

MUSEUMS STEP BY STEP TOWARDS A BETTER PUBLIC HEALTH

Il faut cultiver notre jardin

At the same time as garden centres are allowed to reopen again in Belgium, the famous quote from Voltaire's "Candide" emerges: "Il faut cultiver notre jardin". This aphorism can be read in many ways. COVID-19 compels us to isolate ourselves from the outside world and to revalue our home environment. To cope with this situation, technology has proven to be a wonderful tool, and for those of us lucky enough to have one, so are gardens. However, the time has come to fully embrace the symbolic meaning of Voltaire's evergreen. Precisely because we have to focus on ourselves, there is a dire need for safe and inspiring surroundings that allow us to develop the creative possibilities within ourselves.

Safe spaces

Through their role as qualitative public spaces, the Belgian museums are adequately placed to offer such safe spaces in order to stimulate reflection and relaxation, while also offering comfort and meaning to our lives. The unique values that museums can offer to communities are numerous and well-proven. Moreover, museums can safeguard the core values in a free and safe environment. Caring for heritage and works of art goes hand in hand with safeguarding the public and all the necessary precautions of social distancing that we have to adhere to during this pandemic.

Because of the corona crisis, all our museums have been closed to the public from March 14 onwards. This closure has deep repercussions regarding the operations of our institutions, on a cultural, educational and economical point of view. Therefore, the sector has been working behind the scenes on a quarantine exit strategy. It is very important that the reopening of our museums takes place in a coordinated way, step by step, in consultation with the museum sector and the authorities. The safety of our visitors, our personnel and our collections is vital. This starting point can be found in the exit strategies of many other countries, first in Asia and now also in Europe, that integrated the reopening of museums from the beginning in their plans. In some of the German regions, museums have already reopened at the end of April, while colleagues in Austria and Switzerland are preparing themselves for a relaunch a respectively May 18 and June 8. The experience museums have

regarding visitor management and public routing, they can take a front role as a test environment for the broader cultural scene and leisure sector.

Seven points measure plan

The museums of Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels commit themselves on short term to realise the following seven points measure plan. A first group of museums is ready to implement this strategy from May 18 onwards. Other museums will finish the preparatory technical, administrative and organisation steps in the following weeks.

The seven engagements that are listed below need to be considered as a hygienical starting point that museums can guarantee. Museums can use these to develop their own individual plan and are free to incorporate additional precautions and measures, based upon their own location. Museums are encouraged to publish their plans on their websites.

1 – Museums vouch for **a restriction of the maximum number of visitors per timeslot**. The maximum number depends on the surface area and the specific lay-out of the museum, consisting of multiple large and/or smaller rooms. In accordance with the guidelines for supermarkets, we advise one person per 15 m². This allows us to maintain a safe distance of 1,5 meters between the visitors.

2 – In order to control the number of visitors per room and timeslot, museums can use a diverse range of tools, depending on the existing services and provisions. They can for example limit online reservations through their ticketing system to a specific number per timeslot, they can organise a reservation system by telephone or control the number of visitors at the welcome desk. The museum sector is also looking into the potential of a collectively shared reservation tool. When museums reopen, it is advised to inform the public that reservations and the purchase of online tickets are strongly encouraged. Visitors that choose to arrive at the museum without a ticket, will be advised to

3 – The museums propose to organise the reopening step by step and in consultation with the National Security Council. In doing so, we aim to **limit and disperse** the number of visitors. That way, we can guarantee the minimum amount of physical (and mental) space for our visitors, without queues at the entrance or in too many visitors in smaller museum corridors.

During the first phase of the reopening, from May 18 onwards, museums will mainly focus on **individual visitors**. A museum visit with family members that live together is also possible. However, this depends on a relaxation of the rules regarding necessary transportation: the authorities have to allow transportation to and from a museum.

In a later phase, in accordance with the National Security Council, more components of our normal museum activities can be allowed:

- Group visits
- Group events
- Catering facilities
- Rental of museum rooms

Regarding the reopening of museum shops and catering facilities, the museums will follow the guidelines with respect to the reactivation of retail and the catering industry.

4 – Museums have the advantage of employing “museum guards” who can provide an essential **human factor** in the museum entrance hall and exhibition rooms. In these exceptional times, these employers will be faced with an additional task. They will not only have to ensure that there is a safe distance between visitors and the museum objects, but also between the visitors themselves. These colleagues will be notified with regard to these additional precautions in order to inform visitors and ensure that everyone complies to the additional rules.

5 – Just like supermarkets, museum will take the necessary precautions **to avoid the intersection of visitors**, and maintaining a safe distance between people. One way to organise this is by enforcing a mandatory route that individual visitors have to follow through the museum. At the welcome desk, the museum enables a system to spread out the waiting line. In semi public environments like a

6 – All Belgian museums offer safety and sanitary materials to the visitors and the personnel, according to the guidelines of the National Security Council and the common practice in the cultural and leisure sector. In this way, people know what to expect and what is expected from them. All payments are preferably made electronically, if possible even “contactless”. Sanitizers are available to disinfect tools which are used in public mediation (touch screens, drawers that can be opened by the public, tablet computers, ...). The access to wardrobes is either prohibited, or strictly regulated by the museum personnel, and in accordance with the rules of social distancing. Museums communicate about all the extra precautions and measures on their website.

7 – Museum will comply to all the current and future **regulations of the government**, for instance additional safety controls.

Personnel care

Museums will act as responsible employers and will follow up on all the government guidelines regarding the safety of their employees. Specifically for the museum sector, additional attention is given to the use of mouth masks and the installation of plexi screens at information and welcome desks. Each museum can include such extra measures in its plan, according to the specificity of its own public and work accommodation.

Critical condition

A relaunch of museums should be seen as an essential contribution to the (mental) public health, but it also entails an important economic dimension. Museums, which are for whatever reason not in the possibility to comply to the above mentioned measures and thus cannot reopen, should be able to keep relying on the economic emergency measures (of instance access to temporary unemployment). Museums, who want to open up to individual visitors as a first step towards the complete reopening, are also still heavily impacted and should also not be excluded from the support measures. And last but not least, those aspects of the museum operation that cannot be reactivated short-term, should receive special attention, for instance financial compensations for concessionaires, museum guides and other freelancers, ...).

Brussels Museums

Pieter Van der Gheynst

ICOM Belgium Flanders - ICOM Belgique Wallonie-Bruxelles

Sergio Servellón - Alexandre Chevalier

Musées et Société en Wallonie

Clément Lalot

Vlaams Museumoverleg

Patrick Allegaert

Overleg Regionale Musea

Thomas Ameye