The Museum of Mineralogy and Geology on Mijnbouwstraat celebrated its centenary last year. This spring, the Executive Board made it known that the room would need to be vacated. Everyone agrees that something has to be done.

Jos Wassink

In here, a sense of timeless peace prevails. To the left and right are the rows of display cases flanking long, high-windowed walls. Small cardboard labels indicate which minerals and ores are on display. Silver, gold, mercury, iron and copper metal ores, collected from Bolivia, Siberia, Ontario, Chile and Kongsberg. The professor of mining engineering, Professor Vogelsang, laid the foundations of the collection in 1864. He was amazed that no such collection already existed. A mining engineering programme without a collection? How would students learn how to identify minerals?

Students, staff and alumni collected minerals, ores and rocks from all over the world. In the collection’s heyday, mining engineers would sometimes send entire crates of stones from Africa or Asia to the museum. In a history spanning almost 150 years, the collection of the Museum of Mineralogy and Geology has grown to include 150,000 pieces. “It is a systematic collection,” answers Professor Stefan Luthi (Civil Engineering and Geosciences, CEG), when asked about the collection’s value. “There are complete classes of minerals: evaporites, halites, sulphites, and so on. Minerals are like species in biology. You have different chemical compounds, and within these, there are further differences in crystalline structure. A systematic collection must therefore have every mineral that exists. This collection is unique in the Netherlands.”

To this day, the mineralogical collection has played an important role in the education of students of mining engineering (now Applied Earth Sciences). Prior to examinations, students would visit the collection and stand with their noses pressed to the somewhat dusty display cases, searching for similarities and differences.

Vacating the premises
On 11 March, the rector and professor Karel Luyben announced the end of the museum on Mijnbouwstraat. In a discussion with manager Stefan Luthi and CEG dean Professor Bert Geerken, Luyben explained that the room would need to be vacated, as it would be used for other purposes. Luyben has little time for the argument that the museum’s collection is unique in the Netherlands. He has visited all of the places that currently house the collection: the museum and the basement on Mijnbouwstraat, the CEG basement and the glass main building of Applied Earth Sciences. He was not pleased by what he saw: “With the exception of the museum itself, the collection is in a poor state. It looks untidy, neglected and dusty.” The rector was also disappointed by his visit to the museum. Retrieving the log for the electronic lock revealed that hardly anyone had been to the museum last year. In response to this, Luthi points out that for the last six years, there have been no employees to look after the collection properly.

After making his findings, Luyben tasked Luthi and the curator, Maaike van Tooren, with clearing out the collection. The collection’s top pieces – estimated at around five per cent of the total, including the Triceratops skull and the dodo skeleton – should be kept for small exhibitions. An educational collection that the students can work with should also remain. The main part of the collection, however, could be transferred to Naturalis, the museum of natural history in Leiden, which functions as a national archive in this area.

Dismantling the collection
“Delft has one of the last large university collections,” says Dr. Leo Kriegsman, head of geology at Naturalis. He is involved in the discussions between TU Delft and Naturalis about the transfer of the collection. Naturalis has already taken over scientific collections from TU Delft, including fossils from Timor, along with the geological collection from the University of Amsterdam and parts of collections from VU University Amsterdam.
The collection of the Museum of Mineralogy and Geology has grown to include 150,000 pieces.

and the former Netherlands Institute of Applied Geoscience. "The end is in sight for the institutional collections," Kriegsman acknowledges. “Aside from Delft, only Utrecht University and TNO in Zeist still have a large geological collection.”

A protocol has been drawn up for the dismantling of institutional collections. It determines that Naturalis, on behalf of the state, must be approached first so as to safeguard the conservation of national heritage. "It is important that the systematic collection is transferred in its entirety," says Geerken, who was previously the director of Naturalis. He also wants an agreement on users' rights, so that after a possible transfer of the collection, exhibitions can still be organised in Delft.

Dying a slow death

"It went wrong when mining engineering moved to the new civil engineering building in 2007," according to Maaike van Tooren. In addition to giving her lectures, Van Tooren undertakes the daily management of the museum. Before the move, the whole mining engineering programme had been based in the same building, and students had spent a lot of time visiting and using the collection. The distance from the other building has proven too great, and the collection can only be visited on appointment.

Couldn’t the Science Centre open the room to visits and students? The question elicits a sigh from Van Tooren – and also from Professor Jacob Fokkema, in fact. During his time as a rector with a background in geophysics, Fokkema was involved in setting up the Science Centre. Even then, attempts were already being made to link the collection of stones to the Science Centre. Every time, though, the plans foundered on the issue of money. And that is still the case. The director of the Science Centre, Michael van der Meer, acknowledges that while the CEG faculty might talk up the great value of the collection, it “doesn’t have a penny to spare for it”. Van der Meer wants to have the room refurbished and kitted out for holding conferences, receptions and presentations. As far as he is concerned, the collection can be moved to the second floor or otherwise transferred to Naturalis. In Duco Drenth’s opinion, “We can’t allow money to be a problem.” Drenth is an alumnus of TU Delft and chair of the KiviNiria engineering society’s mining engineering department. When he read about the impending dismantlement in Geo.brief magazine, he immediately contacted the Executive Board. “What about sponsorship?” Drenth is thinking of oil and gas companies with substantial budgets and a strong connection with what goes on under the ground. In a proposal to the EB, Drenth set out his plans to revive the geological exhibition with computers and projections to bring the exposition more into line with the Science Centre. It should become an educational centre for school pupils and the public, where they could learn more about the ground under our feet, with reference to topical issues. “If you could create an exhibition that was able to quell the unease about shale gas, gas-related earthquakes or CO₂ storage, I think the NEB would be keen to participate. It wouldn’t be scared off by one or two million euros.”

Luthi has also submitted a plan; he suggested to the EB that the museum be organised in such a way that parties could be held in the proximity of the display cases. “They also do that at the Natural History Museum in London, for example. What could be nicer than having dinner with a Triceratops behind you?”

Salomon’s verdict

“Closing it down is hardly a creative solution,” says Professor Salomon Kroonenberg, who was responsible for the collection from 1996 until his retirement in 2009. “We were really proud of this collection, and we still are. And you can’t just get rid of that room; it’s Delft’s Teylers Museum. The room can be given a combination of functions.”

Kroonenberg backs the plans put forward by his successor, Luthi: “You leave the top pieces where they are and you also use it as a reception space, without undermining its function as a museum. The EB is responsible for more than financial and organisational management – it must also be a proud champion of Delft’s cultural heritage.” And the money? “Yesterday I was at the KNGMG (the Dutch Earth Sciences Society, ed.). There, all of the Delft alumni were in favour of seeking sponsorship. Call it the Shell, NAM or BP room, for all I care; but if you get rid of it, you’ll never get it back.”

Photos: Hans Stakelbeek

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