# Interview with Marcel Schonenberg, Managing Director, Beurs van Berlage

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Tags: Beurs van Berlage

The Beurs van Berlage, conference centre in the heart of Amsterdam, dates back to the year 1903, and is a significant Dutch monument and unique event center that has become a famous heritage of the country. In what ways does Beurs van Berlage reflect and serve the city of Amsterdam today?

Indeed, the Beurs van Berlage is one of the most famous monuments in the Netherlands, and we are a member of the exclusive Historic Conference Centers of Europe (HCCE).
The building was built over 100 years ago as the Dutch stock exchange.

The Beurs van Berlage is a national heritage of the city, but also a dynamic venue in the heart of Amsterdam. Looking at the history of the Beurs van Berlage, the convention center made a significant impact on the image of Amsterdam, and its social trends in the last century.

From the architectural view, it considered to be the masterpiece of the Dutch architect, Hendrik Petrus Berlage. The interesting thing is that although the original purpose of the building was the exchange place for corn and other commodities, Berlage as a socialist himself, had a Public Palace in his mind for the future use of this complex, which was very progressive thinking in that time .
The Beurs van Berlage was designed after a Renaissance concept of the palazzo publico, and today the building is regarded as a leading design for the 20th century, and Berlage is the father of Dutch modern architecture.

The Netherlands is one of the most popular European investment destinations, and is a home to around 5,100 non-Dutch companies. Moreover, as an organization that brings companies and institutions together, the central location of Amsterdam is a competitive advantage. What other infrastructural benefits do you have that would make the venue attractive for trade, conferences, and shows?

The Beurs van Berlage was designed to provide a place to meet, communicate and interact. Today the venue is a state of art conference centre that boasts over 5,000 + square meters, and accommodates groups of 2 to 2,000 people.

Over the last years, we made major investment in keeping all our facilities to the latest technical standards – all halls and conference rooms are equipped with the projection systems, fiber optic connection, sound and light equipment, and have access to the wireless internet connection. We have in-house catering service that is pleased to tailor the menu for each specific event.

Of course the remarkable benefit of being located in the centre of Amsterdam is that in the immediate surroundings there are numerous hotels within walking distance, and our guests have a choice between 25,000 hotel rooms. The central train station of Amsterdam is located 500 meters from the Beurs van Berlage, which makes the access to the Amsterdam-Schiphol airport very convenient. Moreover, even if our guests are coming by car, the historical centre surroundings should not be concerned, as we have 4 parking garages within a walking distance.

More than just space and square footage, what is the service-oriented approach that Beurs van Berlage delivers to customers?

What we hear a lot from our customers is enthusiastic feedbacks on the hospitality and the intimate atmosphere that the Beurs van Berlage creates. It does not feel like a standard corporate business conference centre in its traditional sense. The marvelous historical architecture and the unique location of our meeting venue add intimacy to all our events.

When you are a delegate in the conference, you don’t want to spend time in the taxi and shuttles to get from the hotel to the conference and then to a restaurant. Additionally, delegates would also like to add some personal value to this trip, and do some sightseeing of the city. At the Beurs van Berlage everything is within a mile.

Our guests are able to avoid the traffic, enjoy a broad choice of restaurants, and see the famous attractions of Amsterdam.

What do you see as the importance of the conferences and events that the Beurs van Berlage hosts for the Pharmaceutical & Healthcare industry?

When it comes to the pharmaceutical industry, this is a very interesting industry for us in terms of its international nature.

Amsterdam by itself is a great hosting location, thanks to its excellent infrastructure and easy accessibility. The fact that the Beurs van Berlage is in the very centre of Amsterdam creates magic around the events we organize. Moreover, we dedicate ourselves completely to the events that we host and have a truly client-oriented approach. The entire complex of Beurs van Berlage is dedicated to the one only event that takes place here at a time.

Given the very attractive and dedicated atmosphere of the Beurs van Berlage, we have been focusing on the pharmaceutical and healthcare industries in the last couple of years. So far, we have already hosted over 15 pharmaceutical and healthcare conferences this year, and we expect this number to grow steadily.

Today we host the Dutch Life Sciences & Health Conference with over 300 attendees, including entrepreneurs, leading scientists, investors, and key management from the Dutch industry. This is a very big event because it aims at improving the innovation and investment climate in the Netherlands.

How has the Beurs van Berlage developed its convention centre model and adopted it in such a heavily clustered industrial area?

In the past we were just a venue that hosts any event that came our way, and it was quite a passive role on the market. Today we have a pro-active approach, and we became more the organizers of the events. This was quite natural shift for the Beurs van Berlage as we know the city so well; we know the hotels and so we are able to negotiate good deals for our guest; we know government and the associations. This definitely gives us a competitive edge.

Managing the Beurs van Berlage is a very unique experience. For example, when transferring the outdated business model a couple of years ago, I had to find the balance between maintaining the historical heritage and adding the latest modern trends to it.

Something I had to take into consideration when converting the building within the boundaries of being a National monument. Everything you see in the Beurs van Berlage is a part of the monument, and even some of the furniture is still original.

Even when we need new furniture we tailor-make it in accordance with the style of the Beurs van Berlage. The unique style of this building is something we want to preserve in the future.

Do you feel threatened by modern technology and the impact it has on the events you hosts?

We don’t feel threatened by the modern applications and technology. Since we have witnessed an impressive demand for our venue in the last years, I can say that modern technology makes it even more important to meet in person. Technology facilitates and complements our offerings, but it cannot replace it. Personal contact is essential in making the first good connection.

What is the strategy of the Beurs van Berlage in the upcoming years? And where would you like to lead the company?

In the past, the Beurs van Berlage was used for various events and functions, but in a more or less fragmented way, with different operators being responsible for different parts of the building. So while we have been in existence as an event complex for a couple of decades, but we have only recently started a new era of unified enterprise.

Two years ago, in 2008 the Beurs van Berlage went through a dramatic structural change. Throughout the take-over, we were able to build a new entity, a new enterprise that runs and operates entirely in sync with each other. That has been a tremendous change for us and for the market.

For the first time we were able to position ourselves as one entity, and manage the entire venue al together. We were able to create an organization that would be geared towards the market, and be more flexible to respond to it.

Since then we’ve seen a lot of developments, and contrary to the economic decline, we have been able to grow our business. I have to admit, this is a remarkable achievement for the newly re-born organization.

After updating our conference facilities, equipment and services in the last couple of years, we are now focusing on increasing our sales efforts.

For the strategy in the next 3-5 years, I see the Beurs van Berlage being emerged into a full service event complex, able to host broad range of concerts, conferences, events, product presentations, gatherings, etc. With the strength of being located right in the historical centre of Amsterdam, and having such a great history behind it, the Beurs van Berlage clearly distinguishes itself from other convention centres in Amsterdam, and in the rest of the country.

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