

The Dutch museological landscape

by Nico Halbertsma, Reinwardt Academy.

Imagine . . . . a 15th century building in the over populated western part of Holland,



packed with glass cases made from Mahoney wood, messing railings, an operating theatre and medical instruments.



You may fire a gun and will hit nobody. Only when there is anywhere in Holland a medical seminar or conference, all the participants will visit the museum.

In the “empty” northern part of Holland, the province of Friesland, flat, endless meadows, cows, lakes with sailing boats, in one of the 11 towns, situated in a 16<sup>th</sup> century building, there is a museum with old not so well painted paintings, textiles, costumes.



From November 2008 till March 2009 the museum had an exhibition on Quilts (patchwork). It attracted so many visitors; you could walk over their heads. There was a Quilt-café run by quilting volunteer ladies.



Due to the curator, who visited in advance all the quilt-groups in the province.

The question is: are the above examples a true picture of what's happening in Holland in relation to audience development or not.

We have to be honest: when we look at our visitors they are still the well educated, over 50 years of age, with enough money to spend and they are regular museum visitors.

Is there more “bad news” from Holland/

I'm afraid . . . yes.

Our museums are still not a mirror of society. They are not representing all the cultures we have in our country. Not in our collections, nor in collecting strategies. They are not a warehouse of memories of all inhabitants (only the white upper middle class). Nor in their approach of society. Nor in their staff.

Dutch museums are inward looking institutions. There is not much sharing of knowledge on collections.

They are afraid of partnerships, especially with non-museums.

Not really target group focussed, still talking about attracting the “general” public. They have an attitude to bring their knowledge to the people; they know what we want to know.

There is a lack of visitor-focussed competences of front-of-house staff, in publicity and managerial thinking.

So Holland is not a place to visit?

Is this really true?

And how do we know?

The above rather negative remarks are taken from recent publications of our Statistics Netherlands, the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB), the Museum Monitor (started in 2007 with yearly 10.000 interviews in 40 “average” museums in Holland) and independent researcher Letty Ranshuysen (2005 report “Invisible Barriers”).

The outcomes of their researches? The bad news I just mentioned above.

But the **good** news is:

1) There is a shift from just plain knowledge transfer via awareness of society to “experience”.

Let’s be clear about current trends: Dutch society is becoming a silver society (may elderly), with many so called new citizens, the growing importance of ICT (silver surfers) and a shift towards a leisure and experience economy. National, regional and local governments stimulate specific target group policies (youth, immigrants, schools). Programmes on demand (though nobody is asking), tailor made (local, special). But the growing use of focus groups and round table discussions is promising.

2) Visitors become more and more (inter)active, which is reflected in the offer of so called interactive guided tours, debate evenings, story sharing and contributing, events (museum nights etcetera) and hands-on activities and interactive displays focussing on social learning (you need someone else to make it happen).

3) An important role for the visitor: use of volunteers in describing the collection, to run the shop, behind the information desk, host and even as education “officer”. A famous example in Holland is the Museum at Scheveningen (The Hague), called Beelden aan Zee (Sculptures at the seafront), run by volunteers (except for paid staff: the director, the financial staff member and the education officer), which are called “partners”! Volunteers as Ambassadors, visiting leisure parks and camping’s on rainy days to tell the people what they might do on a day like this. Peer to peer education by youngsters or deaf people giving guided tours

to other deaf people. Or the Museum school in Oss, a collaboration between the Museum Jan Cunen and a secondary school.

4) The Dutch “culture and school” policy over the last 10 years, with vouchers for the students to use for visiting all kind of cultural events (museums), which will be changed into a “culture card”, like a credit card, with the same possibilities. A special magazine for the teachers with a lot of information on projects and activities. Special training days for them. Pilot projects, special local and regional institutions to bridge the gap between schools and our culture heritage (institutions). Each primary school got its own “internal culture co-ordinator”. The new so called “broad-school”, a type of primary school with a special focus on culture (and sports) and after-school activities. And last but not least the use of culture and heritage is now part of the teacher training courses.

5) The growing use of learning theories (Hein, Kolb, Gardner) in the development of exhibitions and educational projects, which makes the museum visit more effective and has a great impact on the staff (from cleaner to director) as it makes them all more visitor focussed.

6) The use of social networks, off- and online, by (potential) visitors and the staff of the museum.

Isn't this great!

Any gaps?

Oh yes: it is still difficult to attract new citizens, to reach the 20 – 35 year, and the under fives. And real intergenerational activities are still a problem.

Is there hope for the future?

Well, according to our recent National Policy, the Minister of Education & Culture said that every museum should make its own choices, depending on their nature of collections, the museum mission, and the society in which it stands and the people it represents.

So, as a museum you are allowed to be:

- an educational institution
- a place for experiments
- a stage for debate on citizenship
- a place for reflection.

As Minister Plasterk say's: “this creates a differentiation in the museum landscape with a rich variety of programmes and exhibitions for a very diverse audience”.

“Amen”.