The Museum of the Future

Selected blogposts about museums in times

of social and technological change

Jasper Visser
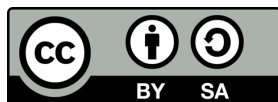
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Introduction

I started [The Museum of the Future](#) in May 2009 to document my work at the National History Museum of the Netherlands. At the time, we pioneered new digital and participatory approaches in museums. When the museum had to end, I continued the blog to write about the projects I did and ideas I developed in my new role as a consultant. The scope of the blog broadened, but the focus remained on audiences, meaningful engagement and participation.

I've always been surprised by the impact the blog has had. Its almost two-hundred posts have been read over half a million times. Many have been republished in newsletters, magazines and books. A handful have been translated. At least 50 students and others have used my posts in their research. (Thanks for the citations!)

What continues to amaze me, are the opportunities the blog creates. I meet so many great people because of it, am invited to speak at wonderful events, hired to work on amazing projects, and interviewed on radio and television. In turn, these experiences have allowed me to see some of the world's most fascinating museums. And then, many of these experiences turn into new posts: the blog is a perpetuum mobile of ideas.

Over the past years, more than once I've been asked to compile a list of the 'must reads' of my blog. This publication is my answer to that question. It contains a selection of posts from the last 8 years of The Museum of the Future, and one that appeared elsewhere. I've selected posts that stood the test of time, and those I have found myself referring to repeatedly over the past years in workshops, meetings and classes. These are not necessarily the most popular posts. Most of the posts are exactly as they were published on the blog. I've added footnotes to update facts, and quietly corrected some typos.

Most blogs do not tell a coherent story, and mine is no exception. I've tried to structure this publication, so that it seems to address some topics in depth. Furthermore, the collection is full of holes and omissions. My apologies for that. Finally, many posts have been built upon in the comments. I did not copy the comments, but recommend you read them as well. And contribute to them, if you please. Thanks in advance!

Jasper, Amsterdam, February 2017

About the author: Jasper Visser

Jasper Visser is an international change agent and social and cultural innovator. He is a highly-experienced facilitator and designs and manages audience engagement, co-creation and participation projects, with a focus on the cultural and heritage sectors and social institutions. Jasper is senior partner at the consultancy boutique VISSCH+STAM.

Jasper has a background in educational design and community-driven development. He started his career as an independent consultant and designer of (educational) programmes and projects for organisations such as the World Bank and the European Union, as well as NGOs and social initiatives. In 2009 Jasper joined the National Museum of History of the Netherlands as project manager new technologies and media. Recently, Jasper has worked internationally on strategy development and audience engagement projects for a wide range of clients including the European Parliament, the State Library of New South Wales, the National Arts Centre of Canada and Philips.

Jasper developed *Cards for Culture* and *Wie is de leraar?* (Who's a teacher?) together with Erik Schilp. He co-developed the Digital Engagement Framework, is a blogger at The Museum of the Future, associated lecturer at the Reinwardt Academy and expert advisor for various projects.

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Photo by Dmitry Smirnov/Strelka Institute.

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Opening statements

18/04/2014

Museums in times of social and technological change[1]

At the end of the first season of Downton Abbey in a scene that is exemplary of the show's greatness, the Dowager Countess of Grantham (Maggie Smith) exclaims that "Sometimes I feel as if I were living in an HG Wells novel." The Countess is responding to the unsettling arrival of the telephone, only months after her life was turned upside down by that other great invention: electricity. Born somewhere in the 19th century, this is too much change for the deeply conservative matriarch.

Four seasons and many spoiled Christmases later, fans of the show know that the telephone was by no means the greatest threat to the existence of the British aristocracy. The scene above happens on the eve of World War One. Four years of bloodshed later the incredible social impact of new technologies threatens the existence of any conservative 19th century institution. And we're just the beginning of the century that will bring us television, H-bombs, the internet and Beyonce.

One hundred years later every one of us carries in our pockets something we still call a phone but which in fact is an accumulation - and combination - of many of the last century's inventions. It's so powerful, at least until the battery runs out, that you would need a staff of thousands to replace its core-functionality in a non-digital world.

One hundred years later, in the first decades of the 21st century, those institutions that survived the 20th century are facing a whole new set of challenges. Technological changes like smartphones, robotics, big data and all the other buzzwords, combined with the social changes that go along with them - changing educational needs, careers paths, social

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[1] *This is an edited transcript of my opening keynote lecture at the Canadian Museum Association Conference in Toronto, April 2014.*

structures - threaten the existence of those institutions that are overly conservative, don't adapt, think this century will be like the last. Museums - and other institutions that represent our culture, heritage and art - are not excluded from this trend. They may in fact be at the very heart of it.

I believe museums (and archives, galleries, libraries, theatres, art centres, …) have a place in the 21st century. I also believe this place might be very different from the place they occupied until now. I believe it's not easy to be a museum nowadays - I've seen enough organisations struggle to keep their doors open and their audiences coming - but I know there is a way forward. I believe the way forward is to become more social institutions, but before we go there, let's look at the changed world.

Distracted people in a high-speed world

So what has changed? And what is changing?[2]

Since the turn of the century, the average attention span of people has dropped four seconds, to eight seconds. Eight seconds is just enough to read and retweet the latest Buzzfeed headline. '14 Cats Who Think They're Sushi.' CLICK.

And there's always something new to click off to. 90% of all data ever produced is produced in the last two years (PDF, p.25). Most of this is real data: raw, inaccessible, closed data useful and meaningful only to its owner. Lots of it, however, is also processed into status updates, blogposts and videos. Everything in the largest library you have ever seen pales in comparison to the number of tweets and photos send today across social media. We're exposed to so much information it leads to infobesity and infotoxication.

As a result, we've become easily distracted people in a super high-speed world.

A large percentage of our media consumption is now done via smartphones and tablets; media that are often combined with another activity (unlike, for instance, reading a book or going to the cinema). We're obsessed with new input. The average worker checks his email 30 times per hour, which means twice since you started reading this article. At the same time the new is quickly old. The lifecycle of breaking news on social media is an hour of coverage, an hour of jokes and rapidly produced cartoons and three days of commentary on how social media blew everything out of proportion. Six months later there will be a documentary on TV, making lots of people wonder what the original fuzz was about.

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[2] *The numbers in this paragraph have changed since publication, the trends are the same.*

So much is written and said about the social and technological changes that are occurring, that rather than repeating what's been said before, I recommend you read and watch smart thinkers about our time. Dave Egger's The Circle may not be a good book, but it's a good commentary of our time. World 3.0 by Pankaj Gemawat puts everything is a sensible broader context. And I like the observations Ramesh Srinivasan makes in many of his talks.

Some of the social and technological changes are local. The closing of a home for the elderly, the energy of a new incubator. For many museums, it's more important to stay on top of local trends than to try to be at the forefront of the global ones. Not many of us can compete with Facebook for eyeballs, but all of us can play an important role in our communities.

Local connections, real value

Maybe the best museum success story of recent years comes from the small Italian Palazzo Madama in Turin. When confronted with an opportunity to buy an iconic collection of porcelain they put some of the main trends in technology and society to their advantage and managed to successfully crowdfund the acquisition.

Photo by Sabina Arena, Fondazione Torino Musei

What is great about this project is not that a small team at a small institution managed to raise 100,000 euros (twenty thousand more than their goal) through the smart use of social media. What is great is that in the process they managed to connect with 1,500 people. Imagine the potential of having 1,500 people willing to draw their wallet when you're in

trouble (and probably: show up when you need feet through the door, vote when you need opinions, help when you need volunteers).

What Palazzo Madama understood well is that the key to success in the 21st century is to make connections first, then involve them in value creating processes. In doing so, they highlight the four key concepts that I believe should define the museum AD 2014: value, community, engagement and co-creation.

A broader concept of value

Many organisations - including museums - have a narrow concept of value: money (or profit). If there's one thing the rise of social media has shown us, it's that this concept is insufficient in today's world. Fast and friendly customer service, for instance, may come at significant financial costs, but when done correctly greatly increases brand value and customer loyalty. We know this (Zappos, Royal Dutch Airlines) but we - museums and other institutions - hardly do anything about it.

Value has many faces: financial, social, political, emotional, educational, creative... Realising these values form a closed system and can be transformed from one into the other with some creativity helps us to be meaningful, pay our bills and add to society.

In this respect, I like the cooperation the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam has started with DIY platform Etsy. After putting their collection online in high-quality and inviting the audience to work with it, the Rijksmuseum now encourages creatives and moms and everyone else to use their collection as a starting point for their own craft, and sell their creations through Etsy. From a money-perspective this hardly makes sense: why allow people to use *your* stuff to make money? From a value-perspective however, it's brilliant: the Rijksmuseum adds tons of value to the lives of creatives, who themselves add value to the collection. This will get them more (virtual) visitors, more reach, more impact, more of anything. Well done!

Active, participating communities

The second element of success is what Kevin Allocca calls active, participating communities. Note the words *active* and *participating*: Your Facebook page probably is not such a community!

Active, participating communities are groups of people that regularly come together and create together (online or elsewhere) around their shared interest, objective or values. Communities exist and it's often easier to tap into existing ones than to try to build new ones

from scratch. Almost every institution I go to is home to one or more communities, sometimes without their knowing.

At last year's NCK Spring Conference in snowy Östersünd, Sweden, I had the pleasure to hear how Veera Jalava connected one of her interests with one of her museum's communities and created a project that is memorable already for its name alone: the Graffiti Grannies. Veera tapped into an existing group's energy and potential by combining their interests and those of the museum into a project that had elderly ladies discover about contemporary street art, make it themselves and learn, grow and be happy at the same time. With their K65 crew, the grannies were not just a passive community, but actively participating in the project.

Most communities aren't large, but their potential energy is. Technology is not an ingredient of any community, but technology - when used smartly - is can give scale to community efforts.

Small aside: As communities are about people, a community manager should primarily be a people-person, not 'knowledgeable about different CMS systems'. Know when you're looking for a webmaster (computers, internet) or community manager (people, connections).

Engagement: Artefacts, audience and action

After maybe two generations of couch potatoes, passive consumption of mass media is again a thing for those on the fringes of society - and has been for ten to fifteen years already. The 21st century as most of history before it and most of the future still to come is a century of activity, albeit through digital tools.

We watch television interacting through second screens and apps, read books we later chat about on GoodReads, read and create our own newspapers on social media. Volunteering, at least in Holland, is getting more popular: active contributions as opposed to passive donations.

Engagement, digitally or otherwise, is the pinnacle step in the development of a relation between people and institutions. If museums don't activate their audience once every while, they will lose them to competitors who provide the opportunity to participate (most likely: a SnapChat conversation in gallery or - with grown-ups - Tinder, the current-day alternatives for blowing bubblegum bubbles).

The ABBA museum in Stockholm is my favourite recent example of engagement done well in gallery. I'm not an ABBA fan, or wasn't when I went to visit the museum 'for professional reasons'. A carefully curated exhibition full of appropriate opportunities to engage (dance, do

quizes, sing, explore) later I can say I've become an ABBA fan. Not because of the interactives, but because of the combination of artefacts, audience engagement and action. And the music, of course. The ABBA museum claims you will walk in and dance out, and they're right.

Co-creation

An activated, participating community creates a lot of energy, especially when this energy serves a higher goal. Not post-its on a wall ('Leave your thoughts!") but a contribution to something bigger. A cleaner city, more social cohesion, a successful creative industry…

Co-creation is a process in which an institution and its audience work together to create value. The institution does what it does best, the audience does what it does best, and together they achieve something that is better than the best of either of them. One plus one equals three.

The Digital Engagement Framework is an excellent example of co-creation. When Jim Richardson and I were asked the same questions over and over again, we decided to structure them in a framework. Together with a small group of early adopters from around the world we tested our first framework and used their feedback, case studies and input to improve and strengthen the framework. It's not just the summary of the experience of Jim and myself, but combines the experience from lots of people from around the world (some of which you can find in the book.)

In the equation, Jim and myself contributed our ability to bring people and ideas together with the ability of people from around the world to do exciting projects and experiments into a Framework, book and set of workshops and masterclasses that are bigger than any one of us would have been able to create on our own.

Of course, many of the examples in this article ultimately are examples of co-creation as well. Palazzo Madama co-created an acquisition with their local community. The Rijksmuseum co-creates a lively creative industry with DIYers from around the world. Veera Jalava co-created social cohesion and street art with her grannies.

Note that co-creation is not a new thing. It's the basis of any business model. What makes it special is the broader understanding of value museums can have, and the active, participating communities that are the basis of the 21st century.

Social institutions

A social institution is an institution that structurally engages its stakeholder to co-create value. I believe museums (and others) will increasingly become social institutions as the years progress. Or they will become extinct.

A common misconception is that social media is an ingredient or even objective of a social institution. It is not. Social media are a good way to talk about the transformation from traditional to social institutions, but in themselves only distract from the transformation. Using Twitter is not the solution, but understanding Twitter is (to some extend).

Another common misconception is that to succeed, museums have to change completely and do everything differently. They don't. When co-creating value with your stakeholders, remember that it is as much about what you can add as what they can contribute. Museums have some very unique capabilities and characteristics (the collection, curators, buildings, etc. etc.) that are the basis for their contribution, and are valuable and valued by the stakeholder.

In Downton Abbey's later seasons, when the estate is struggling to make ends meet, the family tries all sorts of things to move forward. They invite pigs on their land, welcome commoners in their midst, break with conservative traditions and desperately look for ways to stay valuable in the 20th century. Their best successes come when they work with others (the pigs, restructuring their finances) and have a broad view at how they can be valuable. I think they will succeed (or, as a fan, should I say I hope?) and I think they will succeed because some members of the family continuously push for a more social aristocracy.

Parts of the British aristocracy somehow made it through the 20th century. Parts of our cultural institutions will somehow make it through the 21st. The key to face these times of social and technological change is to become more social institutions, co-creating value together with our communities.

Museums in the city of the future[3]

As popular public places, museums and other cultural institutions can play a role at the heart of their communities, being involved in all aspects of daily life, both digitally and physically. This allows them to shape our future, and address real issues in society, from healthcare and welfare to employment and security.

We all know the most powerful statistics of cities: Currently, more than half the world's population lives in cities. In Europe, about three quarters of the population live in a city. Urban life is not the exception. It is the rule. Cities, and especially large capital cities, are magical places. Geoffrey West, who has done the math, shows how cities have disproportionally more of everything.

> *"The great thing about cities, the thing that is amazing about cities is as they grow, so to speak, their dimensionality increases. That is, the space of opportunity, the space of functions, the space of jobs just continually increases." (source)*

Cities have disproportional amounts of everything: wealth, job opportunities, ideas, crime... People even walk faster in cities. And of course, cities have more cultural infrastructure, more museums. Amsterdam, the city I call home, easily has over 100 museums, not counting the living room and small neighbourhood museums. London has at least 300. Moscow in a first count by the Dutch Embassy in 2014, at least 562. In 2011 I met a lady in Washington DC who wanted to visit a different museum in her city every day of the year. I don't know if she succeeded, but it's mind-blowing such a thing is even possible.

For museum geeks, city life is good life. And not just for them. According to the European Commission, "the quality of urban life in the EU is considered to be crucial for attracting and retaining a skilled labour force, businesses, students and tourists."

Nevertheless, not all is well in cities. Cities are at the forefront of many developments, including ones that challenge their future. One only has to remember Paris, where in one

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[3] *This is an edited transcript of my keynote on 27 January 2016 in the DASA in Dortmund.*

year two terrible terrorist attacks unsettled the city and the world at large, while at the same time an historic climate agreement was struck.

My argument today is that cultural institutions in general and museums in particular play a significant role in the future of cities. They are part of the key infrastructure to keep our cities, where so much of us live, healthy, liveable, safe and successful in the 21st century.

Museums are the answer to many questions asked in municipal committees and working groups. Museums are the solution to much of the challenges our society are already facing, and will face in the future. Museums play a pivotal role in community building, sustainability, employment. Museums, in the words of Gail Dexter Lord and Ngaire Blankenberg in their book *Museums, cities and soft power:*

> *"[Museums] are one of our society's main adaptive strategies for managing change."*

When museums become actors in the change of society, however, they often find that they have to take on new roles and responsibilities and are expected to play an active part in the future of the cities they are based in, and the communities they are part of.

Social innovation and museums

The poster child of the relation between museums and cities is the Guggenheim in Bilbao. The Bilbao-effect states that if you invite a world-renowned starchitect and let them design a landmark building, the additional revenue from taxes and tourism will more than make up for the investment. At the same time, a virtually unknown town is lifted from depravation and the future is ever bright. And it worked:

> *"Visitors' spending in Bilbao in the first three years after the museum opened raised over €100m ($110m) in taxes for the regional government, enough to recoup the construction costs and leave something over." (source)*

In the years since, cities around the world have been scrambling to copy the Bilbao-effect, with mixed success. Not every city becomes a cultural hub with a Gehry building. Not every community is enriched by an international symbol. Even in the world of architecture, much has changed since 1997. From the Jan/Feb 2016 issue of Intelligent Life:

> *"Concerns are being raised about imposing buildings that ignore the urban contexts in which they are built, fail to make any concessions to the human scale, and serve only as three-dimensional branding for their creators. [This reaction is] akin to the return analogue that can be observed throughout contemporary culture – in the*

enthusiasm for vinyl records and handicrafts, for example. In an increasingly virtual world, there is a longing for human touch and a spirit of resistance to the invisible forces in which we find ourselves enmeshed." ([source](#))

I'd argue that the Bilbao-effect is too much a top-down, centralized, bureaucratic intervention to work for everyone in in the 21st century, if it did work at any scale at all. The Bilbao-effect is very much like floppy-disks and the dial-up modem: great for the 90s but a bit outdated in the 10s.

A much more realistic poster child for the relation between cities and museums in the 21st century is the case of the Rostov Kremlin, which we also included in [Cards for Culture – Museum Edition](#):

As part of the Golden Circle of Russia, the [Rostov Kremlin](#) (fortress) has about the brand recognition to a Russian person as the Guggenheim has to someone from the Western world. The monasteries and churches in town attract many tourists each year, but lost their connection with the local population that saw the institution as rich and aloof. Last year in Moscow I spoke with the director, and she explained that reconnecting with the local population was one of her prime objectives to keeping the Rostov Kremlin sustainable.

To rebuild the relationship between institution and local community, she organised special opening nights for local people, going in-depth into the collection. They organised courses on Sunday afternoons and a programme to train local people to be tour guides. Instead of a distant fortress, the Rostov Kremlin slowly became a locally relevant, accessible institution, which also benefitted the visiting tourists, who are now welcomed by a friendly, supportive local population.

In his book [Design when everybody designs](#) Ezio Manzini describes such design processes as a form of social innovation:

"a creative recombination of existing assets (from social capital to historical heritage, from traditional craftsmanship to accessible advanced technology), which aim to achieve socially recognized goals in a new way."

Museums and other cultural institutions are uniquely positioned to enable such processes. Our collections, spaces, employees and stories are incredibly powerful existing assets. We're experienced in combining them in new, creative ways. Almost all cultural professionals I meet are socially aware and care about achieving socially recognized goals, at least to some extent. Also, if we give it a try, we can usually bring people together quite well. As such, museums can help provide concrete, practical answers to complex (wicked) problems.

Wicked problems and museums

And, as I mentioned before, there are quite some wicked problems museums can help solve. For instance, healthcare and wellbeing. An especially encouraging solution is [Rhapsody in the Westminster and Chelsea Hospital](#). Basically, an audio guide that encourage patients to look at art, it helps patients feel better, alleviates boredom and gives them a psychological lift. Elsewhere, [Veera Jalava's Graffiti Grannies](#) project connects seniors and street art. Her K65 crew fights prejudices about elderly people and street art, develops the ability of seniors to read the urban environment and gives them alternative options for participating in society.

Museums contribute to innovation and provide employment opportunities. I fondly remember my first participation in [MuseoMix](#) in Nice last November, where we worked with local creatives on developing real products in a weekend. MuseoMix is a sort of socially conscious startup bootcamp, which has generated viable products in the past. (It's unlikely the connected Olympic torch the team I was part of designed will it ever make into production, but if the IOC is reading: we're happy to take this further!)

Museums even play a role in highly tricky topics such as social inclusion. The international museum debate [#museumsrespondtoferguson](#) did not only explore how museums could be more inclusive and better represent the different voices in our communities, but also highlighted cases of museums contributing positively to inclusion around the world.

There are countless other examples of museums solving wicked problems around topics such as education, sustainability, community building, mental health…

Open, inclusive, collaborative, distributed, fun: Social museums

There are common themes in all the cases above. The projects are predominantly bottom-up, initiated by creative communities within or outside of museums. They're distributed and collaborative. They stem from a different kind of leadership; not the hierarchical leadership of a curator or director, but from the individual responsibility of (museum) professionals. The projects an integrated part of society, rather than an add-on. Most of them, as a consequence of the characteristics as much as by design, are resilient.

The type of museum that runs this sort of projects is what I call a social museum. A social museum is a place where all stakeholders work together to create value and achieve a mission. This value, almost always, is social value. The mission, almost always, social impact and innovation.

The social museum goes by many names: the design-driven museum, the distributed museum, the participatory museum, the creative museum, even the post-digital museum. All the adjectives are characteristics of the museum of the future. As such there is not one type of social museum. There is no fixed template. In Amsterdam, many of the highly-local, volunteer-run neighbourhood museums are social museums, very much in touch with the social issues of the specific communities they work with. At the same time, the behemoth of cultural Amsterdam, the Rijksmuseum, has many characteristics of a social museum. They're open, inclusive, collaborative, distributed, quite often fun (and toddler-friendly!).

The most convincing example of a social museum, still, is the story of the Derby Silk Mill. Not only do they contribute directly to social innovation and impact to the community of Derby, they organised their transformation process on social design principles.

It's a simple sum. Cities, which are at the forefront of social developments, have most need for social innovation. Also, generally speaking, they have the best cultural infrastructure to address the social issues at hand. With government stepping back on its (financial) involvement in museums and other institutions, museums looking to stay relevant need to step up their role in social innovation in the cities they are part of.

This requires institutions to change. Fortunately, cities have a disproportional amount of ideas and creative people that, in combination with a museum's existing assets, offer great opportunities for museums to adapt to their new role and responsibilities as managers of social innovation.

The future of museums is about attitude, not technology[4]

In an age where digital media often set the agenda in the cultural heritage sector, Jasper calls for sober-minded deliberation. He has run a series of digital strategy workshops, but the fundamental advice he offers museums is to not get carried away by all the sparkling new technologies. What is essential is to stage and display their collections and knowledge in ways that are truly relevant and engaging to people. To do this, however, they need to understand how digital media transform society and how people think.

Introduction

New technologies have always influenced society. From the printing press which helped initiate the reformation to the industrial revolution and now the digital revolution.[5] Society influences technology as well. Take for instance differences in language, as exemplified by Michael Anti in a 2011 TED talk: "One Chinese tweet is equal to 3.5 English tweets. (...) Because of this, the Chinese really regard this microblogging as a media, not only a headline to media." The technologies of the digital revolution change our societies as much as our societies influence the development and use of such technologies.

Before tinkering with new technologies, every organisation grounded in society should understand their implications on society and vice versa. Technology that is implemented naively will amplify existing inequalities.[6] This is also true for museums. Ramesh Srinivasan describes, for instance, how differences between museum ontologies and those of source communities limit the diversity of cultures and voices that are represented by collections[7]. A

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[4] *This article is originally published in the anthology* Sharing is Caring: Openness and sharing in the cultural heritage sector *(2014, editor: Merete Sanderhoff).* *Read the publication here.*

[5] *See for instance Das & Shirley Kolack, Technology, Values and Society: Social Forces in Technological Change Revised Edition, Peter Lang Publishing, 2007*

[6] *Toyama, Technology as amplifier in international development, ACM New York, Proceedings of the 2011 iConference, 2011, pp. 75-82*

[7] *Ramesh Srinivasan, Re-thinking the cultural codes of new media: The question concerning ontology, New Media & Society, Vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 203-223*

'naive' online collection might actually alienate people from an institution, rather than open the institution up to more and more diverse communities.

I believe that if museums were to take a step back from implementing the latest technologies just to be on the bandwagon ("We have to be on Facebook!") and reflected on the relationship between technology and society and its influence on the role of museums, new opportunities would become clear that will help museums to be meaningful in the 21st century. Some of these opportunities I will describe in this paper.

The head of the long tail

A first opportunity is the abundance of information contemporary society is faced with. A study by Gantz and Reinsel shows that the amount of information in the world more than doubles every two year. Such numbers still exclude the two thirds of the world population without internet access. One can only imagine what will happen to the amount of information easily accessible anywhere when these people join the digital age.

For years, Chris Anderson's book *The Long Tail* (2006) has given people a reason to put as much information online as possible. Unlike in the physical world, shelf and wall space are nearly free and unlimited online. Google will open up even the most marginal content (the long tail) to people who are potentially interested. Research by Anita Elberse has shown reality is more complicated. The vast majority of people will only access the most popular information (the head). For instance the top 10% of songs on Rhapsody accounts for 78% of all plays. The top 1% for 32% of plays. The head gets most attention and only highly enthusiastic geeks and researchers ever venture into the long tail. The long tail might even scare people off. Too much choice is frightening, or as Barry Schwartz says in a 2009 TED talk: "With so many options to choose from, people find it very difficult to choose at all."

In the 2012 summer edition of Wired UK, Neal Pollack explains how finding meaning in the myriad of information is the new obsession in technology. Museum curators and researchers have been doing so for years: sorted through thousands of objects to build exhibitions and do research that matters. In the digital age, this role gets renewed importance, now that curators do not only need to sort through their own collection to find the 'head', but also through the information produced by non-professionals on platforms like Wikipedia and elsewhere.

Museums can take a leading role in making sense of the abundance of information in today's world and making the best more accessible. I believe that such curatorial processes will be much more valuable to virtually everyone, than continuing to digitise ever more of our collections in the hope some geek or researcher, one day, will bump into them via Google.

Factual stories that resonate

It will soon not be enough simply to present the best. Competition for people's limited time is fierce and will likely only increase. Museums need more than ever to attract audiences to their work. Intel's Museum of Me was a useful project for people interested in the future of museums. For one, it proved that museums are appealing enough to market a technology product. Also it proved that the internet generation can be encouraged to visit a museum, as long as the museum tells a story that resonates with them. Real world museums such as the Zagreb Museum of Broken Relationships prove the same thing.

In her book Resonate (2010), Nancy Duarte explains how to tell a story that resonates with its audience. One of the lessons is to make the audience the hero of the story: whatever you tell should be about them. Quite often, museum collections are related to the audience, although it might not always be clear why or how. Other suggestions Duarte gives are the use of visuals, emotions and development. A good story is factual, but also emotional and interactive and uses mixed media to keep people's attention.

In the digital age there seems to be a divide between factual and more emotional stories. Wikipedia articles are factual, YouTube cat videos emotional. I believe there's room in the middle for museums. Projects like Open Culture and Crash Course pioneer by telling stories that are both factual and engaging enough to resonate with their audience. Museum professionals have the skills and intelligence to take curated information and turn it into stories that resonate.

Online learning and 21st century skills

A third opportunity is the rise of online education and the increasing focus on 21st century skills.

Coursera is a free online education platform. It is successful with over 2.5 million users and is enhancing academic recognition of the skills people acquire online. What makes Coursera successful, in part, is that it combines the best elements of traditional education with the new opportunities technology create. For instance, regular traditional tests keep students involved while at the same time, they can pause and "rewind" what their teachers say at will – as Daphne Koller, one of the founders, explains.

It is not unlikely that online learning will replace a significant part of the curriculum of many schools and universities in the near future. This means some of the traditional aspects of

education in society will change. For instance: where will people meet to watch online lectures and where will they learn skills such as global awareness and civic literacy?

As the Institute for Museum and Library Studies states in their 2009 publication *Museums, Libraries, and 21st Century Skills* museums can, and should, play a pivotal role in the education of communities. A museum should look at education as a constant in people's digital and physical lives and as a strong tool to make the connection from online to onsite. Even more than to traditional education, museums can play a pivotal role as content providers and service facilitators to online education.

Systems for direct value exchange

By taking a more proactive role in the above, museums obviously will add more direct value to the lives of people. The last and maybe most interesting trend, therefore, is the opportunity to establish more direct systems for value exchange to support the expectations of the audience.

One of the greatest clichés of the digital age is that is has democratised the relationship between organisations and individuals. Although critics warn us not to overestimate the liberating effects of digital media, it is undeniably true that if an organisation really wants to connect directly with its audience and interact with them, the tools are there.[8] This means information, opinions and creativity can flow more freely than before the digital age.

The same applies to value (money). More direct systems of funding such as crowdfunding can partly replace traditional funding models. For example, according to Kickstarter 10% of all movies at the Sundance independent film festival in 2012 were crowdfunded.

Direct value exchange means that an individual and an organisation directly negotiate with each other, often via an online platform. This means that each deal should be clear and beneficial to both parties involved, for instance an exhibition catalogue and four tickets at discount rate in exchange for the funds to build the exhibition.

By pioneering with such direct value exchange systems, museums will not only find new sources of revenue, but also build supporting communities that can clearly identify the added value of the institution to society, even before society requires it in times of financial cuts and dwindling interest in heritage and the arts.

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[8] *See for instance Morozov, E. 2011. The Net delusion: The dark side of Internet freedom. New York, NY: Public Affairs Books.*

The right attitude

The four trends I've outlined above are by no means exhaustive. Having worked with close to a hundred (cultural) institutions in recent years, I know that the great diversity in museums and societies means there are different opportunities everywhere. The overarching idea is that by taking a step back from contemporary trends in technology and focusing on the wider trends at the intersection of society and technology, in my experience museums can make much better use of their resources and better address long term strategic objectives. I am aware that I've left the important next question unanswered: how? In the discussions at Sharing is Caring 2012, some elements of the how-question have been answered: human resource management, project management, leadership. Without going into detail on the how-question (which would take at least another 2,000 words), I think it suffices to say that the same conclusion applies here. Take a step back and reflect on the larger trends in society and how technology can play a role in them.

In the end, I strongly believe that with the right attitude museums can play a pivotal role in tomorrow's societies, regardless of the changes in technology that no doubt will occur. By focusing on some trends I have intended to present the wider idea that what is needed is an attitude of inquisitive pro-activeness, where the consequence of trends rather than the trends themselves are the main focus of strategy and action.

Creating with communities

18/09/2016

How to work with creative communities? Insights from a workshop in Moscow

http://themuseumofthefuture.com/2016/09/18/how-to-work-with-creative-communities-insights-from-a-workshop-in-moscow/

In recent months, I've written and talked quite a lot about *why* cultural institutions in the future will have a different relationship with their audience, and how I believe they can and have to find a new role in the cities and societies they're part of. In this new role, they work with communities to achieve socially recognised goals, often in new and innovative ways.

What I haven't necessarily written about recently is *how* to work with creative communities to achieve your goals.

Earlier this month I ran an intensive two-day workshop with a group of highly-talented young professionals at the Strelka Institute in Moscow. The workshop forced me to think again about many of the processes I take for granted in my work with organisations and their communities.

First, what is a creative community (as opposed to just any community, or for instance the use of target audiences in an organisation)? Collaboratively, after discussing moments where we felt part of a community and careful scoping of the subject, we defined a creative community as (abridged):

> *"A group of people with shared characteristics unified by a common idea or problem to solve, who come together to act, create and share."*

Photo: A co-created definition of creative communities (Dmitry Smirnov / Strelka Institute)

What sets a creative community apart from other communities, or target audiences, is their need 'to act, create and share'. In the workshop, this greatly helped us to figure out which communities were meaningful to work with in our organisations, and which less so. Harry Potter fans? No. Harry Potter fanfic writers? Yes!

The relationship between an organisation and a creative community is established by the 'shared characteristics', and the 'common idea or problem to solve'. These have to align between the creative community and the organisation. An organisation that tries to engage groups with which it has nothing in common, will have a hard time building the trust needed to create and be creative together. Likewise, an organisation that tries to work with any group and adjusts its values accordingly, risks losing its focus on its own goals.

Working with creative communities then boils down to identifying groups of people with whom your organisation shares characteristics and objectives, and then developing a relationship of trust that ultimately leads to achieving (your) (socially recognised) goals.

In the workshop, we used elements of the [Digital Engagement Framework](#) and [older work on audience engagement](#), as well as a variety of models and ladders of participation as our framework to design the processes needed to build relationships and trust. I don't think it really matters which model you use, as long as you carefully design for relationship development and are persistent and consistent in your execution.

For each of the participants' cases, which they brought to the workshop, we looked at those parts of their existing communities that could be considered creative, i.e. acting, creating and sharing. Consequently, we looked for commonalities between the characteristics, ideas and challenges of these groups, and those of the organisation. Finally, each participant used their own combination of tools to develop processes for relationship development and trust building. Ultimately, they set individual commitments to make this happen in their organisations.

Throughout the workshop, we used Cards for Culture to estimate the impact of working with creative communities on the overall strategy of organisations, and played a few rounds of Pitch Perfect (one of the games you can play with Cards for Culture) to perfect ideas and strategies.

In any and all of my workshops, as well as whenever I start a new community-driven project, such as now the organisation of a completely co-created festival, the task of working with creative communities at first seems daunting to participants and me. And rightfully so. It is not easy to design and predict the behaviour of large groups of people, and make their efforts align yours. A focus on groups that already like to create, act and share, and on the characteristics and objectives you share with them, however, is a great starting point.

At the end of the workshop we had not only discussed and explored the concept of creative communities, but also built a new one (or couple) ourselves. This was one of my secret objectives for the two days, and the ultimate proof that anyone can work with creative communities, with a bit of help from the outside.

Nieuwe Groeten Uit… A crowd-sourced and crowd-curated exposition

Nieuwe groeten uit… ("New greetings from…") was a crowd-sourced, crowd-curated exposition in the city of Arnhem in the east of the Netherlands. Last Thursday my museum opened the last part of the yearlong project. In many ways it's a special exposition and project, I think, and worth sharing.

Somewhat over a year ago FOAM photography museum Amsterdam, the ANP Historical Archive and the Museum of National History of the Netherlands came together to find a replacement for the traditional postcards. Most postcards show an old-fashioned image of Holland: cheese, cows and wooden shoes. The Netherlands has changed significantly over the last years, and Nieuwe Groeten Uit… was a search for new postcards.

The general public played a major part in every phase of the project: gathering the photographs for the postcards, selecting the best post-cards and even putting them on display.

The process from idea to exposition in 10 steps

1. In May 2009 we asked everybody in the Netherlands to send us photos that according to them gave an image of the Netherlands. They could upload their photos on a special website and put them in four categories. All photos were welcome, from those taken with mobile phones to professional shots.
2. In little over a month a wide range of people uploaded 8.000 photos. There was a 3-photo limit for everybody. A professional jury sorted through the thousands of photos to select the best ones for every region and category.
3. In the summer of 2009 a special inflatable exposition space travelled through the Netherlands, stopping at each of the 12 regional capitals. People were invited to vote for their favourite photo of their region, which they did.
4. In every city, special events were organised around the tour. I visited the exposition in four cities and every time it was something special. Hundreds of people cast their

votes and photographers from all over the country came to defend their photo as a winner for the postcards.

5. The maker of the winning photo of each region could win a camera. All selected photos were printed as real postcards. This resulted in 48 unique postcards of contemporary Holland.

6. When the tour ended, the Museum of National History began to prepare for the final exposition. Being the first exposition of the museum, people who sent in photos were often proud to be able to become a part of this first exposition of the new museum.

7. Last Thursday we opened this exposition. Not in a building, but in the city of Arnhem. Photos are put on display in shops and many other places (see below). Hundreds of photos are spread out over Arnhem.

8. In a small venue, a multimedia installation allows people to print their own postcard for the Netherlands using the thousands of photos as a starting point. The installation records which photos are selected and will tell us the most popular ones when the exposition is finished. People can do the same process from their homes on a special website.

9. In addition to the exposition, two famous Dutch writers wrote a book with observations about the photos. Hans Aarsman and Anna Woltz selected the best photos for their book.

10. When the exposition ends this summer, all photos and other input collected through the exposition will serve as a document on how the Dutch see the Netherlands in the early 21st century.

The city as exposition space

The number of ways in which photos are and were put on display during the project especially struck me. Just a selection of the options used:

Photos on display in a music book store and in a hairdressers.

The inflatable exposition space and a photo in an advertising space.

And finally: photos on a billboard and as table cloth in a restaurant.

What I think was especially nice about the project

Nieuwe Groeten Uit… was the first exposition I cooperated in for the Museum of National History. Although my role in the process was limited, especially in the beginning I've spent quite some time working on the project. Some things I learned and think were nice about the project:

- Touring the country with our inflatable exposition space offered great opportunities for community events. The exposition space served as a hub for other activities on more than one occasion. When we were in Arnhem, for example, people organised workshops in photography, tours around the city and many other things.

- The enormous red inflatable exposition space sparked conversation. When the thing was in Enschede on many occasions I saw strangers talk with each other after being "shocked" by the sudden presence of the exposition.
- The cooperation with the partners in the project, FOAM and ANP, left me with some nice contacts in other organisations. On a personal and even professional level we are still in contact to help each other with other projects and ideas.
- The presentation of photos in shops at the final exposition is a thing I truly like. As most of the participating shops are small independent shops, it's a way for them to reach a larger audience. Some of the shops I visited when going through Arnhem to see the exposition are rare places that I'm happy to have discovered.

Over the past year Nieuwe Groeten Uit… gained quite some attention from different types of people. The audience always played a significant part in the project. The positive press coverage and – more importantly – the positive responses of ordinary people, have made this a very useful project to me.

30/08/2010

Building our community of objects with visitors of the Uitmarkt[9]

Last weekend my museum presented itself at the Uitmarkt in Amsterdam. The Uitmarkt is an annual festival that opens the new cultural year. Instead of handing out flyers about our upcoming expositions, we decided to ask the visitors to contribute to our ongoing project the National Vending Machine. The National Vending Machine is a travelling exposition that tells the historical and personal story behind everyday objects. All these objects and stories together we call our 'community of objects'.

I thought it was a perfect chance to put one of the ideas in Nina Simon's book The Participatory Museum to the test. Her case study about Structured Dialogue in the Signtific Game in chapter 3 describes a project where people engaged in conversation online about wild ideas. For me the beauty of the Signtific Game lies in the way people are guided by a select number of possible responses to a wild idea. This structures dialogue and makes it more productive.

We translated this online game to an offline activity around everyday objects. I believe it worked brilliantly. Over the course of the weekend a small team (three people each day) engaged in conversation with hundreds of people, individually or in groups and encouraged them to contribute to our community of objects with personal stories and new objects.

Preparation and tools used for the structured conversation

At the Uitmarkt we were looking for ideas for new objects and personal stories. In exchange for a new idea/story we offered one of our ideas: an object from the existing community of objects.

We printed 3 types of cards for the structured conversation:

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[9] *Nina Simon posted this post as a guest post on her (amazing) Museum 2.0 blog.*

- Idea cards to add a new object to our community of objects. Idea cards had to be filled with the name of the object and the reason for adding it to our community.
- "Good idea" cards to encourage an existing idea and add a story to support the suggested object.
- "That makes me think about…" cards to continue upon an idea and for example suggest a better object to represent the same idea. (I turned out people also used these cards to tell personal stories about other ideas).

We explicitly excluded the option to give a negative response. Some people, however, replaced the "good" with "bad" on the "good idea" cards. "Bad idea" cards, no matter the reason given on the card, always stopped the conversation about an idea.

Also, we put up a wall into which the cards could be inserted and added some existing objects to give people a point to start from.

Engaging people in the structured conversation

We approached people who walked past our stand. A typical conversation would start with the polite question to help us come up with new ideas for our community of objects and an explanation of the project.

In my experience almost everybody was willing to participate, even without explaining the object they would get in return. This gift, however, especially convinced younger participants.

After having explained the project:

- About *half of the people* started to think about a new idea to add to the wall immediately. Later at the day, when most obvious ideas had been posted, these people sometimes changed to one of the 2 other groups explained below. The first group mostly posted idea cards, sometimes elaborating upon an earlier idea with a "nice idea" card.

- About *a third of the people* went to have a look at the wall with existing ideas and the conversation about them. These people would be most likely to continue upon the conversation with a "good idea" or "that makes me think about..." card.
- *A small percentage of the people* started to tell a personal story about one of the existing ideas or simply a personal story. After encouragement, most of these people would add their story to the corresponding idea with a "that makes me thing about..." card. If the story was unrelated to any object, they would post a new idea or think about another story to add to an existing idea.
- A really small percentage of the people could not come up with anything at all. Quite some of them would return later to post an idea after having thought about it for a while.

After concluding the interaction, some people would encourage others to participate. Also, many participants started personal conversations with us about the other objects and their story.

The outcome of the structured conversation

Over the course of the weekend visitors posted about 250 conversation cards. I didn't count all of them, but after having looked through them, I guess about 50% were idea cards, about 35% "that makes me think about..." cards and the rest "good idea" cards.

There were some 10 conversations with 3 or more responses to an original idea. The longest conversation started with a cheese slicer (symbol of the economical Dutch), turned into a heated debate about the advantages of a cheese slicer to an ordinary knife, to give the idea to represent our "Dutchness" with an untranslatable object, the "flessenlikker" (bottle-licker) and then into a conversation about how product design in Holland has changed to make the use of this device impossible.

On an average, interaction with an individual or small group lasted from 5 to 10 minutes.

Our main challenge now is to translate these wonderful conversations to an online representation that encourages conversation as the paper version did.

Concluding thoughts

Every participant left us with a smile, even though it was raining cats and dogs at times. Quite some wonderful stories were lost as in the lively personal conversations we had with participants, not everything could be captured by pen and paper. The results of the weekend were amazing, both qualitative and quantitative, in my opinion.

I think it is quite well possible to translate the Signtific Game to a real-life experience. In next editions I would try to focus more on the "good idea" and "that makes me think about…" cards and encouraging people to use these. Also, I would like to try to turn the process around: starting with the personal stories and turning the conversation towards objects. This would give the community of objects its roots in the stories of people, which in my opinion is a strong starting point for even more interesting conversations.

08/12/2011

30 do's for designing successful participatory and crowdsourcing projects

This week at the <u>Dish conference</u> in Rotterdam I gave <u>a presentation</u> about all the do's and don'ts, tips and tricks, lessons and hands-on advice about crowdsourcing from my experience at the Museum of National History. Well… that's quite a lot to talk about. All in all I came up with some 25-30 little notes, which the audience of my presentation – in a little participatory trick – had to label as do's or don'ts.

Here's the full list, now all as do's, with some additional ideas that didn't fit in the presentation. Use it to your benefit and please add your thoughts when you feel I've missed some.

1. Ask your potential participants **a clear question** or **a clear task**. A clear question is never ambiguous, unless you're looking for (and only looking for) different ways to look at its ambiguity.
2. Run a couple of **real-life test sessions** with your question. Even if it's an online project, ask people in the street your question and see how they respond. Change the question all the time. Once people only respond with the answers you're looking for, you've found your question.
3. Ask **a question that is meaningful** to people. Questions that might be labelled emotional or highly personal are good. Not everybody will answer them, but the answers you'll get will be so much more valuable.
4. Pinpoint **very specific groups of people** you'd like to reach with your project. Design to meet their demands and answer to their needs. Preferably, involve this target group in the design of your project.
5. That said: **don't exclude anyone** from participating if they really want to.
6. **Be extremely clear about your limits** to what people can contribute, and keep these as limited as possible. Racism, hate, advertising and unlawful things are usually enough to exclude.

7. **Accept all other contributions**, regardless of the way in which you perceive their quality. Every time a person took the trouble to contribute to your project, this contribution is valuable (you can use peer reviewing to maintain overall high quality).

8. **Do not put limits on the length of a contribution**, unless these limits are an explainable part of the project. Also, **don't limit the number of contributions** per visitor, but design your system in a way that it gives all contributions equal importance.

9. Quick win: even unwanted contributions can tell you something, so when moderating, don't delete these, but make them invisible. Some of the best things I discovered about how to design good projects I learned from stuff that happened by accident.

10. **Never ever fake contributions**, not even the first 10-20 to get the project going. Even though you think you might be a great ghostwriter/actor/impersonator, many will see through it immediately. Use your own name if you want to contribute.

11. That said: there's nothing wrong with asking your inner circle to be the first to participate. **Encourage colleagues to join** in and share, **tell your friends**. All crowdsourcing is incrowdsourcing in a way, so you better have this work to your advantage.

12. Furthermore, **don't use VIPs to get your project underway**. Next to the life's story of Richard Branson or the photography of Anton Corbijn, my contribution will be so small I better not even contribute. In my experience VIPs that are not raised by the community serving the project will have a negative impact on your project.

13. If you want discussion around contributions, **specifically ask for discussion** or design your system in such a way that new contributions show up near related ones. In my experience, people prefer to present their thoughts as a new contribution, not as a reaction to another contribution.

14. **Design a straightforward process** to contributing, preferably as simple as possible and integrated in the normal things people do in your institution.

15. **Think about the different steps of the process** (making contact, getting people interested, engaging them and making them enthusiastic) and make sure all these are well designed and work towards your goal.

16. Furthermore, to your contributors, **divide the project in clearly distinguishable phases**. For instance, first everybody can tag words, then people can review earlier contributions to select the best and then final description is uploaded to your collections database.

17. **Crowdsourcing is not only about participation**. It's just as important to reach people with your project (PR, marketing, etc.), to continuously improve and redesign

your project (project management) and to evaluate and report on the project. Focus on these elements as well.

18. **Design for different types of participation**. Not everybody is a creator (deciphering words, telling stories), some people prefer commenting or rating or collecting. Make sure your project caters to these different needs and gives a place to everybody.

19. **Make participation almost invisible**, for instance by making it part of the normal stuff people do in your institution or by counting and measuring things they very easily do (like taking guidebooks or making photos).

20. Look for ways to **merge participation in the digital and physical world**. In my experience the best crowdsourcing projects seamlessly integrate online and offline, focusing on the objective rather than the choice of medium.

21. Create **a safe environment for people to contribute**. Make it somewhat private, but also special. For instance, in my experience voting and selecting works best when it is kept individually and small, whereas creating (once done) deserves a bit of an audience.

22. Don't focus on beautiful websites and wonderful installations too much, **focus on highly functional design**. Some of the best crowdsourcing projects I've seen where made on a shoestring budget with stuff that was lying around.

23. **Celebrate contributions with contributors**. All contributions are special, and everyone who dared to contribute is a hero, so openly celebrate contributions, and:

24. **Give credit to the contributors**. Unless the idea behind your project is different, make sure you overdo the amount of credit you give contributors. Keep their names next to the photos *forever*, and use their contributions in future publications of which you send them a free copy (with credit line), invite them to openings and special tours.

25. Because, **always, always give feedback on the results and process**. Keep people informed about everything. What happened with their contribution? What is going on with the project? And not just after 6 months, but all the time. Keep them in the loop.

26. Have fun and **make your crowdsourcing project fun**. Share optimistic stories with the people that participate, focus on the small successes, share the unique things that happen, and,

27. **Allow for participants to have fun**. Even if you're mostly looking for serious contributions, the contribution that is a bit off but makes you smile is always one of the best ones you will get. (Sometimes this smile is a tear.)

28. If you think the joy of participating and your continuous feedback isn't enough, **only give away relevant prizes**. iPads are cool, but hardly ever relevant.

29. **Involve the people on the floor in your galleries in the project**. Quite often, a human voice explaining the project or making people enthusiastic is the best tool to get people to participate.

30. **Continuously evaluate your crowdsourcing project** and make sure you have budget to make changes once you've started. As a rule of the thumb I use that in participatory projects, only 1/3rd of resources should be spend on the launch version, and 2/3rds should be saved for improvements and iterations.

These 30 things might not all be applicable to your future project, and probably there're countless examples of projects done differently that were successful anyway. And that's cool, because, well, as number 31 I should probably add, "You know your audience best, so work with them in designing a project rather than with expensive consultants." (You can ask a consultant to help you with that.)

14/11/2016

How to get a bookclub, boxing lesson and black metal band at your next event? Notes on a participatory process

http://themuseumofthefuture.com/2016/11/14/how-to-get-a-bookclub-boxing-lesson-and-black-metal-band-at-your-next-event-notes-on-a-participatory-process/

How do you get a bookclub, a boxing lesson and a black metal band at your next event? For instance, at the next anniversary of your university?

Of course, you could book them. Go online, look for an affordable local option, and click the appropriate button. But you probably won't. The bookclub, maybe, but the others are simply too unexpected, too random, to even be considered. You'll organise a few workshops, a smart debate, and a rapid-fire inspiration session after lunch. And that's just fine.

On 11 November 2016, the Reinwardt Academy turned 40, and we celebrated this with a festival including a bookclub, a boxing lesson, a black metal band and some forty other activities, including workshops, debates and a solid crash course museology. The lineup was so unexpected, that we called one of the stages "unexpected". At the same time, the lineup provided enough traditional elements (other stages were called "debate" and "bar") to appeal to the large and diverse audience that should appreciate such an event.

The lineup of the festival wasn't devised by a team of creative masterminds, or after a night out in town, but in a carefully designed participatory cocreation process, which I facilitated. When we started with this process months ago, nobody could have predicted what would happen during the festival. Some of the best bits were added in the last weeks, organically, unexpectedly. Watch my vlog of the event to get a sense of the day.

Talking with professor Pierluigi Sacco this weekend in Karlsruhe for a different project, I realised once again that it is this unexpectedness that is the true added value of participatory processes and community-driven projects. It is the creativity of others that adds a sparkle to the things we know and know how to do ourselves.

For the project at the Reinwardt Academy, I knew we could organise a great celebration, even if the entire participatory process would fail. Even if nobody had contributed, the team at the

Reinwardt Academy would have been professional enough to pull something off. We invited the community - between 150 and 200 of them - to participate for an unexpected sparkle. That's what creative communities are good at.

Three implications of these observations:

1. As it is not easy and certainly not cheap or fast to design a participatory process, it's probably best to go for such a process if you want to go beyond what you already know or know how to do (or think you know how to do).
2. All genuinely participatory processes contain a certain degree of unexpectedness, in the outcomes and in the process. This was true for the organisation of the festival. I didn't expect a student to suggest to participate with his band, and I didn't expect some of the celebrated names to be completely unresponsive. I didn't expect a dinosaur (really!) and I didn't expect some of the fiercest critics to (secretly) become the largest contributors (thanks!).
3. Ultimately, I think, it implies that whenever you want to broaden the scope of what you know and know how to do, a participatory process may be an ideal way to do so. This was definitely true for the Reinwardt Academy. After a field day around their vision late last year, we identified some areas where there was a gap between the ambitions of the academy and their day-to-day reality. The festival and participatory process focused explicitly on these areas, thus helping the academy to grow and develop beyond their comfort zone.

What is most definitely not true, is that a participatory process will only yield totally unexpected results. A well-designed process led by an experienced facilitator can deliver expected results, with an unexpected sparkle. As I mentioned, the lineup of the festival consisted of as many expected elements (debates, workshops, a bar) as unexpected sparkle (bookclub, boxing, black metal) as well as elements that combined both (a crash course of the best the lecturers had to offer, for instance).

I am a big fan of participatory processes. Part of this has to do with my background: I've been trained to understand that in order to advance communities, inclusive participation is the best way forward. Part of this also has to do with the unexpectedness of human creativity. There is simply no script that combines the celebration of a museology academy with boxing, bookclubs and black metal, and has hundreds of people leave with a smile on their face. Only a participatory cocreation process can create so much unexpectedness, and such a high level of audience engagement and production quality.

Meaningful engagement

15/06/2016

Museums and migration – building sustainable, peaceful communities[10]

In times of increasing migration, museums and other cultural heritage institutions can become places where diverse communities meet and work together towards a stronger society, and better future. Faced with social issues, heritage professionals have first and foremost an individual responsibility as socially aware human beings, and secondly can help their institutions to be places for social innovation.

Refugees and the European response to increasing migration are topics that deserves more than just a talk. For years, our politicians and others have talked about the boats illegally and dangerously crossing the Mediterranean, and strategies to keep our countries open, with very inconsistent action. Over the past year, this has changed radically, with individuals all over Europe taking responsibility and action. Many of you are well-trained, historically-aware and socially-conscious professionals who will have done projects with refugees and other newcomers, as individual volunteers or in your institution. I encourage you to share these stories with each other, as they always inspire and encourage action.

While in recent months Europeans opened their doors and became volunteers, cultural heritage institutions looked for ways to 'do more'. Some of them approached me, or joined me in various workshops to look for ways museums and others can act in an age of migration. I would like to share some of their stories, and provide some context based on literature, as well as recommendations based on the work and ideas of cultural heritage activists such

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[10] *This is an edited transcript of my opening keynote of the* *European Registrars Conference 2016*.

as [Diana Walters](#) of Cultural Heritage without Borders, [David Fleming](#) of Museums Liverpool, projects such as the [MeLa research project](#) and my former teachers and mentors when I still worked in human development.

My own story starts over a decade ago, as a recently graduated human development worker. In 2007, I organized a study tour through Tanzania to discover the potential of sport for human development with a group of young people, the Dutch Youth Council and [Right To Play](#). Tanzania is a surprisingly stable country in a volatile region, and therefore home to a lot of regional refugees. We spent a few weeks travelling around the country, getting to know local communities and their problems and playing sports with them. Quite often, the situations we faced were deeply emotional, especially when there were children involved. At the same time, the only thing we could do was play sports with the youngsters, something we also didn't really excel in. After an especially painful 3 to 0 loss, doubly defeated, I wondered what we were doing in Tanzania. Then one of our team overheard young children bragging. "Did you see how we beat the Mzungu? They're four times as big as us, but we beat them!"

Playing football in Tanzania

I learned a lot of things from this project, and chief among them is the understanding that even in the toughest situations, small acts such as playing a game of football, go a long way. Likewise, I am convinced that the small actions museums and cultural heritage professionals can take and are taking to improve the lives and well-being of migrants and refugees, can make all the difference in the world. I strongly believe culture, heritage and the arts can play

a larger, more active role in society, and although this quite often requires our institutions to go through a considerable transformation process, there are a lot of things we can start doing immediately that will have an impact. We can also lose at football.

Before we begin, I have to stress that although the context of this talk is the refugee crisis, most of what I will talk about is about the relationship between migrants and museums. There is a difference. As I was reminded by Diana Walters at a workshop earlier this year, refugees are often people in a crisis. When people are in a crisis, really the only thing you can do is to help them get out of it. Refugees need a place to sleep, to shower and eat, and be safe. For this, we don't need a strategy, we need humanity. An inspiring example is the holocaust memorial museum Binario 21 in Milan, which late last year opened its doors to 35 refugees and give them a place to sleep and be safe from the cold. Once the crisis is taken away, and refugees have the opportunity to stay or apply for asylum and essentially become migrants, cultural heritage institutions can start playing different roles. As such, when planning for projects, don't limit yourself to the latest newcomers from Syria, Afghanistan and Eritrea, but also consider the many other migrant communities of migrants that may have arrived decades ago.

To give you a sense of the scale of the issue: Currently, around 3% of the world's population is a migrant. Globally there are over 60 million refugees, among them some 13.5 million Syrians. Migration is a trend in the 2016 edition of Cards for Culture, but when we wrote those cards, the situation was very different from now. One of the most shocking statistics, according to the UNHCR, is that after the European deal with Turkey, the odds of dying while crossing the Mediterranean have become as high as one in 23. Imagine taking this gamble. Migration and refugees aren't limited to Europe, though, and they're not a recent invention. In some African refugee camps, people are born, grow up, and have children of their own without ever being able to go back, or move on. Most migrants live in North America, Europe and Asia, and the United Kingdom is home to the world's most diverse immigrant community. The International Organisation for Migration has created a fantastic interactive map which allows you to explore the flows of migrants between all countries in the world. When you look at the world through a lens of migration, the map changes considerably.

From migration of objects, to migrants as actors

Broadly speaking, when I build upon work from authors such as Laurence Gourievidis in the book *Museums and Migration*, I distinguish three different generations of responses from museums and institutions to the issue and topic of migration.

The traditional approach (first generation) is to consider migration to exist within objects and collections. Almost all museums are about migration, if we consider that the objects in collections are taken from one context and placed into another, sometimes against their will. Just consider the example of the Assyrian wall pieces in the British Museum. They show both stories of forced migration (slave trade) and as objects migrated to another country. Sometimes these objects regain their relevance in a contemporary debate about migration, such as in the case of the Cyrus Cylinder.

You could argue that in the first generation, migration is very much an aesthetic experience, something to marvel at. An image from a gallery in the Israel Museum comes to mind, which shows relics taken from synagogues around the world in a beautiful display of international connectedness and migrating objects and stories.

The fact that our collections are rich in stories about migration is a great starting point for museums and others that want to do something with them in a contemporary context. The recent Nemo publication *Museums, migration and cultural diversity* provides countless recommendations for action, as do museums all over the world.

Since about the 1980s and increasingly so, encouraged by new ideas about museology, we can distinguish a second generation, in which museums focus on migration as a subject. This next generation gave rise to the Migration Museum, a museum about the act of migrating, or specific groups of migrants. Examples abound, from Ellis Island in the United States, to Pier21 in Canada and the Museo de la Inmigracion in Argentine.

Migration museums often serve a specific service. Some, such as the National Museum of American Jewish History (one of my favourites), try to keep the memory alive of the often difficult journeys now established communities had to take in order to get where they are now. As such, they try to close the gap between migrants and host communities. In the words of Gourievidis: "Through heritage, the conflicting claims, aspirations, histories, memories and expectations of diverse communities meet and compete."

Migration museums do not shy away from contemporary issues. Sometimes they may even be labelled activist. The Humanity House in The Hague lets visitors experience what it feels like to be a refugee. Founded by the Red Cross, the museum clearly aims to change people's perception of migrants, and to create empathy for their hardships. They set out, in their own words, to make the unimaginable imaginable. They also proudly proclaim to be more than a museum: a platform for staging live-interviews, debates, exhibitions, events & festivals, film screenings and other activities.

In recent years, changes in technology and society have enabled the creation of a third generation of response of museums to migration. The relationship between museums and communities is changing, and as such the relationship between museums and migrant communities. No longer are communities passive visitors, but ever more often are they becoming active participants in their cultural infrastructure. In this third generation, migration is no longer in the objects or a topic, but migrants become actors in the museum.

My own personal bias is that I believe very much in the third generation of museums. I believe culture, heritage and the arts could and should play an active role in society with their audiences. That doesn't mean there is a lot of great work being done in the other two generations. Many museums are doing excellent work with migrant communities and refugees either through their collection or with dedicated exhibitions, and I hope they will continue to do so. I just happen to think it is both in the benefit of communities and museums, to become socially activist.

The museum as a social actor

The 'third generation' cultural heritage institution is primarily defined not by a collection or a mission, but by the relationship with its audience and the impact it aims to have in its community through culture, heritage and the arts. They often exist on the verge of social and cultural organisations.

Consider for instance the story of a new restaurant / cultural center in the Netherlands. In 2015 a creative community in the city of Utrecht decided they had a personal responsibility towards the challenge posed by the current wave of refugees coming to Europe, especially from Syria. Rather than waiting for the local or national government to take action, they took to Facebook and used their digital skills to raise the money for a restaurant, workshop and cultural center aimed at making connections between refugees and host communities. Quickly, they raised over 160,000 euros through crowdfunding. Their initiative opens this June under the name Restaurant Syr and aims to play an important role in the cultural landscape of Utrecht. Similarly, new initiatives such as the Arka Youth Center in Albania, or traditional institutions that have gone through a transformation such as the Rostov Kremlin, start their cultural activities not only from a collection, but from a community and an aim to have impact.

Once museums recognize migrants as a potential partner, entirely new projects become possible. At the end of 2015, the African Art Museum in Belgrade, Serbia, organised the exhibition "The border is closed". It was a collaborative exhibition between Belgrade-based artists, migrants in asylum protection centres and an NGO. The project helped the African

Art Museum to take an active role towards social issues, as well discuss their own historical exhibition practice. Not only did the project meaningfully involve migrants, it also helped the museum develop itself towards a more future-proof institution.

I believe museums and other cultural institutions have a unique possibility to play a constructive role in their communities and advance social issues. Our collections, staff, knowledge and programming are unparalleled, and most museums are relatively free in their choice of topics to address. In the workshops and sessions I've run on the theme of migration and refugees in recent months, culture, heritage and the arts were frequently mentioned as key elements of solutions and new ideas. The heritage professionals that joined those workshops were also highly interested in exploring new approaches that would help their institutions be more socially active, and came up with many simple ideas with a potential positive impact. For instance, can we help improve the relationship between host communities and newcomers if we allow them to share stories around the collections, or explain different perceptions of society based on art and artifacts? Or can we offer meaningful employment by creating safe spaces for making and tinkering, for instance a temporary makerspace as happened in Tokyo? Can we involve our communities to document our collections better?

An inspiring example of a project done in close collaboration with a migrant community is Olafur Eliasson's Green Light project in TBA21 in Vienna, Austria. During the project, 35 recent immigrants from Afghanistan, Syria, Nigeria, Tajikistan, Somalia, and Iraq engaged in a shared learning experience with the wider public, in which they made unlimited copies of a lamp designed by Eliasson. Apart from the workshop, participants engage in classes, communal activities, and artistic interventions, all arranged in collaboration with artists, cultural producers, NGOs, university students, teachers, sports-coaches and the general public. The lamps, which come with a beautiful story, are then sold, with proceeds going to the programme and various aid organizations.

An institution that works on a socially recognised goal while strengthening relationships in a community, and improving a community's ability to act, engages in social innovation. I believe, as I've written and talked about before, that museums are ideal hubs for social innovation, and that our future lies in working on real social issues together with our communities. I am happy to be part of many projects that explore this new role of cultural heritage.

Building sustainable, peaceful communities

Being active in social innovation allows museums and others to play a meaningful role in the lives of migrants and refugees. To see how, we must have a quick look at a typical conflict cycle. We are all part of the conflict cycle, although it may feel far away for many Europeans, especially in Vienna. Every conflict moves through more or less the same phases. From a (violent) conflict, first the conflict needs to be resolved. Then, communities and their relationships need to be restored, before we enter a hopefully long period of peacebuilding. Peacebuilding is the process that prevents, or at least postpones, a new conflict. In most of Europe, depending on what you consider our last real conflict, this phase now lasts anywhere between 25 and 70 years, but that doesn't mean there is no more need to actively work on peace. Peacebuilding is always relevant.

When museums work with their communities on real social issues, and when they engage in social innovation processes, they contribute to making communities sustainable (more) peaceful. Every makerspace, participatory project or collective exhibition that manages to strengthen a community and improve relationships, can be seen as an act of peacebuilding. This is especially true when such projects bring together groups between which tensions exist, such as migrants and host communities.

The rules and guidelines for social innovation and participatory projects are well documented. Download for instance Nesta's DIY toolkit or reread Nina Simon's book The Participatory Museum if you want to get started. Some of the things I've learned in my years of cultural and social innovation are to always approach people as individuals, share control, be radically inclusive (do not assume representatives of a group represent everyone in a group), to be humble and work together on an equal basis with all involved, and to be flexible enough to adapt to unforeseen situations. Most importantly of all, however, is to stay human in these processes and not become an institutional robot. You may be a highly-flawed human-being like I am, full of opinions and biases and terrible at playing football, but ultimately this is what helps people connect with you. I'm pretty sure that if we had won our matches in 2007 with excellent football and a cold distance, our already tiny impact would have been non-existent.

Call to action

My call to action today is simple. I believe museums and other cultural heritage institutions have a unique opportunity to play a role in social innovation, addressing real social issues while at the same time building new relationships between people, and strengthening

communities. As cultural heritage professionals, you are actors in this process. Play your role, no matter how small, and at the same time be champions for the transformation in your institution. Help your institution transform from a focus on collections and object, to a focus on communities and impact. This doesn't mean you should get rid of your collection. Quite the opposite: it may be what gives us our unique opportunity to engage in social innovation.

The museum of the future actively works with communities on social innovation. Today, we focused on refugees and migrants, but if you do it well for one community, you will be better for all of them. Our work starts from our collections and the many stories we can tell, and ends with sustainably peaceful societies in which we all work together on social impact. Let's go!

A museum as community centre for cultural and social development and activity

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What is a museum?

Over the course of history museums have had to reinvent themselves a couple of times. Once they housed the private collections of kings and other leaders. Their audience: the owner's friends and enemies whom he wished to impress. Then museums became centres of research, romanticised in the late 20th century in movies such as Indiana Jones. In the meantime museums had discovered their public role, often housing elaborate educational and visitor programmes.

In the early 21st century, with the Internet and the 2.0 revolution, museums all over the world flirted with yet another meaning for themselves. Visitors became actors. The recently launched YouTube Play project of the Guggenheim museum in New York exemplifies this change. Online video artists have a chance to see their work displayed in one of the most renowned museums in the world. It is my strong believe that by the year 2020 this paradigm shift in thinking about museums and their role in society will have had a lasting impact on the sector.

So, what will a museum be in 2020?

I think we can distinguish three predominant changes in museums nowadays, that will shape the museum of 2020. The first is leaving the museum building and entering public space. The second is the changing relationship with the audience. The third, more awareness of the social responsibilities of an institution.

Play outside

In June 2010 the Netherlands Architecture Institute launched UAR, an Urban Augmented Reality app for the mobile phone. As they write on their website, "sometimes we feel that our four walls are a bit limiting." The NAi has an amazing collection, but to live the full

experience of architecture you need to go outside. UAR helps visitors to walk through the city and get additional information about what they see. It also allows visitors to see things that aren't there anymore, or are not yet there.

For an architecture museum it might be an obvious choice to go outside of your museum and use the city as your exposition space. However, also other institutions have done the same. The Museum of London has the Street Museum, also an augmented reality app. The Museum of London is a history museum. Another example is the exposition Nieuwe Groeten Uit..., a cooperation between the Museum of National History, FOAM Photography Museum and the ANP Historical Archive, all from the Netherlands. Rather than choosing a traditional space in a museum for the final exposition of this crowd-sourced project, they used stores and advertisement space to display the art works.

In 2020 museums will have partly left their buildings and gone out to reach their audiences in other places. Museums will look for their audiences and be there, where they can best reach people. The building will become a hub for the museum's activities indoors and elsewhere.

The participatory and community museum

Going outside the museum walls in search for the audience elsewhere redefines a museum's relationship with its visitors. This change goes further, though. I've already mentioned Guggenheim's YouTube Play and Nieuwe Groeten Uit..., both expositions in which the audience produces the exposition. In her book The Participatory Museum Nina Simon explores numerous ways in which museums can change their attitude to visitors, from passive consumers of expositions to active producers of experiences.

A traditional museum is a teacher and its audience the students. Often the relationship is one-directional. A modern museum looks for ways to engage its audience in ever surprising ways. The 2008 For the Love of God exposition by Damien Hirst in the Rijksmuseum is probably the best-documented example of this new approach in Holland. Visitors to the exposition became a part of the art by leaving their impressions on the work online.

The new relationship of museums to their audience goes beyond crowd-sourced and participatory expositions. More museums try to build active communities and organise un-museum-alike activities to reach new audiences. The Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam is open till 10pm every Friday with a full programme of music, DJs, video shows and drinks and by doing so becomes relevant to a whole new group of visitors: young locals looking for a cultural night out.

In 2020 we will see museums as community centres, where visitors both contribute and consume. They're places where you can meet like-minded people and discuss arts, culture and history. Both seriously and relaxed, with a good coffee or cocktail and thrilling debates, dance nights and other social events.

Social responsibility

If the museum of 2020 is a community centre with influence within its walls as well as outside of them, it automatically takes on a function in society. I believe a museum has and should have a responsible position in culture, art and heritage and also in society in general.

MoMA's Alzheimer Project Meet Me is part of the MoMA's art and dementia programs. The outcomes of the project clearly indicate the project has a positive social and intellectual impact on people with dementia. The 'Verhalentafel' (Story table) developed by the Waag Society similarly helps elderly in reminiscence programmes. StoryCorps in the USA stimulates conversation between people and stores their sometimes-beautiful stories for generations to come.

All over the world museums experiment with projects that have a positive impact not only on culture, arts and heritage, but also on society as a whole. In 2020 museums will be one of the core institutions in society to close the gaps between people from different generations, backgrounds and social-economic status. Museums will be leading institutions in the public debate about difficult issues.

Once a museum was a place where the rich and powerful showed artefacts they had conquered, stolen or looted from other cultures. Or the museum was stuffed with difficult-to-understand art and objects that had lost their practical value. In 2020 a museum will be the beating heart of a living culture, easily accessible to all people and of true value to society.

At least, let's hope so.

On wine, coding and simple questions

This week I did a wine tasting with a Dutch wine critic. That was fun. Of course we talked about the difference between supermarket wines, new-world wines, old-world wines etc. Regardless of tasting over seven thousand wines per year and obviously having a very refined taste in wine, our host applauded the simple unpretentious wines most people drink. He mentioned how his very first wine came from a carton. It's simple and cheap wine that might be the first step of a life-altering journey through the wonderful world of wines.

(He also repeatedly mentioned that a lack of knowledge about wine is completely unrelated to a good taste for wine. Even beginners easily distinguish the good from the bad when testing blind. I think the same applies to (all) arts and culture.)

I recently fell in love with [Codecademy](). Not, because I'm keen to learn JavaScript, but because the very first thing their website does is to ask me to participate in the simplest way possible: by writing my name. Then, five or six of the simplest tasks later, I have earned a badge, connected my Facebook account and become addicted to (learning how to) code.

For an expert it's tempting to ask challenging questions, "What is your favourite Monet painting?" or "Which historical figure do you think is represented on this vase?" Challenging questions might provide new insights (to the expert). The answers to simple questions rarely surprise.

Last year we ran simple contests on Twitter. We asked a music-related question and a correct answer gave the opportunity of entry tickets to an event. You've done this as well; you know what I mean. Looking back, it was the simplest and most obvious question that triggered the best response. Not only in the number of correct answers, but also in the social buzz around the question. People liked answering a simple question.

Maybe the first step in many flourishing relationships with your audience is to pour them a glass of *vin de table* and ask for their name. It's the simple that gets the masses involved. Later, when they've earned some badges, there's enough time to uncork the *premier cru* and ask after the light in that beautiful Vermeer painting.

02/07/2014

Museums and technology for health and well-being

Depending on the country and culture you live in, museums, heritage and art play a vastly different role in society. In many Western countries museums are seen as a luxury product aimed at and paid for by the haves - especially in the eyes politicians of certain political ideology. Museums can be so much more than a luxury product though, and they often are.

At the MuseumNext conference in Newcastle one of my favourite sessions looked at the relation between hospitals, museums, technology and well-being. At the end of the session we had seen the average stay in a hospital being shortened by one day, and messages of hope and wellbeing being spread to patients. Not a bad accomplishment for a luxury product.

Andrew Nugee of Imagineear told about the Rhapsody project, a collaborative effort of many stakeholders including the NHS at the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital. The hospital has been awarded a museum status in 2009 thanks to its extensive collection of over 1,000 artworks. In addition the hospital hosts 350 concerts annually. The Rhapsody projects brings the artworks and newly composed music by fresh talent together in an audio guide app that can be enjoyed by the patients and their guests alike. Simple and effective. Some stats:

- 100% of patients were relaxed by the guides, 56% very much so
- 100% of patients had boredom alleviated, 63% very much so
- 100% of patients experienced a psychological lift, 27% very much so

Or, as Darren Brown, physiotherapist at the hospital, said: "Without the Rhapsody audio guide, my patient stayed in bed. But now we are using the incentive of the music to go a bit further off the ward each day." Excellent work, art!

The healing effect of museums isn't limited to the UK, recently ranked by the Commonwealth fund as having the number one health care system of 11 rich countries, though. The other project in the session came from the city defined by some as the pinnacle of luxury: Dubai.

In preparation for the opening of the Al Maktoum Hospital Museum, Dubai Culture launched a smart media campaign #wordsthatheal. Through social media and other channels words with healing power were first collected and then shared with patients in the country. Look at

the video or social buzz to get a sense of the effect of this campaign. Again: simple and effective.

Last week the Dutch Creative Industries Fund sent me the publication of this year's Hedy d'Ancona Prize for excellent architecture in health care. The publication (in Dutch, but they'll send it to you for free) showcases a set of creative innovations in healthcare that have a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of patients. Many of these innovations, such as Philips' OneSpace ceiling, are clearly related to work we do in museums. I can, for instance, only imagine the health benefits of being able to enjoy the collection of the Mauritshuis or Rijksmuseum all around me when I'm tied to my hospital bed.

Of course there are many other examples in other areas of health and wellbeing. MoMA's MeetMe comes to mind and I'm sure you know of others (please do share them in the comments!). Museums play a role in health and wellbeing and technology enables us to do so. Museums can be so much more than a luxury product.

17/08/2015

Participatory governance in cultural heritage – case studies and reflections from a recent EENC report

http://themuseumofthefuture.com/2015/08/17/participatory-governance-in-cultural-heritage-case-studies-and-reflections-from-a-recent-eenc-report/
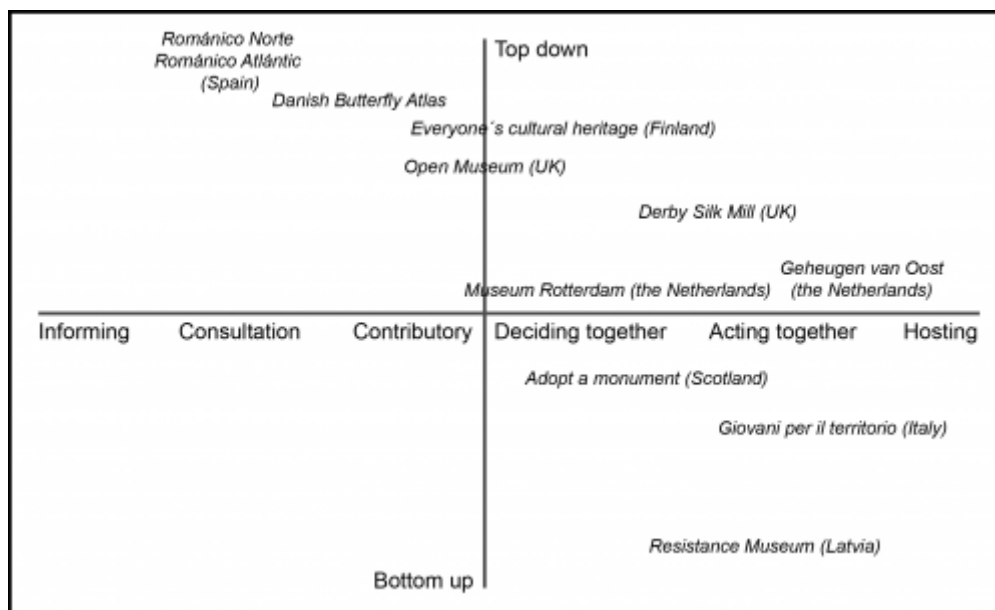
Earlier this year, many readers of this blog participated in a mapping of participatory governance practices in cultural heritage in Europe. Margherita Sani, Bernadette Lynch, Alessandra Gariboldi and myself used this input and our own research for a recent EENC report on the topic. In this post, I present and reflect on some of our findings.

It used to be that if you needed to make sure you got a funder excited about your ideas, all you had to do was add post-its at the end of your exhibition and call it a participatory experience. True or not, participation is a buzzword and as such is often used to make things sound better than they really are. When we started mapping cases of participatory governance in cultural heritage, I feared I'd find many of these: Participation to tick a funder's box.

Fortunately, we found a wide variety of cases where institutions and communities really tried and succeeded to govern cultural heritage participatory, at least to some extend. In Helsinki citizens work together on the planning and budgeting of new institutions, in the Baltics and Scotland ordinary people take responsibility for the maintenance of built heritage, while in the Netherlands and Germany people work together to document their shared heritage.

We defined participatory governance as the sharing of responsibility. Obviously, responsibility can be shared at many different levels, and in many different ways. To facilitate the discussion about this, in our report we developed a simple framework to compare cases of participatory governance. On the horizontal axis, we combined Wilcox Ladder of Participation with Nina Simon's participation framework to distinguish different levels of participation. On the vertical axis, we show where a project has been initiated: bottom-up or top-down?

A framework diagram with a vertical axis labeled "Top down" at the top and "Bottom up" at the bottom, and a horizontal axis with categories: Informing, Consultation, Contributory, Deciding together, Acting together, Hosting.

- Románico Norte / Románico Atlántic (Spain)
- Danish Butterfly Atlas
- Everyone's cultural heritage (Finland)
- Open Museum (UK)
- Derby Silk Mill (UK)
- Geheugen van Oost (the Netherlands)
- Museum Rotterdam (the Netherlands)
- Adopt a monument (Scotland)
- Giovani per il territorio (Italy)
- Resistance Museum (Latvia)

Cases towards the bottom and far right of the framework tend to make the best stories, including my current favourite about the Teatro Sociale of Gualtieri, where a group of young people independently of government decided to renovate an old theatre.

It's a great joy studying the different cases and I greatly recommend you do so. Especially the extended case studies and special categories (which include the European Cultural Routes, UNESCO World Heritage Sites and others) provide pointers and starting points for institutions willing to experiment with participatory governance themselves. The shorter case studies present bright ideas and different approaches to participation, which can easily be copied.

The variety in the case studies is so wide, that it may seem that when it comes to participatory governance 'anything goes'. This is not true. Even when projects are initiated bottom-up, they require a deliberate decision to be participatory, conscious design for participation and quite often courage and persistence on the part of the organiser. Participatory governance doesn't happen automatically and it certainly does not happen by ticking a funder's box. As the case of the Derby Silk Mill shows, you may actually have to convince the funder that something that is to some extend governed participatory is worthy of funding (it took them years).

For me, the mapping exercise poses two immediate questions:

1. Can institutions gradually move up the Wilcox/Simon ladder of participation, or does such change require a disruptive transformation? I.e. can a contributory project such as the Danish Butterfly Atlas over time turn into a project where institution and community act together? The well-documented case of the Geheugen van

Oost (detailed case study in the report) in the Netherlands seems to prove it can happen, but I don't know of many other cases where they achieved such long-term sustainable change.

2. What is the relation between the origin of a project and its sustainability? I.e. can a bottom-up project ultimately be as sustainable as cultural heritage institutions are traditionally designed to be? (Or likewise, can a strictly hierarchic top-down institution ultimately be sustainable in a time where community engagement is so important?). Various cases we found, such as the Teatro Sociale in Gualitieri, seem to prove there is not necessarily a relation between origin and sustainability. Bottom-up is just as long term as top-down.

The mapping exercise and report were only a first step in a wider project researching participatory governance in cultural heritage. I'll be keeping an eye on the developments and will be sure to share any further developments with you on this blog.

Read the full report '[Mapping of practices in the EU Member States on Participatory governance of cultural heritage](#)'.

New media and technology

11/04/2015

Games, gamification and the optimal conditions for learning

I've become a curator. Recently, I've inherited an immense collection of knowledge that I need to transfer to a receptive, but fickly audience. The museum I work for is the institute of parenthood and my audience just one, but a very loyal (and forgiving) one: my son. We're the ideal museum - free access and wifi, flexible opening hours, great coffee - but also an extraordinary one: Instead of designing exhibitions, we play games.

The rational behind games and play as an educational tool can be found in any David Attenborough documentary, "To the young cubs, play is serious business. Through their innocent games they learn invaluable lessons about survival in the wild." (Can you hear his voice?) The 21st century and its call for life-long learning has made us all cubs, even if our wild is a modern office environment.

Good games and play are fun. It's what sets them apart from work. A brilliantly sticky quote by Sebastian Deterding, paraphrasing Raph Koster says that "fun is learning under optimal conditions". In other words, we learn from everything that is fun and when we're having fun, we're learning. This is a convincing call for all facilitators (parents, teachers, museums) to use games and play as much as we can.

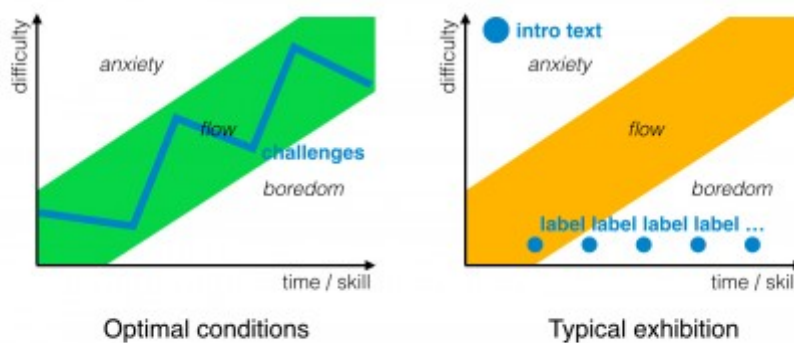And we do, or have been trying to do recently. Codeword: Gamification. By adding common game elements to traditional systems, we make them more fun and enhance learning. Unfortunately, as people like Adrian Hon from *Zombies, Run!* fame point out, it doesn't work that way. Gamification - leaderboards, badges, achievements - doesn't necessarily create games; it doesn't necessarily stimulate play.

The reason is 'optimal conditions'. Fun is only learning under optimal conditions. I can give my son any numbers of points and stickers for building a better tower with his wooden bricks: he doesn't care. He cares about the tower and playing with his dad. Gamification gimmicks don't create optimal conditions.

What does, depends on who you listen to. I like the four simple conditions by Murphy et al. for good, engaging games:

1. Use clear tasks
2. Provide feedback
3. Balance challenges with skill and time
4. Minimize distractions

I can directly relate these to my son's building exercises, but also to most museum projects. Surprisingly few museum projects create the conditions above (and therefore, surprisingly few are fun and learning experiences). Consider, for instance, the average exhibition. We have most fun, and therefore learn most, when the challenges we face are in line with our skills. If the challenges are not, they create either anxiety or boredom (Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow). Here's how that works for most exhibitions' #1 challenge, reading text:

Optimal conditions   Typical exhibition

Of course, there are exceptions (I like the traveling Tutankhamun exhibition, which carefully unfolds the story increasing the level of detail and challenge as you go along). What's not an exception, is that any of the other four conditions is broken to fix the lack of flow. A common solution: adding distractions by gamifying the experience. Just don't!

All learning is a game and as learning can happen always and everywhere people are exposed to new ideas and insights (a workshop, a museum), almost everything is a game. At the same

time, typical gamification is not the best way to create games. Badges, leaderboards and achievements are not automatically fun; they're just as likely distractions. In my museums, we don't use them. We play and have fun and much like Attenborough's cubs, although it's not always apparent, I'm sure there's a lot of learning going on.

04/07/2013

What MOOCs and webinars can teach us about digital engagement

http://themuseumofthefuture.com/2013/07/04/what-moocs-and-webinars-can-teach-us-about-digital-engagement/

MOOCs and other digital learning and discovery tools are without a doubt one of the most exciting new opportunities the digital age offers museums. I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to seeing the MoMA and the American Museum of Natural History (amongst many others) engage thousands with their online courses. It's a big experiment and - as David Greenfield writes on Edgital[11] - there's still a lot we don't know about the potential of MOOCs for museums and museum education.

In recent months I've been facilitating and participating in quite a few webinars and MOOCs and I've been blown away by their potential to make things happen. At the same time I've more than once seen the limits of these tools, such as the ease at which participants get left behind ('dropouts') and how they reaffirm existing power relationships (you need to have Internet access and often speak English). In a newspaper article in Belgium, digital media and education are even said to be a dangerous combination.

Nonsense, of course. Because even if it's true that contemporary MOOCs might be limited in scale and scope and world-changing power, there's no way back to a world in which paper, chalk and blackboards rule. With the number of smart people thinking about digital education, future iterations of the same idea (xMOOCs, cMOOCs, COOCs, SOOCs or however they'll be called) will without a doubt fulfil most of today's promises.

With over 3 million people enrolled in Coursera and many millions more in similar programmes as well as with thousands of facilitators running webinars, there's not just a lot of potential in digitally enabled and enhanced learning and discovery but also a lot to learn from all the ideas and energy this momentum generates. I for one learned tons about storytelling and online involvement from spending four months in Philip Zelikow's modern

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[11] *Unfortunately, this article has since disappeared.*

[history](#) MOOC. And I learned a whole lot about digital engagement from [facilitating a wide range of webinars](#). These lessons apply, I think, to all digital engagement:

- **It may be *massive*, but it's *pointless* if there's no personal connection**
  In Philip Zelikow's class you could see when something exciting was about to happen in world history (if, like me, you failed to see it coming even in retrospect): he would have a little smile while introducing the next topic. The smile sparked many forum discussions: participants loved it! Here was a man, highly knowledgeable, very respectable, and still very human and open. Like many students I felt a personal connection with the professor, which was enforced by his regular appearance in the forums and regular, friendly emails. This must have involved a massive amount of work for the Zelikow and his team, which I think is a prerequisite for any facilitator trying to achieve digital engagement.

- **Not social media; social *social***
  Of course, of course! you say, learning and discovery are primarily social activities, even when done online. Running webinars has taught me that to be meaningful they need coffee breaks, chitchat between facilitators and participants, gossip between sessions and all the other things that make learning and discovery in real life so much fun. Digital engagement is not just social media, it's social *social*. Talking, human interaction, non-verbal communication, maybe even touch and smell (but all that in its digital form). In digital engagement, social media are a distracting tool.

- **Recognition and rewards**
  Fourteen weeks, at least three to four hours per week is a significant investment in anything and especially in a voluntary online course about modern history. Yet it is nothing compared to the investment ordinary people make in online communities, building profiles, staying up-to-date. To avoid dropouts, MOOCs continuously experiment with recognition and rewards to keep their audience engaged. It doesn't have to be much: a friendly thank-you and PDF showing your accomplishments go a long way in the digital age.

- **Online doesn't mean alone**
  The biggest eye-opener for me is that although online communication is often one to one (one organisation talking to one individual in the audience), in many of my webinars the 'one' on the receiving end actually was a group of participants sharing the same laptop. I've heard of MOOC study groups where people watch the videos together. People online are not necessarily (physically) alone. When thinking about digital engagement this means the people at the receiving end will talk, discuss and exchange ideas outside of the scope of the digital environment and maybe only report

some key words back. This provides huge opportunities for facilitators in webinars and other online processes.

Working with MOOCs, webinars and other digital learning and discovery tools is one of the most exciting things I've been doing in recent months. I believe the results I achieve in teams with clients using primarily online tools and the developments I make myself as a professional are very valuable and worth investing in. I'm sure these are just some of the lessons to be learned and I'm curious to hear what your thoughts are. Thanks in advance!

Charming tour guide versus mobile 3D AR app

http://themuseumofthefuture.com/2010/10/25/charming-tour-guide-versus-mobile-3d-ar-app/

Boris Micka advocates the use of technology to make it feel as if it were human. His most innovative tech projects cannot beat the experience of Russian babushkas who know everything about a museum. So what happens when a charming tour guide and one of the coolest museum apps in the world compete?

The Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam

The playground for this epic museum battle is Rotterdam. This harbour town hosts so much great architecture and stories about it, past, present and future, that it really helps if someone or something tells you where to look. Last week I went on a tour through the city called *Metropolder* organised by the Netherlands Architecture Institute, NAi. The exact same tour is available in NAi's UAR app, which uses (3D) augmented reality and Layar technology to tell stories about the buildings in the city.

UAR lets you experience the history and future of architecture with photos, audio and additional information. It also contains 3D models of some future buildings, so you can get an amazing feel of what the city will look like in the future. Sometimes with dramatic consequences, but I'll get back to that later.

The tour I did was hosted by two guides and had some 10 participants. It focused on Rotterdam's relation with water. Polders, harbours and dikes played a central role in most of the stories. The day was cold and a bit rainy. During the tour I tried to use UAR to find additional information to the stories told by its competitor: the real-life tour guide.

Tour guide versus mobile app

Most of the differences between a tour guide and a mobile app are obvious. Let's call the tour guide Karla (not her real name) and the app UAR (real name) and compare them.

1. **UAR knows way more than tour guide Karla.**
    The vast amount of information in the app really adds an extra layer to the tour. The only thing UAR misses is a link to the Internet to find out even more about building

(e.g. using the Wikipedia API), but with all the information at hand this is hardly a problem.

2. **Tour guide Karla knows better what you'd like to know.**

   With all the information in UAR, you might feel rather overwhelmed. Personally, I prefer anecdotes to plain information. UAR can't make this distinction, whereas Karla can. A good tour guide can personalise a tour way better than I've seen any mobile app do so far.

3. **Tour guide Karla knows exactly where you are and where to look.**

   I don't know about you, but I'm always lost when I try to use Layar technology. Apart from global direction and distance, it doesn't tell much about where to look. Karla can tell way better where certain details are and can point you there.

4. **UAR makes it easier to imagine past and future.**

   No matter how vivid the stories of a tour guide about how a building used to look, or will look in the future, they can never beat the photography and 3D models in UAR. The direct relation between present, past and future is a great experience and makes UAR very valuable.

5. **Tour guide Karla makes a tour a social event.**

   No matter how you look at it, experiences on a mobile phone are mostly solitary experiences. A good tour is not. It connects people with each other and encourages conversation between strangers. Although UAR makes it tempting to share a phone and experience past and future together, it cannot beat the real-life tour guide.

6. **UAR is more flexible than Karla.**

   The reason I usually don't take tours is that I have to adjust my speed and interests to other people. Usually other people don't like the same stuff as I do. UAR allows you to discover the city in your own tours, or certain tours at your own speed. It doesn't hurry you along or keep you waiting.

7. **UAR is more dramatic, but doesn't offer the comfort Karla does.**

   I promised to come back to the dramatic impact UAR can have. My sister lives in Rotterdam, 18 floors up with a view on the river. It's beautiful! However, between her apartment and the river a new building is planned. Of course, you can imagine the dramatic result for her view of this development, but with UAR it becomes terribly clear (see photo below). No way imagination can beat that! For UAR, however, that's also a given fact. Okay, your amazing view will be lost, deal with it. A tour guide might respond to your desperation.

View on the Maas after a new building will be completed.

The verdict: is a charming tour guide better than a mobile app?

NAi's UAR is an amazing app. Definitely one of the best museum apps I've used, especially because of its 3D models in combination with AR and a vast amount of architectural information. Its predefined tours are also a great plus, as they give guidance in the myriad of data. I'm happy they'll be rolling the app out in more cities in the Netherlands.

Of course the app can be improved. I don't think it's meant to replace traditional tour guides, but there's some things the app might learn from charming guides such as Karla:

- Using the same 3D AR technology the app might point to specific points of interest, using big arrows that point at the exact detail.
- Personalisation of the information you receive ("I'd like to hear anecdotes", "I only care about this type of building") and in-tour adjustment of these setting ("tell me more about…") can make the app more interesting to a larger audience.
- Encouragement to engage in social interaction in the app could make the experience more intense and more social ("the shop owner has a wonderful story about the building, ask him…")

The other way around a tour guide might learn from the mobile app. For instance to bring historical photography and future impressions of some of the buildings in the tour. I've seen this happen and if it does, the sharing of photos (like the sharing of smartphones) add to the social interaction between participants.

Personally, of course I like the mobile app and UAR especially. But I also enjoy the social event a good tour guided by a charming tour guide can be. In NAi's tour the combination of a tour guide and the UAR mobile app combined the best of both worlds. So, unfortunately, I cannot say who won this epic museum battle. But then that's a typical thing for epen.

05/09/2013

Roles and responsibilities of a Chief Digital Officer in your museum

In an article on Forbes this week Lisa Arthur makes a compelling case why every organisation should have a Chief Digital Officer (CDO), especially now. From the number of comments and mentions on social media I take it the idea resonates well in the cultural sector, and rightly so. I think a Chief Digital Officer may be the most important 'hire' of your organisation in the coming years.

The Chief Digital Officer is a new senior leadership position. CDOs are "digital-savvy, business-driven leaders" who turn organisations from traditional to data-driven models. The article gives a broad description of the characteristics of such a leader, many of which I fully agree with (and think every professional leading position in an innovative organisation should have): technical expertise, cross-functional finesse, silo-bursting prowess, global perspective, etc.

"[T]he CDO is charged with making decisions about how data and customers relate." This role, I think, is especially relevant for museums, which - after all - are data-heavy institutions by design. In our Digital Engagement Framework, the CDO is the person who designs and implements the strategies, processes and technologies needed to connect your organisation's assets (e.g. collection, metadata) with your audiences.

Looking at museum, I think the roles and responsibilities of a Chief Digital Officer should include:

- **Make sure the museum's data is 'open'**, not just for the outside world, but also internally: your audience has to be able to use the data you produce to better their own work and your audience should have easy access to it.
- **Connect 'data' with audiences**. Make sure your collections, events and all other assets find their way to the people who might benefit from them. If 'open' is a more passive approach to data, 'connect' is its active equivalent.

- **Use insight in audience to prioritise data**. Even though we live in a world full of data, a lot of interesting data is still not digitally available. The CDO should use her knowledge about the organisation, its mission and audiences to make sure the right data becomes available.
- **Advocate the use of data in an organisation**.
- **Use data creatively**. Unlike for-profits, I feel museum have the added responsibility to bring the wonderful world of data to people in creative ways. The much appreciated Rijksstudio of the Rijksmuseum is an example of this, as are many other great museum projects.
- **Make data sustainable.** Maybe the most important role, or responsibility, is to keep the data up-to-date and available for eternity. Data should be treated like our most precious collection objects.

Unfortunately, nobody's hiring, so even when your CEO is now convinced you need a CDO, chances are slim you'll get one on board anytime soon. This brings me to the most important thing I take away from the article: *Many museums already have a CDO.* He or she is just called 'information specialist', 'digital manager', etc. To lift the person already responsible for data to the C-suite - with the responsibilities but also the power this implies - is the real message of the article.

Of course, this requires training (leadership, management, fund raising, etc.), courage and some structural adjustments on the side of the organisation, but I believe it's a development we will see in the near future. So, brace yourself, you might have to start wearing a suit to work very soon;-)

13/03/2010

Social media guidelines: Why, what and how to use them?

Lately I've been getting a lot of questions about social media guidelines for museums. There's been a lot written about the use of social media guidelines, so I'll limit this post to my experiences.

Why use social media guidelines?

More and more people join social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook or blog about their life or work. Not everybody is a digital native with perfect understanding of the subtleties of the web. I think guidelines are to guide these people towards a rewarding and safe use of social media.

Social media guidelines help people:

- To benefit from the opportunities of social media.
- To engage in a constructive way in online conversation, be it about a museum or their favourite pet.
- To avoid doing things online they might regret, personally or professionally.
- To find their way in your organisation when they discover conversations about your organisation on the web.
- To feel comfortable while writing about their work online.

Social media guidelines are meant to enrich people's online behaviour, not to limit it.

What should your social media guidelines look like?

The Online Database of Social Media Policies is a great resource to be inspired. However, I do believe most of the policies included are way too long and difficult to use. It works best to have short hands-on statements that focus on:

- The kind of behaviour that should be encouraged.
- The kind of behaviour that is definitely not allowed.
- How to deal with conversations about your organisation online.

Examples could be:

- Threat your colleagues and partners with respect.
- Do not react emotionally on conversations about your organisation.
- Inform communications about any online conversation of our organisation.

I do believe it's best to reach a common understanding about the specific your social media guidelines within your organisation.

How to use social media guidelines?

Simple: as guiding principles. Show and explain them regularly to all employees and share best practices. I always emphasise why the guidelines help the employees and the organisation similarly.

Social media guidelines give your organisation a fixed set of rules about which to talk in case of emergencies, trouble or under stress. They delegate responsibilities and engage all employees in the efforts of the organisation to have a healthy and active online presence.

How do you use social media guidelines in your organisation? Have you ever had to use them? I'm curious to know about that. Thanks!

21st century storytelling

18/10/2015

Museums, stories and the collective process to engage the largest possible audience

http://themuseumofthefuture.com/2015/10/18/museums-stories-and-the-collective-process-to-engage-the-largest-possible-audience/

Netflix know the exact moment you get addicted to any of their series. For House of Cards, it's episode 3; for Mad Men, episode 6. This knowledge will help Netflix in the future tell stories that stick even better. The research reminded me of work Seb Chan did when still at the Powerhouse Museum, where he was able to understand visitor behaviour in exhibitions thanks to wifi tracking and other tricks. Such insights help design exhibitions that tell the most impactful story.

Much more than by their collection, museums are defined by the stories they tell. Erik Schilp defines museum entrepreneurship as the creative and strategic process with which one effectively and sustainably translates *a story* to the largest possible audience (emphasis mine).

Clearly, to reach the largest possible audience the story of a museum goed beyond its exhibitions, and designing and telling the story is the responsibility of more than the exhibition designers and tour guides. Storytelling is a process involving creative and strategic considerations. Successful museums tell a consistent story across a range of media, tailored to different audiences, in everything they do.

An example of such a museum is the Museum of Broken Relationships. Their story of relationships that went wrong, reaches its audience through its permanent and travelling exhibitions, but also through their merchandise (erasers!), digital presence, community, publishing activities and even their cafe. They're a brand that tells a consistent story to its many audiences.

Storytelling is a difficult art. Although research like Netflix's can show us what *worked*, it's hard to predict what will work, especially across cultural boundaries, different demographics and the time span of museum strategies. Hollywood producers can make use of expensive algorithms that take into account thousands of factors to predict the success of a movie. Yet, generally speaking, in such case data analytics does not tend to outperform the hunch. (And I do not know yet of similar algorithms for museum stories and strategies.)

For me, this means storytelling should always be a collective process to look for the story that best fits the purpose and specifics of any institution. In Creativity Inc., Ed Catmull described how they shape such processes at Pixar. It's a tough process and it requires a lot of guts, but Pixar's successes show how this can help tell stories that everyone hears about. These processes shouldn't be limited to the creative team either. First of all, because everyone is creative when given the right tools. More importantly, because telling a story to as many people as possible is a task for as many people as possible.

'Story' is the first of eight themes of the Museum Edition of Cards for Culture. The theme deals with all the ways in which you can tell your story, from exhibitions to education to publishing. When you use the cards in any of the suggested gameplays, they help you discover and design the impact of your story on the other elements of a successful and sustainable museum strategy. You can do this alone, or in a collective process with your team and other stakeholders.

05/11/2013

Space (and presence) as a medium

EyeWalk is a tablet tour that turns the building of the Eye Film Museum in Amsterdam into the stage for a movie. The carefully crafted script by Godmother Films uses the architecture of the building as one of the media to tell a story about suspense in movies. Even the random visitors you bump into while walking the tour (headphones on, tablet in front of your face) act as extras in the experience. It's an extremely well produced tour/film/game. 15 minutes feel like 5.

Papa Sangre II is a survival game for iOS played only with your ears. It has you walking around your living room (or airport lounge or wherever you are playing) with your eyes closed following sounds, occasionally screaming (this doesn't do anything, but I cannot help it). Papa Sangre is all about space and the suspension of disbelief. Again, it's well-produced and one of the most exciting ghost rides I've been in in my life.

Years ago I was blown away by the exhibition Intimate Strangers in Foam. Two strangers, one audio tour, a darkened space and little headlights to explore the art. Intimate indeed, as I moved through the space tied to someone I didn't know. It's still one of my favourite exhibitions of all time, and one that can easily be scarier than zombies. I even remember the name of the artist on display.

It's still a long way from being pushed around the Old Vic Tunels by make-believe riot police and not being entirely sure if you're still part of the play you paid for, but I love it how handheld devices allow us to turn space into a medium when we're telling stories. As the biggest medium ever devised, space is probably one of the most powerful ones as well.

Presence is the twin brother of space in the examples above. I felt quite self-conscious when I pushed through a group of people having their Friday afternoon beer with my EyeWalk on. Papa Sangre challenges you to "get up" and take a firm stand wherever you are. Intimate Strangers, well, couldn't have happened without present strangers. *Our Days of Rage*, the play I referred to, used the audience present in many ways. You *had* to be there, no hiding, no lagging behind. Intense.

I'm starting to realise the greatest gift smartphones and other handheld devices bring us is that we can take skilled storytellers and creative storylines everywhere. The stage is no longer limited to the stage. Forget about access anywhere: who really cares about your opening hours when they're in the middle of an exciting spacial experience?

Most museums are places defined by space and - to a large extend - presence. Theatre has you sitting down (most of the time), an exhibition moving around (most of the time). Maybe it's time to turn space and presence into a medium, rather than merely a precondition. For an example of what this could look like, do a EyeWalk next time you're in Amsterdam or close your eyes and play Papa Sangre in your gallery tomorrow. Enjoy!

Digital storytelling: How to tell a story that stands out in the digital age?

Yesterday I gave two 'interactive sessions' in probably the most beautiful room I ever worked in. Wall-high Sol LeWitt murals and wide windows with a view over central Leuven formed the backdrop for a lively discussion on digital storytelling in cultural and heritage institutions on occasion of the Mediation in Transition conference in M-Leuven.

To address the most important issue first: there is no such thing as digital storytelling. There's only storytelling in the digital age, and frankly speaking this isn't much different from storytelling in the age of hunters, gatherers, dinosaurs and ICQ. This doesn't mean it cannot be challenging to tell a story people react upon online. On any given moment, hundreds of stories are unfolding around you, on Facebook, Twitter, and in niche social spaces. Many of them are much more interesting than anything a museum can possibly offer, at least, in the *right here right now* (because Justin Bieber might have really died this time, and you don't want to be the last person to retweet that, do you?).

So, how do you tell a story in the digital age that stands out, captures people's attention and gets them to act, engage with your institution?

My favourite story for quite some time now and one I've been showing in workshops around the world is the story of the Troy public library. The surprising twists, genuine engagement and originality of the project are a constant source of inspiration for me and I can't get enough of it, even after having heard and told the story many times.

There are a lot of reasons this story works very well in the digital age. Generalising these into lessons to apply to all stories in the digital age, I find four:

1. The story is really unique and unexpected. Unexpected content is one of the three ingredients for a successful viral according to Kevin Allocca in his great TED talk on what makes videos go viral on YouTube, a lesson that also works for other forms of content.

2. The story is told in the public space, in 'active communities'. The streets, Facebook, general media: all the places where the story happens are easily accessible for most people and designed to foster discussion. Unlike your own website or Tuesday night discussion group people come to these places for stories and are, therefore, more likely to respond to them.

3. The story is about the audience. The most important lesson I took from Nancy Duarte's brilliant book *Resonate* is to treat your audience as a hero whenever you tell them something. People should not only be involved and directly addressed, it should be their story, the thing they are telling, to make it stand out. People usually listen to themselves.

4. The story helps create real life connections, has a physical component. The most heavily discussed issue in Leuven, I believe each great story in the digital age needs a physical element to really turn people from simply interested into highly enthusiastic.

Looking at cultural institutions I believe point 1 is the easiest, as most of our content, collections, objects, etc. are truly unique and unexpected to most people. Point 3 is definitely the hardest. We're very much used to telling stories that are about ourselves and the things we own (our collection) or care about (or values, mission). It takes creativity to tell a story that's about the audience and even have them tell this story themselves, while at the same time making sure we get our message across.

At the same time, countless museum guides, educators and enthusiastic volunteers engage visitors in such stories on a daily basis. Telling a great story is an art, it's a skill, but it's certainly not something incredibly tech and difficult. You certainly don't have to be a social media guru in order to tell a great story, even online (it might even help *not* to be a social media guru…).

What I take away from the sessions in M-Leuven is that we'll have to simplify our thinking about digital storytelling. It's storytelling, and 'digital' is just the time we're in. Of course is important to know and understand the tools of the trade and the options they provide for engagement and interaction, but they have nothing to do with the story. I don't even think the mechanics of the web are that different from the mechanics of any group of school kids walking through your gallery (although the web might be slightly more forgiving).

Digital is not the difficult part in digital storytelling. Storytelling is.

09/04/2012

Engagement and outreach

Whenever I feel like there is an occasion for a party, I always quickly reject the idea. I'm terrible at throwing parties. It's not that I'm not a good cook, don't know about wine or have trouble keeping a conversation going. It's not even that I know my musical taste is a bit unusual or have too few friends. My problem with throwing parties is that I know I will never quite invite anybody, or ever publicly announce the event.

This, unfortunately, is a problem lots of people are having when it comes to their digital strategy. We're great (or at least getting better) at designing engaging online content, yet terrible at reaching people with it.

Earlier this year a theatre company in the Netherlands made a production about making news. For months they researched how to manipulate the news and how to get topics trending. The accompanying website was nicely made, with bonus materials and even an interactive YouTube video. The only problem: nobody knew about the production. They had studied making news, but forgotten to be news themselves, as the people involved had to admit reluctantly in an interview.

There's a subtle but important different between providing good engaging online content and actually reaching people with it. I call this difference the difference between engagement and outreach and it's a tough difference if I consider many of the projects I've been advising about in the past months.

Engagement is about designing projects (expositions, websites, events) that turn occasional passers-by into enthusiasts willing to go that extra mile for you. Crowdfunding and other C-words are all about engagement. Engagement upgrades your existing audience and if you're very good at it, might even increase your reach via the enthusiasts. Engagement is done, usually, within the safety of your institution's building, website or social media presence.

Outreach is in many ways the opposite of engagement. Outreach[12] is about designing strategies that reach people wholly unknown to you and connect them with your institution. Advertising is all about outreach, as is the community manager proactively responding to Google Alerts and mingling in discussions on external blogs. Outreach increases the number of people you can later engage. Outreach is done, usually, outside of the comfort zone of your institution's building, website or social media presence.

Every successful digital strategy combines engagement and outreach activities. Outreach connects with people and invites them to come by, and engagement turns them into enthusiasts. Both require different methodologies, different tools and especially a different mind-set, though.

If you, like me when I'm throwing a party, feel like you're pretty good at engagement but still don't reach a whole lot of people, it will pay off to focus more on outreach activities in your digital strategy. Spend more time inviting people, connecting with new target groups, leaving the safety and comfort of your own online environment to build a presence in others. Even on the social web, outreach is just as important as engagement.

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[12] *I've learned that the word* outreach *has different meanings to different people. I use it simply because it implies "reaches out" to people.*

Futureproof institutions

22/10/2015

New leadership for new ideas

At the start of my working life, when people still hired me for my hands instead of head, I would use my excess intellectual energy to improve the work I was doing. I'd redo the archives or tinker with a machine to optimise its output, and I'd learn to race pallet trucks to improve logistics. My behaviour made sure employers liked me, as my ideas helped their business move forward.

The challenge of cultural leadership (any kind of leadership) is that in a rapid changing world, organisations need more ideas to move forward than a few formal leadership positions can come up with, especially when these leaders are also highly involved in management tasks.

This is less an issue of ideas, than the misconception that leadership is a position, rather than an attitude. There are countless great ideas for the future of museums. Unable to find their place in traditional hierarchies, these ideas often result in new, competing organisations. According to Lizzie Muller and Scott East, this challenges traditional leaders and organisations, and requires new approaches to educate future leaders:

> *"The classic model of cultural leadership education aims to propel mid-career professionals towards directorships. (…) But young practitioners are redefining the future of the arts and culture right now – often through independent spaces and self-initiated projects."*

> *"This form of grassroots leading by example operates under the mainstream radar and is rarely recognised as leadership. That's because we mistakenly tend to equate leadership solely with authoritative or hierarchical, rather than relational power. That mistake is bolstered by popular mythologies) of the cultural leader as either*

artistic genius or strategic businessperson – both of which rely on individual
prominence, influence and experience as hallmarks of leadership."

More than anything, leadership is an attitude, not a hierarchical position. The people best suited to sit at the top of a hierarchy may even not have any of the characteristics typically associated with leaders. Such Level 5 Leaders, according to Jim Collins, combine extreme professional will with personal humility. They create the perfect conditions for others to succeed. Such leadership is very different from the artistic genius with a management course still common in many cultural institutions, and may be much better suited for the challenges organisations face today.

The need for a change in leadership is acknowledged widely. Robert Thorpe and Lucy shaw write:

> *"The sector needs leaders who can respond to these challenges and who are prepared*
> *to experiment and take risks with new business models and ways of working whilst*
> *supporting and creating a climate for new ideas."*

In a recent HBR article, Francesca Gina and Bradley Staats describe how leaders (and organisations) behave to become fertile ground for new ideas and learning. Successful leaders focus on failure as much as success; they hire people for their potential and not their past achievements; they focus on long term planning and vision instead of their daily to-do's (they are, after all, not managers); they take the time to think. Just think: how many 'leaders' do you know who are stuck in endless meetings and their email inbox?

The challenge of leadership is not only a challenge for leaders, though. It's a challenge for everyone. As Cards for Culture co-developer Erik Schilp mentioned (quoted on the wall of at least one major museum conference):

> *"The qualities of leadership are no longer reserved just for the leaders."*

Neither are the responsibilities of leadership. The type of grassroots leading by example Muller and East mention are not optional for organisations serious about moving forward in this century, they're obligatory. The formal leaders create the culture and conditions for ideas, while the grassroots leaders have the responsibility to generate and implement them. Together, they move the organisation forward, regardless of their positions.

A job description for future museum professionals

We're looking for: People that help museums stay relevant in the 21st century. Job title: community manager, digital engagement officer, online marketeer, audience curator, hands-on project manager, educator (etc. etc.). Your profile: *hmm…*

In general, the debate on '21st century skills' or - put differently - what we expect in terms of skills, attitudes, behaviour and knowledge from future colleagues is diverse and inspiring. In the museum-context, it might even be more complicated. Studying various reports of such skills (etc.), such as the excellent *Museums, Libraries and 21st Century Skills* (PDF), most of the focus is on skills that help people design the future. Museums, obviously, and museum professionals also play an important role in maintaining the past. This duality is obvious in the ICOM definition:

> *A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development ('future'), open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches ('past'), communicates and exhibits ('future') the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education ('future'), study ('past') and enjoyment ('future').*

Note that I use 'future' and 'past' to make a distinction between the internal, traditional role of a museum and the outgoing, also-traditional-but-now-key-to-receiving-funds role that can be considered to focus on the future of the institution.

As museums realise they need to evolve in order to stay relevant, within them a continuous debate begins between the 'past' and the 'future'. And, as much as the 'traditional' museum professionals need to be comfortable with the 21st century, the future professionals need to be comfortable with the traditional role of museums in society, which is probably why maybe the number 1 question I get from clients and at conferences is to help define a profile for the future museum professional.

Looking at jobs at the 'future' end of the continuum in the ICOM definition, based on the reports above and many discussions, I think the ideal future museum professional is:

- A practical communicator who can (help) uncover stories hidden in the collection, exhibitions, etc. and can make them resonate with a wide variety of audiences.
- A team player not only in her own team (communication, online, etc.) but especially in teams that contain people from all over the organisation.
- A creative, pro-active problem solver who always looks with fresh eyes at the organisation and the things it does to generate ideas for experiment and improvement even where none are (desperately) needed.
- Absolutely passionate about and undoubtedly loyal to the vision of the organisation.
- Well aware of the wider societal, cultural, economic and political environment in which the organisation operates.
- Responsible and willing to take responsibility beyond the scope of the job description and organisation.
- Curious (proven).

Add to that some basic job specific skills (but not necessarily more than basic) and - if you can find them - your organisation will have a team that, together with skilled curators, leaders and support staff, can take on the world.

Which brings me to the next and a tricky point of the job description:

Your experience: Not necessary. In a great post on LinkedIn Lou Adler makes a compelling and thought-provoking case for hiring Mary, a woman with limited skills and experience, but a proven track record of outperforming herself. Rather than filtering people based on length of experience, Adler advises to filter on exceptional performance:

> [A]sk them to describe the biggest thing they've accomplished with the least amount of skills and experience. Then don't be surprised how many talented people emerge from the shadows.

Some of the best professionals I know never managed to stick to one job long before wanting another challenge. Others never finished their degree. Of course, it's tricky, but in an organisation that is at least part made up of stable and experienced curators such a gamble isn't necessarily risky.

Finally, what do you offer these people? Apart from reasonable pay (everybody working for real, even in an internship scheme, deserves to be paid for real), give people what you hire them for: room for development, an ear for their ideas, real responsibilities. In the end, that might be much more valuable to both you and them than their paycheck.

Will you next hire work towards a great future for your organisation?

There are two ways to look at a potential new hire: you can look at what she has done already, or at what she is still going to do in her life. Simply put, you can hire for *their past*, or hire for *your future*.

Certainly, there are positions where a long and prosperous career is an advantage. President of the board, for instance. For others, a decent degree might be useful, such as brain surgeon or passenger plane pilot.

Most of the time, however, a curriculum with ten straight years of working experience in a relevant field preceded by five straight years of relevant higher education only means your potential new hire is extremely good at avoiding change and being predictable.

That is hardly the kind of skill and attitude the 21st century asks for, even in a conservative sector such as culture. Then why, I wonder (because this is a rant), do I see so many unconventionally talented and young people around me struggling to find a position in the cultural sector in the Netherlands? It is not as if we are not in a desperate need for change…

When I came back to the Netherlands after spending some years abroad in the spring of 2009, my curriculum was a hotchpotch of freelance jobs, voluntary work, extracurricular courses and one-year appointments. I've heard it being called a mess. My CEO at the Museum of National History thought differently, and did so with many of my colleagues. Young and ambitious people who compensated a lack of experience with a double amount of enthusiasm and ideas. It's the best team I've ever worked with, and we regularly pulled tricks considered impossible by all the highly trained, highly experienced people in other institutions.

These brilliant young people brought with them fresh ideas, optimism, experience from elsewhere than behind a museum desk, passion and a hunger to be successful. They

developed themselves quickly to be exceptionally great at the work they were actually doing. They became superstars together with the museum.

These people, and so many others around me, don't need ten years of relevant work experience, or even a relevant degree. That is because these people *are* passionate and ambitious and curious and open to new things. No education and no job can teach people to be like that.

You can hire new people to be safe and predictable, or take your chances to innovate and do things differently. You can hire to continue as ever, or to maybe become something special. The first approach suits the organisation that knows of no trouble, faces a bright future, and regardless of what happens will still be there in 100 years. The second, everybody else.

So, what's it going to be? Will your next hire be predictable and boring, or unconventionally and passionately work towards a great future for your organisation?

18/06/2015

The future of cultural heritage is a team sport

Last month I was asked by Flemish policy makers to define the future of heritage, culture and arts institutions. I defined it as a team sport (amongst others). Not as an analogy – 'it is *like* a team sport' – no, what I meant is it *is* team sport. Something you do together and are responsible for together.

A while back we started mapping cases of participatory governance in cultural heritage in Europe. The result was stunning: all over Europe everyday citizens, heritage professionals, professional volunteers and many others are working together to manage, renovate, innovate and disseminate culture. The upcoming EENC paper about the topic is a joy to read (promised)[13].

For instance, through the mapping I discovered the hopeful story of the Teatro Sociale Gualtieri. After being closed for renovation works in the 1980s, the theatre of Gualtieri never reopened. In 2006 a group of young people entered the construction site, which had been empty for nearly three decades. They fell in love with the place and decided the wait for government to take action was over. They started reconstructing the place, reopened it for performances and programmed ever more ambitious theatre productions. They reinvigorated the Teatro Sociale and ultimately got the government on board as well. Fantastic!

At the same time I interned with Björn Stenvers and discovered how he generates incredible value by encouraging all museums in Amsterdam (and elsewhere in the world) to work together.

Last week in Moscow I met the passionate director of the Rostov Kremlin. She told me how they completely reinvigorated the heritage site and museum by reconnecting with the local community. Every month there's a special lecture for local citizens, every Sunday there are courses. They're even training the community to become tour guides, contributing to the local economy and future-proofing their institution simultaneously.

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[13] *See the earlier entry in this PDF, or download here.*

A [social institution](#) involves all stakeholders. This goes beyond its visitors, even beyond its audiences. All stakeholders means employees are engaged, volunteers have a place in the organisation, partners and peers are actually involved and the local community plays a role in the institution. Not just as recipients, but as active participants. As in a team sport: everybody has a role to play, everybody shares responsibility for the result. You win, or lose, together.

With the FIFA falling apart, there may be an opening for a new, universal team sport. I suggest this sport is culture, heritage and the arts. The great cases of participatory heritage and social institutions all over the world show us how to win, and with stakeholders like ours we don't need a Blatter to make it work!

07/03/2014

From traditional to social institutions: what does the transformation mean?

Earlier this week I finished a short series of workshops with students of the Reinwardt Academy in Amsterdam. As part of a society and transformations course we explored the impact of digital media on museums and the transformation of traditional institutions in what I like to call 'social institutions'.

In our book *Digital engagement in culture, heritage and the arts* we define a social institution as an organisation that systematically engages its stakeholders to maximise the value it can co-create. I.e. it works in partnerships to create greater value than it can create in isolation. A good summary of the differences between a traditional and a social institution is given by the IMLS in their publication *Museums, Libraries and 21st Century Skills*:

20TH CENTURY MUSEUM/LIBRARY	21ST CENTURY MUSEUM/LIBRARY
Primarily content-driven	Combination of audience- and content-driven
Mostly tangible objects (art, books)	Combination of tangible and digital objects
One-way information (institution presents information to audiences)	Multi-directional (co-created experiences involving institution, audiences, and others)
Focus on presentation and display	Focus on audience engagement and experiences
Emphasis on enhancing knowledge	Emphasis on enhancing knowledge and 21st century skills
Acts independently	Acts in highly collaborative partnerships
Located in community (operates independently)	Embedded in community (aligned with and acts as a leader on community needs/issues)
Learning outcomes assumed, implied (content knowledge and skills like critical thinking tend to be byproducts of programming)	Learning outcomes purposeful (content knowledge and 21st century skills like critical thinking are visible, intentional outcomes of audience experiences)
Institution leads content development (content tightly edited and controlled)	Content co-created among diverse partners and audiences; accessible in multiple ways

It is one thing to identify the changes; actually creating or stimulating them in organisations is quite another. Together with the students of the Reinwardt Academy we looked at what it means for organisations to transform from traditional to social institutions:

1. Employees have to start thinking differently: networks, partnerships, co-creating.
2. The organisational structure and hierarchy will change (although students from different nationalities had a different idea about the direction of this change: less vertical silos versus more highly specialised staff). Internal cooperation will increase.
3. In some cases the vision or mission statement of the organisation will have to change to reflect the social ideas of the organisation.
4. Some new employees may have to be hired, using new hiring criteria.
5. Organisations structurally have to get to know their audiences (and stakeholders) better. (In a related note, if digital is a dimension of everything, then are audiences the basis of everything?)
6. Audiences and stakeholders may change, with far-stretching consequences for the organisation ("What if they don't want to participate?").
7. Cooperation between institutions and especially institutions and others will increase.
8. The requirements of our physical locations (buildings) and spaces (expositions) may change, as well as their opening hours, accessibility and use.
9. The ownership and feeling of ownership of the institution changes. Co-creating value means giving away as much as it means receiving.
10. The position and role in society of an institution changes: No longer is an institution a passive observer, reflecting on society for the chosen few, but an active player in it.

While discussion the meaning of the transition with the students I was reminded of the incredible scope of the change. It ranges from the profound (vision, role in society) to the mundane (make up of the management team, opening hours). I guess that's what makes organisational change so incredibly interesting (and challenging).

Thoughts about museums

22/09/2012

Blurring boundaries

Today, after many years, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam reopens. It's the end of an era in which the museum was everything but a 'museum': pop-up exhibitions, lectures, AR apps, parties. At the same time the all new Unseen Photo Fair in Amsterdam is reviewed by a national newspaper to be an art fair with a museological appearance. A shop designed to be a museum, or maybe a museum designed to be a shop.

Last week at the Incubate DIY conference I talked about the museum of the future to a small group of people actually interested in this topic. Afterwards I spoke with some people working in libraries. They recognised the picture I painted of an outgoing institution, focused on experience and stories and not afraid to reinvent itself. To them, this was the library of the future.

Boundaries are blurring. I guess they have been blurring for a long time. The label becomes less important. Art fair, museum, library, shop, restaurant, gallery, to most people it's just a place to go for a good story, entertainment and time to be with friends.

While we worked on the Van Gogh exhibition that opened last week, we repeatedly rediscovered we weren't a museum and didn't have to do as museums do. Part of its success *and* its biggest challenges is that we managed to forget about the boundaries, occasionally. I'm pretty sure it's why Unseen is such a success, and hopefully why the Stedelijk will continue to be so.

This is not about the *museum* of the future. This is about the *future*. Forget about the label, cross all blurring boundaries. I wish I had registered another domain name...

What is a museum (as well)?

Ask anyone what a museum is and most people will come up with an answer including a building and paintings on the wall. Or objects in displays. A somewhat older post by New Curator on the function of museums stresses education, inspiration, conservation...

A museum can be so much more, especially for its visitors. The following list gives some of the many things I've seen museum be and used museums for over the last year. It's by no means conclusive. Please add.

A museum is,

- A flex work spot with Wi-Fi and good coffee.
- The perfect spot to finally read James Joyce or any other challenging book.
- A place to go on a first date.
- A place to propose to your future spouse.
- A place to organise your wedding.
- Somewhere to dump your kids when you go shopping.
- Somewhere to dump your husband/boyfriend when you go shopping (and need some time to decide on the right dress).
- One of the schools in your life-long-learning ambition.
- Somewhere to celebrate your birthday.
- A free toilet (clean!).
- A great shop for birthday and Christmas presents.
- A meeting point and landmark.
- The starting point to get to know a new culture. (My favourite: ask local students in the museum to give you a tour and tell you stuff. They usually like it and tell great, unpolished stories.)
- A place to disconnect from work.
- A place to see a movie.
- The best bookstore in town for non-fiction.
- A wonderful organisation to do a meaningful internship or volunteer work.

- A place to challenge your opinions and ideas.

- Somewhere to go with your dad and catch up.

- A quiet place to do homework.

- Somewhere to host a (business) meeting.

- A place to get inspiration for the decoration of your house.

- Somewhere to buy postcards to send around the world.

- A place with lockers for stuff you don't want to carry with you all day.

- A place to meet new people.

- Warm inside when it's cold outside.

- Cool inside when it's hot outside.

- Somewhere to kill the time between meetings when in a different city.

- A venue to host a conference or debate.

- A lunchroom.

- An alternative to amusement parks.

- A place to feel young again.

- Somewhere to recharge your cell phone or laptop (usually there are sockets in the café).

If you're working in a museum, the place can even be so much more! An incubator for social and cultural innovation, a tech lab, a university that pays you to do amazing discoveries… Aren't we lucky to live in an age where museums are omnipresent?

22/12/2011

The great misconception: Value

A persistent misconception is tormenting the cultural sector and it's a misconception about value. I've heard people say the craziest things about value, including from experts put on stage to educate us. One of them, just to pick an example: Social media allows us to have a large impact with a low investment. Bollocks!

Another one: The cultural sector has significant social and cultural value, but not necessarily economic value.

Talking about economical value and social value and their relationship makes the value discussion way too complex, especially since "The Economy" has been branded as something difficult (read Tim Harford to understand it's not) and value is understood as profit and loss (read Seth Godin to understand it's not).

To make everything easier, here're the two things you need to understand about value:

1. Value and money are two completely different things. Value more closely resembles karma. It's a universal currency and the banking of it is outsourced to everybody.
2. In a way, value is a constant. Over the long run, the value you receive will always equal the value you have created for others. However, this relationship can be diffuse.

If you understand this, you'll understand there's no such thing as a big impact for a low investment, in social media or elsewhere. Everybody who tells you so AD 2011 is a fraudster. A tweet that receives hundreds of retweets might be free to send, but to build the engaged following that will retweet it takes at least 6 to 12 months of professional high-quality tweeting. That's a huge investment for, at best, a large impact. It's why corporates pay for their videos to go viral.

(It works the other way around though. Give an endless amount of truly great stuff away for free and one day, 'out of the blue', you might have a huge impact. Read Chris Anderson's Free to understand this better.)

This also explains why if you have a lot of cultural and social value, you also have a lot of economic value (you simply have a lot of value, period). The trick is to convert some of this

value into money to pay your bills. Some cultural institutions such as Tate and Foam Amsterdam are really good at this. You can be too; if you believe you have something valuable to offer.

Value is not a difficult thing to understand, but it's hard to implement in organisations that never had to worry about their karma. And I'm looking at conference organisers when I say, let us please put some people on stage from other sectors who understand the concept of value, so we can pay or bills also in the next decade. Thank you in advance.

18/07/2011

Why success always starts with failure

[Tim Harford](), the undercover economist, advocates a radical change in the way we look at change, leadership, management, etc. His brilliant TED talk embedded below is a nice taster for his ideas, but I definitely recommend reading his book *Adapt*, or: Why success *always* starts with failure.

Failure and the need to embrace the opportunity of failing to be able to get ahead is a popular topic at the moment. Certainly, everybody agrees we learn from our mistakes. However, few openly acknowledge they're 'just trying something' in order to get ahead. In any uncertain field (such as building a museum for the 21st century) however, Tim Harford eloquently argues this is *the* way forward. As he writes "Failure (…) seems to go hand in hand with rapid progress."

The bottom-line is trial and error. At the moment, nobody knows for instance what strategy will most successfully engage people with cultural institutions on [Google+](). Rather than copying what we do on Facebook to see what works, and innovating from thereon, applying Harford's logic we might want to do something radically different. Encourage a wide variety of people with little inside knowledge of the sector (and the tools) to come up with a lot of options, select the best ones and work on from there. Embrace the most unlikely options because in them the greatest leap forward might be hidden.

Why not, like some companies such as [Netflix]() and [Mailchimp]() do, award a prize to anyone who comes up with an innovation that does something previously unthought-of, rather than relying on your own (bureaucratic/9-5ish/exhausted) R&D department?

"Pluralism encourages pluralism. If you want to stimulate many innovations, combine many strategies." Harford writes elsewhere. To keep cultural institutions relevant in the 21st century, certainly we need many innovations. Only [A/B testing]() to move ahead might simply not be enough to face the enormous challenges. We need to look at innovation with completely different eyes.

I don't know if success *always* starts with failure, but I'm ready to believe that.

At a very small scale, a recent experience I had with this was a Facebook ad campaign I designed and ran for xwashier, our local history project. After reading all the blogs and stuff on designing Facebook successful ad campaigns I realised the most important factor for success was sector- and product-specific experience. So I set up a bunch of ads with completely different specs, picked the best performing ones and made variations on them, repeating this until I couldn't think about variations anymore (although certainly there were). I don't know what a perfect Facebook ad looks like, but I discovered a lot of things that don't work. Also, I managed to get more than double CTR on some of the variations as compared to the (studied) first bunch of ads.

I'm sure that if I had involved more people in coming up with variations, and had studied less of the things experts had written down already, there might have been even better results. And if that applies to a Facebook ad, it certainly applies to something as complex and unpredictable as the future of cultural institutions. To remain relevant in the future, we certainly might want to consider Tim Harford's radical ideas.

"How the heck do you leave a building?"

At last week's Ecsite conference Steven Snyder of the [Franklin Institute](#) posed a rather interesting dilemma: If the Franklin Institute wants to achieve its mission of inspiring a passion for learning about technology and science, they need to leave their building. Yet, at the same time they've just invested millions in a redevelopment, are seen *as* a building by their audience and get in most of their revenue *because of* the building. "How the heck," to use Steven's words, in such a case, "do you leave a building?"

In other words: Can outside become your primary side, even if you've had a roof over your head for the last *n* years?

Leaving a building, like leaving anything stable and safe, is all about opening up.

Once there are no more walls to hide behind, you're vulnerable and naked. That is incredibly scary and - to most of us - immediately blocks out the potential positive side effects of being in such a position: the need to work together, the renewed curiosity, the increase in serendipity…

A great example of an institution that has managed to leave their building and revived because of it, I think, is the [Museum Rotterdam](#). I've written about their *[The City as Muse](#)* project before. The project searches for inspirational developments and initiatives among the people of Rotterdam and tries to connect this with the museum. At the moment they're working with care givers, doing pop up events around town and (still) involving an audience otherwise alien to the institution.

Museum Rotterdam shows at least five things an institution needs to leave a building.

1. Time.
2. Staff who feel comfortable being outside.
3. Cooperation with uncommon partners.
4. Openness to new ideas and approaches.
5. Resources and room for small scale experiments.

Or, in plain English, if you want to leave your building you need to hire curious and streetwise people willing to start unproven experiments together with complete strangers for years, while you maintain and supply them. The Good Thing is one such a curious individual can get a long way on a limited budget.

In the discussion that followed Steven's question I noticed it's tempting to think about solutions that make first contact with the audience outside of the walls of your institution, but focus on continuing this relation within the actual building. I see pop-up museums (that seem to *pop up* everywhere nowadays) as such a phenomenon. They're like movie trailers for an institution; fancy advertising space in - often - not-so-fancy neighbourhoods.

Welcome exceptions to this concept might be those spaces that actually dare to be a fancy advertising space, a destination to go to even when you've been to the institution. For instance, &Foam, the concept store of Foam in Amsterdam, is a place I go to regardless of the actual gallery. They are two distinct experiences, which brings me to the sixth point:

6. An end to thinking about your building as a destination.

I specifically don't want to address branding in this post, although this is exactly what Foam, as well as many other institutions (most radically, the Guggenheim) do. Branding is a tricky subject about which a lot of people have very strong opinions, and in my opinion has nothing to do with leaving your building. A brand won't help you leave your building, but leaving your building might help you build a brand.

You don't need a brand. What you do need to leave a building is confidence in yourself. Such confidence does not come from a logo. Instead a strong corporate identity, a compelling mission and - even - the security of a great home base (building) might give you the confidence to go outside. I'm thinking about, for instance, the production park of the [Royal Opera House in Thurrock](). I'm pretty sure they could not have started such a daring project had they been insecure about the value of their work. Which brings me to the last poin for this post:

7. Somewhere strong to start from and return to (for instance, your building or mission).

I do think that if you want to leave your building, not everybody should go, and certainly not everybody at once. Remember point 1: time. For an organisation such as the Franklin Institute, firmly rooted in a building, it should not be about 'leaving' the building, but about expanding the scope of the institution to include the outside, slowly but surely.

And finally, there's technology. If you've been following this blog or seen me speak you know I'm a big advocate of organisations leaving the safety of their buildings. Usually, the projects that get organisations to do so are technology inspired. Think about the great AR projects from the Netherlands of the last years, UAR and ARtours, or last year's xwashier.

Digital media and technology such as mobile can help an organisation give its stories, collection and mission a wider reach more easily. Technology, however, will not help you leave your building. Technology helps organisations that have been playing outside to come up with new and innovative projects. All institutions behind the projects above had been focused on the outside *before* developing their mobile apps.

The technology, just like the brand, is an enabler and it might even be an encouragement, but it's not a precondition.

"How the heck do you leave a building?" Through the front door, a smart person would say. For an organisation like the Franklin Institute I very well see it's not as easy as that. Probably it starts with one person or a small team leaving through the front door to do brave experiments with a variety of local partners. The door will not be closed behind them, though, as they should regularly return and encourage and inspire other to follow their lead, take their experiments to a next level, grow the local network.

I don't think it's easy leaving a building. I do think by acknowledging that their mission reached beyond their physical walls the Franklin Institute has taken an important first step. I'm very curious to see where their journey will take them.
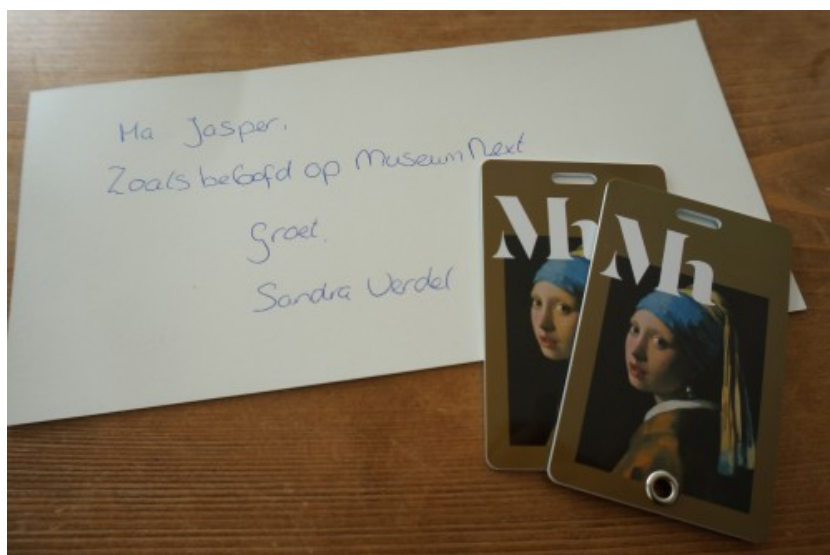
03/06/2015

Mail from the Mauritshuis

http://themuseumofthefuture.com/2015/06/03/mail-from-the-mauritshuis/

It's always fun to receive snail mail from a museum, and especially so from the Mauritshuis. Today I received one of their beautiful envelops with two Vermeer luggage tags and a compliments slip inside, referencing a conversation we had about the Vermeer tags at MuseumNext. Thank you, Mauritshuis (and especially Sandra, who did all this), thank you! My upcoming journeys will be more complete.

You may know the Mauritshuis from their excellent collection, recent renovation or brilliant marketing (click, enjoy). What you may understand from the above is that apart from having and doing amazing stuff, the organisation also is extraordinary.

We're transitioning towards social institutions. The approaches to becoming such a social institution are many, as we discovered by studying lots of case studies recently. Digital media is a common approach, but I believe the best approach may be through your people. More social employees will treat their audiences more socially and these audiences in turn will help the institution transform.

Following up on a conversation with mail and a gift is a sign of such a transition. Clearly, I'm forever indebted to the Mauritshuis. Thanks again!

Field notes

01/11/2009

Testing Amsterdam museums with Seb Chan[14]

http://themuseumofthefuture.com/2009/11/01/testing-amsterdam-museums-with-seb-chan/

Last week I had the honour of having Seb Chan from the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney around. One of the things we did was drop by a number of museums in Amsterdam to see how they designed their audience experience, what was good about it, and what could have been better. This taught me a handful of useful things about audience engagement and interaction design I'd like to share.

Museums we visited were: the Tropenmuseum, the Amsterdam Historic Museum, NEMO, the public library, FOAM Fotography Museum, the Tassenmuseum. In addition I included the Hermitage which I visited alone.

1. Deliver what the visitor expects

Museums are basically boring[15]. They're not amusement parks and shouldn't be. A lot of multimedia and interaction in museums does not convey the museum's basic objective, which is to show beautiful artefacts. Therefore, as Seb noted, "most interaction in museums is like an action-packed trailer to a slow-moving French movie."

The 'Tassenmuseum' (Museum of Bags and Purses) is a small, privately held museum in Amsterdam with a predominantly elder female audience. They come to see beautiful bags and have tea. They come for the traditional museum experience. The Tassenmuseum delivers

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[14] *This is the oldest post that made it into this collection. Almost all the ideas in this post have matured considerably in the years since, and some of the institutions have grown considerably since then. Still, I think there is a strong connection between Seb's insights, and the ideas I wrote about later. Thanks Seb!*

[15] *I don't think this is true any longer. I think museum can be super exciting places!*

exactly this, with a very traditional exhibition approach and a comfortable café. The museum delivers what the visitor expects.

NEMO is a typical science centre. The second you walk into the museum, you hear and see kids running around. There's lots of opportunity for them to engage with the installations and discover the fun side of science. That's what parents expect when they take their kids to NEMO.

Interaction would be completely out of its place in the Tassenmuseum, whereas it's a necessity in NEMO. The lesson: Use interaction only when the audience expects it.

2. The first experience in the museum shapes the visitor's expectations

The Amsterdam Historic Museum[16] opens with a random selection of artefacts in glass cages. These are snapshots of the contents of the museum, quite chaotically (but beautifully) ordered. The first experience in the museum is pleasant, but also makes the visitor feel uncertain about what exactly will be on display. After visiting the museum, the visitor will take this experience home: there's a lot to see and discover, but it's hard to find a continuing story in the exhibitions.

After coming in through its wonderful garden, the Hermitage shocks the visitors with countless moving screens giving visitor information. With the long lines and the huge number of people wandering around, it's an altogether unpleasant experience, one that promises chaos, information overload and people pressing together. After buying the ticket, an automatic gate opens, which promises a cold and impersonal museum. I'm sorry to say that although the building is beautiful and the exhibitions worth visiting, this is what the museum offers as well. It's an altogether chaotic and impersonal experience, only made up for by their friendly staff.[17]

The lesson: Be careful to design your first contact with the visitor (be it onsite or online) in line with the rest of the museum (and design it well).

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[16] *The Amsterdam Museum (which dropped 'Historical' from its name) has since been completely redesigned, with an excellent exhibition introducing people in a nice way to the collection.*

[17] *I think the more recent exhibitions in the Hermitage offer an altogether different experience: They're wonderfully designed, tell compelling stories, and make the visitor feel welcome.*

3. Screens distract from beautiful artefacts

This could be seen in all museums of the test apart from FOAM and the Hermitage (where there were no screens): a screen, no matter how small, is the first thing that attracts the visitor's attention. Beautiful artefacts lose their power when there's a screen near. Best shown with pictures.

The lesson: Place your screens in such a way, that they don't distract the visitor's attention from the original artefacts.

4. Look at other institutions than museums to be inspired

A very smart move of Seb, when we mapped our visits, was to include the public library[18]. Not only is the public library in Amsterdam one of the most beautiful new buildings, but also (although its function is quite different from a museum's) there are a lot of useful lessons to be learnt from the library.

A library should be a place where you want to spend time. The public library is Amsterdam is a very welcoming and comfortable place to be. In fact, it easily beat all museums in the way it delivered a nice visitor's experience. A library should also encourage discovery. With beautiful lighting and spacious shelves picking up a book seemed a very normal thing to do.

The lesson: Museums can learn a lot from other institutions, such as libraries and galleries, but also malls and offices, when it comes to designing the visitor's experience.

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[18] *I still include the public library in every tour I do with (foreign) guests. The space hasn't lost any of its magic in the years since.*

5. Make sure all your multimedia content is available online

The Tropenmuseum and the Amsterdam Historic Museum are packed with multimedia content. There are so much movies to see and games to play that doing all of them would take hours. Especially if a visitor comes in a group, s/he might not be able to enjoy all multimedia content. Nevertheless, this visitor might be interested in these games and movies. Therefore, they should be available online.

Seb asked this question with basically every movie we saw, "Is this content available online?" The lesson: Make sure all your multimedia content is online.

6. The visitor's expectation of what they can do with multimedia changes over time

One of the first objects in the Amsterdam Historic Museum is a touch screen. It shows a map of the central hall and it gives additional information about the artefacts show in it. The first view you get is a map. Immediately I tried to zoom in on the case in front of me, using Apple's two-finger approach. Nothing happened.

In five years time, all people will expect touch screens to react to them as other touch screens do. Zooming, rotating, scrolling... By then a touch screen as the one in the Amsterdam Historic Museum will annoy visitors, as it already annoys the iPhone using generation. The lesson: Design interaction based on contemporary standards, and adjust it when these standards change.

01/03/2011

The city as a muse for Museum Rotterdam

http://themuseumofthefuture.com/2011/03/01/the-city-as-a-muse-for-museum-rotterdam/

Last week I was invited by Museum Rotterdam to the festive launch of a magazine that concludes the first phase of the amazing outreach and participatory project *The city as a muse*. The event – in a circus tent in a peripheric part of town – was in many ways un-museum-like and (therefore?) I enjoyed it a lot.

After a recent shift in direction, which included removing "Historical" from its name, Museum Rotterdam tries to be a museum for all people in the city. *The city as a muse* is a project that searches for inspirational developments and initiatives among the people of Rotterdam and tries to connect this with the museum. The first phase of the project aimed at a group of women *('De Vrouwen van de Velden')* who've organised themselves to jointly cope with the drastic changes in their neighbourhood.

The women are mothers, of varied cultural backgrounds, poor and extremely creative. Once a week they have breakfast together to discuss and organize. The urban curator of Museum Rotterdam joined them for a couple of months and conducted interviews, photo sessions and other activities to discover as much as possible about the lives of the women. The final product of this intensive cooperation is not an exposition, but a magazine like the modern glossies.

The women in the magazine represent themselves, but also a growing group of people in Rotterdam (and cities all over the world). It's a compelling story of Rotterdam AD 2011. I've been following this project for a while and I think it's exemplary and inspirational in a couple of ways:

- *The project truly connected with a community.* Unlike most projects that try to build new communities, Museum Rotterdam spent considerable time and effort in finding an established community with a strong structure, key players and an obvious mission. They then spent considerable time and effort yet again to get involved in this community. The museum almost sort of joined the community and then earned their respect and only then asked for something in return. Their reward: Hundreds of people who would never even have thought about visiting their building now have fond memories of the museum and its activities.
- *The project really left the walls of the museum.* The great advantage when you leave your institution should be that you reach a different audience. Otherwise you just as well could have stayed indoors. Museum Rotterdam managed to get as far out of their comfortable building as possible. Obviously the location they picked for their launch (in the neighbourhood, in a tent) suited the project.
- *The project works cross-sectoral.* Although the official relation between the museum and the women ended in the circus tent, the project did not. Continuing to build upon the stories and strength of the women a community theatre performance is in the making. This way the project has continuity across the cultural sector and different types of institutions benefit from each other's efforts.
- *The museum looked beyond traditional museum means to deliver the message.* Most museum projects result in an exposition, catalogue or presentation. Museum Rotterdam looked beyond this traditional array of options and used a glossy, theater and a circus tent as means of delivering the message. The media-rich world we live in offers us so much more options to do our.
- *The project used no new media.* Museum Rotterdam isn't in at tech forefront (I believe they're not even on Twitter, can you imagine?). Yet with this project they managed to get invited to the 2.0-arena of crowdsourcing debates, etc. To me this proves a great project can still be a great project without a social media campaign attached to it. It all about picking the right tools to do the job at hand. A magazine and a circus tent might be just as well suited to reach people as Facebook and Foursquare.

The coming years Museum Rotterdam will continue with the project *the city as a muse*, looking for more special places in the city. I'm looking forward to their next years and the way in which they'll inspire me.

14/08/2012

Why the Museum of Broken Relationships is so great (and it's not just the name)

According to TripAdvisor it's the third most popular attraction in Zagreb[19], easily beating all other cultural destinations and its name resonates so well with audiences around the world that it goes viral with every new exhibition. Of course I'm talking about the *Museum of Broken Relationships*, awarded the Kenneth Hudson Award 2011 for 'the most unusual, daring and, perhaps, controversial achievement that challenges common perceptions of the role of the museums'. Sounds like an interesting place, and it is. I loved it. Here's some reasons why (you might implement in your own institution).

Great cafe with excellent coffee and wine

First impressions matter a lot. The first thing most people see of the Museum of Broken Relationships is a fashionable terrace where you can sip a coffee or nice glass of wine, served by energetic and friendly people, while listening to jazz. It's such a cool place that they even served the water for a dog with a slice of lemon! Obviously, we spent time there prior to and after our visit, discussing the museum and more important things in life.

Enthusiastic and welcoming staff

Croatians in general are friendly and outgoing people and the staff of the Museum of Broken Relationships was no different. As soon as we came in we were welcomed in the warmest way possible by a host who sold us our tickets, explained that they encouraged photography and pointed to the free wifi. Other visitors she helped install QR readers to read the labels in their native tongue, or in any other way she could.

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[19] *Currently, it's 7th.*

Tell stories people can relate to

The Museum of Broken Relationships is a collection of rather mundane objects (shoes, a bike, bears) with labels explaining their significance, much like 90% of all museums in the world. Yet people read every single label, laugh and cry and discuss objects and share anecdotes because the labels tell stories that any visitor can relate to in a language they will (mostly) understand.

Unpolished and genuine

Nothing in the Museum of Broken Relationships is hidden behind glass. Visitors are asked not to touch objects (too much) but it's not the objects that are 'sacred'; it's the story they tell. And thus, although the facilities are great, lighting isn't always perfect, some of the walls have cracks and the presentation isn't always very subtle. It doesn't matter. What matters is that the museum tells a real story.

From the people, for the people

The collection of the Museum of Broken Relationships is crowdsourced. People hand in their objects reminding them of a past relationship at one of the many traveling exhibitions of the museum or hand them in in Zagreb. Like the collections of most other museums, the objects once belonged to real people like you and me and because this is made very clear from the beginning of the museum, it makes the entire experience more personal.

Great giftshop (great brand)

Hands up if you also think the gift shop is the best part of *any* museum! Certainly the gift shop of the Museum of Broken Relationships is super cool, mostly because their brand is strong. They have bad memories erasers, 'I love break ups' t-shirts and of course a beautiful catalogue which should be sold online because it documents love and despair better than any cheap novel in this summer's top-10 bestseller list.

The [Museum of Broken Relationships](#) is a great museum, charging less than 4 euros to have hours of fun (and less than 2 for a great glass of wine while you're at it). If we really have to say something negative about them, it's that I think they could do more with their collection online (which I'm sure they will, considering their good social media efforts). At the same time it's great they're not, because it gives you something to do in Zagreb for an afternoon plus early evening in their cafe. Chapeau!

Transformations

At the Learning Museum Conference in Riga in April 2012 I was introduced to the work of Cultural Heritage Without Borders and especially of Diana Walters in using culture and heritage as a binding and empowering force in post-conflict areas. CHWB's motto 'we restore and build communities' appeals to my background in international development work as well as to my work building relationships between people, and people and culture. You can imagine how thrilled I was when earlier this year I received an invitation from Diana to participate in a conference of CHWB and the Balkan Museum Network in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The conference was last week and it was a convincing display of the strengths and opportunities of culture and heritage under even the harshest conditions. From all over the (western) Balkans culture and heritage professionals had come together to *see, meet, do* (the title of the conference) and learn from each other's projects and ideas. I was part of an international team of consultants who facilitated hands-on sessions and worked with the participants to design better projects and exchange knowledge and experiences.

It was enlightening to see how small institutions in countries like Albania, Kosovo and Serbia worked on incredibly powerful projects with shoestring budgets. The ambition and creativity of most participants easily matched that of the world's largest institutions, while their ingenuity and willingness to cooperate I only remember from working with really professional NGOs. So much can be done with so little.

Unforgettable was the reception in the Historical Museum of BiH. The traces of the war are still overly visible in this museum that struggles for survival. After drinks, music and moving speeches I visited the museum's exhibition on surrounded Sarajevo, about the siege of the early 1990s, where I was given a tour by enthusiastic people my age who lived through the event. The simple and straightforward exhibition shows everyday objects and photography, some of them quite horrific, others really unexpected. The stories of my peers brought the static displays to life with the typical directness and humour of people from the Balkans. On the makeshift stoves, they told me for instance, you could make a meal and a coffee with one shoe as fuel. After telling me about the experience of eating EU food support (everything but the beef it claimed to be) I felt ashamed about being part of the nations that ignored these wonderful people for years.

It was an honour and a pleasure to work with all these wonderful people on meaningful projects for a couple of days. I hope to be back soon. Sarajevo reaffirmed to me the strong transformative power of culture and heritage and - especially - conversations. Our work can build relationships that go well beyond Facebook likes, even when conditions are tough and budgets non-existent. A big thanks to the people of the Balkan Museum Network, Cultural Heritage Without Borders, the team and magnificent professionals participating in the conference last week. I feel reenergised and changed myself.

14/10/2013

Walk in, dance out! Lessons about interaction and audience engagement from Rockheim and ABBA: The Museum

Usually I prefer theatre to museums because the experience can be so much more emotional. It was not a play but an exhibition, however, that renewed my enthusiasm for making art and not Shakespeare but ABBA that has been in my head all weekend. How did that happen? It turns out that in the countries of Ibsen and Strindberg, they're pretty good at building musical museums: Rockheim and ABBA: The Museum.

Rockheim is the Norwegian national museum of pop and rock music, located in Trondheim. It occupies a colourful box and the renovated warehouse this sits upon and has a small concert venue for live music. The main exhibition is an interactive journey through Norway's musical history. A lot of space is also dedicated to rooms where you can play instruments, learn about music making, dance and enjoy. Rockheim opened in 2010 and still feels fresh and up-to-date.

ABBA: The Museum opened this year in Stockholm on the island Djurgården where you can find many other museum, theme parks and monuments. The museum celebrates ABBA in an interactive joy ride that has you dancing, singing, doing quizzes and taking photos of original artefacts. I'm not an ABBA fan, but this museum is a treat with a consistent level of perfection that is exemplary to museum around the world.

Both Rockheim and ABBA: The Museum rely heavily on participation, digital media and the audience taking an active role. In both museums this sometimes works well, sometimes less so. Both at one point however manage to engage even the most observing visitor (in this case, me) and turn the museum into an experience. What are they doing right?

- **Low barriers to engagement and easily understood interactives**
  In the ABBA museum you literally only need your dancing shoes and signing voice to participate. Technology does all the other things for you (which usually comes down

to putting you next to, on top of or dressing you up like A B B or A.) To record your visit, you use the barcode on your entry ticket. No accounts, no registration, no wristbands. Rockheim mostly uses musical instruments, musical technology (e.g. jukeboxes) and gestures as interactives.

- **Safe spaces for participation**

  In both museums you can be on stage, making music in front of other visitors. According to staff and my experience people don't often do this ("only tourists") which is unsurprising in a world where the majority of people are introverts. Fortunately both museum also provide safe spaces for participation in private booths, using headphones or by keeping the impact of participation limited to a small screen.

- **Positive encouragement**

  Every time you do something in ABBA: The Museum you score points in a game. You don't have to play the game, but I saw many people really trying to score as much points as possible. I know very little about ABBA and flunked most of the quizzes and interactives, but still managed to score many thousands of points which made me feel good. Of course, one good question immediately earned me 500-1,000 points, but all the points, 'well done!' messages, green letters and other positive encouragements made me feel happy to participate.

- **Participation triggers participation**

  Both museums use the participation of visitors to enhance the experience for other participants. This is a tightrope to walk as it can create the opposite of safe spaces. Especially ABBA: The Museum does it very subtly, though. For instance, when you look into the studio where ABBA recorded its songs, you will see other visitors singing in the back in small booths where you can do karaoke. In Rockheim the music you hear in some of the exhibits is selected by visitors in the exhibit, making connections between visitors.

- **A sense of homely freedom**

  I visited Rockheim with other museum professionals, which is normally a recipe for chaos (as many of you know). In ABBA: The Museum I was surrounded by ordinary visitors but they felt as comfortable and at home as the professionals at Rockheim. Chatting, making an effort to see certain artefacts, going away from the fixed route and generally enjoying what other people were doing in the museum. It felt really homely. Well done!

Above: Interactive and exhibition at Rockheim.

Above: A connected piano and interactive at ABBA: The Museum.

Music is a rewarding subject for a museum, especially popular music.
Both [Rockheim](#) and [ABBA: The Museum](#) manage to turn the interest and enthusiasm of their visitor for their topic into something more profound: involvement, engagement. It's tempting (and very Dutch) to look at all the little details that could be better in both museums, but that only distracts from their greater achievement: visitors walk in, and dance out, as ABBA: The Museum promises in its advertisement campaign.

The convincing transformation process of the Derby Silk Mill

http://themuseumofthefuture.com/2014/07/21/the-convincing-transformation-process-of-the-derby-silk-mill/
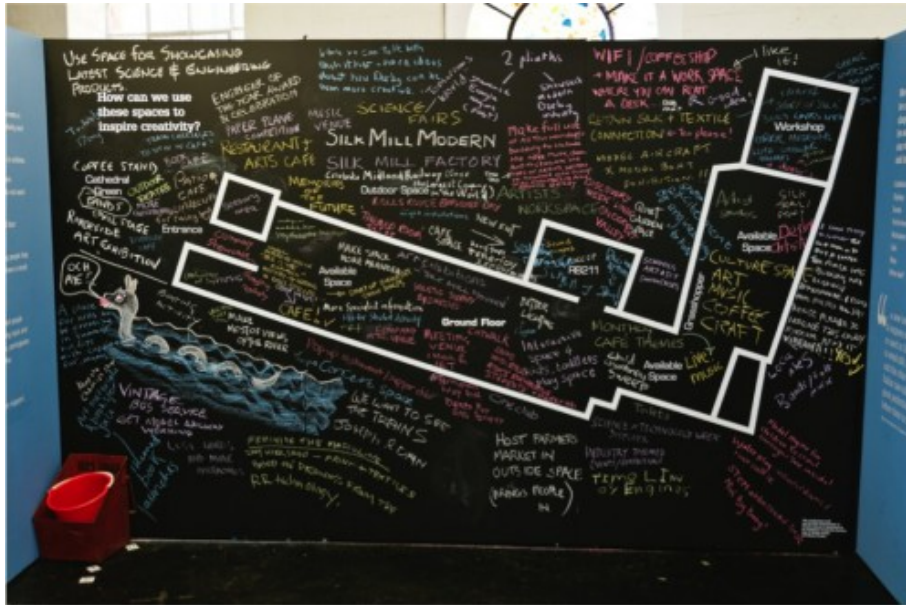
I may have a new favourite museum. It's a museum that is inherently social, embedded in local communities, smartly run and above all a museum that - if happy faces are a metric - does a lot of good. This museum is the Derby Silk Mill. And despite never having been, it has taught me a lot about the museum of the future.

At MuseumNext Hannah Fox talked about the transformation process of the Derby Silk Mill. At a great conference, it was by far the most compelling talk. The approach Hannah shared with us was enlightening and transformed the old silk mill into a place that does a lot of good.

Derby Silk Mill is the site of the world's first factory (Lombe's Mill, 1721) and has been an industrial museum for the last 40 years. Without major investments it slowly became a museum "full of old exhibition cases (…) and a hotch potch of rooms in varying conditions". Short of money, they closed their doors in preparation for a redevelopment of the museum that started in October 2013.

The redevelopment started with a critical question with a subtle detail: What does the silk mill represent and mean, not to 'us' (employees, stakeholders), but to the city and its citizens?

To answer this question, Hannah joined the team. With a background in live brief projects with communities her first step was to ask the city and its citizens themselves to answer this question. Over a weekend, helped by a pop-up café, more than 800 people shared their ideas, from hosting farmers markets to live music gigs.

Next they ran a series of experiments to see what would work and what wouldn't. Music, debates, maker fairs… The museum opened its doors generously to anybody with a good idea (even if they had doubts about the feasibility of the project) and the events were co-produced with the intended target audience. As Hannah said, a museum may not know how to get teenagers in, but teenagers do!

The experiments resulted in the overarching idea to invite the audience to become producers, not just within exhibitions, but of the museum itself. As such, Re:Make was born, a pilot project to remake the museum and get it back open for the public, with the public. The traditional focus of the museum on STEM was also broadened to STEAM: Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math.

In 2013 the museum reopened, at first completely empty. The process of thinking and experimenting with the audience continued, even addressing such mundane issues as the necessity of certain doors. The audience helped with everything: decisions about the collection, exhibition and case design, …! This video says more than I can say about it:

So what's great about this transformation process?

- One: It is really about people. Starting from the question that started the redevelopment and going on in all projects afterwards, the Derby Silk Mill uses social not as a buzzword, but as a key value in their work. This is *social* well beyond *social media* (which by the way they also happen to be very good at).
- Two: Although the audience is invited to discuss everything, this is not a populist redevelopment project. In fact: the Derby Silk Mill stays surprisingly true to its

history and heritage. The site has always been about design, working together and innovation. These values haven't changed, but the methods to act upon them are now radically different.

- Three: The Derby Silk Mill reclaimed meaning making, not only as a assumed inherent outcome of their activities, but as the starting point and definition of everything they did.

Judging by the smiling faces on their websites (and despite recent funding news) the Derby Silk Mill seems to do great and they seem to do good. I sincerely hope they can continue to do so for another couple of centuries, or at least decades so I get a chance to visit them for real.

Quotes from the original transcript of Hannah Fox. Photos copyright Derby Silk Mill, used with permission.

Last words

But is it a museum? A challenge for 2017

In the tough world of circuses, Cirque du Soleil became the world's largest theatrical producer because after a rough start in the 80s, they redefined what it means to be a contemporary circus. To ensure their long-term success and sustainability, they identified their unique strengths and got rid of expensive and hard-to-maintain elements of a traditional circus (such as animals). It is still a circus, but a circus uniquely suitable for today.

Airlines such as SouthWest and EasyJet did the same thing when they pioneered low-cost flying. By getting rid of unsustainable elements and emphasising their core business, they redefined air travel, and what it means to be a carrier.

In September 2016, I was asked for a lecture and workshop in Helsinki to redefine what it means to be a museum today. My belief is that a modern museum (any modern organisation) is not a fixed, static thing, but rather a dynamic collective of people and ideas, that mixes approaches to ensure meaningful engagement with its audiences. In Helsinki, I called this "the Freestyle museum", which is just one label. As my business partner Erik Schilp says, 'there is not A museum of the future', not one template.

A wonderful example of such a museum is the Street Art Museum of Amsterdam. It is a dynamic organisation that uses the neighbourhood it is in as its exhibition space, works together with local communities and does not have a traditional building (see my vlog to get a sense of the museum). Their approach begs the question: Is the Street Art Museum of Amsterdam actually a museum?

The simple answer: yes!. Although it doesn't look museum-y if you compare it to a classical museum, when you look at ICOM's definition of a museum, it ticks all the boxes. The Street

Art Museum of Amsterdam may have unconventional approaches, but without a doubt it's a museum.

What I did in Helsinki when asked to redefine museums, in preparation and live on stage, was take the full deck of strategy cards from Cards for Culture. Together these 64 cards describe everything a museum does and can do. One by one, I picked a card and challenged its importance to defining a museum. "Are you still a museum if you take away (the traditional approach) to education, to online, to politics…?" It is a difficult exercise. The answers aren't a simple yes or no. And the answers are not universal. One museum will excel without a building, another will disappear.

This January, we launched the 2017 update of *Cards for Culture - Museum Edition*. When we launched this tool for playful strategy development in 2016, it's approach to what a museum is and can be, was already broad. I believe the updated version takes this even further. The 16 new trends and 16 new inspiration cards (including the Street Art Museum of Amsterdam, but also a parade, a shop, a bicycle tour, and much more) show the diversity of ideas about the future of institutions. It also helps you define your own unique approach to the future.

I'd encourage you to buy, borrow or steal a box (or use your own understanding of what a museum is and can be), and define your own answer to what a museum is and can be. If you found your unique answer, I'd love to hear about it, for a video on my YouTube channel or simple to know about more case studies. Thanks in advance.

19/03/2014

Why I (still) blog and why you should too (still)

Today we celebrate museum bloggers. They are a special kind of people and if you haven't, you should join them. I've checked and there's room for you and your ideas. You're welcome.

Students and others often ask me why I blog. There are many different answers I give them, the best of them anecdotes.

One of my all-time favourite blogs is Seth Godin's blog. Back in 2007 I decided to send him a 'thank you' note for basically having obtained a marketing degree for free through his posts. Within hours Seth replied, personally, meaningfully. Blogging does that: it completely breaks down traditional mentor-student relationships. When somebody is a true blogger, you know they're OK. You know you can talk to them. You know they're out to help you grow.

Recently and after years of following her blog, I finally met Linda Norris. I didn't even know what her voice sounded like, yet we had worked on a proposal together and shared lots of ideas digitally. It took us literally 0.03 seconds to have a fun, meaningful discussion when we finally met. Blogging does that: it disregards distance in a way other social media do not. When you follow a blog for a while, you know the author.

On an average I receive two to five emails per week from people who know me through my blog. Many of them are students with great ideas and good questions. I try to meet as much of them as possible. Blogging does that: it creates opportunity and builds connections. In fact, if it weren't for blogging I probably wouldn't have met Jim Richardson and we wouldn't have written the DEF book.

I cannot imagine my life without blogging. And I cannot imagine the museum world without its bloggers. At the same time, so much is left unsaid because so many cultural professionals still aren't blogging! I would love to read more about the social impact of museums, their responsibility when it comes to creating healthy, happy and innovative environments, new approaches in (museum) education, culture and heritage for peace building and democracy, community strengthening projects, museums connecting with minorities, …, …, ….

I hope to keep reading and writing for many years to come. And I hope you will join me.

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