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Contemporary Dutch Museums in a Post-Covid Era

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Abstract

During the current outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, museums around the world have been forced to close their doors. Yet, responding to Covid-19 is just one of the challenges they are currently facing. In the aftermath of unprecedented times, international museum leaders are facing numerous obstacles and innovations. The debate about their future has become increasingly heated (Herwitz, 2021; Szántó 2020). The aim of this research is to consider different developments in the museum world, with an emphasis on the developments in the Netherlands.

Reconsidering the Traditional Role of Museums

Observations and interviews with dozens of museum leaders in the USA, Middle East, and Europe between 2006-2021 have shaped researchers' varying views on the future of the museum. Several resources, including books, articles and online sources, newspaper clippings about heritage, and the museum's long-term work have surfaced. Szántó's (2020) six key areas regarding crucial developments in the museum world, as explained further below, have been used as a conceptual model.

Since World War II, the museum field has been lulled into complacency, not just regarding its financial viability, but also its importance and prestige due to a long period of relative peace, prosperity, and globalisation (Szántó, 2020). However, according to Szántó, the Covid-19 crisis has accelerated the drive for museums to change and evolve in six key areas, which coincides with a difficult reckoning with the interconnected legacies of colonialism and racial inequality (2020). The developments will be reflected on below, and examples of museum initiatives will be offered.

1. The significance of establishing a new relationship with the public.

First, the closures due to the pandemic have highlighted the importance of forging a new relationship with the public, continuing a trend that began in the 1970s to transform the museum from an exclusive cultural enclave into a more accessible institution that seeks a reciprocal relationship with its visitors, who are becoming more diverse, or even virtual.

One such idea, already developed in 2011 (Simon & Atkins), is the ‘participatory museum’. The number of neighbourhoods with a community museum or initiative are growing. Because they do not have the ‘standard museum collection’ that a traditional museum does, they stand to offer something quite different, and the inspiration comes from curating items from their neighbourhood, reflecting its local heritage, the area’s history, and the community’s story. In essence, ‘The Participatory Museum’ concept is whereby authors wrote on ways to initiate audience cooperation in the museum. To make their work widely visible, *The Participatory Museum* (Ibid, 2011) can be read online for free.

Another example of an exhibition that has in part moved online is the recent exhibition ‘*Ongekend*’ [Unknown]. Due to the coronavirus development, ten years of special acquisitions and their stories in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam are yet to be physically available and opening soon may be impossible. On the museum’s webpage, the visitor will ‘walk’ past a range of highlights and choose from a variety of options, such as a curator’s explanation or the viewpoint of the depot manager. There will also be online workshops by art experts. (Museumtijdschrift, 2021; NU.nl, 2021b; Van Gogh Museum, n.d.)

2. A modern museum business model that places it as an institution committed to supporting communities and addressing social needs, rather than just the collection and preservation of artifacts.

Second, 2020 solidified the adoption of a broader museum mandate, as evidenced by the International Council of Museums' inconclusive attempt within the last year to construct a new concept of the museum beyond object custodianship, instead designating it as an organisation dedicated to serving communities and addressing social needs. For today's museum leaders, these two imperatives are not contradictory but complementary—and by all accounts, the Covid experience has deepened the sentiment (Szántó, 2020).

One example of a museum that has shifted in concept is the Northern Maritime Museum. It will become the historical museum of the city and province and will be renamed: *Museum aan de A* [Museum on the A]. There will be a major renovation, adjustment of the permanent set-up, and changes to their (educational) offer and the events and activities program (Museum aan de A, n.d.) The reinvented museum will offer a variety of events, many with a historical theme. Workshops, theatre, poetry, seminars, and a study for engagement events range from temporary exhibits to creative student programs (Groninger Internet Courant, 2020).

3. Museums to discuss long-standing economic and ethnic inequalities.

Third, following the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing mass protests, museums started to confront entrenched economic and racial inequities, as well as the forms in which those inequities are encoded in museum collections, presentations, staffing and organisational cultures, and even physical edifices, thus eroding public confidence. The reckoning necessitates a new attitude toward cooperation and repatriation for organisations that collect antiquities and artifacts representing other nations' heritage (Szántó, 2020).

One example is how in October of last year, the Dutch Advisory Committee completed an advisory report 'Colonial Collections and Recognition of Injustice' that discussed a large array of cultural objects from the colonial period. Cultural treasures with a variety of origin stories ranged from gifts from locals to colonial rulers, to looted artifacts from wars and military expeditions. The report concluded that the Netherlands must demonstrate a willingness to unconditionally return cultural objects seized during colonial rule. The strategy for

colonial collections in Dutch museums should be focused on the awareness of injustice and a determination to remedy this injustice as much as possible (Raad voor Cultuur, 2020).

4. To reframe their missions and correct past wrongs, museums are rethinking the experiences they offer.

Fourth, museums are rethinking the experiences they deliver to reframe their missions and right past wrongs, from developing more inclusive heterogeneous approaches to collecting, curating, translating, and storytelling, to embracing technology and architecture that captivates today's audiences, to making their buildings and campuses more welcoming to everyone (Szántó, 2020).

A case study on how to create a more inclusive and polyphonic approach to collecting and exhibiting is the national Dutch Rijksmuseum that will host a show on slavery in the spring of 2021. Rather than abstract ideas, the exhibition takes the form of personal and real-life stories. Stories from Brazil, Suriname, the Caribbean, as well as South Africa and Asia, are included. For the first time, the museum focuses on slavery during the Dutch colonial era in this exhibition. This colonial era, which lasted 250 years, was a period where people were enslaved, dehumanised, and reduced to 'numbers' in the ledgers. The exhibition features ten true stories about people who were a part of slavery in one way or another. These are personal accounts of those who were captured, kept slaves, fought, and those who were taken into the Netherlands as slaves. (Rijksmuseum, n.d.)

5. Museums explore new business models.

Fifth, the deterioration of museum finances and the grim prospects for potential funding has sparked interest in novel business models. Hierarchies in organisations are being restructured. Underexplored territories such as deaccessioning, are being revisited by organisations. Untapped funding outlets are inspiring a more entrepreneurial mentality (Szántó, 2020).

Ownership has taken on a new meaning in this online age of internet trading, sharing, borrowing, and reselling. This realisation has already been reached by Dutch Museums. In addition, museums must remain competitive and find a place in the market (Vink, n.d.). The

MuseumDepotShop is an online store that sells museum objects. These items are from the participating museums' depots. Before the museums can continue with selling, each item must pass a procedure to ensure that there are no legal, ethical, or other barriers to selling to private individuals or businesses (MuseumDepotShop, 2019).

6. This time of crisis seems to bring in a new way of thinking.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this moment seems to be ushering in a new mindset. The museum leaders Szántó spoke with made some of the most striking remarks regarding institutional posture and attitude, rather than behaviour or policies. Museums must “stop being so high-minded” and “let go of this obnoxious mentality that they are an expert on everything,” according to some directors. “We need to get off our own pedestals,” one director said in an interview with Szántó (2020).

Confronting the Moment

Despite the pandemic's undeniable hardships, Szántó (2020) feels optimistic. He believes that we should look back on this chapter as the vessel towards a different kind of museum: one that stays dedicated to its traditional positions and duties but still becoming more community-facing, humble, conscious of the tangible and unseen obstacles to participation, conscientious of ethical ethics, and eager to level with visitors.

The museum of the future might be less influenced by indicators of performance than relevance and authenticity. The organisations most likely to thrive in the 21st century would be those who are able to adapt to the circumstances by questioning which communities they serve, and then seeking new business models. In certain circumstances, the responses may lead to an organisation that does not resemble the museum we are familiar with. The current Covid-19 crisis may allow museums to develop in a multiplicity of pluralistic institutions. The pandemic has thrown challenges at museum executives that no one could have predicted, yet there is plenty of room for innovation and inclusion. To finalise with Szántó's words (2020): “regardless of their circumstances, they all saw this as the culmination of a long-brewing realization: the museum's institutional paradigm needs a rethinking.”

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