

The University of Amsterdam HeritageLab (ErfgoedLab). A learning space

STEPH SCHOLTEN

Abstract

At the Heritage Collections department of the University of Amsterdam, a leftover space was designated in early 2010 as a temporary laboratory for experimentation with heritage concepts, collections and audiences, in the framework of developing plans for renewing the concept and presentations of the archaeological museum. A series of projects have been executed, each in close collaboration with staff and students from different faculties. The HeritageLab has turned out to be an interesting alternative platform for visualizing and presenting research as well as an excellent tool for communication between a university museum and academic education and science.

Introduction

At the 2011 UNIVERSEUM conference in Padova, Italy, this author presented a paper during which this image was shown (fig. 1).

It was argued that university museums and collections need to be relevant in two domains: in representing the university and in at least one part of the core business of the university: education

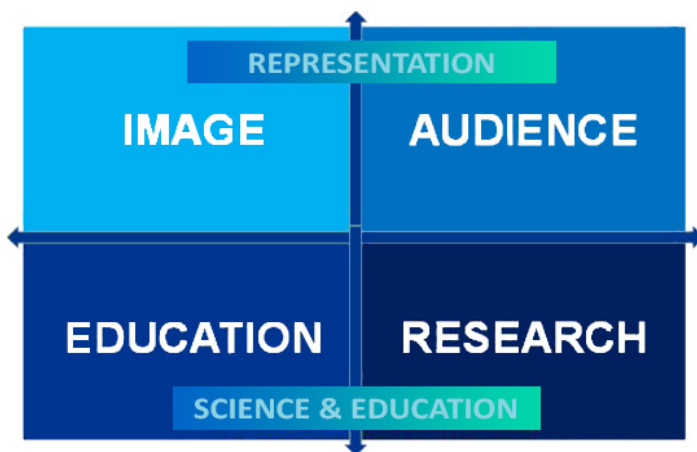


Fig. 1 - Modeling values of academic collections © S. Scholten

and/or science. If they do not do that, the relevance of the collections for the university will, sooner or later, be questioned and if this happens, funding will come into question (SCHOLTEN 2011).

At the University of Amsterdam, this scenario was feared to become reality for its archaeological museum. This so called Allard Pierson Museum¹ has been part of the university since 1934, but it had slowly but surely drifted from its academic moorings. More and more it was becoming an entity of its own,

and one that rarely publicly acknowledged that it was actually part of the university. Its relationship with faculty and university board had become strained. At the same time that this author was appointed overall director of (almost) all heritage collections of the university, in February 2009, a new director for the museum, Dr Wim Hupperetz, was appointed as well. It was clear to us that we urgently needed to improve the position of the museum. Plans for a major refurbishment of both the buildings and the exhibitions were developed, but such plans require lots of time and money before they can be realized. By the end of 2012 we have been able to complete the first phases, including expanding the spaces for temporary exhibitions from 180 to almost 500 square meters, creating a new museum shop, new office spaces for staff and a VIP room for our benefactors as well as cosmetically improving many of the museum spaces. It is a step-by-step process, the speed of which is determined by the available money and the cooperation of many officials within and outside the university in charge of building and financial issues. At this point we still need seven million euro or so to complete the refurbishment.

¹ www.allardpiersonmuseum.nl (accessed November 28, 2012).

The invention of the HeritageLab

But besides all kinds of practical issues, the museum needed to adapt its focus. It has been on its present location since 1976 and it has done well for a long time, but it has lost part of its drive and its connection to the university in the 21st century. The new director of the museum came up with the idea to create a space where we could experiment on a small scale with new ideas and concepts for the



Fig. 2 - The HeritageLab from outside in 2011 © UvA Heritage Collections

museum. He felt it appropriate for an academic museum to call it a laboratory, a place for experimentation. We found a perfect spot in our buildings, right in the middle. It was a kind of leftover, not very practical space that was used for storage of the Christmas decorations and other material (fig. 2).

Funding was applied for and a grant for 'cultural innovation' was awarded by the Mondriaan Foundation, a public funding body.² With this grant, a coordinator could be recruited for two days a week for three years. Mr. Jan Bolten was appointed, a young talent who previously had been teaching in the universities museology master course. He

started in early 2010, so his term is now almost at its end. A sum of 20.000 euro per year was made available from the regular budget to run the activities in the HeritageLab. The purpose of the HeritageLab was defined as: "Bringing the past to the present: a space for research and experimentation. The aim of the UvA ErfgoedLab is to explore the interaction between heritage, collections, science and audiences. As a platform for research and experimentation, it brings together scientists, students and artists to present exhibitions on a variety of themes related to heritage".³

The first project

The very first project was connected to a regular exhibition on a very famous 19th century Dutch book on colonialism.⁴ Five students from five different master degree programs participated: history, literature, museology, sociology and theatre. Together they formed a great group that attracted the attention of the board of the university when they launched a successful campaign for fair trade food in the cafeterias and restaurants of the University of Amsterdam. They also produced a lecture series, a small exhibition and even a half hour theatre show. Through this, the attention of many staff members in different faculties was caught. At the same time, we went around to many receptions talking about the HeritageLab concept to a great number of professors and academic staff. It turned out that many loved the idea of having a different platform than the traditional ones they have in an academic setting: writing articles for journals, presenting papers at conferences or lecturing. The HeritageLab concept provided a possibility to share their research with a larger audience. And that has turned out to be one of the main attractions: the HeritageLab is, most of the time, accessible for the general public that comes to visit our exhibitions. The HeritageLab space is directly connected to our exhibitions rooms via a sliding door that we have gradually opened more and more often, leading to vivid interaction with

² www.mondriaanfoundation.nl/en (accessed November 28, 2012).

³ UvA ErfgoedLab, Max Havelaar Academie 2010, Amsterdam 2011, p. 9. Translated freely from Dutch into English by the author of this article.

⁴ The so-called Max Havelaar by Multatuli from 1860, a book that was considered important enough to be nominated for inclusion in the Memory of the World Register of UNESCO in 2010.

audiences during projects. For educational purposes it turned out also to be attractive: students in different fields can make small, more or less traditional exhibitions or whatever it is that they want to develop in the space. In several projects the HeritageLab has been used as a real working space, e.g. experimenting with modern lighting for exhibitions, crowdsourcing biographies from women from Dutch



Fig. 3 - ErfgoedLab #3 CV Café: crowdsourcing biographies from women from Dutch history © UvA Heritage Collections

history (fig. 3) or developing concepts for the presentation of archaeological finds in a new subway station that is under construction very near the museum.

Other projects

Since the start in 2010 up to November 2012, 14 projects have been realised. Projects are short, typically between two and twelve weeks, and have come from the following fields: archaeology (4), museology (2), history (2), media studies (1), conservation (3), computer science (1) and art history (1). Three projects involved work of contemporary artists (fig. 4), some specifically made for the HeritageLab. Almost all projects have a connected program of lectures and/or debates. Most projects have been documented in simple, low cost publications. On the HeritageLab Facebook fanpage some information on most projects can be found.⁵



Fig. 4 - UvA ErfgoedLab #3 - Capturing Metamorphosis. Artist: Rob Johannesma © UvA Heritage Collections

Every project not only has an angle that is interesting for the scholars or students involved, but also addresses a particular issue that we find interesting for the development of our museum concept. This can be the way that audiences interact with virtual devices in exhibitions or how information about the conservation and restoration of museum objects can be presented to a general audience in a meaningful way. It can address questions about the relevance of crowdsourcing for historical data creation or if contemporary art can be used in a meaningful way in archaeological exhibitions.

⁵ www.facebook.com/pages/UvA-ErfgoedLab/140475979295969 (accessed November 28, 2012).

Results and conclusions

The concept of the HeritageLab has become part of our strategy to establish, in part anew, the museum as a relevant platform for the core business of the university: research and education. It has helped in the development of the plans for the renewal of the museum. We have gone so far as to design a number of 'Lab type' spaces in our plans for the new museum, thus establishing research and education also physically as the core business of a university museum. It has also helped us realize that for an academic museum an open, curious, experimental mindset is of great help when relating to research and education. It has enabled us to make a connection with a number of research projects within the university and on a European level. We now share two PhD positions with the faculty and two more are expected to be hired in the near future. The HeritageLab concept has proven to provide a useful alternative academic platform for students and staff. It has proven to be an excellent communication tool, leading to increased involvement of faculties. Negotiations are on the way with the Humanities Faculty about including the HeritageLab concept in their extensive *Heritage and Identities* research program and funding it in part from it. The HeritageLab concept has literally become the core of renovation plan for the museum. And, maybe most important: the HeritageLab is not so much a space, but a mindset for all activity.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Wim Hupperetz, director of the Allard Pierson Museum, and Jan Bolten, MA, coordinator of the University of Amsterdam HeritageLab, for their creativity and perseverance in the development of this great concept.

Literature cited

SCHOLTEN, S. 2011. If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, got together. Integrating collections at the University of Amsterdam. In: *Arranging and rearranging: planning university heritage for the future*, eds. S. Talas & M. C. Lourenço (Padova: Padova University Press), 31–36.

Contact

Steph Scholten, MA

Director Heritage Collections, University of Amsterdam

Address: P.O. Box 94436, 1090 GK Amsterdam, The Netherlands

E-mail: s.c.g.t.scholten@uva.nl

www.bijzonderecollecties.uva.nl

www.allardpiersonmuseum.nl