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Added value and the Museum

Developing a Museum for Graphic Design in De Beyerd, Breda

The title of my presentation refers to added value and to a museum - a museum of graphic design. As far as we know this is a unique project. But however exceptional it may be, and however desirable in the eyes of the discipline and of graphic design enthusiasts, it is quite legitimate to ask what the added value of this museum might be. And this is what I want to talk about today.

Hippopotamus

In recent times there has been a great deal of discussion in the Netherlands about the value of museums. There are plenty of reasons for this. For example, in the eyes of the government there are too many institutions which call themselves museums, but actually are not. Accordingly, a few years ago a 'quality label' for museums was introduced – an instrument to measure the professional standards of museums.¹ The 'public' is not very interested in such technocratic evaluations; but there is evidence to suggest that the reputation of museums is anything but rosy. For instance, a small-scale study in 2002 showed that the 'museum' is identified with a hippopotamus: museums are thought to be 'lethargic and lazy', and experienced as 'somnolent, dusty places where objects are stored'.²

Considering the poor reputation museums have, we might have chosen a different title than 'museum of graphic design': 'graphic design institution' for instance, or 'graphic design centre'. But the problem is – it really is going

to be a museum: there will be exhibitions, some based on our own collection, you will be able to examine the materials there in depth, or even relax and – of course – visit the shop. And there will be an organization to go with it, with professionals in the field of conservation and management, education, etcetera.

Besides, you should never let yourself be pinned down to a label. The important thing is what you do. And – considering the image of the large and sluggish hippo – especially *how* you do it. I would like to say more about this today, in the hope that in twenty minutes' time you will have some idea of what sort of animal the new museum of graphic design is going to resemble, and what properties are going to make it viable – in our opinion.

But first I will satisfy your curiosity and give you a general impression of what the beast is going to look like.

A new museum

Breda is about half an hour's drive east of Rotterdam. On the edge of the old city centre a new building is now under construction and a stately seventeenth-century building is being renovated. From the beginning of 2008 onwards this complex will house the museum of graphic design.

The location is surrounded by existing buildings, so that a three-part floor plan has been developed. General facilities such as the entrance, the cloakroom and the café will be housed in the old building, with the offices upstairs. To the right is a building dating from the 1990s, which will be extended and equipped with climate control. This building will house the store rooms, spaces for processing the collection, the climate control system, and a shop. Behind the old building will be six exhibition rooms with a total surface area of 1.300 square metres, and an auditorium. To the left there will be a seventh exhibition room, with a large glass wall facing the street.

While graphic design will play an important role in the decoration of the building, of course in the programming it will play the leading role. The

aim of the museum is to inspire the public to look at their own surroundings in a different way and to make them aware of the role of graphic design in our everyday life. By focusing on areas in which graphic design overlaps with other visual phenomena and practices in mass media and culture, exhibitions and activity programmes will explore the relationship between graphic design and visual culture. Current affairs and history will be treated on an equal footing, as will the Netherlands and other countries.

In the exhibition space beneath the ground there will be a permanent display of more than 650 square metres. The subject of the permanent display will be the history of graphic design in the Netherlands from around 1890 to the present. We have set ourselves quite a large number of goals for this presentation. For instance, like every museum presenting historical visual objects, we hope that our public will learn to look at the objects differently as a result of our presentation. In the first place we hope to achieve this by showing how form changes in relation to content, function, technique, artistic intentions and trends. But we also want to draw the public's attention to the close relationship of graphic design with society and therefore also with the great changes which have taken place in society during the last hundred years or more.

Accordingly, themes such as mobility, urbanization and belief in the malleability of society – a popular theme in the Netherlands – are included in the scenario, as will the democratization of the image, the privatization of the media and the globalization of the economy. Nevertheless, the presentation will still be a presentation about graphic design – about its form and development, but also about the professionalisation of the discipline, the proliferation and multimediality of the phenomenon, and last but not least the effect of graphic design as a means of communication.

Now you know approximately what the museum is going to be like, I will try to give you an idea of the position we will occupy as a museum and of our relationship with our environment. First I will share a few more reflections on design and its relationship with museums. Then I will come

back to the debate about the role of museums which I mentioned by way of introduction. Finally I will tell you what consequences all this will have for the way we operate as a museum.

Design and history

The director of the Netherlands Architectural Institute in Rotterdam, Aaron Betsky, recently appealed in a newspaper article for a new museum of design to tell the history of Dutch everyday culture:

[quote] 'Imagine a museum, somewhere in the Netherlands, an hour's journey at the most for most citizens of this country. You enter the museum and see for instance the story of the Dutch postal services, from stamps to the interiors of post offices. You see the history of Dutch silverware, from the Middle Ages to the present, as part of an exhibition about how the Dutch eat. You see an exhibition about transport, from the Royal family's coaches to the Dutch railway engines known as *hondenkoppen* ('dog's heads') and Batavus bicycles. You see how Rietveld tried to make a simple chair which everyone could buy and how architects used it as a basic element for a whole new world of residential design. You can see what the Netherlands is made of'.³

Betsky refers to the Victoria & Albert Museum, and specifically to the British Galleries. Accordingly, the new museum he proposes would be called the 'W&M Museum', after Willem-Alexander and Máxima, the future king and queen of the Netherlands.

In the Dutch House of Representatives there was recently a serious debate about the establishment of a National History Museum.⁴ Betsky responds to this – possibly with a note of irony – with the aim of arousing positive sentiments in Dutch politics with regard to Dutch Design. He puts his W&M Museum forward as a remedy for the country's shaken sense of identity,⁵ and even as the ideal location for the induction of immigrants:

[quote] 'Imagine that you are an immigrant. [...] If you came to this museum, you would see how a culture has been built up in the Netherlands with which and in which you too now have to live'.⁶

As far as I am concerned this flirtation with a completely nonsensical political debate is a dubious move. In any case, Betsky ignores the reality of the Dutch museum landscape. There are so many museums in the Netherlands, including museums which deal with everyday history and culture, that it would be a serious mistake to want to add a central history museum. I will come back to this shortly, but let us dwell on Betsky's article for a moment, because in one respect his appeal was a welcome provocation. He emphasizes the value of design as historical documentation and by doing so puts the cat among the pigeons.

Outside the museums, particularly among design historians, the integration of design history with the history of society has long been a hotly debated issue. But it is difficult for museums to keep up with these historiographic debates. There are occasional experiments in temporary exhibitions, but not in the big permanent displays. I am thinking of projects on a larger scale in other countries, such as the permanent presentation at the Museum of Technology in Vienna, with the title: 'Everyday Life, a Manual'.

The situation in other countries is not much better than in the Netherlands, but Betsky is right to suggest that it is strange that precisely in a country which is designed to the last detail, and to a high standard, the relationship between design and everyday life is not a subject dealt with by museums.

Historical value and artistic value

It is a truism that art museums are mainly interested in having the art works stand out optimally. Art works should speak for themselves, and therefore since the 1920s museums have preferred to exhibit a 'limited number of

objects' in 'austere, neutral spaces'.⁷ As it happens, the most important collections of decorative art in the Netherlands have been built up by the big art museums and there is no independent museum of decorative art. However, it would be too facile to blame the limited attention paid to the social function of design on the regime in art museums.

Moreover, it seems that in the late nineteenth century a Museum of Applied Art was in fact set up in Haarlem; however, this museum was closed down again in 1922. Its role was taken over by successive designers' organisations, which held exhibitions of contemporary design, and also by the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, which hosted some of these and purchased contemporary work, too.⁸ As a result, the Stedelijk Museum built up an extensive and important collection of twentieth-century applied art.

Of course in an art museum it is difficult to link design objects with social history. But actually it is unlikely that a Dutch museum of applied art would have done things very differently than the Stedelijk Museum or any other art museum with an applied arts department. Because, we know that museums of applied art elsewhere in Europe operated just like art museums: for a long time there has been no enthusiasm for 'a cultural-historical approach in which the social function [of design, EC] might be manifested'.⁹

The roots of the fact that museums pay so little attention to the way design is interwoven with everyday life then, rather lie in the history of museums in general. The example of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam – which is in fact the national museum of the Netherlands – may serve to illustrate this.

The Rijksmuseum collection once consisted of art, applied art and historic objects.¹⁰ As such it was unique in Europe and had all the necessary ingredients to grow into a national museum in which art and applied art could be integrated organically into the history of the Netherlands. But unfortunately the formalism which prevailed in views on art in the twentieth century left its marks here too: in the 1920s historical objects were carefully separated from works of art or decorative art.

Ultimately the objects representing a 'historical value' were removed from the Rijksmuseum, leaving a somewhat sterile collection of art objects and 'ensembles'.¹¹ Something similar happened in museums all over Europe. Since then, applied art – to put it as mildly as possible – has had an 'uneasy position between the borderlines of art and history collections'.¹²

As much as the separation of art and design on the one hand and history on the other is not limited to the Netherlands, the distribution of the national heritage among a lot of different public and private institutions, is quite typical.

Pluriformity and Polyphony

It is no Dutch trait to regiment heritage under a central authority. This may be explained by the fact that the Netherlands has its origins in a bourgeois society. The result is what policymakers like to refer to as 'the pluriformity of the Dutch museum landscape'. This fine euphemism means, more or less, that although the Netherlands is a small flat country it seems to have more cultural heritage institutions per inhabitant than any other country. For many subjects there are even two or more institutions, as in the case of maritime history or photography. In addition to the museums there are also many other institutions which preserve, process and exhibit cultural heritage, including municipal archives and umpteen university or municipal libraries.

To recapitulate: we have a tradition of drawing lines between artistic and historic value, no national design museum, but many institutions which preserve objects. Graphic design objects accordingly are distributed all over the country. You'll find them in the big art museums, but also in all sorts of historically oriented museums, archives and many libraries. Art museums, rare book departments of libraries and the Book Museum (which does exist in the Netherlands) restrict themselves mainly to the history of cultural and possibly political products and high-quality typography. The other institutions preserve the objects primarily because - indeed - their value as historical documents, in relation of course to the historical category to which they have

a special relevance: the history of a certain city, of transport, postal services, press, audio-visual media, architecture, film or theatre, various consumer articles, technology and the printing industry, certain social groups or movements, and so on.

This situation, which is at the very least remarkable, naturally has many drawbacks. For instance, researchers have to run back and forth, and much is preserved in duplicate – because printed matter comes in multitude. And just imagine what it means that printed matter is easy to get and easily piled up. Furthermore, in this complex situation sometimes a subject is overlooked. For example, for years no attention was paid to the graphic design archives, and commercial work was given a very wide berth. That's why, frequently a sigh can be heard among the ranks of policy makers and academics: if only there was just one museum of...

But actually the idea of a museum that tells just one story about the history of the state, art, or anything else is outdated. Which brings us back to the beginning: the cultural policy debate about the role of museums and the way we want to operate as a museum.

Traditionally museums have had a strong impact on the value we attribute to cultural heritage. If something is shown at a museum it is considered to be valuable, and the story accompanying it has a high degree of authority. But it is exactly these effects of traditional museums that are now under pressure; they have probably led to the hippopotamus image. Contemporary museums are expected to be more reflective about their own role and to offer more space to unofficial and intangible history, or at least to different voices.¹³ National museums, museums which establish and confirm the canon, museums which want to be top dog – these are the 'somnolent, dusty places where objects are stored' which are experienced as 'lethargic and lazy'.

The pluriformity of the Dutch museum landscape fits in with this re-evaluation of the role of a museum. According to the Dutch Council for Culture, in museums it is not [quote] 'the historic canon [which should] be

predominant, but the understanding that there is no such thing as *the* past or *the* national identity'. At the same time, it says, the many different museums should choose 'their own perspectives on the past' and create 'their own emphases'.¹⁴

In other words, the distribution of cultural heritage in the Netherlands should guarantee a polyphony of perspectives on the past. This is a splendidly democratic and enlightened ideal, which is particularly attractive because of the active role it allocates to the public: the museum reflects and the viewer interprets. But in reality the diversity of perspectives is not so very great, the same things are often repeated, and there is far too little collaboration and harmonization. It will still be some time before pluriformity has truly become polyphony.

Added value

At present there seems to be a boom in Dutch design. From the Dutch Design café in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, to Dick Bruna's Miffy in Tokyo, to the PTT in the Design Museum in London - Dutch Design is hot! What could have been more obvious than to benefit from this fame in planning and programming the new museum?

Our museum could be the place where the success of Dutch Graphic Design is celebrated. Exhibitions and catalogues could be devoted to the great stars of graphic design in the Netherlands. And the whole series of artistic highlights could be permanently exhibited to the public as icons of Dutch Graphic Design, so that the fame of the Netherlands and its graphic design could be permanently confirmed in the eyes of the national and international public. The pinnacle of this celebration might be to offer young designers plenty of space, thus giving them an opportunity to ascend to the lofty heights to join the greatest of the great.

You will have understood that this is not what we are going to do. If we did, we would not be presenting our 'own perspective on the past', but

doing what others are doing already. We would be confirming the existing canon of Dutch graphic design. We would not be providing the public with an opportunity to understand how the value of design is also determined by presentation; how design in fact gives meaning to design. We would simply be relying on the traditional authority of the museum – in other words, we would be selecting the hippopotamus option.

I promised that at the end of my presentation you would have gained an idea of the position we will occupy as a museum, the way we will relate to our environment, and how we will operate. So let me try to get to my conclusion: In our opinion there are two main directions in which museums can develop in the future.

On the one hand they can work on reaching as large a public as possible. To do this they can translate strategies from the world of the media and the free market into museum policy. Focusing on the audience, paying attention to the young and providing 'entertainment' are a few of the catchwords often used in this context. And there is absolutely nothing wrong with doing these things, provided they are done well and given true content. However, in Breda we have chosen a different way of bringing the museum to life. We intend to strengthen our image as a 'knowledge centre'. This sounds a little pretentious, and it is in fact often very wrongly interpreted.

For us, the concept of a 'knowledge centre' implies an attitude with very practical consequences. For example, we do not intend to collect as many objects as possible, and then spend the rest of eternity sorting them out. Instead, we do actively search for partners. We do go on the road, cross the boundaries of our own building. We regard collaboration with other heritage organizations and private collectors as just as important as taking care of our own collection. This even goes as far as paying for collections in other organisations, public and private, to be examined and catalogued, because we see this as an investment in knowledge on graphic design.

Secondly, we do take initiatives to collate knowledge about the history of the discipline. We do not present ourselves as the ultimate authority, but want to cultivate as broad an interest as possible in graphic design. We therefore act as a facilitator for external target groups such as designers, customers and producers, agents, private collectors, publicists, enthusiasts, fellow researchers, lecturers and students, etc., and stimulate them to record, share or concentrate their specific and possibly very private knowledge, or to enrich it in collaboration with others.

Finally, we do try to put that one limited picture, that single canon of Dutch graphic design into perspective – not by setting up a rival canon, but by showing the breadth of the phenomenon itself and making room for the diversity of backgrounds behind it. That's why, in our 'permanent' display, we will not stick to the model of a straight chronological overview but zoom in on a few aspects of the history of graphic design and its cultural historical dimensions as a *pars pro toto* of the whole development. In order to be able to do this, we do have to take the initiative for the development of different views of the history of Dutch graphic design ourselves. Because to date, we have not found many alternatives in the historiography of Dutch graphic design. We have too little time to ponder on this subject here, but let's at least point out, that this situation is the reason why - for instance - we initiated a research on the history of PTT design from a different point of view. With the result, by the way, of a beautiful book, which puts its reputation into perspective.

To summarize, you might say that the 'museum as a knowledge centre' stands for an active, outward-looking attitude, which results in a museum practice which begins with the pluriformity of the museum landscape and ends with a polyphony of voices about graphic design – a polyphony in which views on graphic design in the aesthetic sense and about its place in general history do not exclude each other: a polyphony in which all voices are equal.

It will probably take some time for our public and our partners to get used to the idea that we present ourselves as a museum, but do not claim to be the place where a fixed story is told about what is good and what is bad. But, we do believe that in museums – unlike in science – there is room for subjectivity. Here, things can be put into perspective, speculative connections can be made, and the spotlight can fall on a succession of different stories.

Notes

1 Originally developed and applied by *The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries*.

2 Anita van Mil, *Tussen Nijlpaard en chimpansee. De toekomst van de Nederlandse musea*, Nederlandse Museumvereniging, Amsterdam, 2002, p. 4.

3 Aron Betsky, 'Het echte Nederland heeft geen museum', *De Volkskrant*, 14 April 2006, p. 13.

4 <http://www.nationaalmuseum.nl/>. See also: Hans Goedkoop, 'Geschiedenismuseum / Ziedaar het wonder! De politiek is om', *De Verdieping, Trouw*, 16 May 2006, frontpage.

5 Betsky 2006, op. cit. (note 2), p. 13.

6 Betsky 2006, op. cit. (note 2), p. 13.

7 Lieske Tibbe, 'Kunstinijverheidsmusea. Van techniek naar esthetiek', Ellinoor Bergvelt, Debora J. Meijers, Mieke Rijnders (ed.), *Kabinetten, galerijen en musea. Het verzamelen en presenteren van naturalia en kunst van 1500 tot heden*, Waanders, Zwolle, 2005, p. 262.

8 Tibbe 2005, op. cit. (note 7), pp. 257-258.

9 Tibbe 2005, op. cit. (note 7), pp. 258, 262.

10 Ellinoor Bergvelt, 'Tussen geschiedenis en kunst. Nederlandse nationale kunstmusea in de negentiende eeuw', Bergvelt, Meijers, Rijnders 2005, op. cit. (note 7), p. 370.

11 Tibbe 2005, op. cit. (note 7), pp. 258-261.

12 Tibbe 2005, op. cit. (note 7), pp. 258, 262.

13 See also: Pascal Gielen, Rudi Laermans, *Cultureel goed. Over het (nieuwe) erfgoedregiem*, Lannoo, Tielt, 2005.

14 Els Swaab, 'Help de conservator! Multimediapresentatie in het Zuiderzeemuseum', presentation, 6 July 2006 [www.cultuur.nl/nieuws.html, august 2006], p. 3.