

Fact sheet architectural information

Overview

The Nederlands Fotomuseum, the National Museum of Photography, is the most important centre for the display, conservation, collection, and study of photography in the Netherlands. On February 7, 2026, the museum will reopen in a newly renovated landmark warehouse in the heart of Rotterdam's historic dock area, providing a new state-of-the-art home for the national collection of over 6.5 million photographic images – one of the largest museum collections of photography in the world. The move to the Grade A listed Santos warehouse, one of the best-preserved warehouses in the Netherlands, has been made possible by a donation from the Droom en Daad Foundation. It will enable the museum to make its world-class collection more accessible than ever before and to provide a dynamic platform for Dutch photography. The monumental nine-storey building will include extensive exhibition spaces, a photography bookshop and library, an education centre, community spaces, a museum café, a darkroom, and a rooftop restaurant with panoramic views of the Rotterdam skyline.

Location

The monumental Santos warehouse, the new home for the Nederlands Fotomuseum, occupies a central location on the Rijnhaven harbour on the south bank of the River Maas and is one of the best preserved warehouses in the Netherlands. It sits on the border of the revitalised Katendrecht neighbourhood and the diverse Afrikaanderwijk. The area around the museum is undergoing large scale urban regeneration and development, with a new city park designed by New York-based architects, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Inc, set to transform the harbour basin in the district of Rijnhaven.

History

The Santos building is a former coffee warehouse built between 1901-1902 by Rotterdam architects J.P. Stok Wzn and J.J. Kanter. Initially used as a warehouse for coffee shipped from the Brazilian port city of Santos, the warehouse came to be used for other goods and later stood empty for many years. With its richly decorated north and south facades and traditional Beaux-Arts composition, the Santos building is one of the finest examples of early 20th-century warehouse architecture. The warehouse has been registered as a national monument since 2000.

In 2021 the German design department store group stilwerk began the transformation of the historic building with plans to open its first design store in the Netherlands. The renovation and expansion of the original building was designed by the architectural team RENNER HAINKE WIRTH ZIRN ARCHITEKTEN, Hamburg and WDJARCHITEKTEN, Rotterdam, and carried out by Leiden-based contractor Burgy. The building was acquired by the Nederlands Fotomuseum in 2023.

Key Dates

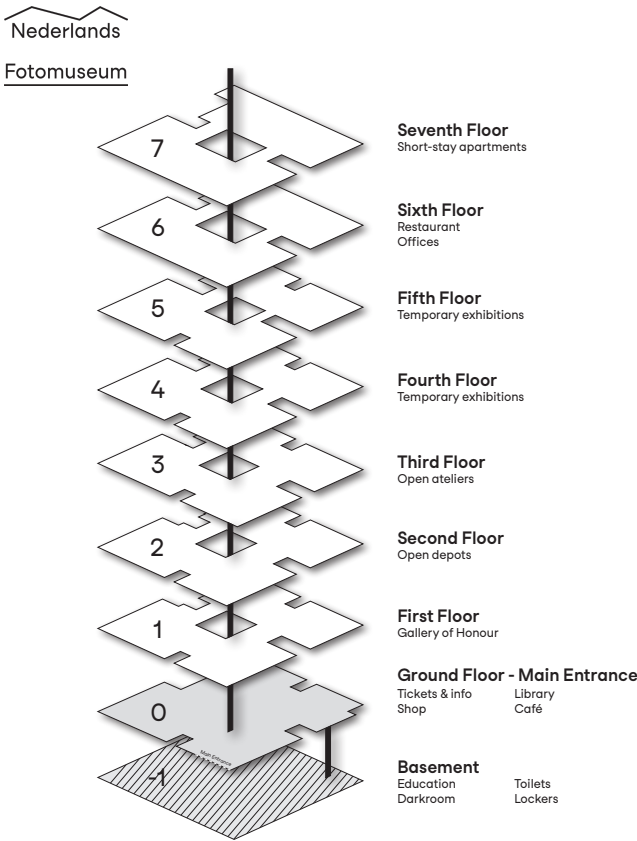
2021

Start of the restoration and expansion of the Santos building by the architectural team RENNER HAINKE WIRTH ZIRN ARCHITEKTEN, Hamburg and WDJARCHITEKTEN, Rotterdam and carried out by Leiden-based contractor Burgy for stilwerk, a German design department store group

Summer 2023	Santos building acquired by the Nederlands Fotomuseum
Early 2024	Construction work complete shell and core
Summer 2024	Start of the adaptive re-use for the Nederlands Fotomuseum
October-November 2025	Relocation of the collection from Las Palmas to the Santos warehouse
February 7, 2026	Public opening of the Nederlands Fotomuseum

Project Specifications

Total building area	9030 m2
Total museum area	8340 m2
Area of public space	5104 m2
Exhibition space	3390 m2
Building height	34,9 meter
Number of floors	9 (8 floors for the Nederlands Fotomuseum, 1 floor of short-stay apartments)



Design Team

Initial Architects	J.P. Stok Wzn and J.J. Kanthers (1901-1902)
Architecture	Architectural team RENNER HAINKE WIRTH ZIRN ARCHITEKTEN and WDJARCHITECTEN
Interior	WDJARCHITECTEN, Rotterdam (public spaces ground floor and basement)
Exhibition Spaces	Bureau Caspar Conijn, Amsterdam (open depots) LMNOP, Utrecht (Gallery of Honour of Dutch Photography)

Project management	STEAD Advisory, Den Haag (museum)
Signage & Visual Identity	LMNOP, Utrecht
Structural Design	Pieters, Delft
Installations (MEP)	Techniplan, Rotterdam (shell and core) Boviam, Maasdijk (museum)
Building Physics & Fire Safety	Peutz, Mook (shell and core, design)
Fire Safety	FSE, Maarheeze (construction phase)

Construction

Building Contractors	Burgy Bouwbedrijf, Leiden (shell and core) Metz Nederland, Schiedam and Muddebouw, Krimpen aan de Lek (museum) Nijssen, Leiden (depots)
Interior	Van Keulen, Nijverdal
HVAC	Massier, Den Haag (shell and core)
Electric	Van Kuyvenhoven, 's-Gravezande (shell and core)
MEP	MKW, Rotterdam (museum)
Watermist	Unica, Rotterdam (museum)

ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES

Restoration

The Santos building is one of the best-preserved warehouses in the Netherlands and its interior is practically in original condition. For the renovation, the architects focused on restoring as much of the historic structure and fabric of the building as possible. Wherever possible, existing external and internal elements of the original construction of the warehouse from 1901- 1902 were restored. The building's original six storeys have been retained, with a cast-iron column structure, along with a large basement below the entire surface area of the building.

Central to the project was an effort to transform the dark interior spaces of the building into a light filled space without destroying the original character of the warehouse. A new central atrium will allow natural light to fill the entire building and connect the ground floor to the top floor with a central stairwell running up through the building.

As part of the renovation, the building's original six storeys have been retained, with a cast-iron column structure, along with a large basement below the entire surface area of the building. To preserve the historic interiors as much as possible, air-conditioning ducts, electricity cables, lighting rails and pipes have been largely incorporated between the original wooden beams of the ceiling.

Exhibition Spaces

On the ground floor, a generous open-plan atrium has been created with a central stairwell running up through the building connecting the exhibition spaces, including a new space on the first floor for The Gallery of Honour - the Museum's permanent exhibition which presents a snapshot of photography in the Netherlands from the invention of photography in 1839 to the present day. Across the second and third floors, a suite of new climate-controlled facilities will house the Museum's collection and conservation centre, with glass windows allowing visitors access to the atelier spaces and insight into the conservation and digitisation process, while the fourth and fifth floors will present temporary photography exhibitions.

Façade

The original elaborately decorated north and south façades of the warehouse have been retained in composition and material. The shutters across the front façade have been opened up permanently to reveal glass windows.

Roof extension

Two new storeys have been added to the top of the original warehouse building. This striking new roof structure is enveloped in a semi-transparent perforated aluminium 'crown' façade. One of these new floors will contain offices and a public restaurant for the Nederlands Fotomuseum. The other will operate as private, short-let apartments.

Sustainability

Adaptive re-use of the more than 125 years old building was the starting point for future proofing this heritage building. The building is completely gas free, and with its overhang and perforated skin across the top two floors, the new building provides excellent passive solar protection.

Key Spaces

The museum building will include:

- On the ground entrance floor, a café, library and photography bookshop.
- Five floors of exhibition spaces to display the collection and host temporary exhibitions.
- An education centre and community spaces.
- A darkroom (in the newly created basement).
- A rooftop restaurant with panoramic views of the Rotterdam skyline on the sixth floor.
- A suite of new climate-controlled facilities, which will house the museum's collection and conservation centre. Glass windows will allow visitors to observe the collection and atelier spaces, with specialists working behind the scenes in areas such as restoration and conservation.

AWARDS

- Design Educates Awards 2025. Gold Prize for Architectural Design
- DAM Preis 2026: nomination
- Heinze ArchitekturAWARD 2025: nomination on the shortlist of the jury
- BIG SEE Architecture Award 2026: nomination

ARCHITECTS TEAM

WDJARCHITECTEN

Karin Wolf
Linde Petit dit de la Roche
Mario Lingga Wisnugraha
Ralph Knufing
Paula Ebert
Nanne Knijff
Heleen Pijman - Rutten
Boris van Hattum
Wessel de Jonge
Sander Nelissen

As a specialist in adaptive re-use and transformation of the existing built environment, WDJARCHITECTEN has built up a rich portfolio in 25 years. Our portfolio comprises a selection of renowned buildings, including many recently-categorised heritage sites. Besides economic importance, maintaining buildings often has a cultural and social significance. Historical continuity aids our understanding of from where we come. As a result of grappling with the past, we can gain a clearer vision for the future. Moreover, the upliftment of existing structures is a fascinating architectural challenge. The tension between old and new is captivating: this interaction leads us to pose exceptional solutions to current downfalls. Most importantly, extending the service life of

buildings is a fundamental contribution to a sustainable future: reduction of demolition waste and the use of fewer new raw materials greatly contribute to CO₂ reduction. Additionally, improving the energy performance of a building further reduces the building's overall carbon footprint. Thus, making maximal use of urban and buildings structures is a crucial first step towards creating a sustainable living environment, in every respect.

In all of our designs, the new use of the building is the leading framework. That is why we start by listening: we listen to the client's wishes about the building's intended new functions, use and program, and we also listen to the building: we wish to bring out its story and recognise the significance of the context for which it was created. Through design and research, we make the positive aspects of a building, which are sometimes hidden, visible again. We breathe new life into old structures, adding what is lacking, and in doing so, we translate our clients' wishes and requirements into a tangible and coherent form. Throughout the creation of this unified final vision, we emphasize the importance of space and light, because for us, architecture that has clear intentions; comfortable and calm interiors; and is designed with careful selection of materials and details, creates spaces in which people thrive.

Central to our approach is creating the right balance between the new function and the existing building, building complex or redevelopment site. Our craftsmanship allows us to quickly and accurately identify opportunities for spatial enhancement: both architecturally and in terms of function and economy. We combine this insight with our knowledge of historical and cultural aspects of the building's context, and our knowledge of present-day socio-economic developments: this is how we make buildings more suited for the future again. We understand how real estate operates, and what is necessary to make projects feasible.

RENNER HAINKE WIRTH ZIRN ARCHITEKTEN

Karin Renner
Melanie Zirn
Stefan Wirth
Fabian Schebesta
Sung-Mun An
Naomi Kadish
Anne Arnbjerg
Lukas Hähnel

The planning office RENNER HAINKE WIRTH ZIRN ARCHITEKTEN has been working in Hamburg-St. Pauli for 28 years. The international expertise gained through formative years of training abroad with Will Alsop, Adele Naude Santos, Sauerbruch & Hutton and 3XN quickly led the team to many competition wins and award-winning buildings. Karin Renner, Stefan Wirth and Melanie Zirn lead an interdisciplinary team of 30 architects, urban planners and interior designers. The team has been working in Germany and abroad for many years, and their wide-ranging expertise and particular sensitivity to the genius loci is implemented in all projects, on both large and small scales. The particular focus of their work lies in the areas of master planning, harbour planning, neighbourhood development, residential construction, school construction and research. In particular, the design of iconographic buildings, also in conjunction with the conversion of listed buildings and contemporary extensions, has led to award-winning projects such as the Villa Oppenheim in Cologne and the Lufthansa reception building in Hamburg. Another area of expertise of the team is the parametric 3D design of lightweight extensions with metal façades and perforations, which have also given the Santos building a new crown with iconographic radiance. The common thread in the designs and buildings is the pursuit of conceptual and formal clarity, as well as the self-evident integration of sustainability requirements. The identity of each design always develops from the specifics of the situation and the demands and self-image of the functional uses. Architecture must be customised for the location, the function, the budget - and the people. The design comes afterwards; it is the creative freedom as a sensitive response to the genius loci. The art lies in the self-restraint of the means, in aesthetic and economic terms.