

## **GUM**

### **The Ghent University Museum as an activator of critical citizenship**

Marjan Doom

In October 2020 the Ghent University Museum or GUM opened its doors as the first academic museum in Flanders (Belgium). Over the course of 10 years a team of curators, researchers, educators and policy makers had defined the identity, mission and vision of this new museum. They determined how GUM would position itself both in the academic and in the local and national cultural scene, and what audiences it would target.

Ghent University had composed a diverse and rich collection (est 400.000 objects) over the 200 years since its foundation: academic heritage from and for education and research. In 2012 the university made a bold decision. Not only to open the very first university museum in Flanders to increase the accessibility to its collections, but also to leave the genesis of its museum into the hands of a young team. Without the restrictions nor the guidelines of blueprints, they were given the time and support to explore the position of a museum within a university and within society. A challenge they embraced to push the boundaries of existing formulas and jump into the void of an experiment. They created a Forum that catalyses the dialogue between the collection and the public, between science and society. Not a hall of fame about the achievements of the university nor a hub for scientism, but a transparent and honest conversation about the nature of science, from time to time even holding a mirror up to its own scientific community. With this vision, GUM fully embraces the societal role of universities to encourage and educate critical citizenship, supporting its university's motto "Dare to think". Simultaneously, GUM embraces the societal role of museums as public spaces where reflection and dialogue are activated. As such this Forum intertwines the mission of a university with that of a museum and takes a unique position within the landscape of museums. [Fig. 1: GUM resides within the Botanical Garden of the university. Together they offer a unique visitor experience. An impressive mural, a work by the internationally praised street artist ROA showing a pile of skeletons, adorns the facade of the museum.].

### **Management of the museum and its relation to the university**

GUM saw the light after a long preliminary stage within Ghent University. Until 2012, the university housed several separate small-scale museums and academic collections, little-

known and often visitable by appointment only. In the run-up to the opening of the new GUM, all these collections merged into one central entity within Ghent University: the Centre for Academic Heritage and Archives. GUM, the Botanical Garden and the University Archives reside in this entity.

This new Centre for Academic Heritage, managed by an intendant, shows the growing ambition of Ghent University to invest in the safekeeping and public accessibility of its heritage. GUM does not only play a central role within this Centre. It is also an initiator and symbol of the growing ambition of the university to implement a unified vision on heritage, collections, patrimony and culture within the whole of the organisation. In this regard GUM represents an all-embracing, professional heritage programme for the whole university. [Fig. 2: The Graphic design studio Pjotr was responsible for the remarkable corporate identity of GUM. The design has hints to the graphic design of the university, yet stands on its own and positions GUM within the cultural ecosystem of the city]

The museum is led by a director, appointed by Ghent University. An advisory board was installed to provide strategic advice. The board consists of academics and experts from the museum and cultural field. General administrative decisions impacting the University as a whole, are taken by the governing board of Ghent University.

A scientific Committee was set up to monitor the connection with the university concerning research and education, collection development, programming and advice on scientific content in temporary exhibitions. Within this Committee all university faculties are represented. The members have a double role to play. They bring their academic expertise to the table as advice, but they also take their role as GUM's antennas within the research community of the university to broaden and deepen the knowledge (development) on the museum collections and operations. The members communicate to their students and fellow faculty members on internship programmes, topics for bachelor and master theses, running and potential future research projects etc.

Students are part and parcel of GUM. The Museum Student Team, abbreviated to MuST, is composed of students with various educational backgrounds. The students are invited to work behind the scenes, attend workshops led by museum professionals and explore various collections. Likewise they represent the young board of GUM and are involved in several decision making processes. They send an elected representative to the advisory board. In this way, they can connect their own reality to that of the museum's.

Students run internships on a wide variety of museum operations, from collection research, over communication strategy to the development and design of temporary exhibitions. GUM cooperates with various educational partners inside and outside the university. The temporary exhibition for example 'Van Eyck in Depth. Friction and harmony through the eyes of architects and artists', was developed together with students of the 'Engineering and Architecture' programme of Ghent University. [Fig. 3: 'Van Eyck in Depth. Friction and harmony through the eyes of architects and artists. Students designed the scenography of this temporary exhibition together with the curators and scenographer. They worked on the concept and scenography of the exhibition during the course of an academic year].

## **Display**

The displays are curated on the foundation of a distinct vision <sup>1</sup>. It does not translate research output of the academic community to the public. GUM brings the story of the scientific process, of how scientists search, how they use their imagination, how they overcome obstacles and are driven by doubt, on a path to new insights. Visitors do not learn about great geniuses or inventions. On the contrary, they discover that science is the result of failing, overcoming obstacles and using one's imagination. That a scientist should think outside the box and never take something for granted. The visitor is guided through seven themes: chaos, doubt, model, measurement, imagination, knowledge and network and in doing so, GUM raises questions, but never fills in the answers. That is up to the visitor. [Fig. 4-5: Themes like Chaos and Imagination guide the visitors through the scientific process. Objects from diverse disciplines are juxtaposed in a contemplative atmosphere.].

GUM wants to offer an experience of beauty and surprise. We want the visitor to meet the unexpected, beyond the textbook science or natural history museum. We therefore display surprising wonderful objects but not according to discipline or chronologically but interdisciplinary and with respect to their esthetic value. Juxtaposing objects that are at first glance completely unrelated, has the effect of surprise. Visitors are more challenged to see the connections, and this activation creates time. Time that visitors do not allocate to bite-size information transfer but that is needed to evoke reflection and engagement in the subject.

We explicitly choose to collaborate with artists, allowing a multi-layered perspective on our collection, display and vision. Artists work on commission and/or we display loans from colleague museums. Displaying art and juxtaposing the artistic research methods and processes to scientific methods, shows cross-overs between the disciplines. But equally

delineates the goals and intrinsic values of their outputs. It helps the visitors to gain insight into the how and why of science.

### **Mission statement**

Our mission statement is our backbone, the initiator of everything we do, including the translation of this mission into how our visitors experience science. This mission is not non-committal, it states our view of science as a human and dynamic concept with room for debate, imagination and doubt. This is of the utmost importance in a world where black-and-white-thinking prevails, where public debate seemingly lacks every nuance, where doubt is perceived as weakness and complex issues require immediate answers. In short, where critical thinking is in dire straits.

#### **1. Science is human**

And so are scientists, with their emotions and biases. They should always keep questioning and doubting.

#### **2. Science dares to think**

Scientific research requires creativity and bravery: thinking outside the existing lines, going against one's intuition and daring to fail.

#### **3. Science constantly evolves**

Science and society are closely intertwined. Society influences our perception of science and how we engage in research.

### **Forum for Science, doubt and art**

Science museums, especially university museums, suffer from the reputation of being highbrow or elitist. For many visitors, the threshold for contact with science and the academic world is very high. As a new kid on the block, GUM wanted to make different, original choices in museum display, communication, programme and target audience. Our baseline *Forum for Science, doubt and art* encapsulates our vision on outreach and display and positions the museum within the cultural ecosystem. Moreover, it embassies our societal role.

The goal is to be welcoming without coming across as dummifying the audience or choosing the "science is fun" card. It is of key importance to GUM to address and reach an audience outside the usual suspects within the academic community and regular museum visitors.

Many science museums explicitly target families. We have defined one of our main target audiences from within the 15-25 year old age group, an ambitious choice, as this group doesn't traditionally count as 'museum lovers'. After almost a year of opening, admittedly in a non-representative year due to the pandemic, 36% of our visitors are registered under 26.

The word forum represents to GUM:

- An open house, highly accessible (physically and mentally) with an invitation to participate in the conversation.

- A dynamic atmosphere fostering high levels of activity, while at the same time the design calls for contemplation. GUM can be a silent place, offering the opportunity for reflection and insight while, at the same time, the museum is full of spaces where debate and discussion, performance and other experiences can take place.

- A Forum, as a democratic place, implies multiperspectivism and inclusivity. These aren't empty concepts at GUM. Science is not preached dogmatically. We observe science together with the visitor in search of what it exactly is that defines science. We do not proclaim but go through the thoughts processes along the visitor's side. GUM positions science as a human activity. We promote science as the most valuable tool to acquire objective knowledge whilst acknowledging the many other ways knowledge can be created and shared. We take a bird's eye view on science and invite the visitor to create his/her own perspective. By not imposing a perspective we hope to include all perspectives and open up the dialogue between them and their owners.

- We explicitly get rid of the stereotype of the old, white, male scientist. To feel a connection, the visitor needs to experience recognition: we emphasise the human qualities of the scientists, not their genius. The scientists and characters which appear in our multimedia applications have been carefully selected to reflect a broad diversity of ages, genders and ethnicities.

- The same sensitivity for diversity and identifiability can be found in the way we approach employing our guides and hosts. We have created a diverse pool, pursuing the ideal match between the group of visitors and the guide as an ambassador. From our MuST team, for example, we have selected particular students to offer guided tours to secondary school classes. We offer tours in 10 different languages to broaden our accessibility and in the main exhibition the texts are offered in four languages.

## Biblio

1. Marjan Doom: The Museum of Doubt. A modest manifesto by a science curator, Ghent 2020.