



The Unseen Museum: Wesley Meuris' Research Building

Michel Dewilde

The Schelfhout Collection: the motive

The Scharpoord Cultural Centre in Knokke-Heist invited the artist Wesley Meuris to develop the exhibition design for the collection of Congolese sculptures and objects belonging to Mr. Joseph Schelfhout. In response to this request, Meuris designed a comprehensive installation in the shape of a 'museum' and called it 'Research Building'. Eventually the artist housed the Schelfhout collection in part of his 'museum structure'. The 'Research Building' installation occupies nearly the entire space of the cultural centre.

Meanwhile, this exhibition had to cope with quite some negative criticism in the specialised press. It appears that the Schelfhout collection mainly consists of forgeries or copies of well-known African artefacts and that the organisers (according to the critics) were aware of that fact. The debate about this multi-layered exhibition has completely shifted towards the 'authenticity' of the Congolese pieces on display and the role of the Scharpoord Cultural Centre in the communication about the genuineness of these works.¹ Following several conversations, it appeared that both the artist Wesley Meuris and the cultural centre were aware of this aspect at the start of the project.²

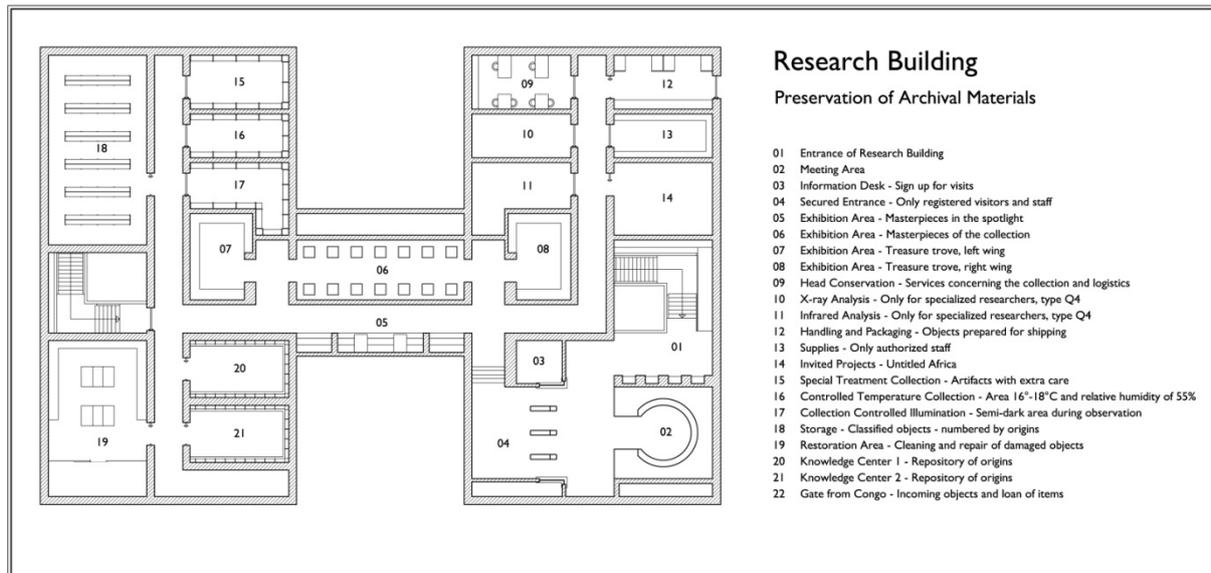
Strangely enough, every article, review or reaction remain blind to the actual intentions of Wesley Meuris, which proves to be a missed opportunity. Indeed, the questions concerning the authenticity of the African works on display or Belgian relations towards the Congo were only a motive for Meuris to develop an impressive discourse about the history and function of museums, the evolution of exhibition design and the role of the artist and his installation in all of this, the position and experience of the viewer within the exhibition process and so much more.³

Researching a structure: the floor plan

Starting from the tenet that the essence of an exhibition design consists of the articulation of dialogues between selected and/or newly designed objects and the space surrounding them, with the aim of conveying a particular content, experience, etc. to the audience, 'Research Building' raises a host of questions.⁴ What is it, indeed, that artist/exhibition designer Meuris wants to communicate to the audience? What are the intentions of the organiser, and are these the same as the artist's? What is the role of the collector Joseph Schelfhout and the ex-colonial association of Knokke-Heist in this process? And we can easily expand this list of questions. The exhibition in the Cultural Centre of Knokke-Heist has several titles and sub-titles, such as: 'Congo Collection', 'Schelfhout Collection', 'Private collection in an imaginary museum by Wesley Meuris', etc.

Nevertheless, the artist has opted to add yet another title, namely: 'Research Building'; this is no coincidence. Both the choice of title and a reading of the museum floor plan, designed by Wesley Meuris, provide the first clues of his eventual intention. Meuris has designed an H-shaped museum plan, which he divides into three large sections, consisting of 22 separate rooms. In the concrete development of these rooms, the artist consciously refers to the traditional basic functions of a museum: acquisition, conservation, scientific analysis and, finally, communication with the audience and/or presentation of specific 'valuable' objects; each of these is assigned a separate department. Moreover, spaces such as the 'meeting area' (no. 2) – where visitors can 'meet and admire' both each other and the first African images of the museum in a semi-circular room – and the place reserved for guest exhibitions (no. 14) evoke connotations of recent developments in

museum structure and the functions linked to this. The relatively small number of exhibition rooms for the objects and the large number of rooms reserved for research and conservation is a striking aspect of the artist's floor plan. A second prominent aspect is the specific location of particular departments in the museum plan: the so-called exhibition rooms or galleries are situated perfectly symmetrically in the middle of the building, but they are relatively far away from a number of rooms that are essential for the functioning of a museum on a practical level. We are thinking, for instance, of the storage space (no. 18), the restoration room (no. 19), etc. As Meuris could really 'create' a new museum and as such was able to determine the internal arrangement of the rooms, this fact is far from insignificant. These decisions amplify the feeling that Meuris was occupied primarily with conceptualising museums and other research institutions and much less with the actual development of a practicable museum.



If we interpret the floor plan as a two-dimensional drawing without any actual architectural referent, the balance of the design is obvious. Although we can find most types of rooms and infrastructure of a contemporary museum in the plan, some rooms seem not to be grouped functionally. And yet 'Research Building' appears to be more complex and richer than this interpretation makes us believe. In the non-hierarchical lay-out of the floor plan – with, for instance, exhibition spaces that are not more important than other parts of the building – we detect echoes of a series of important post-modern visions of the museum and its functions. This combination of abstract, historical, and practical or experiential discourse runs is a central theme of the exhibition installation, and is found in the actual presentation of the African sculptures.

All in all, we can state that Meuris has combined several museum scripts and their architectural translation with a visualised abstraction of this type of institution.⁵ This is enhanced by the enigmatic room no. 22, which we find on the room list of the floor plan as 'Gate from Congo – Incoming objects and loan of items'; yet the number 22 is nowhere to be found on the actual plan. This room, this gateway to the Congo, is effectively situated in another, symbolic dimension, outside the blueprint and beyond the actual building.

Trail: labyrinth

Another important element in every exhibition design is the trail the visitor is supposed to follow through the exhibition structure. As such, every exhibition develops textually, virtually, auditory or four-dimensionally, from a series of navigation forms. In 'Research Building', the viewer essentially walks inside a concept, in which he primarily distinguishes buildings, their related functions and their presentations, and is invited to discover the causal links. This becomes clearer when we look at the most important aspect of the floor plan, namely the trail that Wesley Meuris has laid out for the visitor. After he has entered the building, this visitor is immediately faced with the choice between visiting the central exhibition section (left) or a wing with rooms meant for scientific experiments (right).

In other sections of the building as well, the visitor has access to rooms normally reserved for the scientific staff of such an institution, namely the restoration room (no. 19) and the central storage space (no. 18). This appears to be a constant factor in the floor plan and the trail through the exhibition; it refers to the deeper level of this project. One could argue that an important part of the Schelfhout collection is displayed in rooms no. 18 and 19, and that as such the visitor is given access to this part of the building. If we follow this line of thinking, it

means we are dealing with practical considerations by Meuris, namely the need for extra exhibition space for the collection. Yet the artist could easily have designed larger or more exhibition rooms with more space for the collection. As argued earlier, the 'Congo Collection' is not the subject of this project. The fact that the visitor has access to this usually inaccessible part of the building is a conscious option chosen by the artist.

'Research Building' is an installation that literally represents the discovery, the research, of the different dimensions of a building, in this case a museum complex, with its various functions reflecting a series of cultural values. As such, visitors are given access to certain 'scientific departments' of the building, as they assume the role of researcher themselves. At the same time, the wide accessibility for the visitor of nearly all departments of this building again refers to a series of developments within the post-modern museum script, as mentioned earlier.⁶ Again, this is an example of the continuous switching back and forth between the physical experience of the visitor in the actual exhibition and theoretical and historical reflections on the subject.

Exhibition design and presentation

In short, once the identity between creation and selection has been established, the roles of the artist and of the curator also become identical. A distinction between the curated exhibition and the artistic installation is still commonly made, but it is essentially obsolete.⁷

The Scharpoord Cultural Centre asked the artist Wesley Meuris to create the exhibition design of the Schelfhout private collection.

Essentially, Meuris adds the role of artist to the one of exhibition architect or designer. Moreover, he realises a second doubling by opting for an exhibition design in the shape of a museum/research centre, in which the actual Schelfhout collection is subsequently included – the artist 'curating' the exhibition together with the collector. As such, 'Research Building' also encompasses the entire gamut of positions within the art realm: artist, curator, designer, museum architect, researcher, collector and visitor. Who is the curator of this project, by the way?

Commissioning an artist or an architect to develop an exhibition design is nothing new as such, and Meuris becomes part of a long tradition, but he crosses various perspectives and visions, and links them up. On the level of formal presentation of and communication about the Schelfhout collection, for instance, he opts for a combination of elements from various periods and visions of the history of exhibition design. In the installation in Knokke-Heist he puts the African images in surroundings bathing in a series of vivid colours. He alternates between brilliant greens, reds and hues of grey and stresses the spectacular effect of the entire set-up with dramatic lighting. This form of presentation is reminiscent of the typical, colourful design of 19th-century museums, before the rise in Germany of museums with the typical white walls and the developments leading to the so-called 'white cube'.⁸ Yet at the same time, Meuris refers to recent trends in exhibition design, in which, starting in the 1980s, the supposed neutrality of the 'white cube' was abandoned in favour of a colourful and often theatrical staging of the works of art from museum collections.⁹ We are specifically referring to all those museums that are employing (interior) designers for the lay-out of their permanent collections or temporary thematic exhibitions, in order to realise a 'new experience' of these works. In many cases, this leads to 'stylish' surroundings in which the relation to the content of the work, the general concept or any analysis of the position of the viewer is often lost.

The ironic script

The formal presentation of the Schelfhout collection leads us to the most important aspect of the exhibition: the content of the project. From all the information we could gather, it appears that Meuris was also the determining figure on the level of the content.¹⁰ Thus the question arises about which theoretical framework was developed or used for the selection and positioning of the various African sculptures within the exhibition.

At first glance, Meuris does not seem to be working with a specific thematic, historical, geographical or so-called 'ethnic' framework in order to structure the exhibition discourse on this collection of African works. Neither does he seem to opt for a 'narrative' division of the space, in order to write a larger plot by means of the selected African objects. The artist does not choose a performative spatial distribution either, actively connecting the position of the visitor, the museum space and the selected object in the exhibition. What is striking is the apparent absence of contextualisation of the entire set-up: there are few references, if any, to the history of the collection, the owner himself or the methodology applied, let alone to the various Congolese nations whose works of art are displayed or the link with the former Belgian colony, etc. Yet after a close reading a number of key aspects of the project stand out: for instance, Meuris systematically wields remarkable – even pretentious – names for the exhibition rooms, such as 'Masterpieces in the spotlight' (room no. 5). He applies the same technique for the labels accompanying the individual sculptures. Can we then still take these 'Congolese sculptures and objects' seriously, if they are described

and presented in this way? Meuris is using irony as a weapon in his critical reflections on collecting such sculptures and objects, on the symbolic impact of a museum or any other institute on these objects and their authenticity – both specifically within the situation of the Schelfhout collection and in general, in all museums. The tense Belgian relationship with the former colony of the Congo is addressed in rooms no. 20 and 21, named 'Knowledge Center 1 & 2'. In these rooms, Meuris has surrounded a map of the Congo, with a construction of more than 350 empty wooden boxes with the names of all the nations found in the Congo. With this cartography, Meuris refers to the asymmetrical balance of power between coloniser and colonised on the one hand – it is, after all, 'the one' who pigeonholes, classifies and rules 'the other' – and to the more universal human need to organise and categorise things and people on the other hand. Both rooms are presented in a cool and cynical finishing. Again we will refer here to certain post-modern museum installations in which irony, double bottoms and self-mockery, in a theatrical design, are used to question the authoritative discourse. At this level, this installation links up with some of Meuris's earlier works, such as the installation 'The world's most important artists' (2009); it also constitutes one of the central elements in his practice.

Concluding, we may claim that both the subject and the context of the exhibition 'Research Building', are the analysis, conservation, exhibition of and communication about (art) objects, in all their institutional parts and translations. 'Research Building' functions as a search and research engine, now metaphorical, then again poetical, critical, theoretical or emotional. In this sense, the Schelfhout collection forms an interesting point of departure for Meuris, and he approaches it critically; but it is not the subject of this exhibition. The collection of Congolese sculptures is presented by Meuris in a consciously flashy design, and stripped of any reference. It is presented as a nearly endless flood of images that seem to be completely interchangeable and which function as decorative 'ethnic objects' as they are found in many private homes. By its presence and lack of authenticity, the 'Congo Collection' not only gives the 'Research Building' a research subject, but also partly lends it legitimacy. In the end, this exhibition installation also serves as a 'museum', with a 'real' collection of objects. Meuris works with the image of a visitor who is sent out to investigate through a labyrinthine exhibition installation, conceived as a museum, with an experience and analysis of both as a purpose.

Michel Dewilde, Gent, 21 November 2010.

¹ We refer here, among others, to the articles by Piet Swimberghe, published in *Knack* on 9, 15 and 18 November 2010, and in *De Morgen* on 15 November 2010, etc. Eventually, the Scharpoord cultural centre, through its curator Christophe De Jaegher and several members of the board, responded with a text 'showing' that: 'the exhibition itself incorporates criticism on the collecting of African art'. This reaction came across as hardly credible for the press; it should have been communicated better from the start. Indeed, this reaction is in stark contrast with the choice of words in the information leaflet of the Scharpoord cultural centre, which mentions a 'unique collection'. Or did this confusing communication form part of the exhibition strategy?

² Wesley Meuris in conversation with Michel Dewilde, November 2010.

³ This text is a short summary of the text: 'Wesley Meuris: Research Building: The Unseen Museum', which will be published at a later date.

⁴ Obviously, this cannot be claimed to hold universal validity for all forms of exhibition; among others, the relations with the surrounding space and the visitor are completely different in the case of a video exhibition in which the videos are set up separately in 'black boxes'.

⁵ The term 'museum script' has been borrowed from several authors; it refers to the relation between organiser/museum/exhibition maker, their presentation/exhibition and the public. In this, important questions are considered, such as: do museums or exhibition makers use certain standard schemes, formats or scripts to develop the exhibition and to eventually communicate with the visitor; in the development of these schemes, is a specific attitude or role of the visitor envisaged; more even: does such a scheme or script produce a 'standard visitor'? Several authors, among them Carol Duncan, Eileen Hooper and Julia Noordegraaf have used the term script, originally from the world of film, in order to refer to the visitor ritual (Duncan), the museum presentation (Noordegraaf), the relation between visitor (subject) and art object or the complete museum presentation (Noordegraaf). I further discuss this argument in the text: 'Wesley Meuris: Research Building: The Unseen Museum'. Let me point out here that Meuris mixes various museum scripts, among others in order to further develop the notion of 'the visitor as researcher'. Cf. e.g.:

Duncan, Carol: *Civilizing*

Rituals, inside public art museums, p.7-20, London, 1995; Hooper, Eileen: *Museums and the interpretation of visual culture*, London, 2000

⁶ We refer here, among others, to the hybrid museum script described in: Noordegraaf, Julia, *Strategies of Display*, p.196-243, Rotterdam, 2004

⁷ Groys, Boris: *Multiple Authorship*, in: *Art Power*, p.94, Cambridge, 2008

⁸ Cf. e.g.: Dorner, Alexander, *The way beyond 'Art'*, New York, 1947

⁹ Cf. e.g.: Klonk, Charlotte, *Spaces of experience*, p.173-222, New Haven, 2009

¹⁰ Wesley Meuris in conversation with Michel Dewilde, November 2010