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## Discovering Volunteers as an Essential Community of Practice in Small Museums in the Netherlands

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## Chapter 6

# Discovering Volunteers as an Essential Community of Practice in Small Museums in the Netherlands



Silvia Naldini and Nicholas J. Clarke

**Abstract** Museum volunteers form a community of practice that potentially connects a museum to our ever-more diverse society, which includes newcomers and immigrants with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, who are often marginalised. This community of practice holds the means to inform proactive transformations of small museums to become cultural hubs for social contacts. This aligns with the Council of Europe's Faro Convention which democratises the ownership, use and interpretation of cultural heritage. The Small Museums Change research project, which is reported in this chapter, developed a method to assist small museums to define transformation directions by facilitating volunteers to express their assessment of the museum, and express wishes and ambitions as guideline towards an integral transformation. The method proved successful in defining the core qualities and values and in identifying key ambitions for future planning for the seven small museums in the Netherlands that participated in the project. This chapter describes the method developed, highlights its outcomes and successes, and reflects on its value identifying hitherto undiscovered potentials. The method also proved to be valuable as tool to support volunteers as invaluable community to safeguard and further develop museum experiences for community engagement.

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## 6.1 Introduction

Museums are reassessing their relationship to society, both globally and in the Netherlands. They are transitioning from being repositories of artefacts into social hubs that seek to be relevant to local and international contemporary discussions. At the same time our understanding of the museum has evolved from being only a building containing objects to a place where action and interaction with the public occur. The museum is no more only a repository for items of value. The museum is now a value-creator. In this architecture is not the focus of what a museum is (the *purpose*), it is merely a facilitating agent (one of the *means*).

Volunteers have a key role to play in this transition in those countries where volunteerism forms an integral part of the museum landscape. So prevalent is volunteerism in the Dutch museum landscape that the national Dutch Museum Association can fully justify the statement that: “Almost all Dutch museums work with volunteers” (Museumvereniging, n.d.).

Dutch museums face growing pressure to professionalise, to improve the curating and digitalisation of collections and upgrade their facilities and operations to reduce their ecological footprints, while also adapting to, and leading the charge on reassessing dominant social narratives and norms.

In essence all museums need to continuously transform in order to meet the expectations of their public, both their loyal visitors and the communities attached to the museum and in order to reach new public audiences. Museums need to be sensitive to and reinterpret social needs and innovate if they wish to continue to attract visitors. In the Dutch context, museum volunteers have a key role to play in this transition and in many instances are instrumental in the implementation of change. They are the presenters of cultural heritage, they often present the narratives related to the museum’s collection to visitors, and are essential to back-of-house operations.

The criteria used for the *Small Museums Change* study were derived from the outcomes of the *Metamorphosis* research project on the transformation of large/iconic museums in the Netherlands resultant from that country’s Delta Plan for Culture. That project highlighted that a broad participation and support of stakeholders is key for a durable transformation. This conclusion points to the principles embodied in volunteering: participation and (mutual) support. The most important point of departure of this exercise was that the volunteers form a community working in the museum but are at the same time also strongly linked to the area and its population where the museum is located.

This chapter presents the background, method and outcomes of the *Small Museums Change* research project, which aimed to show that volunteers form not only an essential source of knowledge about their museum and its context in society, but also a community of practice essential to achieve sustainable and durable small museums. It describes how the roles and ambitions of museums are evolving, in part due to external pressure, but also to a changing awareness of their social role amongst museum institutions. It then discusses museum volunteers as an essential

community of practice and presents the method of engagement that was developed to engage these volunteer communities associated with small museums in the Netherlands. Finally, following the presentation of a case study, it outlines the hitherto untapped potential of small museum volunteer communities as change agents.

## 6.2 Small Museums Change

Approximately 50% of museums in the Netherlands are categorised by the Dutch Museums Association as ‘small’: museums with an annual turnover of less than €400,000 (in comparison to ‘large museums’ with a turnover of at least 8 times larger) (Museumvereniging and Stichting Museana 2022). For the purposes of the research, museums were deemed to be ‘small’, when they are staffed mainly by volunteers and with a formally employed staffing component of a maximum of 2fte (full time equivalent).

Due to their reliance on volunteers, small museums often have a very close relationship to their communities, as the volunteers often live in proximity to the museum, or form part of a community with a specific scientific or historic interest. The role of small museums and their community of volunteers in the Netherlands has received attention from the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE) through research carried out in the context of the process towards the ratification and implementation of the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Faro Convention) (Council of Europe 2005) by the Netherlands (Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands, n.d.).<sup>1</sup> Research undertaken independently but in parallel at the Delft University of Technology showed that museums are developing towards becoming cultural hubs for social contacts (Roos et al. 2019).

These points of departure led to a research project titled *Small Museums Change*, which aimed at exploring and supporting the transformation of small museums and their social contexts specifically, with a focus on museum volunteers. The project focussed on direct engagement with museum management and the volunteer communities in the form of structured engagements, to deliver direct advice to museums, but also to reflect on the acknowledged and untapped value of the volunteer for the small museum in its continuous transformation.

## 6.3 A Landscape in Transformation

The main characteristic of ‘modern’ museums is that they are open to the general public. Museums have over time transitioned from private collections accessible to selected guests for contemplation and study, into institutions formally accessible

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<sup>1</sup> The Netherlands ratified the Faro Convention in January 2024.

to everyone. An early example of such a publicly accessible private collection in the Netherlands is the Teylers Museum in Haarlem, which already in 1784 opened its doors to the general public (Teylers Museum, n.d.). Even though museums in the nineteenth century were open to the public at large, the visitors they attracted still were—in line with their didactic aims—mainly scholars, and people who could appreciate art. These visitors represented a very small portion of society.

Over the course of time, museums have radically changed their relationship to society. Presently, they don't only have the task of preserving and displaying their collections, but have also acquired an important societal role. In the International Council of Museums (ICOM) definition of what constitutes a museum, adopted in 2022 (ICOM 2022), their fundamental status as being ‘open to the public’ is addressed first. This is followed by other relevant conditions: a museum should be ‘accessible and inclusive’ and ‘foster diversity and sustainability’. Museums encourage the ‘participation of communities’, offering ‘experiences’ which are meant among other things for ‘knowledge sharing’. The ICOM definition provides not only a description of museums with their task and mission, but also, implicitly, an encouragement to engage in actions and changes meant to meet the essential characteristics addressed.<sup>2</sup>

‘Open to the public’ is a precondition for achieving accessibility and inclusiveness. Moreover, the attachment of communities, also of various origin, including for example immigrants, not only reflects a very democratic approach, in line with the Faro Convention, but is essential for the continued existence of the museum and the creation of new narratives. Community engagement has become an even greater imperative for small museums than before, for their financial health and sustainability. The volunteer plays a key role, not only in providing resources for the operation of the museum, but also acting as a link into their associated social networks and therefore providing an important conduit in museums’ efforts to foster social inclusion.

The current continuous transformation of the Dutch museum landscape can be traced back to a national subsidy programme, the so-called *Deltaplan voor het Cultuurbehouw* (Delta Plan for Culture Preservation), which was implemented from 1990 to 1994 with the aim to safeguard collections in Dutch Museums. The programme was extended to 1998 with as aim to reduce the backlog in the conservation and management of Dutch museums, libraries and archives, specifically the (climatic) conditions in which collections were curated and displayed (Ministerie van Welzijn, Volksgezondheid en Cultuur 1990).

A review of the legacy of the Delta Plan was undertaken at the Section for Heritage and Architecture at the Faculty of Architecture of the Delft University of Technology during 2017–2019, published under the title *Metamorphosis: the transformation of the Dutch Museum* (Roos et al. 2019).

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<sup>2</sup> “A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.”

*Metamorphosis* confirmed that the Delta Plan resulted in a professionalisation in the Netherlands in museum management, the definition of the key objectives of individual museums and stimulated growth towards a greater financial independence. The benefits, however, were most evident amongst large (national) museum institutions with an established national reputation, large operating budgets and professionalised management and operations staff. The implementation of the Delta Plan provided a vehicle for the realisation of great political, architectural and museological ambitions, all expressed through grand architectural interventions.

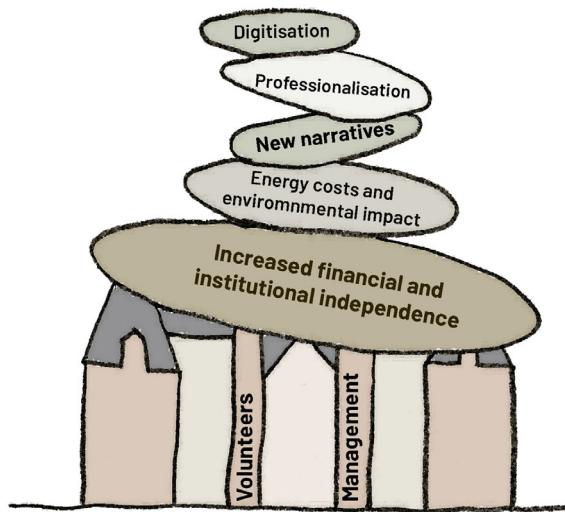
Consequently, as *Metamorphosis* illustrates, the transformation of a museum was and still is often approached as an architectural problem. By placing the architectural programme at the core of a museum, the projects delivered by the Delta Plan were often inflexible “outwardly impressive and interesting (autonomous) buildings”, that “... often fail to fully accommodate the daily operation of the museum including changing exhibitions, visitor flows and preservation of the collection”. In instances they even became unworkable in the longer term, because they were devised to achieve individual architectural and political ambitions: they were not the result of a design project that was founded on an understanding of a shared vision on the museum and its mission (Roos et al. 2019, pp. 57–58). The Delta Plan resulted in projects at an architectural and collections level. Following its retrospective analysis of the successes or not of this programme, the *Metamorphosis* project, highlighted that dialogue, which should include all stakeholders, is key to the success of the transformation of a museum. Integrality and the involvement of people is essential to achieve durable and sustainable success.

In the light of the scale of contribution of volunteers to Dutch museums and internationally, it is evident that involving volunteers as a key stakeholder group is essential for small museums’ continued existence and continued transformation. Yet the tacit knowledge of the volunteer has to date remained largely untapped, their impact unacknowledged and consequently their continued contribution has become tenuous.

## 6.4 Small Museums in Transformation

Small museums in the Netherlands face an uncertain future due to reduced subsidies, increased energy costs and building performance requirements, changing social views of the (residue of) the past and other demands (Fig. 6.1). Attracting visitors is key for the short-term survival of small museums as income from entry fees contributes to independence from sponsors and governmental/municipal policies (Roos et al. 2019, p. 13). The precarious nature of the financial dependency and limited resources of museums became critical during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. While the total costs for museums in the Netherlands rose by 14% over the period 2021–22, subsidies only increased by 1% (Museumvereniging and Stichting Museana 2022). Especially small museums suffered from increased costs

**Fig. 6.1** Small museums under pressure face an uncertain future (Naldini and Clarke 2023)



and reduced incomes. A Dutch example is Museum De Voorde, in Zoetermeer, which was forced to close in 2022 due to a lack of municipal funding.

Deploying volunteers can provide a quick and efficient answer to financial strain. The *Metamorphosis* project collected the staffing figures of 15 Dutch museums that had undergone architectural transformations as result of the Delta Plan. This data showed a general increase in the number and contribution of volunteers to the core tasks of museums. One director interviewed as part of the *Metamorphosis* project recalled that in response to severe economic challenges in 2012, the museum changed course, through a reorganisation with a new reliance on a large number of volunteers and a very reduced staff component (Roos et al. 2019, p. 127). A year later the museum could report that it was financially independent.

Museums age. This often becomes visible in out-dated and deteriorated collection displays (for instance due to unreadable cards, poor lighting, ...) and a deficit of means with which to provide their public active and enriching experiences. As often stated, technology can help engaging a broad audience (Rozendaal et al. 2018), which is surely of fundamental importance for museums in general, and yet very difficult to achieve in small museums, as in most cases they suffer financial distress. Small museums, with small buffers and reliant on volunteers, have relatively limited resources with which to effect change.

Yet, it would be a mistake to think that an increase in size and status could provide a useful response to these challenges. Small museums do not necessarily need to become larger to remain or become successful. Their nature and uniqueness lie in their size. They can be lean and mean, unhampered by institutional culture and long-term administrative encumbrances and commitments to the body politic. Scale can be sought in networking and connecting on different levels with other museums and institutions to foster resilience. Such activities do not alter the nature of the individual museum, but rather define it better and can result in knowledge

dissemination and exchange beyond the boundaries of the place where the museum lies and of its country. Networking can enhance the cultural value of a museum and should be encouraged. For small museums with limited means, volunteers form an untapped resource—they provide an entry into networks with links to highly diverse social, religious, business and other communities.

## 6.5 The Unseen Community: Volunteerism in Dutch Small Museums

The contribution of volunteers to the museum landscape in the Netherlands cannot be overstated, and this is especially true for small museums. Put simply, small museums rely on volunteerism and without volunteers there will be no small museums.

According to research undertaken by the Dutch Museum Association, 66% of the total employment at Dutch museums in 2020 was provided by unpaid volunteers or interns. The main reason Dutch museums are so reliant is financial. The same research highlighted that approximately 1 in 5 small museums are managed entirely by volunteers (Museumvereniging, n.d.). These small Dutch museums today face unprecedented pressure to transform and become more (financially) independent, while diversifying and rescripting narratives to align with societal developments.

Museum volunteer communities are often thought to consist of retired people—but this is not the case. While it is true that many volunteers are retired, the community also includes (young) people undertaking internships and individuals with special/thematic interests or with a strong historical association with a museum or community. The volunteer community is in fact a varied community, representing all of society: from former manual labourers to highly educated knowledge workers. Not all museum volunteers have a background in museology, in fact, a museum background amongst volunteers would be an exception.

Visitors are fundamental to guarantee the existence of the museum. Visitor engagement aims at offering visitors a personal experience of the museum, thereby stimulating repeat visits. Engagement is nowadays entrusted to the museum actors (the volunteers), being the custodians and tellers of the museum narratives, and implies the creation of the means for interaction with the museum's collection, which is the tangible context for the stories.

Placing volunteers central to museum presentation and management brings its own set of challenges. As the contribution of volunteers is just that, *voluntary*, issues of accuracy, responsibility and capacity arise. Well intended actions can lead to detrimental consequences with limited recourse available for correcting mistakes.

The noble act of volunteerism therefore brings with it many challenges. Providing training for volunteers can lead to significant outcomes but may require certainty that individuals are committed to roles or institutions. This may require contractual commitments, which if not carefully considered, may be counterproductive as entering into a contract could be seen by individual volunteers as a means to reduce

their freedom to choose when they want to commit to tasks. Contractual agreements could in turn have legal repercussions, not least in terms of labour law. These, and others, are all aspects that small museums are poorly equipped or resourced to deal with. A key consideration for the continued contribution of volunteers in the small museum sector is to find ways to give volunteers a role that provides them with choice and agency to contribute in meaningful ways to the conservation and preservation of a museum's narrative and collection, while also engendering a sense of belonging.

Small museums need to change to keep up with changing social circumstances and to become financially resilient, but engendering change requires key ingredients. The Dannemiller–Gleicher Formula for Change ( $C = D \cdot V \cdot F > R$ ) posits that transformative change (C) takes place when the product of the dissatisfaction with the status quo (D), a vision of what is possible (V), and (importantly) first concrete steps (F), exceed the resistance to change (R) (Clarke 2021).

The transformation of a small museum should be guided by a vision shared by the management team running it (often largely or entirely volunteer), with continuous support of the other volunteers. As volunteers form a community of practice essential for keeping their museum alive, they are best positioned to reflect on the limits and especially the potentialities of their museum, and with guidance to develop a vision to feed the design of future transformations. Their dissatisfaction with the status quo (D) is often the greatest. At the same time, addressing the causes of dissatisfaction through the implementation of first steps (F) will often require their personal time and energy.

The transformation of a museum in which volunteers have a meaningful role demands that each volunteer needs to be aware of their own role within the museum in its present state and the tasks and responsibilities which the envisioned change would mean for them as community and individually. Finally, in view of a transformation, it is important that they reflect on their own will to change, their attitude towards growing in knowledge (e.g., following topical courses, changing roles), and be willing to adapt to meet the needs related to their future tasks.

## **6.6 Small Museums Change: Discovering the Vision of the Small Museum and the Ambitions of the Volunteers**

The conclusions presented by the *Metamorphosis* research project highlight that successful museum transformations rely on the engagement of different actors, the analysis of different needs and an ability to remain adaptable, among others (Roos et al. 2019). *Metamorphosis* also concluded that volunteers are not often seen as knowledge resource or given agency in strategic thinking about the continuous transformation of the museum to which they dedicate their time and energy. This omission is problematic as the volunteers play a critical role in the managing of Dutch museums, and they form a community of practice with a vast experience of museum

management and operation. They are also in effect the users of the facilities and the guardians of its collection and narrative,

Following on from *Metamorphosis*, the *Small Museums Change* project, spearheaded by the authors, sought to further explore the role of volunteers, understand their critical contributions and understand if and how giving volunteers a greater voice could lead to more durable museum transformations. The growing social role of museums in general, and evidenced by the conclusions of *Metamorphosis*, was a fundamental point of departure for the *Small Museums Change* project, which, aligned with the ambit of the Faro Convention, aimed to uncover the potential of small museums to become cultural hubs for social contacts.

Seven small museums—each faced with an imminent transformation, located in a different socio-economic and geographic context, and each with a unique collection or narrative—were identified to partner in the research project.<sup>3</sup> Pertinent basic information was collected on the partner museums, including their buildings, the spatial organisation of their offering, their collections, curation and policies, annual visitor numbers, number of employees and volunteers and how the management system is structured and operates.

The main focus of the research was to establish how engagement of volunteers through stakeholder engagement workshops and feedback sessions could benefit small museums in transformation. To this aim, individual half-day workshops were held with the volunteers of each participating museum. The aim of the workshops was to define a commonly held vision of the volunteers for the future of their museum. This focus stimulated interest and, as a result, debate amongst the volunteers.

The workshops were meant to give the volunteers a voice. Employed staff and high-level management (even when these were volunteers) were excluded from the discussion to provide a level playing field in the discussion. The workshops and the feedback provided were also meant to assist the volunteer corps to reflect on their current and possible future roles and to increase their sense of belonging, through making the value of their personal contribution explicit.

An important ambition was to assist the volunteers to come to see the museum as a complex organism, including material and immaterial components, connected through networks, which all need to be addressed in the process of change. The definition of museums as ecosystems (Vermeeren et al. 2018) helps in understanding the dilemmas of a multifaceted reality and the need for a shared vision. Therefore, a co-creative approach was deemed necessary, involving actors working in the museum, but also stakeholders from the outside. The aim of the workshops was to help the volunteers analyse the present state of the museum and discuss and clearly express their wishes and ambitions.

A strategic aim was for the outcomes of the workshops to be useful as information to underpin a design process or a change in the building or to create new narratives

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<sup>3</sup> Museum Thorn, Thorn, Limburg; Dutch Museum of Lithography, Valkenswaard, Brabant; Museum Paul Tetar van Elven, Delft, South Holland; Dutch Museum of Working-class Districts, Utrecht, Utrecht; House van Meerten, Delft, South Holland; Luther Museum, Amsterdam, North Holland; Streekmuseum Vredegoed, Tienhoven, Utrecht.

related to the collection, all of which should be directed by their commonly held vision for 'their' small museum.

## 6.7 Methods of Engagement

A bespoke engagement method was developed for *Small Museums Change*, based on experiences from preceding research projects. The basic information collected on each museum followed the model developed for *Metamorphosis*.

The analysis of the spatial structure of the museum and its relationship to visitor experience was founded on Dorus Hoebink's theory of the museum as social performance (Hoebink 2016), which compares a museum with the stage of a theatrical performance. In particular, Hoebink's approach to the assessment of the museum spaces as dynamic/static was referred to for the analysis of the small museums, where warming up/cooling down areas were identified as well. This part formed a preliminary study of the museums in terms of space/routing and display of the collection (Fig. 6.2). Analysing the spatial logic of a museum building shows where the experience offered to the public has changed, because the transformation of a museum as institution is often aligned with its architectural transformation.

Hoebink additionally developed a visual representation of the character of the museum as social performance in the form of a heptagram, with seven elements (Fig. 6.3). This visualisation makes it possible to not only express in simple terms the current character of a museum as social performance, but also to map an ambition for the future for the same. The heptagram helps to map the focus of a museum shows what to focus of a museum is, and can be used to illustrate a change in focus.

Hoebink's heptagram was slightly altered for the purpose of *Small Museums Change* to better reflect the situation of the small museums and serve the aim of involving the volunteers in the definition of its narratives and their conveyance to the public (Fig. 6.4). The use of this tool made it possible to, subsequent to each workshop, present the current and wished-for character of each museum to be clearly visualised in a way that enables comparisons between different museums.

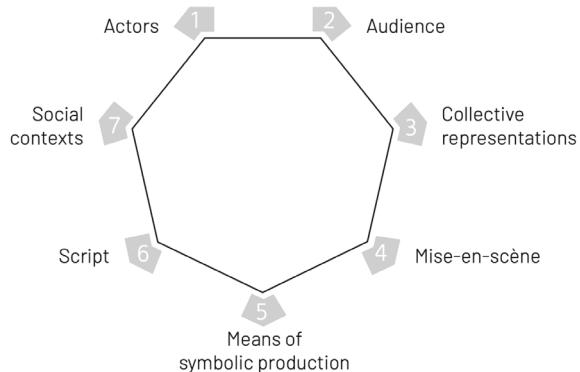
The process and tools developed for the volunteer workshops is based on the 'Kansenkaarten Kerken' (transl. opportunity cards for churches), which presents opportunities for reuse of vacant churches in the Netherlands based on the involvement of stakeholders and ordinary people connected with the church in different ways (Remøy and Clarke 2021) (Fig. 6.4). The museum is conceptualised as consisting of two inter-linked domains: the building and facilities (the *means*) and the collection and society (the *purpose*). These domains are each divided into six layers (Fig. 6.5), resulting in 12 layers in total.

The research method has at its core one-day workshops that are held at each participating small museum (Fig. 6.6). During these workshops, volunteers are asked to reflect and deliberate on the 12 layers connected with the museum, its collection, society, the building and its facilities. A key aim to the method developed is that the engagement method is low-key and low-tech and the outcomes can be validated.

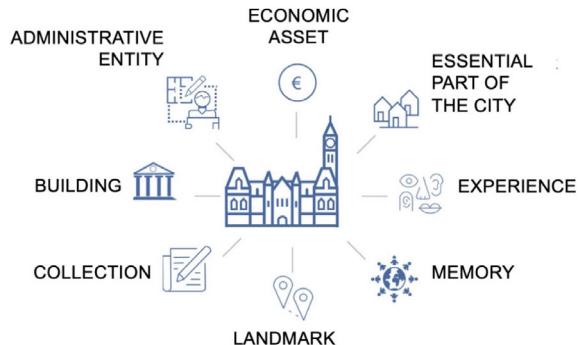


**Fig. 6.2** An example of analysis of museum in terms of dynamic/static spaces; in this instance the Dutch Museum of Lithography (Naldini and Clarke 2023)

**Fig. 6.3** A visual representation of the character of the museum as social performance in the form of a heptagram as developed by Hoebink, with seven elements (Roos et al. 2019)



**Fig. 6.4** A schematic representation of a church building in its context (Remøy and Clarke 2021)



	Layer	Bearers	Opportunities	Wishes
COLLECTION AND SOCIETY	Narrative (Story)			
	Collection			
	Science and Research			
	Responsibility			
	Society			
	Connectivity			
BUILDING AND FACILITIES	Location			
	Building			
	Exposition/ presentation			
	Facilities			
	Accessibility			
	Visibility			

**Fig. 6.5** Conceptualised framework diagramme of the domains and layers defined for the museum, used for the volunteer workshops. *Source* Authors from Naldini and Clarke (2023)

The risk that the discussion during workshops would be merely theoretical, even though based on facts concerning the museum (visitor amount, use of spaces, facilities, etc.) and on the personal experience of the volunteers, was mitigated by the method's strong link to practice. This basic analysis structure forms the backbone of the workshops. The method includes dividing the volunteers into an equal number of groups of maximum five people. Each group is given the opportunity to identify the 'bearers' and opportunities related to an individual layer and note their wishes on A1 sheets using Post-it notes. The sheets are subsequently rotated between the groups to allow for peer review and addition of views by all participants. Reviewing groups can add a 'plus' (+) or a 'minus' (-) sign to indicate their agreement or add additional insights. A plenary presentation of the results signals the end of the individual workshops.

Following each workshop, the data gathered is consolidated by the researchers. A feedback session presents the consolidated outcomes of the workshops to all volunteer groups and museum management teams, to validate the conclusions, following which final reports are submitted to each museum.



**Fig. 6.6** Volunteers in discussion during a workshop on 22 October 2022. *Source* Clarke

## 6.8 Pilot Case Study: Museum Thorn

The research component on Museum Thorn, located in the white city of Thorn, was used as an experiment to validate the designed method. Museum Thorn was, at that time, located in a part of the monumental former courthouse (or 'Dinghuis' in Dutch). The museum management were in discussion to rent some extra floor space, to be able to extend the display areas of the museum in the monumental building.<sup>4</sup>

A first preparatory meeting of the research team, supported by architect Job Roos (Braaksma and Roos Architects), was held with the management of Museum Thorn to establish modes of engagement and outline the expectations and limitations of all parties. To better understand the aim of the envisaged change of the museum,

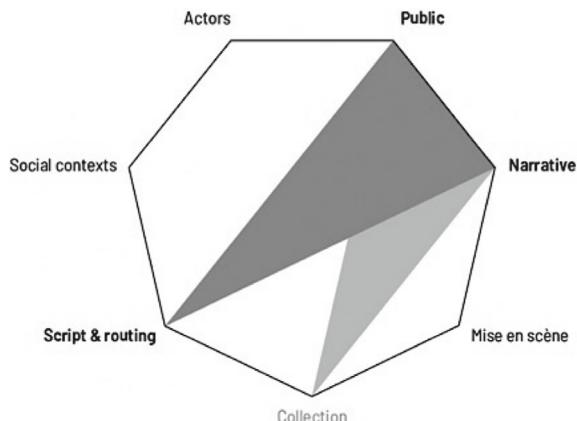
<sup>4</sup> The Dinghuis is owned by the Bernoster-Kemmers Foundation and both the museum management and the Foundation expressed their interest in a pro-active research project to further define a possible extension intervention.

the discussion was focussed on the ‘bearers’ of the museum: its central location and proximity to the historical Abbey, its location in the historical Dinghuis, a large-scale model of the village dating to the 1980s called the ‘panorama of Thorn’ and its public amenities (Naldini and Clarke 2023, p. 46). This resulted in two narrative lines emerging as being the most important form of ‘heritage’ of the museum: the connecting role of the musical traditions of the village and the role of genteel women from the Middle-Ages. The latter narrative has a wider European reach. The mission of the museum was expressed as to tell these stories to the visitors and preserve this immaterial heritage for future generations. The museum’s collection consist of artefacts from the village and aim to tell story of the village, but the discussions uncovered that the collection was far less important to the narrative of the museum than the village itself. The meeting concluded that an effective change could only be expected through strong and interactive storytelling focussing on the village and not on the artefacts. This required a script that engages visitors and leads them through the whole village, of Thorn, which should become the ‘museum outside the museum’.

The subsequent workshop with the volunteers, including the management team (formed by volunteers) confirmed this approach. The outcomes include that the presentation of the narratives should not be entrusted to the material kept in the building, but on an interactive experience of significant parts of the village Thorn. This shift in focus is clearly illustrated in the outcomes of the workshop as illustrated in the heptagram (Fig. 6.7) which illustrates how the museum volunteers wished to move towards no longer using the collection for supporting the narratives but work at a script for a routing involving the whole village.

However, the engagements were followed by strict restrictions during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The financial difficulties and the restrictions during the time of the pandemic made it very difficult for the museum management to keep paying the rent for the museum building, let alone extend their facilities. Together with the outcomes of the discussions, this situation brought the museum change its strategic vision: the decision was taken to strengthen the narrative and the script

**Fig. 6.7** Outcomes of the meeting and the workshop at Museum Thorn. *Source* Authors



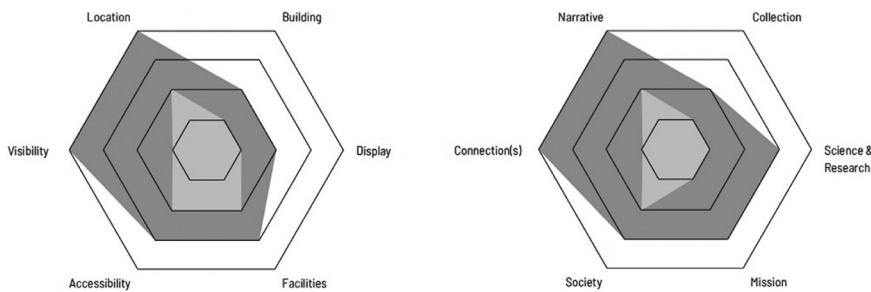


**Fig. 6.8** The village of Thorn, with the Abbey at its centre, photographed in 2022 *Source Naldini*

to engage the public, not by developing a larger inhouse display area, but rather to diffuse the museum by using the whole village as exhibition under the motto ‘Binnenste Buiten’ (trans. inside-out) (Fig. 6.8). By activating the social networks of its volunteers, it now hoped to develop new narratives, also because contributions could be sought by newcomers to the region who approach cultural heritage from a different cultural perspective. This went along with a general decision to strengthen the network of the museum, based on its core narratives, through the identification of stakeholders inside and outside the village, and thereby to embed the museum in a larger network. These initiatives, it was considered, could lead to an improved financial stability, as the museum as institution would have no overheads to be able to utilise the village as part of an extended museum offering, while being able to draw more visitors.

The outcomes of the workshop reported in graphic form (Fig. 6.9) show the present situation of the museum (light grey) and the intended course for its future (dark grey). The building, on which all attention had originally been focussed, but also the collection and its display, have become less important than the narrative and social networks. The location of the museum is now seen as being very important, as in the new approach the whole village of Thorn has been conceptualised as both the diffused museum and the setting for its storytelling. Accessibility, but especially visibility are now important factors to be considered in planning changes. The museum’s new mission includes a societal goal, which consequently calls for a research network that extends beyond the Village of Thorn to a European level, as one of the museum’s new core narratives, that of the genteel women, has a European character.

The meeting and the volunteer workshop at Museum Thorn delivered interesting results for the development of the museum and radically changed the original developmental plan, which included disconnected ideas for transformation such as extending the museum or improved collaboration with the Thorn Abbey, into an *integral transformation plan*. An integral transformation plan is meant to reach the main goals addressed by the community of the volunteers considering different aspects of



**Fig. 6.9** Outcomes of the workshop with volunteers of Museum Thorn presenting the current nature of the museum (light grey) and a wished-for future course (dark grey). Making the most of the location (the whole village) and increasing the visibility of the museum are the first aims. *Source Authors*

the museum mission—from the narratives, to the visibility and accessibility, to the museum building. The engagement also again highlighted how crucial narratives are for preserving the heritage, and the connection with communities and stakeholders. Ensuring such links are established and maintained is considered to be means for social interaction and financial resilience.

## 6.9 General Case Study Conclusions

The internal evaluation of the Museum Thorn trial case study showed that the method developed provided very useful and delivered significant new insights. This validation led to the choice to use the method in engagements with six additional small museums. All workshops were volunteer-focussed and, following analysis and consolidation by the researchers, the results were reported to the volunteers and discussed. In all workshops, the volunteers successfully expressed their wishes and ambitions, based on which the researchers could distil a vision for the future of the museum. Most importantly, volunteers were encouraged to express their attitude towards society and engagement of the public.

The volunteers indeed proved to represent a very important link between the museum and its immediate geographical and socio-cultural environment. Most volunteer groups wanted to strengthen their small museum's social contacts, indicating a both a wish and a latent potential with regard to the interaction of the museum with society. Various initiatives emerged from the workshops, which confirmed the assumption that museums can become cultural heritage hubs for social contacts. Some already existed, others were novel.

As case in point, the volunteers of the Dutch Museum of Working-class Districts (Volksbuurt Museum) in Utrecht—which is devoted to the history and heritage of its own quarter—invite its less mobile and other marginalised local community groups (which are seen as the museum's 'neighbours') to coffee in the museum once a week



**Fig. 6.10** The Dutch Museum of Working Class Neighbourhoods has an interactive display that invites visitors to experience the smell of the city quarter at the turn of the previous century (Naldini 2023)

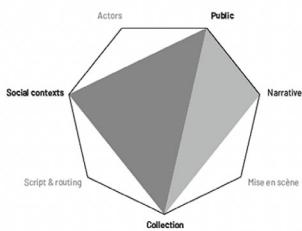
(Fig. 6.10). This is intended to enhance socialisation and plans exist to extend this initiative and invite resident youth to similar meetings.

The above leads to the conclusions that, thanks to their volunteers, small museums can go beyond merely presenting a narrative, and generate a greater social contribution by addressing issues at play in their immediate geographic vicinity (Fig. 6.11). This indicates that small museums have a role to play in furthering democracy and integration. This is also in line with the foundational principles expressed in the Faro Convention. Engendering social contacts is extremely important in the current context of large migration flows and intolerance.

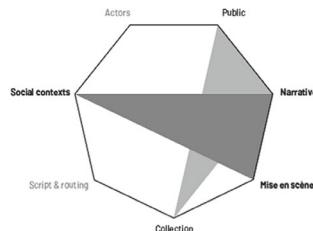
The bottom-up character of volunteer initiatives resonates with other outcomes of the workshops: volunteers want agency in decisions about the future of their museums and are prepared to modify their own functioning to this aim. Unsurprisingly, they express a belief in the mission defined for their museum. They also know that a successful transformation requires the integration of the expertise from different fields of specialisation, from architects to conservators, engineers to educators. This integral character of the transformation needs to direct future actions, including the maintenance of the building and facilities, the acquisition and de-acquisition of the collection, and changes in the complex fields of accessibility and visibility. They are not averse to new technologies or to projects being entrusted to specialists and university students, even if such actors do not directly belong to the volunteer group of the museum.

The engagement method applied in the project led to outcomes that can be understood and used by the volunteers and management of the museum alike. This validated the approach and method. The most important measure of validation, however, was represented by the positive reactions of the participants, who, in many instances, asserted that the project provided for the very first time a forum in which they could contribute their perspectives to the future of their museum. Only in the case of the Dutch Museum of Working Class Neighbourhoods had the volunteers been asked

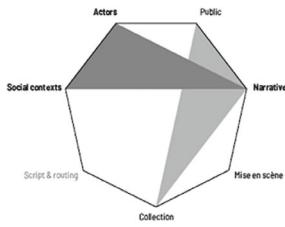
Museum Paul Tetar van Elven



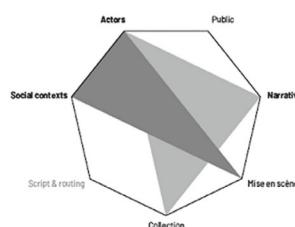
Dutch Museum of Working Class Neighbourhoods



Luther Museum



Vredesaoed Museum



**Fig. 6.11** Outcomes of the workshop with volunteers of 4 museums. Enhancing social contacts is deemed crucial for the future of the museum. *Source* Authors

before, by the director, to participate in a workshop. As already noted, three of the seven museums already applied some of the outcomes of the project to substantiate and redirect their policies, even before the conclusion of the research project. The outcomes were elaborated and graphically represented in English, aiming at providing students and interested volunteers abroad with a research instrument. The results were peer-reviewed before publication as open-source book titled *Small Museums Change: Volunteers for Social Engagement* (Naldini and Clarke 2023). The outcomes as presented by the volunteers were reported in Dutch in the appendix of the book, to allow all participants to understand thoroughly and use them.

## 6.10 Conclusions: Democratising the Volunteer as Change Agent

A transformation of especially small museums cannot be entrusted to the director or specialists such as architects alone, even when it concerns the building. Some of the key actors and community with the tacit knowledge of the museum are the volunteers. The method developed for the *Small Museums Change* project provides one way for architects and other specialists to tap into the lived experiences of the volunteers.

When looking from the museum outwards, volunteers are a ready conduit with which to connect to society, including to marginalised communities. In this sense,

the volunteers are the link between the museum and different people with different expectations and needs.

During the workshops, it soon became evident that, as anticipated, some participants had never been asked about their vision on the museum before, even though small museums depend on volunteers for daily operations and the implementation of any change. The discussions in and between the groups were fruitful, leading to new insights into the wishes and needs of the volunteers, and opportunities for future change in the management, but especially the narrative of each museum, which was appreciated and positively valued. The usefulness of the project is evidenced by the fact that the museum directors of three of the seven museums indicated to the researchers that the interim outcomes of the workshop were being used to reshape their development policies—while the research was still ongoing.

The project has discovered that volunteers cherish the ambition of their museum to become more inclusive, dynamic and pluralist. These perspectives align strongly with the principles embodied in the Faro Convention. Bolstering social networks can also support the financial independence of small museums.

The active involvement of the volunteers implies the identification and definition of roles, tasks and responsibilities. Volunteers can apply their knowledge and skills to fulfil museum tasks and further develop them for an effective understanding and consequent use of available knowledge resources. For specific, new functions, emerging from the vision for the future of the museum, also calls for volunteers can be consequently better facilitated. Volunteers across the board expressed the wish to improve their knowledge and skillsets to be able to better contribute to their museums. Positive facilitation of volunteers however may require a clearer definition of their tasks and responsibilities. Exploring the legal ramifications of contractual agreements might be beyond the abilities and resources of many small museums, as are for instance some of the specialist knowledge required to effectively curate their collections. They need institutional support.

Because of the role that small museums and volunteers play in enhancing social contacts, they should receive better recognition—also in terms of funding to support their durable change and financial independence.

*Small Museums Change* has conclusively shown that small museums are anchors for many Dutch communities. However, small museums in the Netherlands, and elsewhere, find themselves in a landscape of change and must consequently continuously transform to be able to survive. Smallness is an essential characteristic of these institutions, and transformations should aim to preserve it. Smallness does not equal weakness. Small museums often and continuously achieve the impossible: they transform with limited resources and adjust to changing conditions, including rising costs and changing social perspectives. This is only possible due to the dedication of the museum's community.

But the resilience and flexibility of small museums in the face of change depends to a great extent on the engagement of the volunteers and their skillsets. This is why engaging the volunteer communities of small museums is essential to their durable transformation. These communities of practice are an important, if not most important resource a small museum has at its disposal. Giving them a voice at a most basic level

provides valuable insights into the operational challenges of museums. At a more fundamental level, engaging the resident volunteer community in the management of small museums taking their wishes into account in strategic planning and decision making, strengthens a sense of belonging, engenders commitment, and can greatly facilitate the diversification of museum narratives, thereby improving access to and democratising cultural heritage.

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