

MAS - MUSEUM AM DE STROOM – ANTWERP, BELGIUM

Key words: building capacity | by habit | by choice | place | community rooted | co-creation

Synthetic data sheet

Full name	MAS, Museum aan de Stroom
Address	Hanzestedenplaats 1, 2000 Antwerp, BELGIUM
Legal status	City Museum
Year of establishment	2011 (the new reorganisation)
Website	http://www.mas.be/
Social Media	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr, Foursquare
Area of activities	Heritage
Kind of activities	Research, Exhibitions, Education, Events
Total amount of budget 2014	around 5.000.000 €
Exhibition Space	5.700 m ²
Number of employees	60
Number of volunteers	140
Number of annual attendances	650.000
Ticket prices	10 € the full ticket

Data refer to 2015 except for the total amount of budget

Background information

In 2011 the city of Antwerp united different city collections in its new city museum, the MAS. Both the cultural policies and urban planning policies since the 1990s explain the creation of the MAS. In 1997, three of Antwerp's city museums did not manage to attract national funding because of their shabby conditions of conservation. Hence, the Antwerp city council had to take a decision either to renovate these museums or to close them. Instead of renovating each museum, the city decided to create a brand-new city museum for the old collections in the old port area of Antwerp, which would add to the urban renewal of this run-down quarter. In order to realize the project, the Flemish government of Belgium committed itself to an investment of 21.000.000 €. In 2011 the MAS opened its doors. The storey building by Neutelings Riedijk architects functions as a landmark between the city and the port and reconnects the Eilandje to the city centre. The MAS includes the collections of the former Ethnographic Museum (with non European ethnographic collections), the former National Maritime Museum, the former Volkskundemuseum (with local ethnographic collections) and the local history and applied arts collections of the Vleeshuis (Butcher's Hall) Museum. The mission is to

highlight that Antwerp is a city on a river with a port, which has always been connected to a wider world. For centuries, Antwerp has served as a place of exchange, and now is a multicultural city with more than 52 nationalities. The MAS has collected together the traces left behind by these exchanges and uses them to tell new stories. MAS aims to be a city museum with an overarching mission of telling stories about the city, the river and the port, about the world in all its diversity, about the essential connection between Antwerp and the world.

The MAS is displaying this rich collection of more than 500.000 objects in its open-view storeroom, on the 2nd floor, and also in four permanent exhibitions, which take their cue from the connection between Antwerp and the world and bring into relation maritime, ethnographic, urban history and applied arts collections. The 3rd floor of the MAS is devoted to temporary exhibitions (on average 3 big exhibitions a year), but also on the other floors the presentations are regularly changing in order to show the wide diversity of the collections and projects of the MAS.

A pedestrian boulevard inspires contributions from artists and allows people to experience the connection of the MAS with the city and the port through beautiful alternating panoramic vistas.

In 2013 the MAS won the European Silletto Award given out by the European Museum Forum in acknowledgement of the best voluntary and community involvement of a museum.

What do they want? Goals and achievements

The relationship between the museum and the audience is embedded and indicated in the mission: "MAS is about citizenship", a place that tells stories that to create understanding between people and between cultures.

The first years have been primarily devoted to communicate the building, a fantastic and iconic landmark of the city; currently the main challenge is to engage the visitors to enter and to discover the contents of the different collections.

The museum has 650.000 visitors a year (quite steady data in the last years, except for the year of the opening when the museum reached 1 million of visits). Many visitors "explore" the building, use and live the place and the premises (from the walking boulevard where some exhibitions are hosted to the rooftop), but only 1/3rd pays a ticket for visiting the collections.

In terms of organisation, the museum has 60 employees including the security staff, but – quite unusually - the marketing team is an external body and belongs to the municipality of Antwerp (physically they are based in the museum building, but they are not directly coordinated by the museum direction). The direction considers a great advantage having the marketing department outsourced, because it is skilled and it handles the museum direction as a client (this aspect makes the relationship more effective and straightforward) and because they are part of a bigger municipal organisation with important budget for communication and promotion.

The MAS is a City museum and therefore the citizens of Antwerp of all origins are at the core of the AD strategy (albeit there isn't an explicit and formal AD Plan shared among the staff), but the museum dedicates particular attention to the following groups: young people and students, for which it developed the "MAS in Young Hands program"; socially vulnerable groups (the elderly, the disabled, people in poverty, newcomers), direct neighbours of the MAS and Antwerp heritage organisations. Other important targets

consist in the international tourists (cultural tourism flows are increasing in the city) and in the so-called "Architecture lovers", interested in the iconic side of the building.

One of the main future priorities in the Ad strategy is to try to convince people who discover and use the building (as an iconic place or a place with a nice view) to do a step further in entering and visiting the collections and the temporary exhibitions. This target can be considered as a particular kind of "audience by surprise" in the sense that currently many people know and live the place, without being fully aware about the contents and stories that are shown inside the building. Like many big iconic museums there is a tension between the building and the contents / collections it contains, and this creates the need to rebalance the positioning of the institution as a place for living vibrant experiences stemming from the objects and the stories of the many different eclectic collections and exhibitions. In terms of price policy every month the museum opens one floor only for 2 euros (instead of 10 €) to enlarge its potential audience.

About the relationship with the municipal cultural policies, MAS is supported for its role of cultural landmark and as enabler of urban and economic regeneration in the North area of Antwerp; there are no specific public requests related to AD objectives and achievements.

How do they do it? Making it happen

Different museum's functions are dedicated to implement the museum's audience policy. Beyond the marketing department, the Education area plays an important role and it is articulated in four departments: 1) public services, 2) MAS in Young Hands, 3) Schools, 4) Citizens activities.

The digital identity of the museums is the result of a digital eco-system that encompasses the institutional website, social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) and a digital platform called "Collection Antwerp" that gather citizens of Antwerp who collect and create contents and stories starting from their own cultural tangible and intangible heritage. The platform allows an overview of the entire collection (the items that are not on display in the museum - over 95% of the total - are though made widely accessible), and the free usage of the images (covered by a Creative Commons licence).

Specific training activities are provided (thanks to the municipal funds and training courses) to the staff with particular attention to audience and education skills.

Cross-disciplinary approaches are pursued for setting up important projects like, like key exhibitions. In these cases, at the early stages, curators work with the project leader, the education department, also with some people from the marketing and sometimes with some members of the City heritage.

The museum carries out some qualitative analysis about visitors and audiences. Active engagement processes and front-end evaluation related to the preparation of an exhibition are other useful occasions for obtaining insights and information about audience perceptions and opinions on the museum and on the themes tackled.

Nevertheless, visitor studies and audience analysis are perceived as an operational area where improvements are needed.

Active engagement of communities and crowd-sourced approaches are pivotal for involving audiences and for improving the development of different initiatives like temporary exhibitions. In many cases people are asked to take part and to contribute to the different initiatives of the museum through open calls; in other cases, the communities are engaged because of relevance and of familiarity with the topics raised by an exhibition. For the current exhibition "Buddha & Mind", several Buddhist communities were involved for providing ideas and opinions as well as for promoting the event. The cross-cultural exhibition "Sacred places" (2013) – created to show the differences and similarities between the three world religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam - is particular interesting because the museum engaged the three religious communities of the city for working and contributing to the development of the project. The museum worked initially to inform the associations of the different religious communities about the project. It was then decided to involve the groups in a much more profound way, asking the people to provide testimonies, stories and personal feelings about their sacred places and to bring pilgrimage souvenirs that have been showcased during the exhibition. More than 600 people were involved for the openings of the exhibition and special evenings were organized for the different communities.

The project "MAS in Young Hands" is particularly significant for describing an effective approach of engaging young people in the museum's life. The main aim of the project is to actively involve a group of students aged 15 to 25 that every year proposes ideas, fresh perspectives and solutions for the design and development of specific events and activities (the most popular are the "mask parties" and the sleepover at the museum) in order to make the museum alive and more attractive toward young audiences. This five-years-old project involves about 15-20 students every year and a dedicated museum employee. The students are recruited in September every year through an open call. The museum is looking for a group of young voluntary people with different socio-cultural background, strong motivations, enthusiasms, and relational skills. The kind of involvement required is quite demanding because each week the members are requested to participate in the different activities and tasks. The crew changes every year but a number of people remains for more time and allows certain continuity along the project. At the end of the project they receive a certificate of participation and a reference letter with the competences and skills gained and improved during MASYH.

The group provides also indications and proposals for improving the museum communication (even though the relationship with the communication department is not always easy). Curiously, they often propose more traditional, non-digital and paper materials (like fliers, stickers and guerrilla materials) for promoting and targeting their peers, instead of using exclusively the digital communication.

There is a yearly specific budget for MASYH of 12.500 € for managing all the activities (communication, contracting artists, organisation).

In years the relationship between the MASYH and the other museum departments has improved (at the beginning it was quite problematic) and now the collaboration with the different areas is very effective because every volunteer of MASYH can chose a godfather /godmother in the different departments. Godfather/godmother's role is conceived as a sort of light mentorship in order to help the young in a specific task or to stimulate him/her to provide ideas and opinions about project developments.

After 5 years, the main achievements in terms of AD strategies are related to the reinforcement of MASYH label on a local level; it is difficult for the museum to assess a

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positive correlation between the project and a significant increase of young people of the city as museum's visitors, but the programme has improved the effectiveness of the communication of special events addressed to young audiences. MASYH is also helpful because it generates additional audience through engagement of friends and families of youngsters involved.

This project is heavily time-consuming and the time frame (in terms of integration with the different functions of the museum, team building and effective empowerment of the volunteers) doesn't always fit with the schedule and pace of the museum's production process that is faster and requires short-term feedbacks.

Interviews: Marieke van Bommel - Director; Liene Conard - "Mas in Young Hands" Project Coordinator; Chris De Lauwer - Curator

Interviewer: Alessandro Bollo – Fondazione Fitzcarraldo (Italy)