

VFD

Architects

Evolution of Excellence

Frans Dingemans and
Arnold Bos

Photo credit: Anders Johannessen

VFD Architects has created ship interiors for Holland America Line for the past 35 years. The firm's owner Frans Dingemans and managing director Arnold Bos talked to Cruise Business Review about how the design and style of the HAL ships have developed over the years.

By Anders Johannessen

VFD Architects has enjoyed a very long and, until recently, quite exclusive relationship with Holland America Line (HAL). When CBR visited the VFD office in Utrecht in late September, design proposals for the interiors of the latest Signature-class newbuilding - to be named the ms Nieuw Amsterdam and scheduled for delivery in 2010 - had just been completed. That makes it the 17th ship VFD has designed for Holland America since 1983/1984, when the 33,900 gross ton ms Nieuw Amsterdam and ms Noordam were delivered by Chantiers de l'Atlantique in France. Even before that, back in 1974, the company was involved in the transformation of the former Moore-McCormack liner the ss Argentina into the ss Veendam. The venerable Holland-America Line had just terminated its transatlantic service be-

tween Rotterdam and New York and been rebranded as Holland America Cruises, shifting its focus solely to cruising.

Frans C. J. Dingemans has been the owner and CEO of VFD Architects since 1993 after he took over from **F.W. De Vlaming**, the company's founder. Dingemans, a graduate of Delft Technical University, joined what was then known as Architectenbureau De Vlaming, Salm, Fennis in Amsterdam in 1979, when he first became a partner (The company changed its name to De Vlaming, Fennis, Dingemans following changes within the partnership). Today Arnold Bos, who joined the firm 26 years ago, serves as COO. Highly recognized at home in the Netherlands for its work on utility buildings, private housing, hotels and restaurants - as well as major government projects such as aqueducts, tunnels and

noise reduction barriers - VFD is known internationally mainly because of its work on cruise ships. This part of the business is handled by VFD Interiors, which offers total concept and general arrangement development, marine interior design, branding and signage, 3D modeling and artist's impressions, and artwork consultancy and mounting.

Big ships with an intimate feel

"After the Nieuw Amsterdam and Noordam had been delivered, we were involved in the design for a pair of 60,000 ton vessels for HAL in the late 1980s, which were to be built by the Bremer Vulkan yard in West Germany," Dingemans recalled. "However, these plans were changed when Carnival took over the company." **Ted Arison** had some very firm views on how Holland America should develop and wanted a different kind of ship for the brand that would establish Carnival's presence in the premium cruise market. "Arison invited us to take part in every aspect of the design and wanted to hear our opinions on everything," Dingemans said, adding, "We were given few restrictions in our work." This gave VFD Interiors much influ-

ence over the layout of the public rooms on the new vessels, which were ordered from Fincantieri's Monfalcone yard in November 1989. Named the ms Statendam, ms Maasdam and ms Ryndam, respectively, they were completed in 1992-1994 and became known as the S-class. A fourth vessel, the ms Veendam, was ordered at a later stage and was delivered by Fincantieri's Marghera yard in 1996.

At 55,400 gross tons and with a capacity for 1,266 passengers each, the S-class vessels were by far the largest cruise ships ever operated by Holland America at the time of their delivery. In order to retain a feeling of intimacy on board - a quality appreciated by many of HAL's loyal passengers - the two main decks of public rooms were given an asymmetrical layout. From the main show lounge and forward stairway, a promenade extended aft throughout the ship, crossing from portside to starboard near the ship's atrium, then back towards the centerline near the aft stairway and main dining room. This arrangement made it possible to create lounges and bars of varying sizes in between, from the cozy Piano Bar with room for just a few dozen patrons to the more spacious Explorer's Lounge and Ocean Bar. "It is quite rare for cruise ships these days to have small public rooms, but we feel it is important to cater to different preferences," said Dingemans. "Sometimes passengers want to be part of a big group, and sometimes they want to be more to themselves." The overall decorative theme for the interiors of the S-class vessels was the Golden Age of Dutch shipping, which was reflected both in the choice of materials as well as in the artworks and antiques.

F.W. De Vlaming was the lead architect on the Statendam before Dingemans took over the responsibility for the Maasdam and every subsequent HAL newbuilding. Looking back, Dingemans regards De Vlaming as something of a mentor when it comes to designing cruise ships. "He taught me the tricks, what to be mindful of when working on a ship instead of a building on dry land," Dingemans said.

Designing flagships

Next came Holland America's new 59,600 gross ton flagship the ms Rotterdam of 1997, which was intended as a replacement for the company's Grande Dame, the ss Rotterdam of 1959. Delivered by Fincantieri's Marghera yard, the new vessel was in essence a refined version of the S-class design, though somewhat longer and faster. The added length made room for a new staircase midships, as well as for an additional lounge. Dingemans had to come up with an interior style befitting a Holland America flagship, and opted for the use of rich colors and dark wood paneling. Paying homage to HAL's long history, certain decorative elements from past flagships were also incorporated. The Ambassador's Lounge, for instance, featured a dance floor reminiscent of the one in the Ritz-Carlton Lounge on the ss Rotterdam and a ceiling decoration cop-

ied from the ss Nieuw Amsterdam of 1938. The new Rotterdam debuted to high acclaim, thanks in no small part to the design work carried out by VFD Interiors. "The Rotterdam actually became the reference ship for the interior outfitting standard of all Carnival newbuildings," said Dingemans, "including the Queen Mary 2."

The Rotterdam was joined by three near-identical sister ships - the 61,000 gross ton ms Volendam, ms Zaandam, and ms Amsterdam - in 1999-2000. Together, this quartet became known as the R-class.

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Atrium, Rotterdam



Pinnacle Grill, Eurodam

"On the Volendam we carried through a floral theme in the interior design, and on the Zaandam it was music," Dingemans recalled. For the Amsterdam, which was designated as Holland America's second flagship, a more formal style was again required. "Ted Arison wanted the Amsterdam to be a mahogany ship," added Dingemans. Part of the reason why the interiors of these four ships were so heavily themed, according to the architect, was that the timeframe allowed more effort going into the design of each vessel.

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ning of a period of hectic activity for VFD Interiors and a slight change in style. "Holland America wanted the Vista-class to have a more youthful character than the previous ships," said Dingemans, "and the gt/ms Zuiderdam and gt/ms Oosterdam in particular were quite colorful and daring in style." Many of Holland America's loyal passengers disapproved of this change of direction, however, and VFD was asked to tone the style down a bit for the remaining vessels, the gt/ms Westerdam and gt/ms Noordam. However, the history of Dutch

seafaring and exploration - together with the heritage of Holland America Line itself - remained the main decorative theme on all the Vista-class ships. With a capacity for 1,848 passengers each, the Vista-class vessels brought Holland America into the big-ship league. This presented VFD Interiors with some challenges. "We were even more concerned to create an intimate feeling on these ships because the Vista-class is considerably larger than previous HAL newbuildings," noted Dingemans. "When working on the general arrangement on the previous ships, we had literally moved steel barriers to get the layout we want-

ed, but this became more difficult on the Vista-class because of vibration concerns," he continued. Still, Dingemans and his colleagues at VFD Interiors were able to create curved promenades extending from fore to aft on the two main public room decks, with bars and lounges of varying sizes. "We even made the cabin corridors stepped so that their great length should not seem so overwhelming to passengers," said Dingemans. "Instead, we wanted to make the passengers wonder what's behind the next corner!" Although their design had been derived from the so-called 8000-class of vessels built for Carnival Cruise Lines and Costa Cruises in Finland, the work done by VFD and Fincantieri on

as even the S-class vessels, which are now 15 years old, do not look dated." Another aspect stressed by VFD in the design of the Holland America ships is the connection between the passengers and the sea, and most of the public rooms on board therefore offer sea views. "We believe that being at sea is the most important aspect of being on a cruise ship," Bos noted.

VFD Interiors was perhaps one of the first design firms to fully realize the importance of integrating art into the overall scheme of the public areas on cruise ships, as demonstrated in 1983/84 on the Nieuw Amsterdam and Noordam. Beginning with the Maasdam in 1993, VFD Interiors also took over the responsibility of art commis-

are being refurbished because customer demands are changing," noted Dingemans, "with retail and leisure taking center stage." This has resulted in some of the original interiors created by VFD being replaced by new designs even though some ships had not even been in service for more than two years before they were altered (in the case of the Westerdam and Noordam). VFD Interiors is involved in these refits too, but part of the design work is being done by Yran & Storbraaten Architects of Oslo and a Designteam from London.

"The approach now taken by HAL is to refurbish the ships every five years or so," said Arnold Bos. "The brand clearly wants to refresh its image and follow current trends." This has resulted in certain public rooms being redone in a more minimalistic and cool style than has traditionally been associated with Holland America. "Less is more is the mantra in much of today's architecture," noted Bos, "but the problem is, what is in fashion today will be out of date in just a couple of years." That is why VFD Interiors has been reluctant to fully adhere to trends in their designs for the Holland America ships.

VFD Interiors is no longer Holland America's sole interior design firm when it comes to newbuildings. Beginning with the first Signature-class newbuilding, the 86,700 gross ton ms Eurodam, which debuted in July 2008, the Dutch architects were given the responsibility for about 60% of the ship's public areas. The remaining 40% was awarded to Yran & Storbraaten. Additionally, Fincantieri's **Luke de Micco** designed one of the bars and NB Design Group of Seattle did almost all of the passenger cabins. The same arrangement will be retained for Holland Americas' next and so far last newbuilding, the ms Nieuw Amsterdam.

"With Holland America now employing several architects, and with fewer newbuildings scheduled for delivery over the next few years, we need to look elsewhere for work in the marine industry," said Bos. "We have a lot of expertise that we want to put to good use," he added. In fact, some of this expertise is currently being used to transform Holland America's former flagship, the venerable ss Rotterdam of 1959, into a hotel, convention center and maritime museum in the port of Rotterdam. It is only fitting that VFD's architects are the ones returning the ship to her former glory, as they knew her well from before, from when she was still in service for HAL. "We are returning the ss Rotterdam's existing public rooms almost exactly to how they appeared when the ship was new back in 1959," Bos explained. In order to do this, the architects must consult ocean liner literature and old photographs. Additionally, new areas and rooms with new functions will be designed in a modern way with transparent, translucent and modern materials. For instance, there will be a maritime museum on board. "The ss Rotterdam is technically now a building," Bos continued, "but in her physique she is still an old ocean liner with sheer and camber in the decks." That makes the refurbishment work especially demanding. ■



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the general arrangement made the Vista-class ships perfectly suited for Holland America's needs.

Timeless design

With the exception of Carnival's **Joe Farcus** being responsible for the show lounges and observation lounges on the first three S-class ships in the early 1990s, VFD Interiors served as Holland America's sole architects from the Nieuw Amsterdam in 1983 to the Noordam in 2006. The Dutch design firm thus can be said to be largely responsible for developing the style and atmosphere that has come to be expected from Holland America. Dingemans is a bit reluctant to describe the style of their interiors as typically Dutch. "In fact, the HAL ships tend to be regarded as very European by American passengers, while European passengers find them very American," he explained.

"Our design philosophy is to use modern items, but in an intellectual way," said Arnold Bos, VFD's COO. "We have taken the best from the past and the present and created a distinctive, quite timeless style for the Holland America ships. Their interiors stand the test of time very well, seeing

sioning and mounting on HAL's newbuildings, each of which feature a collection of art and antiques valued at about \$2 million. "Art should play an integral role in the interiors," said Dingemans. "In fact, public rooms should in many cases be designed to accommodate certain artworks or antiques, not the other way around." By adhering to this philosophy, VFD has succeeded in achieving a symbiosis between design and décor on the Holland America ships. A striking example is the Pinnacle Grill and Pinnacle Bar on the latest Noordam. The chairs for this alternative dining venue were designed by VFD and executed in hand-cast aluminium by the Italian artists **Gilbert Lebigre** and **Corrine Roger**. The artist **Mina Wu** was then hired to create designs for fabrics on the chairs as well as for the room's ceiling and walls. In other words, the Pinnacle Grill restaurant can be considered an art piece in itself.

Times are changing

For the past four years, Holland America has carried out an extensive fleet refurbishment program dubbed the Signature of Excellence initiative. This is set to continue over the next two years. "The HAL ships