

# Museum advisors expect turbulent times

**Wim Scholten** Museum advisors are facing a serious threat: if they're not careful they're going to be out of business. The growing professionalism of museums and the development of consultancy agencies are forcing museum advisors to rethink both their policies and their very *raison d'être*. And museum advisors too must become more professional.

Being an expert in something that there's no more demand for. That's the dilemma soon to face museum advisors throughout Europe. Although this function is understood differently in the different European countries there are certain general lines that can be traced. In Austria, Flanders, Hungary, Italy and Latvia the concept of museum advisor scarcely exists. There the job is still in its infancy, as it was twenty or so years ago in Britain, Germany and the Netherlands. Then these countries each had one or two advisors appointed by central government and operating at a national level. During the 1970s a process of decentralisation began in the Netherlands and today almost all of the twelve Dutch provinces have their own museum advisor or advisory office. They are responsible for the development and implementation of museum support. And in view of the rapid professionalisation of museums this would seem essential.

Happily, there are occasions such as the biennial European Museum Advisors Conference when the function of museum advisor comes up for serious consideration. Then questions are posed such as: In what sense is the museum advisor a specialist or a jack-of-all-trades; does their specialism lie in fact in their very general knowledge; can museum advisors cross their own borders and participate actively in exchange programmes or international aid programmes; what is the role of the advisor in improving the quality of museums? This is a type of professional self-examination, asking questions about the work of the museum advisor and in particular how this can be improved. One year prior to the next European Museum Advisors Conference scheduled for Italy in 1999 seems a good time to examine the status quo and initiate discussion.

## Efficient dogsbodies

The museum advisor has a wide range of functions. In general terms, there is a distinction between those aspects directly concerned with support of the museum, and the aspects concerned with policy and the cultural infrastructure of which museums and museum advisors form a part. Museum backing takes place following a specific request from an individual museum but also deals with museums jointly. Features connected with museum support are - depending on the size and nature of the museum - management of the museum collection and exploitation of the collection in terms of a public and business enterprise. Here the role of the museum advisor is to make recommendations, and to organize educational programmes and study days. Furthermore, museums can ask the advisor's help in connection with drawing up inventories, documentation of the collection, developing a collections policy, arranging and designing items inside the museum, general exploitation, publicity research, passive conservation and the recruitment of sponsors.

Support work for a museum is somewhat comparable with that of medical doctors who run their own dispensary. To a certain extent the museum advisors can dispense their own medicines and come up with their own solutions. But for specialist treatment they recommend the museums to consult an expert. A museum advisor may literally help a fairly small cultural-history museum in making policy plans or designing its interior. The advisor can supply the museum with information, publications, examples, knowledge gained from experience, and proffer assistance. But if more help is needed and if there are the financial means to pay for this, the museum advisor may recommend a specialist, such as a financial expert, a designer or a text writer.

Museum advisors also contribute to a museum's policy. Advisors will be aware of what is going on in the museums in the area where they work, will contact their colleagues for brainstorming sessions and take note of developments that are relevant for museum policy. Advisors also make recommendations to central government such as in connection with the implementation of subsidy rulings. In a few instances the museum advisor manages a subsidy budget delegated by central government.

Finally, museum advisors have the function of figurehead to whom organizations, institutions, businesses and government bodies can address their questions in connection with museums and related activities. The advisor is an ambassador for the museums or in a sense is acting as an intermediary for them.

## The Dutch situation

Museum advisory agencies have sprouted throughout Europe over the past few years. They are growing steadily and broadening the scope of their activities. Increasingly, museum advisors are working in larger teams that comprise specialists, (temporary) project developers, and secretarial and administrative assistants. The organizations are legal bodies in their own right and operate in a largely independent manner. In this way the organizations try to take advantage of the changing museum set-up as well as of the supply of help and advice from other, even competing, bodies. Together with Britain and Germany, the Netherlands leads in these developments. The situation today in Holland reflects what museum advisors in other European countries can expect in the not-too-distant future.

On the national level the organization of Dutch museum advisors overlaps somewhat with such

bodies as the Dutch Museum Association (hereafter referred to as the NMV, its Dutch abbreviation). The NMV also handles the development and implementation of activities connected with museums. The NMV coordinates activities that further expertise, including some of the courses provided by the National Museum Advisors Liaison Group (Dutch: LCM). A potential point of conflict here is that the LCM organizes these courses for the benefit of all museums, while the NMV is primarily concerned with supporting its members. Despite this, the two organizations cooperate to an increasing extent and regularly discuss policy at board level. In other countries the museum advisors and the museum associations often cooperate within one organization although here too the problem arises that museum associations according to their statutes exist to protect their members, while museum advisors work for all museums. For the advisor, what counts is the quality of the museum, how the museum functions, and what are the museum's goals. However, it seems far from desirable that museum advisors and museum organizations function along parallel lines but independently. It would appear that efficient fine-tuning and clear agreements could save a great deal of time and energy - both in sharing material resources and preventing competitive strife.

In the Netherlands there is an ever-increasing number of umbrella organizations at the regional level, dealing with cultural heritage, such as the *Federatie Stichts Cultureel Erfgoed* (Federation for Cultural Heritage in the Province of Utrecht). Nearby, in the province of South Holland is a similar organization. It is inefficient to have different small bodies operating separately from each other within one small area. Such a situation invites museum advisors to strengthen and expand their own sphere of influence. Also in other

countries it now appears at the very least an interesting question to consider the extent to which museum advisors can expand their field of activity, combining or fine-tuning with other areas that deal with conservation and sharing in the cultural heritage.

One actor who quite clearly cannot be ignored is the external consultant. Dutch museums no longer rely only on museum advisors for advice and support. Provided they have the financial means, they can also call in a commercial agency, or they can opt for a combination of the two. The strength of museum advisors lies in their general knowledge, the fact that they are quickly and easily available, that they can offer ongoing support, and above all that they are not expensive. Their general knowledge, however, is also their Achilles heel; it means they cannot easily offer specialist advice. Also, when it comes to advising individual museums, their time is limited. Generally speaking this holds in inverse proportion for the commercial consultant.

#### **A new look for the museum advisor**

In Europe the museum world is changing. It varies from country to country how and to what extent this is happening, but the general line is unmistakable: the demands placed on museums and museum staff are becoming greater. The conservation, management and presentation of museum collections is requiring greater expertise than formerly. More and more, museums are going over to a professional approach, becoming more businesslike and commercially oriented - partly thanks to museum advisors - so as to meet the higher demands. Sooner or later they will no longer require the knowledge and skills of the museum advisor. The general questions concerning museum management will have been answered; in their place will come

problems of a more specialist nature concerning topics ranging from salary administration to integrated pest management.

What conclusions should be drawn? Should advisors adapt to the changing demand and appoint specialists - in vastly different areas - in the museum organization; or alternatively should museum advisors remould their own organizations into specialised agencies and project bureaus. It looks as if the Dutch advisors have opted for the first alternative. However, in view of the steady and swift increase in professionalism this would seem to be a fairly undefined trajectory: where to draw the line limiting the number of required specialisms? The path of arbitration seems more plausible - small, flexible bodies able to coordinate efficiently the supply and demand of the museum market, and who have access to a network of commercial, semi-commercial and non-commercial specialists.

For those museums that wish to promote their professional profile but lack the financial resources to hire specialist services, museum advisors will be able to supply the means by which services per project can be hired for a minimum charge. In such cases the museum advisor acts as a non-profit making organization. Possibly a certain financial profit can be gained from advising third parties, in particular government bodies (with the exception of the government body who is paying for the museum advisors agency) and acting as consultant to firms and bodies who wish for information about the museums. It works out in practice that there is a striking difference in the cost of this type of advice from a museum advisor, or from a consultancy agency.

Another possibility for the museum advisor is providing help for museums that are not capable of undertaking the type of

professionalisation discussed above, without some assistance. Museum advisors can draw up a description for such museums, defining the aspects of professionalisation that are considered necessary. What elements are essential for the running of a museum in order for it to be considered 'professional'? In Britain and recently in the Netherlands museum advisors and museum associations have jointly drawn up a museum register based on certain predetermined standards. This has the great advantage that museum advisors and museum associations, the museums themselves and also others, such as government bodies, can fine-tune their tasks and responsibilities following reciprocal discussion.

Nevertheless, museums - in all their variety and differing degrees of professionalism - will undoubtedly retain the need for expert and objective information and guidance. There are two ways that museum advisors can react to this. In the first place they may look for mutual needs and provide a solution that assists several museums at once. For example, a study day may be organized, or the advisor may try to find ways of gaining financial support from the provincial government. Secondly, advisors may address individual questions from museums and attempt to come up with a cut-and-dried answer. It is not necessary in either case to have the required expert knowledge in house. It is more efficient and often more effective to call in, or to refer the case to, experts in the area. In such cases the responsibility and the expertise of the museum advisor are concerned with the arbitration and the organization. The New-Look-Museum-Advisor will be well advised to take a leaf from the books of the management agencies with their already extensive market.

Finally, advisors would do well to emphasize their essential service-mindedness. Museum advisors function traditionally in a limited geographical district. This district should be,

from an organizational point of view, one unit. This is the only situation in which a museum advisor can give his work a structural bedding. In the Netherlands, where each province is responsible for its museum policy, this has a great advantage. One province will view and value the role of museum advisor differently from the next. Dutch museum advisors can count on that. The function of museum advisor should be brought more under public notice, particularly through their own association the National Museum Advisors Liaison Group, or LCM. Meanwhile, the first cautious step has been taken with the presentation of a policy proposal titled *De verbindende factor, Beleidsvisie 1997-2000* (The Binding Factor) (Tilburg, 1997, LCM). In this publication the position of museum advisor and that of other museum auxiliary services are described as essential for the good functioning and further development of museum infrastructure both in the provinces and the country as a whole.

#### **Awake!**

Museum advisors both in the Netherlands and other countries operate from their own territory. There they sit, safe and sound, looking much as if they're stuck fast, and could only be persuaded to move occasionally to attend a national or international conference. Fresh air is needed, fresh outlooks. Otherwise museum advisors may find themselves becoming ever more blinkered, working in an ever narrowing perspective. And although the museums and government authorities may appear satisfied, the advisors may become largely insensitive to outside influences. They know their clients down to a T. And so opportunities, such as the creation of specialised consultancy and project agencies, may slip past unnoticed, while threats such as the growth of commercial museum advisory agencies, may suddenly erupt.

It is advisable for museum advisors to cross the borders of their territory with a certain frequency, sometimes temporarily taking up a job elsewhere, in a museum, a cultural institution, a government body or indeed with a commercially operating agency. Job rotation aerates the soil, provides new perspectives. International cooperative and exchange projects also brighten the jaded vision, and present new outlooks. In this respect the platform at the European Museum Advisors Conference is under-exploited.

[translated from the Dutch by Wendie Shaffer]

#### **Bibliografische gegevens**

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#### **Wim Scholten**

was Museum Advisor to the Province of Zeeland and Deputy Chair of the National Museum Advisors Liaison Group in 1998