

# The Contemporary City as Backbone: Museum Rotterdam Meets the Challenge

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Paul Th. van de Laar

**Abstract** Changes at Museum Rotterdam illustrate how history museums can rethink their relationship to history and community. Recognizing that its residents are increasingly transnational, without ties to the Rotterdam of the past, Museum Rotterdam is using the tools of urban anthropologists to involve residents in exploring contemporary heritage. Museum Rotterdam next plans to enhance its activities as a traveling museum that circulates around the city to enlarge the commitment of urban communities through local heritage programs based on new urban stories that help to bring people together.

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## Introduction

People love cities, like to read popular city histories, enjoy local history television documentaries and city trips. Unfortunately, city museums are not benefiting from the rising interest in cities as places of multiple stories. City museums — and in general history museums — are “increasingly viewed by their communities as irrelevant and unresponsive to the societal changes around them.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, city museums should not just be interesting museums *in* the city, but should be *relevant to* the contemporary city.<sup>2</sup> Cities are moving fast, so, to keep pace, city museums cannot afford to be “frozen against the city.”<sup>3</sup>

Museum Rotterdam, the city museum of Rotterdam, has spent the past seven years working to acknowledge the importance of the present city.<sup>4</sup> Following post-modern trends, Museum Rotterdam has not only made a turn towards

participation, but has started to position the contemporary city as the backbone of its work.<sup>5</sup> The present transnational city has become the focus of our museum policies, and staff members are charged with mediating between the museum and city life. Urban curators are trained to have an eye open for contemporary heritage as “a resource for creating the future.”<sup>6</sup> Besides introducing new heritage concepts, Museum Rotterdam aims to stimulate audiences to be active members in transforming the museum into a “borderless museum.” We hope these efforts will create an active city museum that uses the present city as a social and cultural laboratory, linking contemporary urban stories with the past.

## City Museums and Dynamic Heritage

In a provocative way, David Fleming, Director of the National Museums of Liverpool, has criticized the object-driven focus of museum curators in city museums. He speaks of “object worship almost to the point of fetishism.”<sup>7</sup> Although these curators may have acknowledged the limitations of tangible collections in telling city histories, the object-oriented approach has remained the standard of museum professionalism for a very long time.<sup>8</sup> These collections, however, do not reflect urban history in general very well and most visitors lack the contextual information needed to link the objects to the urban historical context. Besides, most city museums have difficulties collecting the recent history.

Nowadays, though, most city museums have become aware of the limits of an object-oriented paradigm and have accepted that intangible heritage, traditions, values and beliefs are all part of the heritage spectrum. A dynamic and social-cultural meaning of heritage has become the standard in some parts of the world. Dynamic heritage in an urban historical context is, then, the “working memory of a city.”<sup>9</sup>

This dynamic urban heritage approach helps us to overcome the limitations of nostalgic heritage, in particular in fast-moving transnational cities. These transnational places reveal an urban dynamic; self-awareness and representation are shaped by the existence of a diverse population whose socio-cultural and economic relationships are not necessarily confined to the nation or city of residence.<sup>10</sup> When we accept the stimulating thought that urban heritage might be a resource for creating the future, a nostalgic approach limits the possibilities of involvement of transnational populations; in particular, because nostalgia for a place or particular monuments is not something that people from elsewhere, with a different cultural background, might feel.

City museums need to acknowledge that their future stakeholders are a mixture of minority groups and a diverse population. In less than 20 years' time, the majority of people living in the port city of Rotterdam, for instance, will be of non-Dutch origin. Newcomers do not share the same subjective experiences of communities with a strong lobby for celebrating Rotterdam's nostalgic heritage. For them, Rotterdam's distant past has less meaning than for inhabitants who are formed in Dutch and Rotterdam society.<sup>11</sup> Nostalgic heritage inadvertently excludes those citizens with different ethnic or cultural backgrounds, unless they are able to share memories with these heritage communities. City museums embracing a modern concept of heritage should stress the importance of its dynamic interpretation. This will enable citizens — and this makes it especially relevant for transnational cities — to have access to the “working memory” of the city and afford them a reinterpretation of the historical city canon. In fact, the new approach boils down to what may be called “bonding heritage.” This concept is not based on romanticizing the past, but on heritage as a collective purpose of community building, a serious form of new urban human and cultural capital.

The awareness of “bonding heritage” calls for new urban research strategies. A city museum should not give up its scholarship, but should ensure instead “that it engages in research that has resonance for the communities it serves.”<sup>12</sup> City museums need to enlarge and stimulate their research opportunities. Their focus should not, however, be collection-driven but context-driven, exploring the present city from a contemporary heritage point of view.

In this respect, city museums can learn a lot from the expertise of urban anthropologists. The ethnographic method, participant observation, and other empirical, qualitative close observation models are to be mentioned, in particular. These methods have proven to be both versatile and successful in urban social and cultural programs. The American non-profit organization UrBaN (urban & anthropology) speaks of public anthropology as “an effort to use anthropological theory, methods and research to help the public understand urban cultures, constructively address their problems, and celebrate their achievements.”<sup>13</sup>

## Museum Rotterdam

Museum Rotterdam was founded in 1905 as the Museum of Antiquities, in an era when Rotterdam developed into the largest European transit port. Like many European port cities that witnessed socio-economic upheavals, the

museum founders were driven by a civilizing ideal and wanted to expose the Rotterdam working-class people to bourgeois culture.<sup>14</sup> Not surprisingly, the collections on display were an accumulation of objects of a patrician kind, material testimonies to a glorified past. The Rotterdam Museum of Antiquities started in the cellars of the Schielandshuis. This 17th-century city palace was the residence of the Board of Schieland, the public authority of the water district that controlled the maintenance of the dikes in the area where Rotterdam was founded around 1270. The Museum of Antiquities became the Historical Museum of Rotterdam, and the building underwent an intensive restoration in the 1970s and 1980s. After reopening, it evoked the grandeur of the former palace. At that time, the Historical Museum of Rotterdam wanted to show the audiences Rotterdam's Golden Age. During this century of Dutch world primacy, the port city had transformed into the second most important city in the Dutch Republic. The nostalgic and patriotic focus of the museum was understandable, considering the fact that Rotterdam was bombed by the Germans in May 1940 and had lost its city heart. On the ruins of the devastated city a new modern city was built; the Schielandshuis was the only 17th-century building that survived the bombardment.

The Schielandshuis is still the main building of the museum; although we plan to move in 2016 to a modern building that better corresponds with the new ambitions of the museum. We want to rent two floors in Forum Rotterdam, Rem Koolhaas' innovative and multifunctional new retail, living and cultural destination on the Coolsingel, in the center of Rotterdam.<sup>15</sup> Museum Rotterdam will present there the story of Rotterdam and becomes the new cultural historical axis of this building, linking Rotterdam's past with the present city. The old Schielandshuis image contradicts with this new mission and heritage concept of Museum Rotterdam. In order to accentuate the new focus, the museum dropped the "Historical" in its name and changed it into Museum Rotterdam in 2011. This decision, albeit nostalgic Rotterdammers find it hard to accept, fits well with our new ideas on the role of city museums.<sup>16</sup> The name change communicates that Museum Rotterdam is not just something of the past, but a gateway between the present-day city and its past through a dialogue with urban communities that shape the future city.

## Museum Rotterdam's Recent Initiatives

For the past seven years, Museum Rotterdam has spearheaded collaborative projects with urban communities that test and refine our new vision.

Museum Rotterdam's current vision started around 2005 with a so-called Panorama Project, which focused on ten different areas in Rotterdam.<sup>17</sup> Several of these neighborhoods belong to the most ethnically and culturally diverse areas in Rotterdam. Through schools and interviews with key figures in the neighborhood, the museum started to map the recent past of these areas, collecting pictures and neighborhood stories and turning them into local panoramas that were exhibited in public places like social welfare agencies and shops. Especially, the elderly used this project to share their own memories with other inhabitants. We asked children from elementary schools to present their favorite objects and write down why they wanted their personal belongings to be collected by the museum. We photographed the children and assembled their pictures, along with neighborhood panoramas, into collages. To many children this was their first acquaintance with a city museum and their first opportunity to observe the community activities of museum professionals. We used the experiences in an overall exhibition in Museum Rotterdam's main building. The team gained a lot of experience working on this project, which was used in other experiments. In particular, it showed us how museum educators can enhance social cohesion using personal heritage as a key linkage factor.

In 2007, Museum Rotterdam started a program focusing on young adults in Rotterdam South, the part of Rotterdam that was developed in the 1870s into a port area populated by dockworkers and migrant labor families. Originally it was a white urban working-class neighborhood and it turned into an ethnic zone in the 1970s. Almost 80% of the population today is of non-Dutch origin in this socially and culturally marginalized area of Rotterdam. The heritage and participation project was named *Roffa 5314* when a curator noticed that in this part of Rotterdam young adults associated themselves with "5314," the postal code for Rotterdam South. *Roffa* is a Surinamese nickname for "tough" and is used as slang for Rotterdam. The young, mostly unemployed adults in this area associate themselves very strongly with their urban zone 5314. In their typical Rotterdam South lifestyle, through tattoos, clothing, and graffiti, they express a strong local identity, a cultural response to their fellow residents living on the northern city center, the richer part of Rotterdam. Our museum professionals developed the heritage and participation program *Roffa 5314* as an outreach program in line with the heritage and participation agenda of the museum.

*Roffa 5314* organized events and performances (hip hop and rap open mic nights) for the young 5314 artists, supported by their own local Rotterdam



Houses in a Rotterdam-South neighborhood that are to be demolished. This area has become a favorite place for “5314” pieces. The graffiti ranges from detailed pieces to short, messy tags. Photo taken by Hans Walgenbach.

South fan groups, which we recorded on video. During these events, interviews were conducted and lifestyle elements, clothes, personal identity markers, and accessories were collected and catalogued by Museum Rotterdam staff. We issued four periodicals containing articles on the background of local Roffa groups, which were distributed freely to the inhabitants of the district 5314. The Internet played an important role in the Roffa project.

A Facebook-like website was set up, where the Roffa youth posted their own pictures and web logs, and created their own virtual Roffa 5314 world. The results of this program were presented in a neighborhood exhibition hall and curated by members of 5314. This project attracted national attention and was considered a ground-breaking participation project from a modern urban heritage point of view.<sup>18</sup>

The neighborhood documentation project is another example of our changing approach to local heritage. It operated by the mantra: one must look behind the scenes in order to know how people actually live. The project concentrated on the transnational western part of town, an area that contrasts sharply — physically, socially, as well as culturally — with the modern inner city. From the 1960s onwards, Rotterdam’s western area offered abundant cheap homes for low-income households, often migrant families from the Mediterranean. From the mid-1970s the left-leaning city government targeted these areas for an urban renewal scheme, in essence the renovation of existing

housing stock and the building of socially acceptable new homes. The central idea was building for the neighborhood, which implied not only improvement of housing conditions, but also a renewal of the physical, social and cultural environment. We selected one of these neighborhoods for the pilot project.

The pilot started with statistical data assembled by the Centre for Research and Statistics of the municipality of Rotterdam. This centre gathers rafts of relevant statistical data: demographic patterns, ethnicity, types of households, migration and emigration figures, public health, labor and housing conditions, welfare related data (average incomes, rents of real estate prices, social provisions, level of education), and so on. This representative dataset helped us to place the household studies in an urban context.

Streets and households in this neighborhood were selected at random. For instance, the pilot project started with the selection of every 10th household in four randomly chosen streets. We invited these households to participate in the documentation project, which was introduced in the local newspaper and advertised in free copies of the neighborhood press. The interviews concentrated on 11 topics. Apart from vital facts (name, address, number of family residents), several questions about migration history and living conditions were listed. We analyzed household data and compared with the



The urban neighborhood, a place to collect future heritage? Photo taken on an urban heritage tour in Rotterdam-West, by Henk van der Kroon, Rotterdam.

general statistical data on a city level. Our in-depth interviews and inquiries focused, however, on issues related to daily life in a transnational city.<sup>19</sup>

## The City as Muse

These aforementioned urban heritage initiatives laid the groundwork for a three-year intensive community-based heritage and participation program, named the “City as Muse,” which began in 2010. In its first year Museum Rotterdam’s urban curator did extensive fieldwork among an intercultural women’s group, some of them single mothers, living in one of the poorer parts of Rotterdam. She interviewed them on a regular basis, made photographs and used their personal stories to set up a heritage agenda based on participation by these women.

The women live in a Rotterdam neighborhood that used to be one of the landmarks of the post-war welfare society. However, this housing area proved not to be suitable as a living area for an intercultural society and is slated for redevelopment in a few years’ time. Upon learning the plans for the neighborhood, the women did not sit down passively and await their



Proud women “Van de Velden,” the cover of the special magazine *Every Women*, a glossy dedicated to this women’s group. The women are styled as important representatives of their Rotterdam communities, resembling the members of the Rotterdam elite, whose pictures are collected by the museum. Photo by Mark Janssen.



uncertain future. They joined forces and started an informal group, which meets on a weekly basis and has become the contact group for local officials and social housing agencies. These women have breakfast together and discuss the major social issues of living in the neighborhood. Together they plan social activities, assist other parents with the education of their children and are widely involved in community programs. In order to document these women's stories, the Museum Rotterdam team created a glossy magazine, *Every Woman*.<sup>20</sup> Exhibition installers and artists were involved in turning the heritage project into a public performance. Some works of art were collected and have become part of the museum's contemporary heritage collections.

### Museum Rotterdam's Heritage Model

These heritage initiatives opened up new doors to the city. From 2013 onwards, Museum Rotterdam will present exhibitions in various locations around the city and will be branded as "Museum Rotterdam-on-location." This is a kind of community museum network that combines urban stories and participation programs and turns them into accessible, public-profiled exhibitions. This city museum network uses concepts of social and learning curatorship, which are based on urban historical anthropologists' skills of participating and close empirical observation models using an inductive methodology. The urban stories and participation projects are being used to reformulate our collecting strategy with a focus on contemporary transnational issues. Museum Rotterdam-on-location uses a strategy whereby museum professionals integrate with urban communities and base their research agenda on active participation. Collecting is thus not a passive undertaking, and in the end the cooperation needs to be conveyed in a Museum Rotterdam-on-location exhibition.

### Conclusions

City museums, as promoted by David Fleming and others, should be "agents of social changes and break up the city museum's wall."<sup>21</sup> Reframing history is thus essential, and more energy and efforts are needed to mobilize communities. In the 21st century, communities should be entitled to share their expertise with professionals. The future urban curator will be a kind of heritage broker, an intermediary between the public and the museum. Museums need to follow this path to enlarge their representativeness and help to feed the

passion for the city they live in. That was exactly the purpose of our heritage experiments in Rotterdam. All cases show that the museum has literally opened up its doors and has admitted the city into its museum premises. These projects stirred up discussion on the role of Museum Rotterdam as an engine of social change by addressing controversial cultural and social topics. In this light, the museum professional's working field is the heritage context of contemporary urban society, and is based on a profound knowledge of local situations by close observations of community, places and interactions. These close anthropological observations help urban curators address urban issues that matter in transnational spaces.

In the future, Museum Rotterdam will broaden its activities on location, which in essence means the entire city of Rotterdam, with its metropolitan international flavor and multicolored inter-cultural demographics. Unlike a traditional historical museum, Museum Rotterdam does not take the past but the present as its departure point. An essential component of this policy strategy is bridging the gap between the past and contemporary transnational Rotterdam. In exploring and presenting contemporary heritage, Museum Rotterdam is working together with urban communities, which assign specific values to cultural heritage and want to safeguard it through public and collective action.

### Notes

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### About the Author

Paul Th. van de Laar received his PhD in Economics from the Tinbergen Institute. He is general director at Museum Rotterdam and teaches urban history in the Erasmus University School of History, Culture and Communication. He is particularly interested in urban visual culture, migration history and the impact of transnationalism on new ways of collecting contemporary heritage.