

ERASMUS+
SECTOR SKILLS ALLIANCES

Mu.SA: Museum Sector Alliance
575907-EEP-1-2016-1-EL-EPPKA2-
SSA

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W21.1.2.A

MUSEUMS AS PLACES OF NEGOTIATION

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Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Module:	W21.1. Negotiation skills
Unit:	W21.1.2 Museums as places of negotiation
Learning Object:	W21.1.2.a Museums as places of negotiation
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Abstract:	After presenting some practical tools on how to carry out a negotiation strategy, this learning object aims to introduce the topic of how museums are negotiating today. We will explore two museums: The Musée de l’Homme in Paris and the TropenMuseum in Amsterdam as examples of museums that are having to negotiate with their past, allowing themselves to have difficult conversations with their audiences. In our opinion, they are examples of museums that have decided to confront the past to build a better future, regardless of how difficult conversations might be. There is no right or wrong answer and we believe that as museum professionals we need to create spaces for inclusive conversations.
Keywords:	<i>Negotiation, societal challenges, digital communication, museums</i>



The document created in 2018 for the project Mu.SA – Museum Sector Alliance, funded under the Erasmus+/KA3 programme (project number 575907-EEP-1-2016-1-EL-EPPKA2-SSA).



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Aim and objectives

This learning object briefly illustrates two cases the Musée de l'Homme in Paris and the TropenMuseum in Amsterdam as a starting point to discuss how museums are negotiating today with their past to rethink their present and future.

Learning outcomes

After studying this resource, you will be able to analyse at least two successful factors of the two museums analysed and conclude at least three reasons why museums should become places of negotiation.

Keywords

Negotiation, societal challenges, digital communication, museums



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Introduction

Why are we adding this article on museums as places of negotiation? When designing the module, we believed that it would be interesting to add a broader perspective on the term negotiation.

As Aurélien Colson, author of the *First Move*, says **“We negotiate, that is we spend time interacting with others**, because we need to achieve something and we think we can achieve this in a better way with the consent and the input of the other side of the table, rather than on our own.”

Many museums are trying to renegotiate with their past in many different ways, for instance the concept of decolonising the museum is revisited and debated today, and it can have very different meanings as it says in this interesting article on [Museum Next](#).

We wanted to reflect here about two museums that went on this journey as Michel Van Praët¹ (2019, 38-47) mentions of “when designing their research and cultural action projects, [museums] consider how **they respond to fundamental social issues**. They should also examine “the extent to which they are contributing to the **development of humanity’s knowledge and allowing the critical and sensible confrontation of that knowledge** with the tangible and intangible evidences of human activity and natural productions”.

¹ Michel Van Praët¹ (2019, 38-47) “The Modernity of the Museum: Sharing and Creating Knowledge Through Confrontation with the Material Evidences of the Past and the Present”, *Museum International*, 71:1-2, 38-47, [DOI: 10.1080/13500775.2019.1638025](https://doi.org/10.1080/13500775.2019.1638025)



1 Museums as places of negotiation

According to Michel Van Praët (2019, 38-47), “The museum is not endangered by the evolution of its social missions, but by the neglect of its original ambition **of contesting mere beliefs in favour of knowledge gained through the collections of material references.**”

Van Praët in his article argues that museums should not be reduced to a mere exhibition production, but it remains a goal for the future that museums develop all the potentialities that their collections offer in terms **of contributing to the creation and sharing of knowledge by confronting their materiality with any and all of the museum tasks.**

The responsibility of museums in valuing the heritage they maintain and contribute to create, means that they must, beyond exhibitions designed to maximise attendance, invest more in the issues debated in society, regardless of which museum family they belong to.

Van Praët continues saying that museums should develop cultural actions **that allow the public to confront what they think and feel in the face of the material fragments of reality that make up the collections.**

As Maria Vlachou argues: “Cultural organisations have claimed for a long time to be ‘safe’ or ‘neutral’ places which do not get involved in politics and welcome everyone. However, more and more voices among culture professionals are questioning what “safe” and “neutral” actually mean.”²

² Vlachou M., August 2017 “A question of relevance”
<http://musingoncultureextra.blogspot.com/2017/09/a-question-of-relevance.html>

Museums do have a political influence, all the activities undertaken have an influence, and this always brings us to negotiation, internally and externally, with all the different stakeholders.

The following two museums examples demonstrate this issue, that museums can be places of negotiations accepting to have difficult conversations with their audiences. In our opinion, these are examples of museums that have decided to confront the past to build the present and a better future, regardless of how difficult conversations might be. We believe that there is no right or wrong answer, and as museum professionals we need to create a space for inclusive conversations.

1.1 The case of the Musée de l'Homme – Paris

The Musée de l'Homme (MH) is located in Paris. After an important renovation it re-opened in 2015. Historically speaking, the MH is certainly one of the world's foremost anthropological museums (Schlanger, 2016, pp. 1090-1099).

The museum history emphasises, for instance, the institution's resonance with the left-wing policies of the 1936 Front Populaire, the anti-fascist and anti-racist militancy of (some of) its staff, the library is dedicated to a pioneer of the French Resistance, Yvonne Oddon.

The Museum holds a cruel past, which according Schlanger there is not much talk about. Until the 1970s, visitors here could view on display the remains of Saartjie Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman from the Eastern Cape who was exhibited as a freak and nicknamed the "Hottentot Venus" in early 19th-century Europe because of her large buttocks. Baartman's bones were only returned to South Africa to be respectfully buried in 2002³.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2015/oct/14/paris-musee-de-l-homme-museum-reopening>

The Museum today aims to provide visitors with an understanding of human evolution and societies by combining biological, social and cultural approaches. It deals with the earliest days of Humanity as well as the modern era, questioning the future of humankind.

The new MH's slogan is "Humankind evolves. So does its museum"⁴. As you can see from the museum website, the Galerie de l'Homme tells the story of the human odyssey through a visit circuit in three parts: Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we headed?

In 2017 the museum opened its first temporary exhibition "**Nous et les Autres - Des Préjugés au Racism**". One interesting aspect is that they linked the exhibition offline with the online and social media, through the experience [CHROMA](#).

On the topic "diversity is a richness", they asked visitors to share their colors with CHROMA for the exhibition "We and Others - From Prejudice to Racism"! Visitors could create their poster online with their mobile or in the museum space, share it on social networks with #NousetlesAutres.



Fig. 1 Musée de l'Homme website

⁴ According to Schlanger (2016) the MH should try to make more room, among the dazzling displays and playful presentations, for those 'things that present danger' (as Mauss called them), things that betray friction and resistance, things that encourage debate, highlight costs and point to alternatives, things that can lead us, beyond our evolving human nature, to a better understanding of social realities and historical processes.



Fig. 2 Musée de l'Homme website

1.2 The case of the TropenMuseum in Amsterdam

We would like to quote Maria Vlachou's words⁵ "I was totally taken aback during my first visit to the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam last year. What I found was what we call an ethnography museum calling things by their name. What I found was a museum questioning its practices, its views and its contribution to colonialism. **A museum asking questions, both about the past and the present; a museum getting people involved, encouraging them to share their views, thoughts and feelings; a museum sharing the responsibility for its next "difficult" exhibition.**" (September 2019)

We echo Vlachou's words and positive impressions. Since the moment you enter the museum you have this feeling that we need to deal with our past to see the relationships with our past actions and the future. We felt that the museum was actually trying to make efforts to create a debate with the visitors, openly like the call to actions show in the different locations off the museums, asking "**What do you refuse to accept**", "**What do you think about slavery?**", "**What matters to you?**" and more indirectly given you the time to reflect.



Fig. 3 The TropenMuseum façade

⁵ <http://musinoncultureextra.blogspot.com/2019/09/the-urgency-of-difficult-conversations.html>

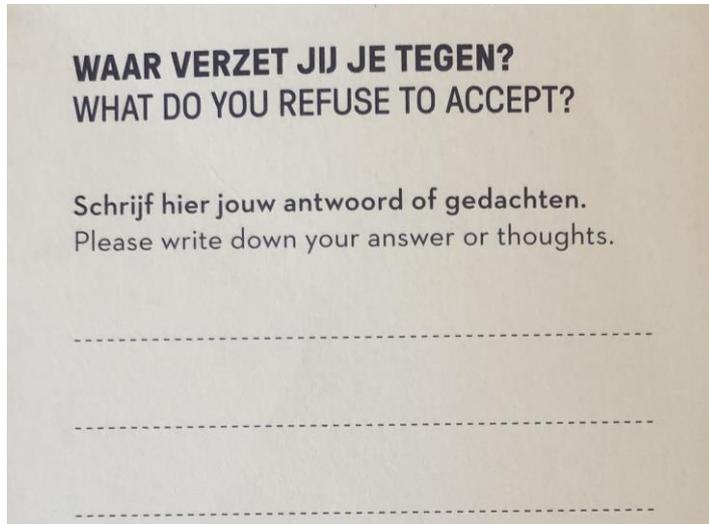


Fig. 4 Notes displayed in the exhibition that asked questions to the visitors

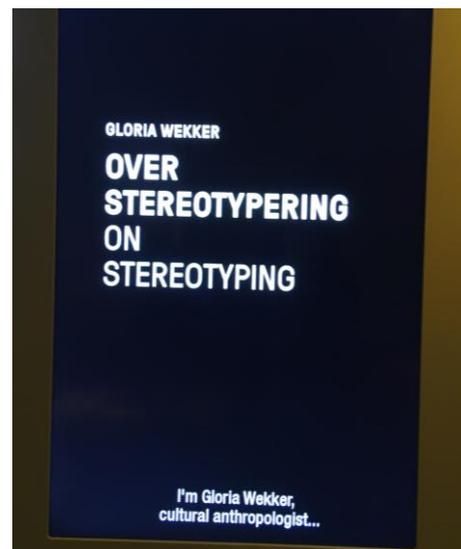


Fig. 5 Video of cultural anthropologist explain the meaning of stereotypes

Also interesting is the work the museum is doing on potentially sensitive words in the museum sector (Published on Jun 27, 2018).

https://issuu.com/tropenmuseum/docs/wordsmatter_english

In the foreword the museum director, Stijn Schoonderwoerd, explains the reasons behind this initiative:

“As a museum that deals with cultures from across the world and that has the task of representing these diverse cultures with integrity, it has become a necessity to be self-critical about the types of narratives we develop and the words we use. We have come to question our perspectives and our practices of marketing and display, and seek to include diverse voices. In doing so, we have had to think about the words or phrases that are sensitive to particular groups, that can cause offense, that elide important context, and that are understood as derogatory.”

We again agree with Maria Vlachou’s words: “Being a true museum leader involves all three qualities: vision, courage and humility.”⁶ (September 2019).



Fig. 6 Permanent exhibition things that matter

⁶ <http://musinoncultureextra.blogspot.com/2019/09/the-urgency-of-difficult-conversations.html>

2 Conclusions

Many museums are currently trying to renegotiate their past in many different ways. For instance, the concept of decolonising the museum is a hot issue and is being debated today, and it can have very different meanings as it says in this interesting article on [Museum Next](#).

We wanted to present here two museums that went on this journey as Michel Van Praët (2019, 38-47) mentions “when designing their research and cultural action projects, [museums] **consider how they respond to fundamental social issues**. They should also examine “the extent to which they are contributing to the development **of humanity’s knowledge and allowing the critical and sensible confrontation of that knowledge with the tangible and intangible evidences of human activity and natural productions**”.



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