**Abstract**

This paper reflects the multidisciplinary approach to the conservation and renovation of the historic interior ensemble of Amerongen Castle in a revived public context. New insights deriving from a holistic approach were developed to conserve a multi-layered history, respecting all remaining phases of the building’s past. The intention of conserving the ‘existing fabric’ above ‘restoring to a former situation’ with respect to its aged condition was the starting point for a ten year conservation project. Extensive research into the building and its history, the indoor climate and the interior decorations and the collection of artefacts was carried out. In addition, a housekeeping program was installed. The results and assessments of work carried out were described and correlated for every interior space. This was the basis of a conservation project in which artefacts, context and narratives sometimes prevailed over interventions. The author acted as curator ad interim, project advisor and conservator.

**Keywords**

Amerongen Castle, interior-ensemble, space book, slow preservation, housekeeping, conservation heating, re-peopling, virtual presentation

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**Amerongen Castle: The House a Phoenix: The Conservation and Reviving of a Dutch Historic House**

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**Introduction**

Amerongen Castle is a country estate in the centre of the Netherlands, strategically located in the Rhine estuary. The fully decorated house today represents the living history of a single family for over more than 700 years. It reflects an almost complete collection of art and artefacts of this one family until 1977. At which point, the house was sold to the Dutch State and was opened to the public under the care of a trust. Amerongen Castle is a listed building. The house and interiors are valued amongst the most important historical mansions in the Netherlands [Gerretsen and Van der Woude, 2011].

This paper describes the way in which the castle was revived for its reopening to new visitors in 2011 after suffering from disastrous floods in the 1990s. Moreover, this paper concentrates on the analysing and weighing of conservation decisions made in this context. The conservation of the collection was dominant to the restoration of the building. How then, did specialists, advisors and professionals from different disciplines collaborate in the restoration of the building and its collection? This paper looks into that process, its effectiveness and its failures.

**The castle - first destroyed**

Amerongen Castle, an edifice dating back to the middle ages, suffered its first major catastrophe in 1673 when French troops, then occupying part of the Dutch Republic, burnt the castle down. By 1681, its then owner and resident, the influential diplomat Baron Godard Adrian van Reede, had the castle rebuilt in the fashionable architectural style of Dutch Classicism (Figure 1).
The mythological bird the Phoenix was (and remains) depicted on a wooden hatch in the vaulted ceiling in the Long Gallery. The Phoenix symbolises a resurrection from flames and ashes, a restart of life after disaster (Figure 2). This hatch closes off an opening, used to transport via a still existing hoisting pulley, building materials during the 1673-1680 rebuild. The castle has recently undergone a similar parallel to this historic event. Another rebirth of this remarkable house took place in 2011 when the castle reopened for the public after an extensive restoration of the building and conservation of the interior.

Fig. 1. Birds eye view of Amerongen Castle with the house and moat in the centre.

Fig. 2. The Phoenix depicted on the wooden hatch.
In 2000 the castle, functioning as an historic house museum, was forced to close and almost went bankrupt. This time the calamity was water, not fire. Two floods in 1993 and 1995 had affected the moat surrounding the building, the electric wiring system and caused biological infestations. This created a high-risk situation for visitors. In addition, driven by new health and safety regulations, the authorities revoked public access because of insufficient evacuation routes. Moreover, the floods had caused cracks in walls and led to an inadequate interior climate. This caused structural defects in the building, deterioration of the interiors, its decorations and collections - a disastrous situation. However, from this dramatic predicament, Castle Amerongen would emerge again, not as a renewed but as a preserved Phoenix.

**Preserving authenticity**

Although the house suffered from floods and a lack of maintenance, the interiors were still an exceptional ensemble because of their completeness. An independent advisory committee to the Board of Trustees also recognised this at the start of the major restoration that took place these last 10 years. They stressed careful planning and execution of the conservation and restoration campaign. The aged authenticity, the patina of time, of the interior ensemble was regarded as one of the most important and rare aspects of the house. The committee advised coherent conservation of house and collection. The ensemble had grown old together. It is not the individual artefacts or the building itself, but the ensemble in its original setting that makes Amerongen Castle so valuable. This, then innovative, vision determined the conservation plan for the collection, which was used to solicit the necessary funding [Van der Woude, 2003].

It also led to a change in approach of the architectural restoration and renovation of the fixed installations. The focus became conservation, respecting the existing fabric rather than renewing it. Therefore, the architectural finishing of the interior remained an important part of the historic house museum ensemble. All epochs of interior decoration and any architectural changes in the house made before 1977 were respected. The curator took on the task to save-guard completeness and authenticity of the interior ensemble during the planning and execution of the conservation of the building, ensuring that amongst all stakeholders, there was an understanding of minimal intervention.

**The family**

The context of the castle and the usage of the house changed over time. It developed from a military and defensive keep to a summerhouse, to a family home and finally to a museum with four weekend apartments (for family members). The house had been originally rebuilt as a summer retreat but in the late nineteenth century, the last heir of the Van Reede family, Count Godard van Aldenburg Bentink (1857-1940), decided to take up permanent residence while raising his a large family [Mulder, 1949]. This had consequences for the indoor climate as large stoves were installed to heat the building in the cold and wet seasons. From 1880 until 1940, the seventeenth century summerhouse was lived in the whole year round, whereas previously it had been closed up and put to bed after the summer season. This resulted in more wear and tear of the building, its upholstery and the vulnerable collection of art and artefacts. Housekeeping and regular maintenance could be kept up to standards, but the heating and fluctuating indoor climate situation enhanced deterioration.

The starting point for the conservation of the interiors and collection was to keep the historical integrity and atmosphere as a living house-museum intact. Originally, the goal had been to present the house in the situation of its former full-time resident, Count Bentinck. Policy changed later as the Trust followed the curator’s argument to present the collection in the setting of 1977. Count Bentinck’s children lived in the castle from 1885 until 1977 and were the last owner-residents. The castle had been extensively photographed before this
sale, providing clear evidence of the arrangement of the collection (Figure 3). Thus, today the castle has been preserved to reflect the period between 1940 and its sale in 1977.

Fig. 3. Grote Zaal, drawing room, photographed in 1977.

Around 1950, the family Bentinck retreated to four small but comfortable apartments, with modern plumbing and central heating. They did not notice the deteriorating conditions in the other parts of the house. The staterooms and some of service rooms in the basement were kept intact but were rarely used and neglected. Damage occurred because of leakages, bio-degradation and insufficient housekeeping. The family could not keep up the maintenance of the castle prior to its sale in 1977. They retained the use of the apartments during holidays and weekends, a situation that continued until the start of the conservation of the house in 2005.

Only six years after being sold, Amerongen Castle in 1983 opened as an historic house museum, almost completely managed by volunteers. Although efforts were made to conserve the textiles, to restore the roof and the facades, there was neither notion of a housekeeping program nor a sense of urgency to deal with the backlog in maintenance. The floods of the 1990s changed this at last. Finally, in 2000, it was obvious that major restoration works were inevitable and the house was forced to close in order for these to be carried out.

The first priority was reorganising the housekeeping and taking preventive conservation actions (Figure 4). Infected pieces of the collection were treated by an O₂ suppression method. At the same time, a thorough documentation was made in which all spaces were described and valued by art and building historians [1]. It
resulted in the so-called Ruimteboek: space-book or room-book, a digital database in which all the historical and factual information is ordered per room [Ruimteboek, 2005-2011]. The architect used this database for the conservation plan where all actions and professionals needed are mentioned, it is still being used by the curator for housekeeping, and will be used for maintenance as well.

**Time machine**

It took about five years of research, planning and preparations before conservation of the interiors could start. Although the museum was closed, guided tours around the conservation site were allowed. A portable cabin was placed in the grounds as a conservation-documentation centre and special interest tours were organised. The public was invited to see and follow the progress to both the collection and the building. Visitors loved to see old building techniques and materials that are usually out of sight. The original floorboards in the drawing room, the Grote Zaal (drawing room) were normally covered by rugs, but could now be seen and appreciated for their size, quality and the way they are laid to form a smooth ballroom floor (Figure 5). These boards were a gift from the Kürfurst of Brandenburg (1620-1688), cut from one of his forests in Germany. When the floorboards were taken out for conservation visitors were beamed back into history like a time machine. Tangible traces of the seventeenth century carpenters working on the house, such as old tools and wood shavings, came to light. Students and professionals in the field of cultural heritage participated in several
courses, workshops and research highlighting the process of conservation. Participants were asked to share their expertise, meaning valuing and risk analysis. Interns helped in getting the house ready for the winter, for building activities and to protect the collection.

Originally, the collection of art and artefacts would stay in the house during the building restoration. Some objects are accustomed to a certain environmental conditions and a change of location could lead to new damages. The spectacular but fragile so-called Van Mekeren cabinets with marquetry inlaid flower arrangements were particularly worrying within this context. Moreover, the collection would be available as reference if required. Thus, some of the paintings and textiles are treated in temporary studios in the house and in the castle grounds. Visitors could observe conservation being executed on location. However, most of the paintings were treated at the Stichting Restauratie Atelier Limburg (SRAL) studios in Maastricht, or in public view by SRAL conservators in a studio at the Bonnenfanten Museum, Maastricht.

The house as a vessel

Castle Amerongen is a vessel with an integrated collection of artefacts as its most important feature. Preservation of the collection and the conservation of the interior as an ensemble are of prime importance. The conservation plan for the building was based primarily on preservation and consolidation and secondly on conservation. The prime concerns were to stop rapid deterioration and to consolidate structural damage.
first priority obviously was to meet the requirements of the fire department and make the house safe for visitors and residing guests. However, the intention to keep the historic house museum authentic as an old and meaningful artefact can be contradictory to the needs for public access.

Two cases demonstrate such a contradiction. The first one is that of a stone paved floor of Old Kitchen found the oldest part of the building, dating back to the Middle Ages. The floor of the vaulted room in the service basement consists of a variety of tiles, slabs and stones, many of which were either broken or damaged. The diversity of components and their condition tell the story of the household and of the floods which often occurred in past centuries (Figure 6). A drainage pipe above the floor in outer wall at the south side, installed to dissipate the floodwater, is witness to these. While the current condition of the floor shows history in a charming way to the visitors, it also proved quite a health and safety risk. In the initial conservation plan, the decision was to lift the tiled floor in order to install floor heating. Subsequently, the previously unsteady floor would be levelled to improve safety. However, the curator had second thoughts and suggested leaving the room unheated so as to respect the floor in its present fragile state. It was reasoned that the oldest part of the building should stay ‘old and cold’, as castles usually were. These arguments were convincing and plans were changed. Only a few of the broken tiles and loose stones actually required stabilisation to improve safety. There remain some functional limitations to Old Kitchen, which does not contribute to improving the indoor climate; however, the space retains a sense of historical authenticity for the visitors to see, feel and understand.

The installation of a fire escape was another issue of conflicting intervention, this time where authenticity lost out. Fire and safety regulations required a second escape route. This was created by linking a service staircase to the basement and the attic, however it meant sacrificing a money-vault dating from about 1900 and breaking up a vaulted ceiling in the basement. The placement of modern fire escape meant the loss of an original and unique part of the house; a difficult decision to make. It is hoped that the new stairs will never be used for their intended purpose.
Indoor climate

The context and setting of the complete collection in Amerongen Castle was problematic because of inadequate indoor climate conditions. Placing new installations, such as central heating radiators underneath the windows, would entail (re)moving objects within the fully decorated interiors or affecting the convincing image of the ensemble. The collection should retain its arrangement as of the mid twentieth century.

Indoor climate research by the Technical University of Eindhoven provided a fundamental assessment of the different environmental conditions [Ritmeijer, 2007] (Figure 7). This research is still ongoing. Derived data formed the basis for the renovation of the technical installations. The results showed that temperature and humidity levels can be improved with a combination of:

- a ‘slow’ floor-heating system under the tiled floors in the basement and the main (first) floor;
- using the stone core of the building for ‘thermo storage’ during the summertime;
- lifting and spreading warmth through the building, e.g. open staircase and galleries;
- recognising the buffering-effect of heated areas, such as the basement, 3rd floor and former apartments;
- applying indoor ventilation by opening doors between state rooms, halls and galleries;
- re-installing external shutters at the windows on three facades for insulation and sun-reflection;
- closing internal shutters and double blinds to insulate the windows, reducing climatic impact and fluctuations.

*Fig. 7. Front, False colour infrared image showing gradients of cold (blue) and warm (red) surfaces ©TUE.*
Under floor heating was installed in some areas. However, this decision meant a major intervention to the historic fabric of the seventeenth century building as most floor tiles had never been lifted before. The floor heating system was not designed for comfort but for conservation heating. It stabilises the indoor climate and reduces high relative humidity levels. The heating system is regulated by hygrostats rather than by thermostats. The climate has been monitored for two years now and the floor heating seems to be working sufficiently. Reduced conservation heating seems to be a success and the indoor climate is now better balanced to the seasonal climate. The house has regained its former role as vessel for the collection, with a heating system safeguarding the conservation conditions.

The state-bedroom or so called Lodewijkskamer (a Louis XVI-room) was also much improved because of the new heating policy. The room is named after its eighteenth century baroque state-bed decorated with Chinese silk, hangings and embroidery. It was known to be in good condition in 1977. However, today the textile hangings and the linings of bed frame and canopy are badly deteriorated and in need of restoration. For twenty-five years, water seeped along the west façade due to a leaking gutter, causing an overly damp environment in this room. Sunlight, fungus and bug infestation by carpet beetle did the rest. Today, the historic interior with damaged wallpapers form the early nineteenth century is conserved, but the state-bed has yet to be treated. Three adjoining rooms with central heating now buffer this room, and this should be sufficient to create a better indoor climate for the state-bed, the wallpaper and the other decorations. If not, a central heating element might be considered in the future. The existing iron stove could be fitted with a central heating coil and be re-used. Central heating piping is already installed under the floorboards as a precaution, as throughout the rest of the museum.

A year round housekeeping program is essential in keeping interiors and collection in a good condition. The house will not be closed all together in wintertime. Visitors are welcome during its winter sleep. While the large nineteenth century stoves in the fireplaces are no longer lit, their oxidation due to extreme relative humidity has been stopped due to improved climate conditions and better maintenance. Vulnerable objects like framed prints that hang on outside walls are put into storage during wintertime, avoiding damage by damp. Individual care of solitary objects will remain important.

These points clearly show the intentions of the conservation team to look for solutions from a holistic perspective. The combination of housekeeping practices and innovative technical installations reduces risk to the collection and future interventions to the historic interiors.

‘Amerongen Castle: How it used to be’

Before the reopening of the historic house museum, the Board of Trustees launched this statement to promote the castle. It more or less sums up the focus of the conservation project. It also stresses the intention to preserve the historical function of the castle in today’s society and for the future generations, as the place it used to be: for people to meet, to discuss, to engage, to reflect, to enjoy, to share and to learn. The Trustees intend the castle and the house to explore its historical function in a broad and modern cultural sense. After a ten-year period of conservation and renovation, it has a future again. Conservation will be part of this. The Trust initiated a Restoration Expertise Centre on the estate with conservation facilities for the ongoing preservation of Amerongen and other cultural heritage locations.

The historic house museum reopened in July 2011. The opening festivities commemorated the first rebuilding of the house, more than three centuries ago, with a spectacular and innovative visual presentation by Peter Greenaway. The ‘resurrected’ house is revived with a virtual presentation of the diplomat and nobleman baron Godard Adrian van Reede and his wife Margaretha Turnor (1613-1700) [Greenaway & Bodeke, 2011]. This
couple commissioned and guided the original rebuilding of the castle, so it is fitting that they are involved in the celebration of this new rebirth (Figure 8). In the presentation, this moment is celebrated in a fictional story of mid-summer day in 1680. The first resurrection was symbolically captured in the painting of the mythological bird on the hoisting hatch. Now the house has risen up for a second time. Amerongen is truly a Phoenix.

![Fig. 8. Re-peopling Castle Amerongen, 'Godard and Margaretha', still of the multi-media projection (2011). © Greenaway](image)

**Conclusion**

The conservation of this extraordinary historic house has been an interesting and complex process. It was based on a holistic view focusing on the interior ensemble housed within an historic building. Collaborating professionals decided on the existing building fabric and the collection of artifacts. Sometimes the preservation of an old situation dominated, at other times renovation prevailed. Innovative installations are now fitted in the house based on recent research and using new views on the balance between indoor climate and seasonal impact, called slow preservation [Ritmeijer, 2007].

The overall conservation plan demanded a clear vision of a prioritised and less invasive intervention to the house as it is an important historical artefact in itself. To appreciate this fully, the relevance of the house in the context of the collection was analysed, described and valued before conservation started. The space-book turned out to be an indispensable tool in the decision making process and is still used for curatorial purposes, housekeeping and maintenance. Because of private and public funding, the conservation was an open process in which all administrative, financial and public stakeholders participated. The narrative of the house as historical ensemble and its conservation received much attention. It involved public engagement ranging from visitors to supporting friends, volunteers and the local community who share the interest in the Amerongen Castle as living example of a rich cultural heritage with a future.
Endnotes

[1] Values considered were: Historical value and Authenticity and Uniqueness. Further points considered were if the contents were typical of a particular period of occupation or if the artifact was part of the historical building fabric.

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