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THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

PELMETS AMID THE PALMS Classic English décor travels to Tangier



POST, MODERN
1920s Dutch mail depot with a radical stamp

SCHIP SHAPE

Anchored by a funnel-like tower, the aptly named Schip housing scheme certainly made waves when it was built in Amsterdam a century ago. The post office at the prow is no longer open for business, but a museum has opened in its wake, transporting visitors to the days when a fearsome operator manned the faience phone kiosk. Michael Webb gives the first-class restoration his stamp of approval. Photography: Rachael A. Smith



Lavender-coloured faience tiles cover the walls and counter of Het Schip's post office, which was an essential amenity when architect Michel de Klerk created the

showcase housing scheme in 1919. The bench offered a place for people to perch while they waited for the operator to put calls through to the phone booth, right



APREK



This page, clockwise from top left: the brick cylinder is a continuation of the elliptical tower outside; a vintage postbox has been moved indoors to protect it from vandals; the service counter shows De Klerk's gift for practicality and ornament; the phone booth has double doors for sound insulation, while the leaded windows evoke birds on telegraph wires; an arched window and bowed ceiling complement the geometry of the glazing bars and tilework. Opposite: swing doors link the lobby to the postal hall





This page, clockwise from top left: double doors separate entry from exit; De Klerk specified maple floors for the work areas, but in his rush to complete the interior he was compelled to use an inferior wood covered with linoleum – 100 years later his vision has finally been realised; contrasting grille patterns animate the view from behind the service counter; a stern sign warns against unauthorised entry to the staff area. Opposite: the control booth would have been occupied by a phone operator



GOOD DESIGN is deep-rooted in the Dutch DNA, from the handsome merchants' houses that line the canals of big cities, through a century of progressive architecture, to the latest generation of railway stations. Het Schip, a newly restored block of workers' housing on Spaarndammerplantsoen in Amsterdam, was designed by Michel de Klerk a century ago, and is still a highly desirable place to live. 'Nothing is too good for the worker, who has had to do without beauty for so very long,' declared the architect, who was the 25th child of a poor Jewish diamond cutter. In his short career, he designed luxury furniture and social housing, bringing the same invention and passion to both. A photograph, taken in 1909, shows a dreamy bearded man in a floppy hat, rumpled jacket and bow tie; the very picture of a bohemian artist. But De Klerk quickly became one of the most admired architects of his day.

Inspired by the English Arts and Crafts movement, he helped found the Amsterdam School, a group of young architects that, in the words of a newspaper reviewer at the time, 'has rejected the doctrinaire application of rationalism as leading to monotony and aridity, and is out to restore fantasy, richness, and the picturesque to their former position'. That perfectly describes the sculptured brick mass of Het Schip, De Klerk's masterpiece, and particularly the post office that occupies the tip of the triangular plan. An elliptical brick tower, which is topped with a band of dark tiles, evokes the funnel of a steamship and gives the building its name. Above the twin entry doors is a stone that is carved with the street number and a greyhound to suggest the swiftness of postal delivery.

In 1919, few workers had telephones and they deposited their money in the post-office savings bank while buying stamps and sending parcels. That made local branches as important as the corner shop, and De Klerk designed the interior as an amenity the postal authority could lease and operate. It served the community from 1921 to 1999 before it became a victim of cost-cutting by the newly privatised operation. All Dutch post offices have now gone the way of the typewriter and rotary-dial telephone, overtaken by new technologies, and a few have been creatively recycled. The cathedral-like hall in Utrecht's main post office has become the reading room of the city's new central library, while De Klerk's little jewel has been restored to serve as a time capsule of a vanished era.

Alice Roegholt, who directs Het Schip museum, was quick to realise its potential. She installed exhibits on the history of the building and De Klerk's designs, but quickly outgrew the space and relocated her displays to the first floor of the main building. They illustrate the development of this quarter, which attracted workers newly arrived from nearby farms in the early years of the 20th century. Before the Eigen Haard (Our Hearth) association was established in 1909 to build affordable, good-quality housing, these migrants lived in miserable tenements. Het Schip offered 16 different floor plans in its 102 apartments, a landscaped courtyard where children could play and a meeting hall for the tenants. Sculptured details include a tiny windmill to re-



mind residents of their roots, and the towers and swelling bays culminate in a tapered brick spire modelled on that of the Palace Hotel in Copenhagen, which the architect had sketched during an early expedition to Scandinavia.

Inevitably, such extravagance provoked a degree of criticism. City council members complained about the cost, but were ultimately persuaded that they would be judged on the legacy of quality housing. The rationalist Nieuwe Bauen movement deplored 'opulent architecture springing from the obsession with form... and excessive individual artistic expression'. The tenants, however, loved it and one was moved to write to *Het Volk* newspaper following De Klerk's untimely death on his 39th birthday. 'It is as if every brick cries out,' the correspondent lamented. 'Is not the Spaarndammerplein a fairy tale dreamt of as a child, as something we children never had?'

The building was extensively renovated between 1977 and 1980 but the replacements for decayed bricks were thought too uniform. The restoration of the past two years employs bricks made from Groninger clay and custom-baked in a peat-fired oven to achieve the subtle variations of tone that De Klerk intended. This ambitious project gave Roegholt the opportunity to complete the restoration of the post office she had begun in 2000. Back then, the institutional green paint was stripped, along with the linoleum that covered the floorboards in the work area behind the counter. Trusting her instincts, she challenged experts who insisted that the architect had used whatever materials were readily to hand. A three-day search in the Amsterdam archives turned up a long-forgotten list of the architect's specifications. It included

a maple floor, but when she asked for quotes from a timber merchant, they explained that maple was imported from Canada and could not be shipped during winter. She realised that De Klerk must have faced exactly the same issue when he substituted an alternative wood. This time around, she placed her order in the spring and the floor is now just as the architect wanted, with a concrete base to protect it from damp.

A vintage red postbox, formerly located outside, now occupies the tiny lobby. Although De Klerk himself designed a box (along with a stamp and a coat of arms for the post-office authority), it was never put into production. Another pair of doors leading into the main hall evokes the bustle of this space in its heyday. A bowed drop ceiling complements an arched window, and the walls are partially clad in lavender tiles. Across from the service counter with its wired shutters is a tiled booth. Younger visitors, chatting heedlessly on their mobile phones, may be astonished to learn that an operator had to ring the number, wait for the connection and then direct the caller to enter the aptly titled Spreek booth. This mystery needed to be guarded; to the left of the bench where callers waited is a perforated gate with the sign 'Verboden' and a carved hand grasping a truncheon to emphasise the prohibition on entering the inner sanctum ■

Het Schip, 45 Oostzaanstraat, 1013 Amsterdam. For opening times, ring 00 31 20 68 68 595, or visit hetschip.nl

Opposite: the greyhound just visible on the underside of the number block symbolised the speed of postal delivery at a time when it was run as a public service.

This page: the brick tower crowned with fluted tiles evoked a steamship in a harbour, giving the building its name and marking the entry to the post office.

