

MAS and the city: working on the edge between museum and communities

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MAS is known today as a museum where one can discover objects and stories, a place where one looks at the world, at Antwerp and at oneself. In the run up to its opening in May 2011, four museum collections merged together with the so-called *heritage cell* of Antwerp. A thematic approach led away from previous collection profiles and headed for topics that were relevant for the past, the present and the future. The Public and education department's goals for working with volunteers and target audiences were met by the *heritage cell*'s core principles of networking, exchange of expertise and community participation.

The following years MAS experimented with innovative projects, such as *Spoorzoekers*, *Heilige Plaatsen*, *Heilige Boeken* and *De winkel om de hoek*. During these long-term projects, different communities were invited to participate to one or more of the museological functions of collecting, research and presentation. This implies a shift in perception: the collections are wider than those kept in storage space. They also involve ICH and oral history. Expertise is not owned by the museum curators, but shared with audiences, inhabitants of Antwerp and (source) communities. It implies different working methodologies, so also different skills of museum staff. Participatory projects usually take more time and are less certain of their outcome. However, they get people actively involved beyond the traditional museum visit. Meanwhile MAS learns to plug in society and current trends and hence to overcome the image of a museum being an isolated institution.

After a lustrum, MAS considered the time ready to formulate a vision on the participatory approach related to the (super)diverse communities in the city. After many interesting initiatives, it needed a clearer vision on the term 'participation', the applicable decision processes, as well as how this all positions the museum. While writing this vision note, the Flemish Minister of Culture added in his Cultural Heritage Decree a fifth function to the four established functions of acquiring, conserving, researching and presenting: participation.

MAS's vision note explores the concept of participation and its processes. It is described as a transversal approach. In each case, co-operation with communities appears to be tailor-made: there is not one uniform methodology. The note therefore tries to look for models of partnership (N. Simone; Our Museum) combining it with the renowned museological functions, pointing out various motivations for participation as well as the specific concerns during the participatory processes. This leads to a vision statement on participation at MAS, criteria which projects should meet, and a flow for deciding on what projects the museum can or cannot embark on. The flow and decision diagram were tested on already realised projects. And the note was presented during the yearly 'staff day'. However, the proof of the pudding is in the eating: its usability is still to be tested with future

initiatives, both formulated from within the museum as offered by extern partners. So undoubtedly evaluation and improvement will follow in due time.

More information on

Spoorzoekers: <http://www.mas.be/nl/activiteit/antwerpen>

Heilige Boeken Heilige Plaatsen: <http://www.heiligeplaatsenheiligeboeken.be/nl>

De winkel om de hoek: <http://www.mas.be/nl/activiteit/de-winkel-om-de-hoek-locatieproject> en <http://www.mas.be/nl/pagina/het-virtuele-land> en <http://www.mas.be/nl/activiteit/de-winkel-om-de-hoek>