long complex and are still apparent today.



We wanted to create something that is visually dynamic and animates the historic building

WIM PIJBES, DUTCH ART HISTORIAN

Its history ties in with the arrival and departure of thousands of transatlantic passengers from the surrounding riverbank embarkation points around this time. Among them were hundreds of Chinese sailors working on the steamships of big shipping companies. In the 1920s, some 2,500 Chinese, mostly seafarers and their families, lived in Katendrecht, underpinning its budding Chinatown district.

"We could choose who we liked; that was our luxury," Pijbes says. "But here there was a Chinese connection."

Ma will help Pijbes realise the

creation of Rotterdam's answer to New York's Ellis Island museum – a place that tells the "universal and timeless story" of migration.

"The Fenix will be a symbol for the city of Rotterdam, a city of migrants today, but from where an estimated 3 million people left for the New World," says Pijbes, who found it strange that a country where migrants make up about a fifth of the population had no such showcase. The US\$6.4m renovation of the warehouse seeks to honour their legacy.

After seven years at the helm of Amsterdam's famous fine arts museum, the Rijksmuseum, Pijbes is helping Droom en Daad invest in art and cultural projects in Rotterdam.

That the project has Ma working in the former Chinatown has no personal relevance to him, although "it is important culturally for my work as an architect".

"It was here on the Katendrecht that one could find opium kits, and the first Chinese restaurant in the Netherlands, possibly in Europe," he says.

He also feels the transformation of the old factory into a museum, will see "this forgotten part of history brought to life once more".

"It is important to remember the people and the events of our past ... and we wanted to create something that elevated the experience of moving through the space and taking in those stories, as well as provide points of contemplation and reflection into our design," he adds.

Pijbes says he wanted to lend some wow-factor "fun" to the museum through MAD's involvement. And that, Ma achieves, with his vortex-like staircase, "possibly built from carbon fibre".

"We wanted to create something that is visually dynamic and animates the historic building, while trying to preserve as much of the original structure as possible – and keeping the number of supports to a minimum, so that they are not visible – to make the tornado appear as if it is 'floating'," he says.

A city still in the making – with a hyper modern look owing to extensive World War II bombardment – Rotterdam will benefit from the addition of a dynamic public landmark, Ma says.

"New ideas need old buildings," Pijbes adds, "to give a sense of place. Monuments can offer inspiration for future generations."



Clockwise from left: a Chinese restaurant in Katendrecht in 1936; Ma Yansong; a rendering of the spiral staircase at the Fenix warehouse. Photos: Handouts

