

Good shopping at the Amsterdam Museum

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Museums are under growing pressure of proving to the public what they are worth.^{1, 2, 3, 4} Maybe you are one of those who currently question the value of museums? In the project 'Buurtwinkels' (Neighbourhood Stores), the Amsterdam Museum uses a multiple approach to answer you. Seeking the benefit of the city, the Amsterdam Museum shows that it offers value for money.

Shopping list

In this essay the impact of 'Buurtwinkels' is discussed on different levels, mainly by relating the project's approach to relevant literature.

First, the context is considered – motives and objectives underlying 'Buurtwinkels'.

Here, also the connection with the project 'Entrepreneurial Cultures in European Cities'⁵,⁶ is described. Next, the content of 'Buurtwinkels' is explained, the components that constitute its 'unique selling points'.

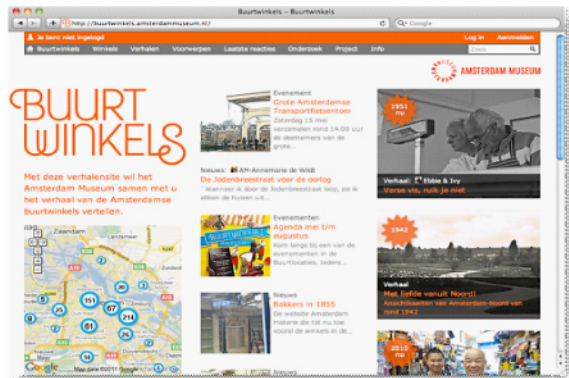
After the 'why' and the 'what', 'where' we find the museum subsequently comes into view. The media used in 'Buurtwinkels' implicate on both museum and audience. How do roles and positions change here?

The last thing to consider is whether in the end anything of social value is to be found in the audience's and the museum's shopping basket. There are good arguments why museums should strive for social impact. However, how to achieve this, and what exactly to achieve is a more complicated issue.

In the conclusion the balance is made up: how does the Amsterdam Museum offer value for money?



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1 Exhibition poster⁷

2 buurtwinkels.amsterdammuseum.nl⁸

3 Exhibition poster in an Islamic butcher⁹

4 Sharing memories, Amsterdam Museum¹⁰

5 Different generations, Amsterdam North¹¹

6 Students, Van Eesteren Museum, Amsterdam West¹²

7 Students and elderly sharing stories during a 'Stories of the Past' meeting, Amsterdam East¹³

Heading for the neighbourhood shop

The Amsterdam Museum wants to strengthen its profile as a city museum by exploring themes closely connected to the identity of life in Amsterdam. The museum has a tradition of developing presentations together with specific communities.¹⁴ Following the exhibition 'Oost, Amsterdamse buurt' (East, an Amsterdam Neighbourhood)¹⁵ and the associated community website www.geheugenvanoost.nl¹⁶ (Memory of East), the museum looked forward to develop another, neighbourhood related project.

'Neighbourhood shops' was regarded as a good choice; in contrast to 'East', more neighbourhoods could form part of it. The story of shops could lead to different perspectives, such as economy, streetscape, migration, and the history of consumption could be dealt with.¹⁷

With 'Buurtwinkels', the museum aimed to research, document and present the story of Amsterdam's local shops in the 20th and 21st century and to discuss the position of the entrepreneurs, and their contribution to local economy and social cohesion.¹⁸

The museum aimed to reach a new, diverse audience; not just elderly visiting for nostalgic reasons, but also the entrepreneurs and others who do not easily enter the museum. Experimenting with outreach, cooperation with volunteers and participative and on-line collecting were also objectives. Finally, the museum strived for a long-lasting collaboration with non-cultural partners such as Ymere,^{19, 20} an Amsterdam housing corporation and already sponsor of the museum, which facilitated events and with whom the museum shared expertise.^{21, 22, 23, 24}

While developing the first ideas for 'Buurtwinkels', the Amsterdam Museum co-initiated 'Entrepreneurial Cultures in European Cities', a project in which eleven museums and cultural organizations from eight European countries explored "the possibilities for small and medium-size businesses to contribute to an emerging European citizenship".²⁵

Many local shop owners in Amsterdam have an immigrant background, belong to lower socio-economic groups and are hardworking people, a position hindering them to engage with a museum.²⁶ Now, in 'Buurtwinkels' the museum provides this community with a platform. Reflecting on collaboration with different partners here, ECEIC project leaders Tietmeyer and Kistemaker state that the collection of the entrepreneurs' heritage was "meant to help the entrepreneurs in question to identify with the museum as a place which also contains their history, and as a forum for intercultural dialogue."²⁷ The ECEIC project aimed not primarily at academic exchange, but merely learning from each other's approaches in working with groups outside the museum.²⁸

"All these memories... make us enjoy what is now far behind, the days of our youth. And how wonderful our country is enriched by so many new cultures. My enjoyment doubles!"

Note in the visitor's book, 24 June 2011.

Unique selling points

Next to the temporary exhibition in the Amsterdam Museum, 'Buurtwinkels' includes smaller 'in situ' presentations in various city quarters: a former shop in Amsterdam North, a Turkish coffeehouse in East, the Van Eesteren Museum²⁹ in West and in the Jordan district the Theo Thijssen Museum³⁰. The Amsterdam Museum exhibition is an evocative presentation on neighbourhood shops in past and present; the other locations emphasize more on sharing stories, meetings and events.

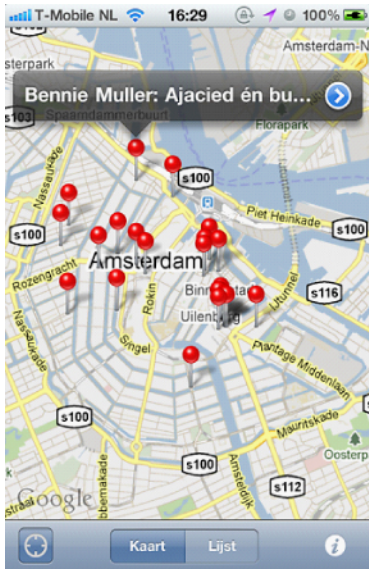
In 2009 the museum initiated <http://buurtwinkels.amsterdammuseum.nl/>.^{31, 32} This participatory platform is open for everyone to subscribe, to share anecdotes or pictures concerning one's neighbourhood store and to contribute to the story of Amsterdam's

local shops in past and present. As of 19 July 2011, with the help of volunteers, students and on-line visitors, 329 descriptions of shops in past and present (c. 1,300 neighbourhood shops currently exist in Amsterdam) and 458 stories have been collected on the site, next to 159 virtual objects. Further, amongst others Amsterdam's newspaper *Het Parool* contributes to the site with a series of articles and the Department of Sociology of the University of Amsterdam publishes research on the social impact of neighbourhood shops. Reports on 'Buurtwinkels' meetings and events, films, and a historical framework by curator Annemarie de Wildt form part of the website as well. The website is also used to publish events: walks and tours, meetings, and documentary screenings. Using semantic web technology developed by Mediamatic, different types of information are intelligently linked; every story, object or event is provided with context.^{33, 34}

A 'Buurtwinkels' iPhone App is available as well, enabling one to locate neighbourhood shops, to learn about their histories and to discover pictures and links to other stores and stories.

Any Amsterdam resident missing the above at least will encounter one of the posters of 'Buurtwinkels'. Telling the histories of shops and shopkeepers, these are placed on shop windows throughout the city, as is the general exhibition poster.³⁵

In addition, the museum uses <http://blog.amsterdammuseum.nl/> and twitter.com/amsterdammuseum to communicate the project on a regular base.



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8-10 Neighbourhood Shops App. Design: Mediamatic³⁶

11 Lydia Teding van Berkhout. 'Butcher Rodrigues in front of his shop, Vijzelgracht 20, corner Derde Weteringdwarsstraat.' 1983. Collection Amsterdam Museum, SA 38929³⁷

12 Portraits of entrepreneurs on Rodrigues' former shop, Vijzelgracht, Amsterdam-Centre^{38, 39}

13 "I'm Judith Seymonson of telephone shop Optie #1 on Javastreet 47. The shop is founded in 1998."⁴⁰

Who owns this shop?

'Buurtwinkels' includes different locations, old and new media, tangible and intangible material and involves museum staff, external parties, and hundreds of co-authors who contribute via the website. This choir of voices is fundamental to the project. The cooperative approach signifies a change of roles for both the museum and the audience. Whereas the first becomes actively involved in social issues, the latter becomes active in the museum itself.^{41, 42, 43} Instead of visitors, people ultimately become participants.⁴⁴ Now, what is the impact of these role reversals on the ownership of the project?

The impact on the museum itself is considerable. 'Buurtwinkels' proves the potential of social media in the context of immaterial heritage preservation. It is the kind of platform Dicker describes as "allowing for retention of a curatorial voice, deep analytical thinking, audience directed creativity, and the ability to use content to communicate ideas." Furthermore, Dicker describes the role of the curator in the 21st century in relation to social media. The added value of this changed curatorship, "a high degree of visibility, extensive networks, and the opportunity to have a subjective voice", becomes apparent in the connection between social media and the physical exhibition.⁴⁵ In 'Buurtwinkels', this integration at first glance seems more apparent in the community site than in the exhibition. The curator's publications are explicitly identified on-line, compared to contributions of individual co-authors in the exhibition. Nevertheless, the exhibition is strongly supported by collecting via the site over the past years, by the network of volunteers and other contributors.⁴⁶

The 21st century curator here moves away from the traditional role of the "keeper of truth".⁴⁷ "Curators nowadays often cooperate with colleagues from educational departments, while the public plays a central role as 'practitioners', as the ones who

attach a special value to a specific heritage. This is especially true for intangible heritage.”⁴⁸

Annemarie de Wildt, curator of ‘Buurtwinkels’, reflects on the challenges she encountered: “It was interesting to work closely with the educational department, which was leading the project. For them the process (outreach, working with neighbourhoods and entrepreneurs) is even more important than the product (a good exhibition). We tried to balance both, this occurred for instance with stories written by volunteers. Should we correct their mistakes and grammar? In the end we did, because the stories are meant for a wider audience.” For external contributors, the project was a true learning experience: how to write a story, how to make a photograph and how to share these on the website. ⁴⁹

The approach chosen in ‘Buurtwinkels’, affect the principles of learning as well. Stories, objects and in depth information are shared with the audience both on-site and on-line. Whereas in the on-site museum the focus usually is on who the visitor is, and how to take the visitors profile into account in the learning process, in the on-line world an variety of environments exist. Considering that “all learning is influenced by an awareness of place”, Parry and Arbach differentiate the circumstances of the on-line visitor in “location (physical, geographical position), place (type of space), and situation (circumstance, activity or intent).”⁵⁰ ‘Buurtwinkels’ proves awareness of these aspects. The project can be encountered wherever one is, at home when browsing or even contributing to buurtwinkels.amsterdammuseum.nl, via the App when on the move, or when shopping in one’s quarter by encountering a window poster or satellite presentation (though the latter two are actually off-site and off-line). The different means operate on different levels and communicate in a media and environment adapted way. People are invited to participate in the project whereas simultaneously, the project

becomes part of their location, place and situation. The Amsterdam Museum thus displays a “sensitivity to place”, while the audience gains a deeper “sense of place”.⁵¹ Also on a more fundamental level, things shift: Scott refers to Weil (1997) and Maggi (2000), who envision a museum of the future that will be a centre for community confrontation, exchange and debate. Maggi calls this the forum-museum.⁵² Parry and Arbach see the learner actively engaging with and producing content. As a result, “a shift in the control of media production” takes place. “Museums can now enable social interaction and learning through practical situations by encouraging the on-line museum learner to act as collaborative producer.”⁵³ The outcome is a widening horizon, writes Hooper-Greenhill: “Where audiences are used to co-author museum narratives, new perspectives on old histories may emerge.”⁵⁴

In the case of ‘Buurtwinkels’, the exhibition no longer is the major means of communication but only part in a “nucleus of events”. There is not one or unified perspective or set of values here and as a result of that, the museum itself is moving “into the spaces, the concerns, and the ambitions of communities”. Taking this into account, the Amsterdam Museum can be characterized, following Hooper-Greenhill, as a post-museum as opposed to a modernist museum.⁵⁵

“He told me many things about the past that I didn’t know until now. Now I realize how blessed I am. When I’m having difficulties, I’ll remember this interview.”

*Student Nellufar Naik Mohammed (18), reporting on a ‘Stories of the Past’-meeting at ‘Buurtwinkels’, location Amsterdam East, on 28 June 2011.*⁵⁶

In the shopping basket

Before considering the social impact of 'Buurtwinkels' on the entrepreneurs' community and others in the city, the fundamental question is whether and how museums should strive to have any social impact.

Opinions vary here; for example Appleton, arguing against the social role of museums, states that "museums should stick to what they do best – to preserve, to display, study and where possible collect the treasures of civilisation and nature. They are not fit to do anything else."⁵⁷ Sandell and Silverman on the other hand argue that museums have a responsibility as social agents.^{58, 59} Sandell is aware of the gap between theoretical assumptions on the impact of museums on society, and the measurability of the outcomes.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, he states that museums have an intrinsic responsibility to keep in touch with today's society. Museums always have impact on society; they have the power to strengthen, or to challenge existing structures of power. Museums should "shape that impact through practice that is based on contemporary values and a commitment to social equality."⁶¹

The Amsterdam Museum proves to be aware of its responsibility to publicly explain what its value is,⁶² how it deals with social responsibility and aims to strengthen civil society. Following the publication 'Meer dan Waard' (More than Worth) of the Netherlands Museum Association,⁶³ the museum's 2010 annual report was structured along five social values museums have: Collection Value, Experiential Value, Economic Value, Educational Value and Binding Value. The latter three in particular apply to 'Buurtwinkels', as the report clarifies in describing the diverse, innovative elements, the aim to include new communities and the collaboration with volunteers, journalists, entrepreneurs, street managers, and (non-)cultural organizations, contributing to the project from their own perspective.⁶⁴

The approach of 'Buurtwinkels' results in natural environments for storytelling, leading to a process in which "information (and meaning) is created rather than transmitted", where "visitors make meaning through a constant process of remembering and connecting" and where a "sense of self, 'who am I as an individual' and 'who am I as a group member'", is created, expressed, and affirmed.⁶⁵

The meaning created here is subjective and unpredictable. However, in this process of meaning-making museums gain relevancy.^{66, 67} "As the meaning-making approach suggests, visitors may seek to fulfil the need to reminiscence, to have a social experience, to express their individuality, to feel part of a community." By fulfilling these needs, museums become places for a satisfying experience.⁶⁸

It might be concluded now that the parameters in 'Buurtwinkels' are set right. However, high visitor numbers or extensive on-line contributions are not automatically achieved as a result of that.^{69, 70} The museum noted: "People who normally do not visit a museum pay a visit to the different neighbourhood locations; however, visitor numbers are modest." Practical issues play an important role as well. "Money is a boundary for people to visit. The museum provided free entry cards that people, also entrepreneurs with their families, did use." Given the workload of the entrepreneurs, time is a restriction as well. Annemarie de Wildt: "At the opening we put a lot of effort in inviting the shopkeepers of Javastraat and indeed two busloads (busses paid by us) came. We also put the opening time at 7pm, after the shops closed."⁷¹

An assessment of the long-term contribution of museums to social value is argued by Scott to be a "matter of survival."⁷² Here, a merely quantitative evaluation is not sufficient, as Scott also acknowledges: "It is now recognised that inputs and outputs should result in outcomes. The impact and effectiveness of performance are, therefore, important additional criteria for assessment."⁷³ The project should not be judged solely on visitor numbers for the different locations and the number of contributions to the

website, but also on the qualities of the experiment and the user experience, including the impact on various people working in the museum.

The museum indicated a number of qualitative outcomes: “It is a valuable experiment, showing how difficult it is to work outside its walls.” And “the people whose story is on the website are proud of this, tell their customers and in this sense become ambassadors of the museum.”⁷⁴ Scott makes clear that long-term social value occurs as the result of cultural participation.⁷⁵ This is echoed in the observation by Van Eekeren: “It is difficult to measure what exactly the impact is. In the end, we reach just a minority of Amsterdam’s shopkeepers. However, it is clear that as a result of this project more attention is being paid on neighbourhood shops by the media and probably also consumers have developed a stronger sense of the importance of neighbourhood shops. Surprisingly, sponsor Ymere and the city government both display much positive attention towards entrepreneurs. Maybe we have reinforced an existing trend: the retailer as a hero.”⁷⁶

Conclusion

The current economic and political climate increasingly forces museums to prove their value for society. To gain the necessary support, museums need to invest in new types of relationships, with existing and new audiences. In the Amsterdam Museum’s project ‘Buurtwinkels’, well designed, innovative and inviting on-site and on-line media lead to new ways of audience participation, presentation and collection. The relationship between society and the museum is strengthened, and interrelationships between consumers and entrepreneurs, neighbourhoods and residents are stimulated. ‘Buurtwinkels’ invites people to participate right where they are, in neighbourhood shops, in the streets, and on the web. The project visualises underlying relationships in Amsterdam’s everyday life, raising an awareness of one’s position in society.⁷⁷ In the

chosen approach, the Amsterdam Museum shows an understanding of its social agency.

There is more to say still: out of this article's scope, but necessary for a thoroughly evaluation would be a qualitative research of the impact on the entrepreneurs community's self-image and social-economic position. Also of interest will be the impact of the intended sharing of knowledge on this project with the wider museum world. This will also reveal whether and how the 'Buurtwinkels' approach is applicable in other fields than social history museum projects.

There is more to do as well: in 2010, c. 2% of the Amsterdam population visited the Amsterdam Museum,⁷⁸ while 85% paid a visit to a neighbourhood shop each week.⁷⁹ Both the shops and the museum offer value for money; will 2011 show an increase of numbers and appreciation for the two of them? You are part of the answer.

Amsterdam Museum

www.amsterdammuseum.nl

www.buurtwinkels.amsterdammuseum.nl

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