

# Sharing Experiences: Establishing an Expertise Centre on the Protection of Dutch Cultural Heritage

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## **Abstract**

In the Netherlands an Expertise Centre on the Protection of Dutch Cultural Heritage is being established to bring together scattered knowledge and expertise on collection safety and security issues. A website is being set up based on a broad, integrated security concept. The website will include the DICE database for incident registration. More specialised expertise will be made available on demand. The Centre has been funded for two years, whereupon its viability will be assessed. For the Centre to become a success, the entire cultural heritage field should overcome its reluctance to share sensitive information and commit itself to the Centre.

**Key Words:** Expertise centre; Security; Dutch cultural heritage

In January 2008 a new project was started at the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, National Library of The Netherlands (KB): the building of an expertise centre on the protection of cultural heritage for Dutch heritage institutions. This presentation about this expertise centre will focus on three issues:

- Why are we doing this?
- How are we doing it?
- How do we share information in the Netherlands, both on a local and national level?

## **Heritage is More than Libraries**

The expertise centre is not only meant for libraries, but for the whole Dutch heritage world: museums, archives, monuments, churches etc. The project has two major goals. Knowledge and expertise on safety and security matters are well provided in the Netherlands, but they are scattered and there is no central independent place where all the information is accumulated. So our first goal is to collect the fragmented knowledge and expertise, and present it in a structured way via a website.

The second goal is to propagate the importance of focusing on safety and security issues in the organisations. At least in some of the institutions the awareness for safety and security issues is not very high. To give an example: last April the Netherlands Museum Association (NMV) organised a meeting on disaster preparedness plans. After the meeting, a curator of a medium-sized museum told one of my colleagues that he himself wasn't very interested in the subject, but he was told to go. To him it was a waste of time. He would rather have spent the afternoon doing his normal job on the contents of the museum collection.

## **Coming of Age**

The expertise centre has only started, but it already has a long history. In the beginning of this century some major incidents happened in the Netherlands. In May 2000 a fireworks factory in Enschede exploded, destroying a complete neighbourhood and leaving 23 people dead. The Rijksmuseum Twenthe, on the outskirts of the stricken area, was also damaged, but was luckily not destroyed. On New Year's night 2000–2001 a crowded bar in the village of Volendam caught fire with 14 fatal casualties, all youngsters. And then 9/11 came. The awareness of safety and security issues in society grew, and in the heritage world as well.

In 2002 a project started in The Hague for co-operation at a local level between heritage institutions. In the meantime Dutch politics decided that it was no longer necessary to have a specialised police force for art crime. In 2002 this service stopped, including the connected database for stolen arts

and antiques. In the same year three major thefts occurred in Dutch museums, including the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam.

In 2004 the Netherlands Museum Association, together with some other institutions, contacted the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to discuss the situation. The Ministry reacted in a positive way and early in 2005 it was decided that three initiatives would be explored. The first one was to discuss the possibility to re-establish the specialised police force for arts and antiques and the database for stolen art, not an easy thing to do in a bureaucratic world because three ministries would be involved. Those things take time, but in May it was announced that during this year the new force will be installed. The second initiative was setting up a central database for the registration of incidents in all Dutch heritage institutions. That database was built by the KB in 2006. And the third one was the founding of an expertise centre on the protection of Dutch cultural heritage.

## **Target Group**

The heritage field in the Netherlands, as probably elsewhere, is quite complex. There are medium-sized, large and very large institutions, with more or less professional staff, but we also have very small institutions that depend in many respects on volunteers. Some collections are national property, others are owned by local governing bodies and some are private property. The collections are very diverse: we have to deal with libraries and archives, but also with museums with different kinds of collections, with churches, and with monuments.

What does this heritage field expect from such an expertise centre? There are several ways to organise an expertise centre and probably there are as many opinions as there are experts. In 2005 a first study was carried out by the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (*ICN*) and in 2006 the KB was asked by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to do some more research into the way such an expertise centre should be organised. After consulting the field, a first draft paper was written and discussed in the winter of 2006–2007. Of course we got different views, but it was not too difficult to draw a general conclusion and in spring 2007 a final proposal was sent to the

Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. The result was that the Ministry asked the KB to establish the expertise centre as proposed, to be started in January 2008.

## **Building the Expertise Centre**

The project will last two years. In the summer of 2009 it will be evaluated and then the Ministry will decide whether it will continue to finance it or not, and where the centre will be finally accommodated. The fact that the KB is building the expertise centre does not necessarily imply that the KB will also host it after it has been established permanently.

The expertise centre will work in this period with a small staff of 2.6 full-time equivalents. We have a webmaster for 0.8 fte, which is important, because of the fact that the main focus is on building the website, at least this year. Besides the webmaster we have two senior staff members with experience in safety and security issues in heritage institutions, both for 0.5 fte. Lastly, I myself will work four days a week on the project as the project manager. The fifth day of my week is dedicated to other KB security issues.

We have put a lot of effort into involving the most important players in the Dutch heritage field. The project has a steering committee consisting of the directors of six important heritage institutions and organisations, chaired by one of the directors of the KB. Besides the steering committee, there is a feedback group of experts, partly from the same organisations or institutions, but also for example from the cultural division of the Dutch army and from the Dutch Government Building Department.

The existence of the expertise centre can only be justified if the whole field decides to participate, not only by using our information, but also by telling us what their needs are. For that reason we work together with representatives from all over the Dutch heritage field.

Besides collecting and editing the information for the website, an important task for the staff is also to be available for consultation by telephone or email. We are very much aware of the fact that the members of staff of the expertise

centre have a broad and not a specialised view on all aspects of safety and security. Therefore, we are also building a database of specialised experts to whom we can refer. The intention is to be available by telephone at least daily during office hours. And of course we also approach institutions and organisations directly when we deem this necessary.

## **Principles**

For the information on the website we approach safety and security from a broad, integrated security concept, which means that we focus on collections as well as on human aspects, on buildings and on business continuity and IT. We are in the process of building the website and hope to launch it later this year. The website will have six main entries to the information provided and will also contain a closed Forum where experts can exchange experiences and discuss security issues, and a news section. The six main entries are:

- risk management, with special attention to methods of risk assessment;
- safety and security policy; every heritage institution should have a formulated security policy, based on its risk assessment, together with sufficient integrated safety and security plans and disaster preparedness and recovery plans;
- measures that can be taken, both organisational, as well as constructional and electronically;
- relevant legislation and regulations, and schemes for grants for security issues;
- prevention networks;
- DICE, the Database for Registration of Incidents in Heritage Institutions.

## The Pilot in The Hague for Prevention Networks

In 2002 in a project was set up in The Hague in which nineteen heritage institutions, all based in The Hague, started working together on safety and security issues. These institutions included the Nationaal Archief, important museums such as the Mauritshuis and the Hague Gemeentemuseum, and of course the KB. In the project they were working together with the local police and fire brigade, while the pilot was coordinated by the ICN.

The goal of the project was two-fold: at the end of the pilot all institutions should have an integrated plan for the safety and security of people, buildings and collections, and there should be a lasting co-operation between the parties with professional help in the case of calamities.

In 2003 the The Hague Cultural Prevention Network was officially established when a covenant was signed to seal the co-operation. All institutions involved now have an up-to-date integrated disaster preparedness and recovery plan and meet regularly to discuss safety and security matters. Since then all over the Netherlands about forty of these local or regional networks have been established. This networks approach is subsidised by the Dutch Government and all institutions, large and small, are stimulated to participate. The meetings of these networks are an important means for the expertise centre to communicate directly with the institutions.

## Incidents

*'Danger, men at work'* is an important message to be found on every British building site. Wherever people are at work things can go wrong. This also applies to heritage institutions. An example, as shown in Figure 2, occurred in the offices of our expertise centre in April when someone made a mistake while working on a heating unit. Luckily there was no one injured, no damage to collections, and even the computer that had been in a warm water shower for about 15 minutes is still operating.

But things can also go dramatically wrong. We know of course of the Anna Amalia Bibliothek a few years ago. And only recently, on May 13, a major

*Fig. 1*



*Fig. 2*



fire destroyed the Faculty of Architecture of Delft University. At this moment the fate of the important library collection of 40,000 rare architecture books and magazines is still unclear. The library is located in a part of the building where the fire did not strike, but the construction is very unstable, so it is too dangerous to enter the building — which has to be demolished. It depends on whether the demolition can be kept under control as to whether there will be a chance to save the collection or parts of it. Some 350 important books, including a Blaeu atlas, that were in an exhibition in the building, were already saved. But it might possibly take four to eight weeks before the rest of the books can be reached, so the fate of the collection is very uncertain.<sup>1</sup>

## DICE

As stated before, in 2006 the KB started with a database to register this kind of incident in Dutch heritage institutions. In 2006–2007 the database was only used by a small number of institutions in a pilot project. Now it must become an important instrument for the expertise centre. It is open for use by all Dutch heritage institutions. The database has been built in such a way that the incidents that are entered can only be seen by the authorised representative of the institution that has entered the data itself, and confidentially by the staff of the expertise centre.

The database can be used by each institution for its own incident registration, but it also provides the expertise centre with information on things that can go wrong. We definitely do not have the intention just to register incidents with DICE, though I am convinced that the registration and analysis of incidents that occur stimulates the awareness within the institutions in the first place. Our goal in the expertise centre is to analyse incidents in the central database, to learn from what went wrong and to discover new trends. A few examples: when a map thief, like Bellwood (when he is free again) or Perry would try to hit again, libraries and museums with map collections could be warned immediately if such an incident was recorded. The same goes for the continuing robbery of bronze statues and other outdoor art. After the first recordings we could have sent a warning that museums should be aware of this risk, and so have the opportunity to take measures.

On the website we want to provide the possibility to exchange experiences: what went wrong and what did we do about it? And how do other institutions react in the same situation? And finally, we want to learn about best and worst practices, and of course share the results of our investigations with our users.

## **Commitment**

Will this initiative work? Yes, this can work, but only if all (or at least a large majority of the) heritage institutions decide to co-operate. Up to now the experience is that many institutions are not very keen on sharing their experiences. At the present time, the database has about 75 users, of which 25 have entered incidents, but numbers are growing. Presently, we are examining the reasons why other institutions do not participate yet. Is it false shame? Are they afraid that their secrets will become public? We are very curious to know, because it will provide us with instruments for our promotion campaign.

A total commitment and confidential openness between colleagues are essential for all of us. Not only in the Netherlands, but also on an international level between libraries as gathered here. Some incidents are our own fault, others happen to us without blame. But we all get stronger if we analyse what went wrong and try to avoid the same thing happening again. And we have to be prepared to share those experiences with our colleagues. Because in that way we will not only improve things in our own institution but the whole heritage world will get better.

## **Websites Referred to in the Text**

DICE, the Database for Registration of Incidents in Heritage Institutions, <http://www.erfgoedincidenten.nl/> (Dutch only)

Gemeentemuseum Den Haag (The Hague Municipal Museum), <http://www.gemeentemuseum.nl/index.php?id=1&langId=en>

Mauritshuis museum, <http://www.mauritshuis.nl/index.aspx?siteid=54>

Nationaal Archief, National Archives of the Netherlands, <http://www.en.nationaalarchief.nl/default.asp>

Security Expertise Centre website, <http://www.kvce.nl> (Dutch only)

ICN, Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, <http://www.icn.nl/Dir003/ICN/CMT/Homepage.nsf/index2.html?readform>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In the last days of May in a major operation the library collection, the cartographic collection and the print collection were taken out of the building. The major part of the collection is safe and undamaged.