

Taking the Initiative in the Power play

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1 Intro

How can museums cope with the political threat of severe budget cuts and political driven reorganizations? In this presentation I will give an example of how museums in the Netherlands recently anticipated collectively on the political pressure to shrink and merge. Together with signals from how museums handle this in other European countries, the presentation seeks to inspire museums to learn from each other in surviving reductions and what role collectiveness can play.

2 Starting point

Before the crisis the museum landscape in the NL was under construction. For more than 1 billion euro's of rebuilding was being invested. And for more than half a billion spent in the conservation of collections (Deltaplan). The results of the golden decade since the mid nineties. Visitor numbers were steady. The investments lifted the budgets. Museums were the darlings of government, be it national or local. Museums were not questioned.

3 Populism and new liberalism

Since 2001 the political landscape changed completely and definitely. The powers that be lost their power and new movements took over, either outside the ruling parties – like Pim Fortuyn and later Geert Wilders – or within parties, especially within the liberal party. New was the questioning of what was not to be questioned: public funding of the arts

The reaction of the cultural scene was one of denial, or at best of writing these voices of as being brutes.

4 Crisis in sight

Six years ago Lehman brothers fell down. As remote as it seemed, the effect of this on public finances was soon clear. Predicted cuts of 10% in the total national government expenditure we're laughed away as being panic. Today we are at a cut of 10% since 2008 and still new cuts are underway. From the 5 billion euro spent on culture one billion was cut.

5 Perfect storm

So the changed political landscape and the crisis together created a perfect storm for the cultural scene that on their side was ill prepared for. So when it came, the reaction was one of anger, frustration, and a militant spirit. March for civilisation. Scream for culture. All misunderstood.

So from everybody darling culture became an elitist left wing hobby. Political influence from the culture sector itself was swept away. Budget cuts came, with a condemning tone of voice, as if culture was a subsidy addict than needed to go to the re-hap.

6 Even museums

In all this, the contemporary arts, both the visual and the performing arts, were first in the spotlight of this storm. The mood was 'let's do the arts first and then the museums will follow later'. This has two grounds: First museums were somewhat spared, also because populism goes well with national pride, so our heritage is relatively save under this political sky. Second, because museums take care of the heritage that is publicly owned, you cannot so easy get rid of them as you can with spaces for arts or theatre companies.

So, in the first round, where the budget of the arts lost up to 40% and that for museums 'only' 20%, government prepared for a second round, in which it wanted to reorganise the museum sector, in order to make it less costly.

7 The leap ahead

The museums, united in their two national associations, were not in for being the subject of policy change. Not that policy was all good, but they just didn't trust the policy makers and their advisory bodies in the capacity to come up with something good. So they asked their associations to do it ourselves. And this we did.

We – the two national associations - formed a commission of ten museum directors, from art galleries to historical collections, from national to regional and from the biggest to more mid- sized. The chair and vice chair were taken by non-museum academics. This commission was asked to answer the following question 'what was needed to ensure the duration of the museum sector and how to meet the needs of society for museums in the near future.

8 Cooperation

This is where they came up with: What the museum sector needs now is more and extensive cooperation:

- between museums
 - o collective collection policy
 - o coordination in research
 - o a collective step towards schools
- between governments
 - o governments agreement between national regional and local government on their policies towards museums
 - o legal basis for museum's work and for protection and funding of the collection.
 - o to facilitate collectively the co-operations between museums, also across their borders
 - o to coordinate the care of collections if a museum has to close down.
- between the two museums associations: who decided to merge as a result. We are now the one and only Museums Association in the Netherlands and we speak with one voice.

9 Minister's choice

The advice was influential. The minister of Culture accepted the advice with enthusiasm. At the same time she also was advised by her Arts Council to intervene in the autonomy of the museums, and push them into a 'chain of museums'. Museum had to be pushed into co-operations.

The minister, knowing that the museums themselves were willing to push cooperation further, chose to join the initiative of the museums and give the museums the benefit of the doubt. She followed the advice of the commission the museums themselves established and even added a small budget to stimulate new and promising forms of cooperation.

10 Many forms of cooperation

After this political success, we chose to make a campaign to foster the upcoming urge for cooperation. A new commission was formed with the assignment to collect existing examples of sustainable cooperation that proved to be beneficial in:

- lower cost and/or higher income
- more visitors and an more diverse audience
- more visibility of collections

The aim of this inventory is to inspire museum's to follow these examples. The report came out a year ago and is also translated in English, in cooperation with NEMO. It's for all of you to use.

11 Co-operation examples

150 examples with museums

on advocacy: local, regional and national

on collective promotion

- combi-tickets
- advertisement
- travel arrangement

on education

- Sunday morning museum university for the young

on (travelling) exhibitions

on research

on manifestations: memorable years, theme-programmes

- with museums in the same field
- with local partners, cultural or divers

on shared fields of collection

- defining the 'Dutch collection'
- acquiring and de-accessioning collectively
- swapping 'rolling stones'
- digitizing and publishing
- collecting oral history
- archiving
- sharing curators

with artists and designers

- on making new products

with heritage communities, be it ethnic, religious

with schools

- on education

with universities: collective archives, special events

with television and radio:

- documentary
- educational
- talent scouting

with newspapers and magazines

with the police: educational program

with hospitals: exhibits, trips to the museum

with hotels: exhibits

with castles: exhibits

with sponsors: exhibits

with the airport: exhibits

with a large oil firm: on conservation and research

alliances and mergers

- on positioning towards each other (fields of expertise, proposition to the audience)
- back offices, ICT, P&O security office
- on sharing curators and collections and redistributing them
- on having one storage.
- with libraries, archives, tourist information desks
- with museums in the same field: Tropen, Volkekunde, Afrika / Army museums.

12 Lessons learned

This all may sound a bit too Dutch for you. Not every nation is organised the same way, and governments in some countries have more to say than others. But I do think there are lessons that we all can learn from this example.

- Prepare yourself by making up your vision on the future before government decides for you, about you and without you.
- Political pressure does work, but political rule does not work.
- Seek the power of the collective, don't go solo. Lobbying is also a social affair.