



Red Star Line Museum

A Museum Project in Antwerp about Human Migration and International Mobility

Background information

The Red Star Line Museum will open its doors in the spring of 2013 in the old Antwerp port district known as 'het Eilandje' - the Islet. The museum will be housed in the original departure halls for passengers of the Red Star Line shipping company. The Museum tells the story of the legendary shipping company, the Red Star Line, which carried 2.6 million people from the city on the Scheldt to the New World between 1873 and 1934. The museum, which will feature original objects from public and private collections and a large number of multimedia installations, will become a place for remembrance, experience, debate and research, with a focus on migration and international mobility in the past and the present.

Historical buildings: the silent witnesses

A dilapidated complex of three red brick buildings stands on the Rijnkaai in Antwerp's old port district, het Eilandje. Until recently, nothing about these empty ruins even suggested that (world) history had been made between their walls. For more than 60 years, the ocean steamers from the Red Star Line moored just a short distance away. The buildings themselves served as the medical and administrative inspection centre for third-class passengers.

The buildings that will house the future Red Star Line Museum are silent witnesses to the migration of millions of people to the New World at the start of the previous century.

The new Red Star Line Museum will open in 2013 on a historical site. This will temporarily finish off the cultural axis that connected the historic city centre with het Eilandje and moved from the FelixArchief past the MAS | Museum aan de Stroom, the Ballet van Vlaanderen and deFilharmonie to the Red Star Line Museum.

Museum concept: migratory stories in the heart of the old port

The former Red Star Line buildings are currently being restored and redesigned as a themed experience museum about emigration through Antwerp. Visitors will be able to relive the journey that millions of European emigrants took, passing through Antwerp for a while, before moving on to America a century ago. The Red Star Line Museum will bring their journey back to life, and place it within a universal context of migration and human mobility. The travelling, migrating human being has made the world, and Antwerp, into what they are today, and into what they will become. This is why modern migratory stories are also being given their place within the museum as part of Antwerp's cultural heritage.

The exhibition will display original objects from the collections of the City of Antwerp, the npo Friends of the Red Star Line and other parties who will offer objects on loan. Multimedia installations will be integrated to provide a historic background or to invite visitors into the world of the migrants. There will also be plenty of room for individual experiences, testimonies and quotes.

The museum will be a place of remembrance and experience, but also a place for revealing and sharing our migration heritage, debates and research. Visitors will be able to learn about family tree research. The Red Star Line Museum will also put on activities outside the walls of the museum, with city walks and other activities for and with the public.

A radical restoration, a moving museum experience

The American architects' office Beyer Blinder Belle and the Belgian architects' office Arcade designed the future site. Belgian scenographer Christophe Gaëta – known among other things for *Dit is onze geschiedenis!* (Tours & Taxis – 2007-2008) – helped create the scenography.

The historic character of the three brick buildings will be retained as far as possible. The architects will replace the non-authentic part of the building, between RSL 1 and RSL 3, with a new construction. They are also adding a tower, an observation point for looking out over the quays and the bend in the Scheldt from where the Red Star Line steamers once departed.

Beyer Blinder Belle was also responsible for the renovation of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York. In the vision of the designers, the Red Star Line Museum completes the story of Ellis Island. Indeed, for a great many passengers travelling to New York, the port warehouses on the Rijnkaai were the last stage of their journey on the European continent. The site today is one of the rare remaining physical witnesses to the exodus of tens of millions of Europeans to the New World and the only original building of its kind on the European continent. The designers want to bring out the best in these historic treasures.

RSL 2 will be the entrance and reception area and provide housing for temporary exhibitions and other activities. A permanent exhibition will be housed in RSL 1 and RSL 3. In the middle of the three buildings there will be the open **tower structure with observatory platform** overlooking the Scheldt. The design of the towers alludes to both the bow of a ship as well as the monumental chimneys of the ocean steamers.

The permanent exhibition will start in RSL 1. This is where visitors will discover the site, the historic era of the Red Star Line and the broad theme of migration and travel. In RSL 3, visitors will then be able to follow the journey taken almost a hundred years ago by the European emigrants – from their country of departure, via Antwerp, to the U.S. Not only are the historic backgrounds covered in-depth, but also the universal emotions associated with migration as the global population is still living in an era of mass migrations.

A short history

1934-1999

Until 1934, the buildings on the Rijnkaai served as a medical and administrative inspection centre for passengers travelling third-class with the Red Star Line

shipping company. After the company went bankrupt in 1934, the Red Star Line complex was converted a number of times and used for different purposes, after which it was left unoccupied. Along with the buildings, the history of the shipping company also sank into oblivion. In 1992, Red Star Line collector Robert Vervoort put in a request to the city council to build a memorial on the Antwerp quays for the occasion of the 120th anniversary of the creation of the shipping company. At this time, there is no mention of listing the buildings.

2000

Antwerp's Mayor and Municipal Executive pass a favorable ruling on the protection of monuments within the port area and het Eilandje. In addition to the Montevideo warehouses and De Shop, the list also includes the Red Star Line buildings.

2001

The Flemish government lists two of the three Red Star Line warehouses (RSL 2 and RSL 3) as protected monuments "because of their historic and industrial-archaeological value."

2002

The National Shipping Museum organizes the exhibition called "Emigrants" about the history of the Red Star Line and the emigration via Antwerp. Initial contacts are made with the Ellis Island Foundation and the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York.

2004

After an exploratory study in Belgium and the United States, the Mayor and Municipal Executive set up a project group that looks into the conversion of the buildings into a memorial "with an educational museum function."

2005

The Mayor and Municipal Executive decide to purchase the Red Star Line buildings from the Port Authorities. In compliance with a procedure led by the Flemish Master Builder, New York-based Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners LLP is selected as part of a temporary association together with the

Antwerp-based Arcade, as the designers for the development and design of the buildings.

2007

The briefing links the premises and the history of the Red Star Line shipping company and its passengers with the universal notion of human mobility.

After listing the Red Star Lines 2 and 3, the Flemish Minister Dirk Van Mechelen also listed the corner building RSL 1, the oldest of the three, as a protected monument. The Mayor and Municipal Executive approve the provisional design of Beyer Blinder Belle for the restoration of the three buildings.

Musea en Erfgoed Antwerpen vzw becomes the project manager. Starting in the fall of 2007, a team is assembled to deal with the coordination and preparation of the new museum.

2008

AG Vespa is appointed as the delegated architect and takes over the preparations of the building project on behalf of and at the expense of the city. The architectural design is refined and a maximum budget drawn up. The Antwerp international maritime group CMB (Compagnie Maritime Belge) becomes sponsor of the Red Star Line Museum.

2009

Planning permission is granted.

2010

In its Decree of March 12, the Flemish government sets down the final amount of the subsidy. On April 20, AG Vespa awards the contract to THV Van Wellen - BMG. As part of the VRT Canvas Public Secrets Day on May 16, the rundown buildings are open to the public for the last time. The preparatory building works start on May 17. The first phase of the building includes the groundwork and foundations, and the creation of the basement under the whole RSL 2 building. On June 28, the first stone is officially laid.

2011

The Red Star Line Museum compiles contemporary stories about migration with the purpose of integrating these into the new museum. All of these stories are collected in the Antwerp city archives. In March 2011, the preparatory foundation and structural works for the restoration of the buildings is complete. The actual restoration of the building, phase 2 of the works, starts on April 18, to be carried out by the contracting company, Strabag.

Contact Details:

Red Star Line Museum

www.redstarline.org

www.facebook.com/RedStarLineMuseum

Press Contacts:

Sue Dorn

Carolyn Izzo Integrated Communications

sdorn@ciicnews.com

914-924-7811

Patricia Fahie

Carolyn Izzo Integrated Communications

pfahie@ciicnews.com

845-675-9065

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