

THE MAKING OF

THE RENOVATION OF THE ROYAL MUSEUM FOR CENTRAL AFRICA

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From the Musée du Congo to the AfricaMuseum: a metamorphosis

The Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) was founded as the 'Musée du Congo' 120 years ago, in 1898. Originally, the museum was housed in the present-day Colonial Palace, but owing to the increasing number of visitors and the ever-growing collection that building soon became too small and construction started on the current museum, which was officially opened in 1910 by King Albert I.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century it was felt to be time for the museum to undergo a comprehensive renovation, in terms of both its content and its infrastructure. In relation to content, it needed to provide a better picture of contemporary Africa and its cultural and natural riches. At the same time, there was a desire for the museum to adopt a more critical approach to the colonial past of the Congo and Belgium.

Nowadays, the museum has distanced itself from colonialism as a form of government and accepts responsibility for the part it played in the past in disseminating stereotypes about Africa.

Simultaneously, the historic building was in need of thorough renovation, as well as additional infrastructure to improve the museum's relationship with the public. The result is staggering. The AfricaMuseum now provides an enthusiastic story about contemporary Africa, casting a critical gaze on colonialism and its implications up to the present day. The importance of the diaspora is also extensively examined.

However, the AfricaMuseum also remains a memorial to that past, and some of its rooms – such as the 'Crocodile Hall' – were restored to their original state, as they would have been on the museum's opening in 1910. The AfricaMuseum also hopes to become a forum for debate where differing opinions can be aired.

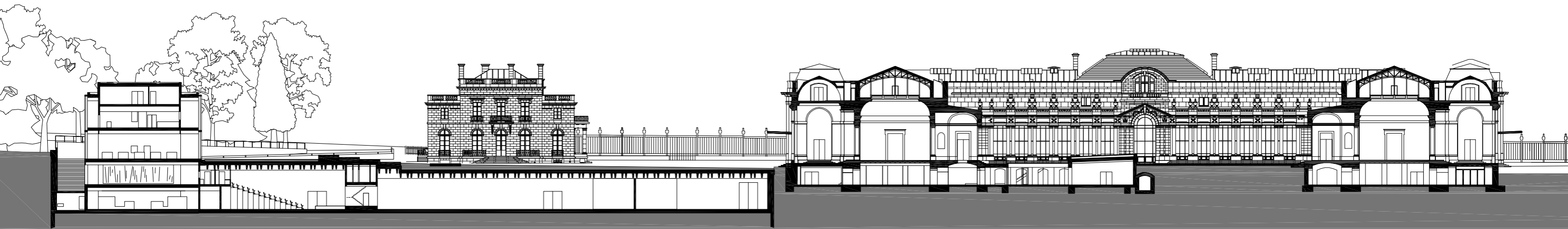
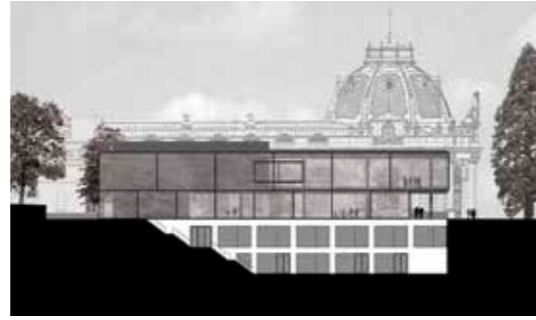
The additional public infrastructure is impressive, boasting the new glass welcome pavilion, new conference facilities, including an auditorium, new exhibition rooms, and the presence of contemporary art.

The AfricaMuseum has not only doubled in terms of public space, but is now also fully accessible to disabled visitors.

We would like to extend our sincerest thanks to the works commissioner, the Belgian Federal Buildings Agency, the Temporary Association Stéphane Beel Architecten and to the main contractor Denys, for their professionalism, dedication and expert contributions.

We would also like to thank our numerous sponsors from both the public and private sectors. Finally, a special word of thanks must go to the hundreds of people – our employees, our African partners and the partners from the diaspora – who for years have given of their very best to make this renovation such a great success.

GUIDO GRYSEELS
Director General







INTERVIEWS

GUIDO GRYSEELS

Director general, AfricaMuseum

This will fire your enthusiasm for Africa

Guido Gryseels seized on the task of renovating the AfricaMuseum from day one of his appointment as director general. Nearly 18 years later, his fledgling project is fully grown and he can confidently let it stand on its own two feet. 'And, just like any parent, I feel terribly proud of it.'

You became director general of the AfricaMuseum on 1 August 2001. Was it immediately obvious to you that the museum needed root-and-branch renovation?

It was as clear as day that my first priority would be a fundamental renovation of the museum. When I was appointed director, I found a place that had scarcely altered since my childhood. The last major modifications had occurred in the 1950s. Our museum was still providing a Belgian perspective on Africa that pre-dated the independence of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other African countries. We were frequently branded the last colonial museum in the world.

How did you tackle that, conscious of the fact that the Congo had already been independent for nearly half a century?

I sat down together with the whole staff to devise a broad strategic plan. It wasn't just a matter of the museum, but also concerned scholarly research, collection management, the administration and communications. But as I've said, the first priority was a comprehensive renovation. We wanted to become a museum about contemporary Africa with a new critical perspective on the colonial past.

A number of working groups then submitted initial proposals. I felt it was important for these working groups to include an African perspective too, from members of the African diaspora and from African institutions.

That is now 17 years ago. Why did it take so long?

We quickly realised that it was also necessary to modernise the museum's infrastructure. It was no longer suited to the needs of the twenty-first century. We didn't have any conference rooms, no auditorium, the shop was very limited, and there was no restaurant, only a cafeteria, and no climate control in the exhibition halls. These days, people's expectations of a visit to a museum are different from those of a century ago. Consequently, together with the Federal Buildings Agency (which is responsible for our infrastructure), we developed a general plan for a wholesale renovation of the museum. Then it dawns on you that the building is listed and this means you're not allowed to make any structural changes. You're not allowed to remove any walls, you can't break up any hundred-year-old statuary, and the windows also have protected status. So, you can't just



