

## **Societal development and the traditional museum:**

Applying New Museology to a different context

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### **Introduction**

*The Dapperstreet<sup>2</sup>*

*...Anything is a lot, when you expect so little  
Life keeps its wonders hidden  
To suddenly reveal them in a divine state.*

*I thought about all this,  
Soaking wet, one drizzly morning,  
Simply happy in the Dapperstreet.*

The Dapperstreet is part of a neighbourhood often referred to as “East”, situated in the eastern part of Amsterdam. It is a lively and vibrant multi-cultural part of the city. It has a daily market with food from around the world, but is also known worldwide because of the murder on Theo van Gogh, the Dutch film director who was killed there in 2001 because of his

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<sup>2</sup> Poem by J.C. Bloem, *The Dapperstreet* (Het Verlangen, 1921). Translation by Davida de Hond.

critical and provocative statements on the Islam. Thus it can be concluded that it is certainly a neighbourhood with its own problems but, as can be read in Bloem's poem, a place to call home and long for.

### **The context**

The Amsterdam Historical Museum (AHM) has for some time been working on different projects that aim towards giving the city of Amsterdam and its current inhabitants a more prominent position within the museum. Through exhibitions, presentations and other activities, the museum wants to establish a closer relationship with its surroundings. An example of this is the project 'Het geheugen van Oost' (The Memory of East, a neighbourhood in Amsterdam). In this project, stories and pictures of people living in East are collected and presented on the Internet. The website started as a cooperation between the AHM and a diversity of socially engaged organisations. As can be read on the website, 'The Memory of East strives towards stimulating social integration and participation of diverse target groups in the east of Amsterdam'.<sup>3</sup> The website is currently run by volunteers, and these also provide for guided tours through the neighbourhood in which the stories presented on the Internet are told.

At the moment, the AHM is working on a new project in which it seeks participation from the community of Amsterdam: 'Buurtwinkels' (neighbourhood shops). The project shall be a part of a bigger international European project, entitled *Entrecult*: 'Entrepreneurial Cultures in European Cities'.<sup>4</sup> This project focuses on entrepreneurship and European citizenship in different ways in several European cities.

The Buurtwinkels project is focusing on the heritage of neighbourhood shops and its customers in the city. The theme of this project is chosen because everybody shops and neighbourhood shops are places where different people meet

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.geheugenvanoost.nl/> 14th of May, 2010

<sup>4</sup> [www.eciec.eu](http://www.eciec.eu) 14<sup>th</sup> of May, 2010

and all kinds of social contacts are being made. Neighbourhood shops are, as we may say, a mirror of society. The AHM has launched a website where, among others, shop owners and customers can post pictures and stories connected to the neighbourhood shops.<sup>5</sup>

In the course of 2010, different activities will be organised in the neighbourhoods of Amsterdam. The culmination of the project will be in 2011, when a large exhibition will be organised at the AHM presenting the outcomes of the initiatives taken regarding the heritage of neighbourhood shops. By realizing the *Buurtwinkels* project, the AHM is working together with different organisations and institutions such as housing co-operations and the University of Amsterdam. One specific part of the project is done in close cooperation with the Reinwardt academy (RWA). The AHM has approached the academy because it is seeking new ways to engage the inhabitants of Amsterdam, in this case the inhabitants of the Dapperbuurt, a neighbourhood situated in the east of Amsterdam.

The AHM has asked the master students of the RWA to do research on forming a so-called Community of Practice (CoP), which can be described as a group of people that shares common interests or goals. Concerning the *Buurtwinkels* project in the Dapperbuurt, the AHM wants to approach working with communities in a new way. The museum seeks to find out whether and how it is possible to work from a more bottom-up approach, thus giving its community more influence or power, as you might say, in deciding the content of the *Buurtwinkels* project in the Dapperbuurt.

The method of working with a CoP has been chosen in order to create a 'working group' that will be deciding on the content and execution of the project. We, the students of the RWA, were asked to do research on who should be part of a CoP and how to compose such a group. In doing this, the students

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<sup>5</sup> <http://buurtwinkels.ahm.nl/> 14th of May, 2010

where confronted with different dilemma's. What is the role of the different stakeholders involved in the project? Can the AHM be part of a CoP and will this effect their desired bottom-up approach or should the role of the museum be limited to acting as a facilitator, thus executing the ideas born within the CoP? Working in three groups, the students gave their advice to the AHM. Based on the different outcomes of the three research groups, this article will reflect on how and if their findings and New Museological principles can be applied to the *Buurtwinkels* project.

### **Multiple-perspectiveness, Negotiation and Intention: What's in it for me?**

The different stakeholders that participate within this project need to be distinguished and at the same time the reasons why they want to invest in and undergo this process. There are several perspectives that need to be looked into, in order to fully grasp the potential, but also the possible pitfalls of this approach and the limitations the parties involved in the project have. So therefore every stake- and shareholder within the project will be introduced from its own perspective and showcasing the intentions and ground sets that each of the parties have and had (and had to have due to institutional constraints) during the process of the project and will help to see where the project can go from here, after the involvement of the Reinwardt Master students.

### **The AHM**

The AHM is the city museum of Amsterdam and housed in the centre since the year 1975. It is a collection-based museum, with as a core the history of the city of Amsterdam. It is a traditional museum, where the museum professionals acquire the collection and decisions regarding the collection and exhibition lie very strongly with the curators.

It is not the case that the museum never worked with(in) the neighbourhoods of Amsterdam. In 2003 they made a

publication called “Blauwdruk” or “Blueprint” where several projects had been discussed on involving society in the museums practice. This was experimental too, but on a short-term basis and it has not changed the organisation into a less hierarchy-based institution.

Since 'blueprint' there have been projects that focussed on society itself and with a slight participatory focus, but not to such lengths as is now proposed by the New Museology theory.

In it for:

- Short-term projects
- Theory
- Input
- Experimental exhibition; with certainties

The restraints of the museum have become clear throughout the process and have influenced it. There are certain ways of how the museum can use its budget and the institution needs to have certain goals it needs to achieve, in order to keep getting funding from their sponsors. The employees of the museum have been working in a strong internal discourse, this has made them used to one way of working, and this also leads to constraints.

Changing an organisation is very drastic and resource and time consuming, which the museums organisation does not have. This provided challenges because where does the museum only use the inhabitants as a free-story provider and where does it become a CoP, without becoming the “social-workers” they are often afraid to become.

### **The Reinwardt Academy**

The RWA, Academy for Museology, resides in the Dapperbuurt in Amsterdam. It has a Bachelor program on Cultural heritage and a Masters program which focuses on

Museology, a more theoretical and policy approach to the subject matter concerning museums and heritage. It also has a 'knowledge circle' in which several researches on subjects associated with Museology and museums are brought together. It seeks for a new approach on Museology, multiple perspectiveness within the profession and advocates for a more inclusive approach to heritage, by involving society itself. Therefore New Museology is perceived as important to research and include and introduce in "daily" practice of more traditional institutions, such as the AHM: Seeking to what extent New Museology theory is implementable and focusing on theory and practice within a traditional museum.

In it for:

- Long-term relationships
- Practice
- Output
- Experiment and articles; with room for uncertainties
- Long-term projects

### **Inhabitants of the Dapperbuurt**

In it for:

- ?

Their can be several phrases stated such as better living environment, sense of place, sense of belonging, integration and so on. But what do the people in the neighbourhood really want? And do they want something at all from this project? This is something that cannot be addressed by us or the institutes involved in the projects. What can be said is that all inhabitants willing to participate want a nice place to live and connect with their roots in the neighbourhood and getting to know their neighbours.

### **Master students of the Reinwardt Academy**

We, the writers of this article and the rest of our class, do our

Museology course at the RWA. In this context we have done this project. But we do not represent the institute and do not have any long-term visions on what the RWA should be. We are somewhat part of the Dapperbuurt, because the RWA stands in this neighbourhood, but neither of us lives here. Therefore we do not have direct ties with the neighbourhood as an entity. The AHM is the furthest away from our context; therefore we can be critical about their intentions of working with 'New Museology' and our ideas on the feasibility of this approach. But the case is that this was an assignment, given to us by the RWA and the AHM, so we had to cross a threshold before saying what we really felt during this process. We had to let go of the fact that the museum would judge us on our project initiatives. We were the ones to get in contact with the people living in the Dapperbuurt and, each group with their own approach methods, talked to a good share of people. We became a link between both the RWA and the AHM. The different people from the Dapperbuurt we had contact with saw us as independent, so they shared what was on their mind and were honest.

## **Project**

What is necessary to make it work?

In working with a CoP, there are certain things that the AHM has to keep in mind. By initiating this project, the museum already has made it clear to the community that there will be some form of cooperation in the near future.

By placing 'community' at the heart of the museum enterprise, 'it will be possible to overcome the role of museums as hegemonic institutions. In giving voice to the powerless a process of self-discovery and empowerment will take place in which the curator becomes a facilitator rather than a figure of authority'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Witcomb, A., 'Re-Imagining the Museum. Beyond the Mausoleum London' In: Watson, S.(ed.) *Museums and Their Communities* (Oxon 2007) 133

It is important that the AHM has this notion in mind when starting to negotiate with the community. A starting point, from this perspective, would be recognition of the different interests involved. At one level we have the community of the Dapperbuurt, which interests have not been defined to the core, but which will have a focus on an interest in defining and interpreting their cultural heritage, and in this case their neighbourhood shops, for themselves and others. At another level we have the interest of the heritage profession, with their values of the importance of preservation and the proper documentation and interpretation of collections. It is important that the AHM and the Dapperbuurt community discuss these differences in order to come to a mutual understanding. Curators, educational programmers, gift shop managers and administrators should all 'ideally have some involvement in this collaborative project and be prepared to think through the implications of this relationship as well as to support this project administratively'.<sup>7</sup> Their participation heightens awareness amongst the people in the AHM of 'the legitimacy and importance of cultural protocols when developing new relationships'.<sup>8</sup> One of the most important elements of new relationships between museum and source communities is the extent to which they promote learning and growth for the museum profession.

Bringing community members of the Dapperbuurt into the AHM will turn this dominant-society institution into an arena for cross-cultural debate and learning, and can lead to extraordinary exchanges of knowledge as well as opportunities for people from all walks of life to begin to understand the views of someone from another cultural group.

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<sup>7</sup> Peers, L.L., Brown, A.K.,(ed.) *Museums and Source Communities* (London 2003) 10

<sup>8</sup> idem.



In order to let the project in the Dapperbuurt succeed it is important that the AHM sees itself as part of the process rather than something that is closely defined in terms of mechanistic functions such as conservation, display or education. By concentrating on the inputs and outputs of this process the focus moves on to what the museum aims to achieve and the process or activity can be tailored appropriately. Traditionally museums have concentrated on the outcome, the display or educational activity, without having a focus on the actual process and impacts on society. The greatest problem with such an approach is that it is very difficult to determine whether a particular activity has succeeded or failed.

For this analysis people are seen as the most important input into the museum process. The relationship museums have with users defines their reason for existing. This relationship enables museums to contribute to their users' sense of identity and encourage them to be better citizens. It allows them to make and reconstruct their identities and possibly encourages them into a particular course of action. It is this effect upon people that is the outcome of the museum process. 'In the context of the process model, collections, buildings and staff are the resources used by the museum process and have no independent meaning. The objectives of museums must be couched in terms of the influences that they have upon people' (Newman & McLean, 65). It is through this approach that museums can contribute to include communities.

### **Power shift; a turning point in the process**

This is something that is interesting to zoom in on. When it came to power, or better said the sharing of power and decision-making the discussion got more heated and the question arose whether the approach the AHM took was the way to go. Only the representatives of the RWA were pleasantly surprised with the discussion that took place. It seems that traditional museums, such as the AHM, really

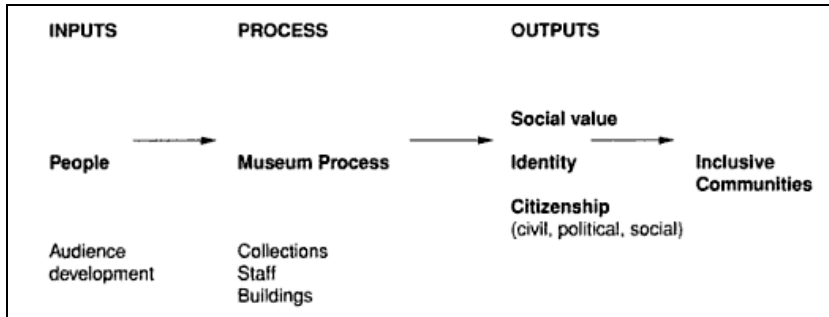


Fig. 1.1 The contribution of museums to inclusive communities

want to be groundbreaking and do something new, but not change their organisational constraints in order to really carry it out. There are several examples that can be given to provide arguments for this that we have felt during the project, but at this time we have chosen for the most exemplary one: Thé definition;

A neighbourhood shop cannot be part of a chain of stores (i.e. McDonalds, El Corte Ingles or Wal-Mart), have no more than five employees and has to have four walls.

The curator and staff made this definition for the exhibition that will be made in (and with) the neighbourhood. But there are several problems that arose concerning this definition:

- The definition itself; making a definition in a project which should be aimed on active involvement and grass-root initiatives, without involving the members of the neighbourhood itself is uncalled for and inappropriate. It shows that the true fundamentals of New Museology and the theory behind it are missing and that the intention of dividing decision-making is not something that is wanted throughout the organisation and employees involved.
- A neighbourhood shop cannot be part of a chain; in this definition there are several neighbourhood shops within the

Dapperbuurt that cannot be part of the project, because they are part of a chain of stores. An example on why this is simply wrong within the Dapper-context is the FeBo, a chips and snack shop chain in the Netherlands. Mr Levering has been the owner of the store for thirty years. He is chairman of the entrepreneurial representation committee in the neighbourhood and spokes person for numerous inhabitants. In interviews with him he stated to have filled in municipality forms, dealt with money and marriage issues and solved other problems of and with people living in the neighbourhood. He is widely trusted and appreciated. He also lowered his coffee prices, so that his shop could stay the meeting point of several groups living in the Dapperbuurt. This has to be a neighbourhood shop: a place of interaction and reaching out, not only with a commercial interest.

- No more than 5 employees; Within the Dapperbuurt there are several stores that have more than 5 employees, but still could be seen as a neighbourhood shop. It seems that this criteria was built into the narrative of an idyllic image of a neighbourhood shop, where an old pension-aged couple are running a shop that has been in the family for decades, an image that does not exist anymore on the scale it did in the '50's in the Netherlands. It does not seem fit to make the amount of employees part of such a definition. When the people living in the neighbourhood give meaning to a place with 20 employees, it should be taken up in the exhibition and not be excluded from the start.

- Has to have four walls; the centre of the Dapperbuurt is the Market, which won the "best-market-award" in 2009. The market stands do not have four walls so, according to the definition given by the AHM, this implies that they are not included within the framework of the exhibition. There has been resistance from the neighbourhood to this part of the definition, because the market is the centre of the neighbourhood. Market stands simply are shops that are being built up again every day. But this is the only different with the other shops in the neighbourhood. This was a point of friction

between the different stakeholders of the project. The members of the Dapperbuurt, which we had contacted, were even refusing to work with the AHM if they used and implemented the given definition within the project.

### **Conclusion. Is it possible?**

Engagement with the concept of community will prompt the AHM to revisit their museum space and question their identity, role and social value. By encouraging this idea of community participation in museum activities, the AHM plays with the notion of democratizing the history of the city of Amsterdam and the museum space. It is linked with bringing in new voices, new histories, and new people. The AHM has to be aware that this approach will challenge the authority of the curatorial and research expertise of museum staff. The success of the 'new' relationship between the AHM and the Dapperbuurt will depend on how these two sides are willing to participate and cooperate with each other.

In addition, if the AHM decides to continue with this project, they also have to ask themselves whether the CoP they are working with is representative, whether its members are accepted by the inhabitants of the Dapperbuurt, and 'how the balance of authority between the community and museum expert is best struck'.<sup>9</sup> In the outline of the *Buurtwinkels* project, it has been shown that applying New Museological principles might result in social development such as creating relationships between people with different social backgrounds. However, one can say that throughout this article one single word claims a key position: power.

The way the AHM has decided to start its project can be seen as a combination of the two versions of New Museology: the

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<sup>9</sup> Croke, E., 'Museums and Communities'. In: Macdonald, S., (ed.) *Companionship to Museum Studies* (Oxford 2006) 184

British and the Latin one. The Latin version of New Museology is characterised by Grassroot-initiatives and museums that either arise because of these initiatives, or facilitate wishes, ideas or projects by persons or communities. The British version on the other hand aims towards the museum as both facilitator and initiator, but strongly focuses on including its surroundings. These are the difficulties caused by power this term that pose serious challenges for the AHM.

The AHM can be seen as the initiator of the *Buurtwinkels* project. The museum has decided on the theme of the project, not the community living in the Dapperbuurt. As such, grassroot-initiatives do not form the basis of the project. On the other hand, the AHM has been outspoken about its wish to serve as a facilitator: the content and project will for the largest part be created by a CoP that consists of people connected to the Dapperbuurt and not by professionals working in the field of heritage.

Connected to the problem of the AHM being an initiator and facilitator at the same time is the question of what exactly is the goal of the project. For the AHM, the goal is to be more visible in the city of Amsterdam, to experiment with new forms of exhibition making, how to apply Museological theories and working with a CoP. It is clear that these goals are rather inward looking. This results in difficulties reaching the inhabitants of the Dapperbuurt: what is in it for them?

In order for the *Buurtwinkels* project to become a success, both on a short- and a long-term basis, the AHM and the inhabitants of the Dapperbuurt will have to create a common goal in order to work on an equal basis. Will the goal be working towards a beautiful exhibition, or is it also possible for all stakeholders that the process of working together can result in positive outcomes, regardless of what the final look of the exhibition will be?

In order for the chosen method of working on giving shape to

the *Buurtwinkels* project, it is crucial that all stakeholders can agree on method, goals and outcomes. Mutual respect and understanding have to be key terms, as well as always communicating directly with each other. This will result in working with non-professionals without giving them the feeling that their qualities were underestimated and they were being used, only for a good result and subsidy for the museum.

If the preconditions given above will be implemented successfully, the *Buurtwinkels* project has the potential of growing towards a for the Netherlands innovative and new form of working with heritage. The project might serve as an instigator for new ideas and concepts that are born from grassroot initiatives. In fact, this might be the biggest potential of the project: to make people aware that heritage is not something that is only to be found in elite museums, but is something of us all that it can be a meaningful tool for bringing people together.

#### **About the authors:**

Davida de Hond (1987), The Netherlands. She has her BA degree in Cultural Heritage and is currently doing her MA degree in Museology. Her BA thesis focussed on social technology and societal relevance of heritage institutions. She choose for the heritage field because it beholds key-ingredients for well being and quality of life.

Sebastian van der Lans (1980) has obtained a propaedeutic degree in Art School and is a Bachelor of Arts. He is currenty following the international Masters Degree Programme in Museology at the Reinwardt Academie.

In 2006 I finished a BA in Communication and Information Sciences, in 2007 I finished a BA in English Language and Culture and in 2008 I received my MA in American Studies. I am specialised in American cultural history after WW II. Right now, as part of the Master of Museology at the Reinwardt Academy, I am interning at The American Museum in Bath and working on an exhibition about slavery.

Freek van Kessel holds a BA degree in Cultural Heritage from the Reinwardt academy in Amsterdam. He wrote his BA thesis on the changes in function and meaning of botanical gardens throughout history. At this moment he is

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Mercedes Montes de Oca, graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Art History in 1993 then continued the PhD studies on Aesthetics and Critics at the Literary University of Valencia, Spain. During that time she was involved in several projects of the University and other Institutions related with Art, heritage and photography, mainly in Spain. Since 2003 Mercedes lives and works in Netherlands. She is currently enrolled at the Master of Museology at the Reinwardt Academy and particularly interested in concepts of cultural rights, representation and identity in relation with the role of the museums in a multicultural and globalizing society.