

Ship to Shore

IN THE PORT OF ROTTERDAM, THE OFFICES OF A FAMOUS SHIPPING LINE HAVE BEEN TRANSFORMED INTO THE CITY'S HIPPEST HOTEL. BY BENJAMIN MOSER

To get to the Hotel New York in Rotterdam, you really should take a taxi—not one of those Mercedes parked in front of the train station, their air fresheners fighting a losing battle with the smoke from their drivers' roll-ups. Those might get you there faster, but if you're dropping anchor in Europe's largest port, you should take the water taxi. In a modern city, this gimmicky little boat has no practical purpose. But as you weave through the enormous barges and the towering containers, Rotterdam becomes an entirely different city. The short ride has just enough drama to make you feel, when you stagger into the hotel lobby and sidle up to the bar, that you've got your sea legs, that you've really arrived. >>

The building that houses the Hotel New York was originally built between 1901 and 1917 as the headquarters of the Holland-America shipping line.

Hôtel Particulier

And once you've entered the Hotel New York, you couldn't be anywhere but Rotterdam, the city of ships. Paradoxically, even the hotel's name strengthens this impression. The building is the former headquarters of the Holland America Line, the shipping company that delivered hundreds of thousands of people to the United States and to just about everywhere else. If you're descended from Northern or Eastern European immigrants, there's a good chance that in the hotel's café-restaurant, where you now sit sipping pinot noir and eating coq au vin, one of your ancestors sat atop her packed bags, reflecting that this was the last place she would set foot on European soil.

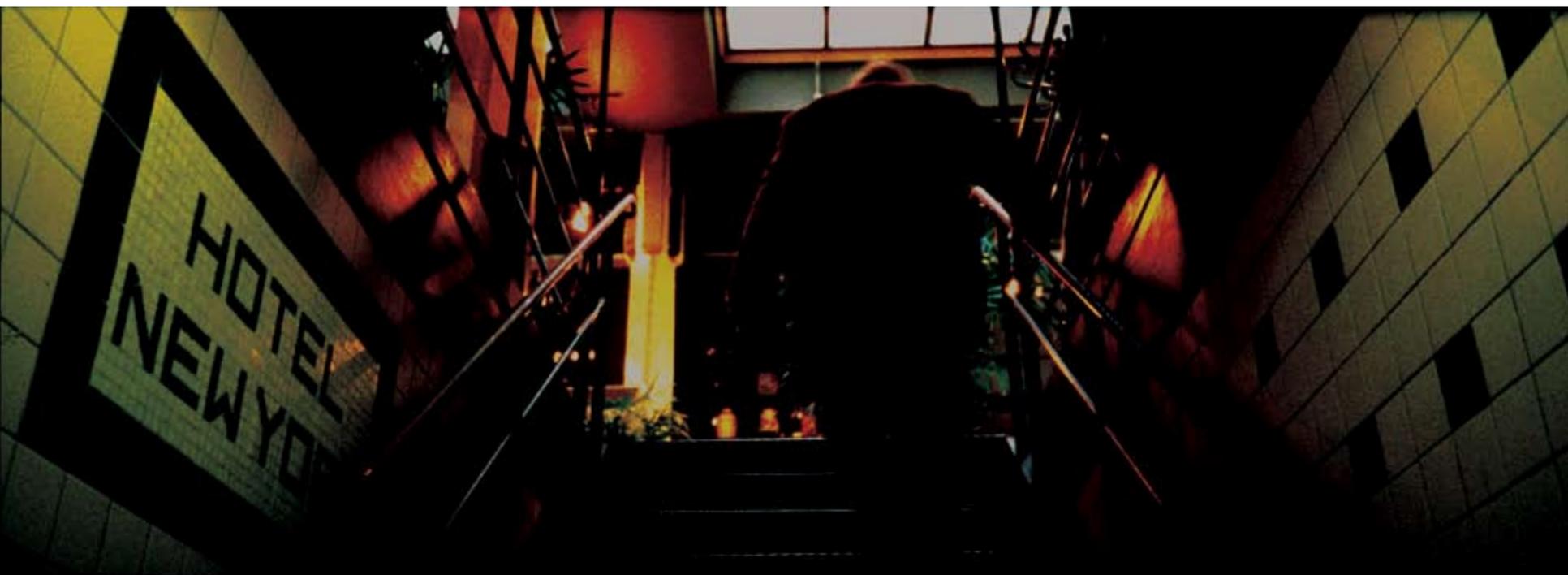
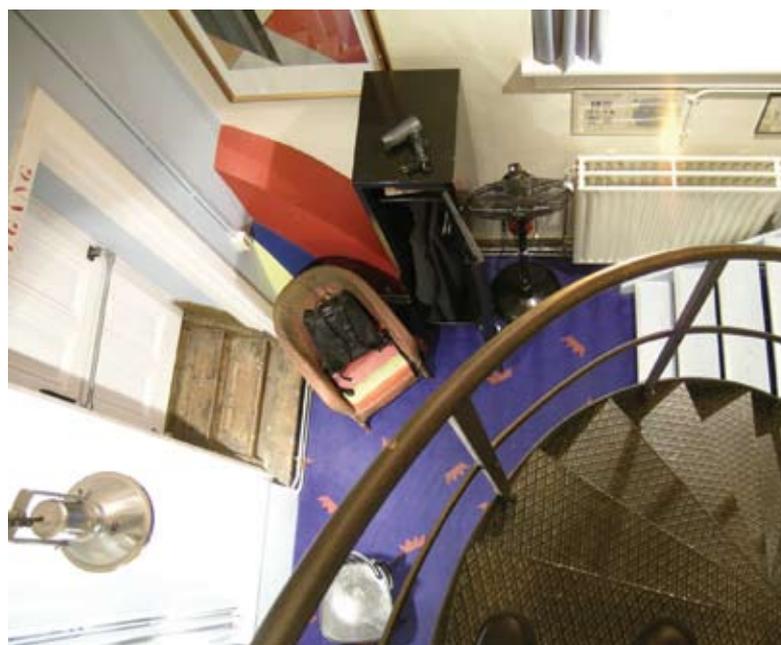
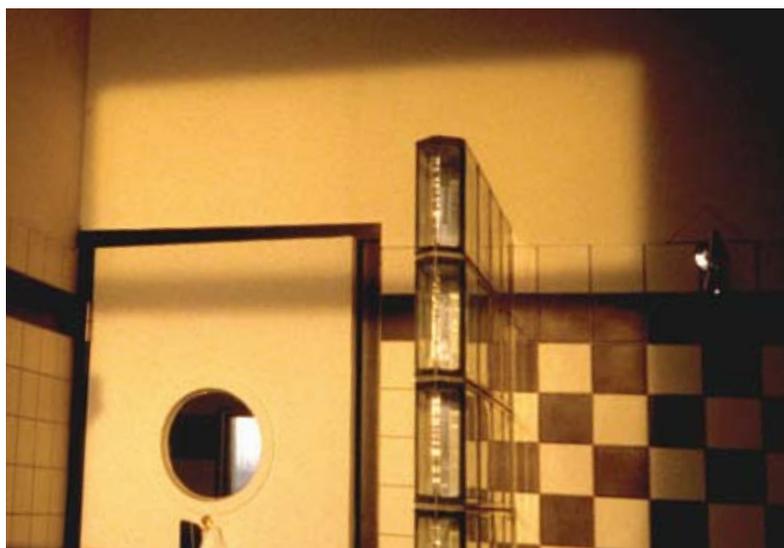
That restaurant, a cavernous, casual space, would have looked very different in your grandmother's day, when it was a crowded canteen whose floors were covered in sawdust, the better to absorb the spills from the cheap beer it served to emigrants and refugees from all over Europe. Upstairs, the big bosses sat chomping on their cigars in mahogany-paneled offices, dispatching ship after ship toward the

New World. The enormous liners that parked at the quay out front eventually transported, in the age of mass ship-bound immigration, countless Europeans to new lives in America.

Those days are long past. But at the Hotel New York, an impressive Jugendstil building from the turn of the last century, you can never forget that Rotterdam is a port that happens to have a city, rather than (like New York) a city that has, among other things, a port. Surrounded on three sides by water, at the tip of an island that juts into the Nieuwe Maas river, the hotel itself sometimes seems to be steaming off toward Manhattan. Its nautical decoration—an oyster bar, a chandelier made of shells, and old trunks stacked in the hallways—reinforces the theme.

It's the best possible theme for Holland's second largest city. Rotterdam grew rich off shipping, leaving not only a priceless artistic legacy—the spectacular Museum Boijmans van Beuningen shows where a lot of the profits went, and in terms of architecture Rotterdam is probably Europe's most avant-garde city—but also a cosmopolitan

Clockwise from below: The hotel's nautical theme is apparent in such small details as portholes in the doors. A few of the 72 guest rooms have multiple stories. A stairwell leads to the main lobby.



Hôtel Particulier



Clockwise from left: A guest room interior; a shipping poster from 1913; the hotel's restaurant, which attracts both visitors and Rotterdam locals.



population. It's a city that has always looked to the future, so don't let nostalgia overtake you as you sit in the hotel's reading room, with its old stained glass panels. For all the building's storied past, the Hotel New York is as casual, comfortable, and modern as Rotterdam itself.

Look around at the restaurant, for example, where your grandmother spent her final moments in the Old World. This is that rare hotel restaurant where you actually want to hang out. Even rarer, it's a hotel restaurant where locals actually want to hang out. Since the hotel opened in 1993, the restaurant has become Rotterdam's favorite place for everything from a romantic dinner to a Sunday spent eating bagels, reading the papers, and watching the barges go by.

Still, the hotel is not so casual that you don't feel a blush of glamour as you walk up the wrought iron staircase. Even the humbler rooms have enormous windows and spectacular views. If you're up for something grander, sleep in one of the two clock towers, where you can peer through the windows, past the cranes of the port, and imagine the towers of New York looming just over the horizon. And if you want to feel like a shipping magnate, stay in one of the boardroom

suites, where the industrialists of old sat plotting their next moves.

After one look at these gigantic rooms, with their restored original carpeting, mahogany paneling, vintage chandeliers, and wood-burning fireplaces, you'll have to wrench yourself away in order to see the city: the old Pilgrim Fathers' Church, for example, where the founders of Massachusetts prayed before departing to the New World; or the buildings around the Museumpark, which features not only Rotterdam native Rem Koolhaas's Kunsthal, but also the Museum Boijmans, the city's leading cultural institution; the Netherlands Architecture Institute, in a funky building atop an artificial lake; and the Sonneveld House, one of the country's best-preserved early modernist houses. On the nearby Witte de Withstraat you'll find the Netherlands Photo Museum and Rotterdam's famous contemporary art space, the Witte de With. When you finally return to the Hotel New York, you'll almost wish Grandma had stayed. ■

Hotel New York: 31-104/390-500; www.hotelnewyork.nl

Benjamin Moser has written for Harper's, the American Scholar, and the New York Review of Books.