

The Memory Palace, a different and innovative way of exhibiting archival documents

A report on the principles and the choices

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The National Archive forms the 'national memory' of the Netherlands. The collection tells us where we come from and who we are through almost 125 kilometres of documents, over 300,000 maps and drawings and about 15 million photographs.

The National Archive has set out a more public focused course since 2002 which is expressed in its mission in serving every person's right to information and giving an insight into the past of the Netherlands. This resulted ultimately in refurbishing the premises, which made the unique collection more accessible in several ways to a larger and wider public. The goal is to further the use of the collection.

With its new public space, the National Archive wishes to be a dynamic centre for information, enrichment, education and a meeting place where effort and relaxation are the key words.

The programme in this public space varies from offering the experience of the past – with exhibitions, lectures, workshops, debates, publications, etc. to facilitating and stimulating active research – through educational projects, research support and guidance, seminars, etc.

In the implementation of its mission, the National Archive focuses on three target groups: deep diggers (researchers), browsers (people with an interest in history, lovers of cultural heritage) and surfers (education, journalism). For the digger, the National Archive puts the emphasis on its collection and points out its unique, vast and rich character. For the surfer it will profile itself particularly as a source of historical information. For the browser, the National Archive responds to the need for the sensation of history and develops various programmes and presentations on the basis of its collection.

Browsers are searching for the 'historical sensation'; the exciting feeling of standing eyeball to eyeball with history in the form of original documents which report or document history. Both the museological part of the collection of the National Archive and the high discovery content of an archive, lend themselves particularly well to such a form of experiencing culture. The National Archive wishes to serve the group of people who are seeking this form of experience as widely as possible.



The remodelled reading rooms

After a huge remodelling by architects Van Eijk & Van der Lubbe, King Willem-Alexander opened the new visitors' centre of the National Archive on 16 October last year with the inaugural exhibition 'The Memory Palace – with your head in the archives'.

The preparations for this exhibition started about three years earlier. The brief for this inaugural exhibition was as follows:

- to give a very wide public easy access to the collection
- to acquaint the public with the wealth and scope of the collection
- to inspire visitors to use the collection
- to surprise visitors in more ways than one

1. Introducing the public to the wealth and scope of the collection

Where does one start with such a huge collection? And how does one keep it orderly and within bounds?

The first thing we did was to formulate a general principle; we are not going to make a treasure trove display, we want to tell stories. Stories that are hidden within the documents.

We started with consulting all our colleagues with the underlying notion that they are the ones with the most knowledge of the collection and asked what is worth telling from that collection. At the same time and from the beginning, we involved the employees in the project. Then we presented our criteria and inventoried all the ideas and subjects that had come up. This exercise ultimately resulted in a summary statement of just over four A4 sides.

In order to consolidate this long list, we formulated the criteria which the stories had to satisfy:

- Jointly, they should represent different periods from history
- It should be possible to make a link between a personal story and a wider historical perspective
- The different types of archive should be given a higher profile.
- The story must be relevant and preferably have an up to date aspect.

Finally, from a long list of about 15 subjects, 11 stories were selected:

- Navigating through the Middle Ages
Records of a powerful convent (1179-1598)
- War in the Peking Legation Quarter
The manoeuvrings of an envoy and his commander (1909-1919)
- Reluctant hero
The story of a policeman in wartime in The Hague (1944-1946)
- Europapas ('Eurofounders')
Towards European unification (1948-1957)
- 'Welcomed home with the smell of Brussels sprouts'
Repatriates from Indonesia in Dutch 'contract hotels' (1946-1970)
- 'Once There Was a Clever Girl'
Women and the VOC – Dutch East India Company (1602-1799)
- Image-building in the Golden Age
Johan van Oldenbarnevelt (1547-1619)
- Going to Berbice!
Pieter Groen goes West (1792-1794)
- Divorce equals suffering
What new legislation can lead to (1965-1971)
- The Da Vinci of the North
Jan van Scorel (1495-1562)



Divorce equals suffering

2. Giving a wide public easy access to the collection

At first sight, archival documents do not appear very attractive. Yet they are the unique pieces of evidence of historical moments and events and often hide an extraordinary story.

Criteria for the presentation:

- telling of the story where the principal pillars of the story are made up by the original documents.
- a maximum of 15 documents per story
- Seeking variety with 3D objects on loan and moving images or sound
- Exhibiting documents in a surprising and new context and design

Archival documents are often hard to read, either because of the handwriting or the old script. However, the manuscript also brings history closer to us and makes the historical sensation alive. How does one ensure that the attributes come to the fore and that the drawbacks are as much as possible excluded?

Principles for the presentation:

- All original handwritten documents are to be made digitally legible with specially developed software. Also the documents which consist of several pages but from which we can only show one or two, shall be shown digitally in their entirety.
- Besides the modern interpretation, documents in old scripts will also be given a transcription. The visitor should be able to touch the sentence and the relevant transcription of the line appears above it with beside it the modern interpretation.

Archival documents are about the past but they also definitely have a contemporary relevance. However, this is not evident to the same extent in every document.

Principles for the presentation:

- We have tried as much as possible to make a connection with our own times and the subjects that have a meaning in modern society when we selected the stories and gave them a title.
- For each story we chose an artist who interprets either the entire story or one or more extracts from the story. The language of the artist is contemporary and brings it closer to today.
- In the case of two stories (divorce and returning Indonesian expatriates) we ask visitors to look back and e-mail us their stories or experiences.



War in the Peking Legation Quarter

3. Inspiring visitors to use the collection

By asking various artists from different disciplines to work with the stories, the exhibition offers the visitor a varied menu. In addition visitors can see what kind of expressions and products archival research can lead to.



The Europapas

Behind the idea of involving various artists, lies the idea of the dissemination. Where possible and relevant, the artists are encouraged to market their products within their own networks and on their own platforms. Theatre artist Jaime Ibanez has for example devised a performance about Pieter Groen, the main character in the story 'Going to Berbice!' This

performance had its premiere at the Oerol Festival and has been shown in various festivals around the country during 2014.

Actor and singer Ricky Koole was asked to write a modern version of the old folk song 'Once there was a clever girl' for our tale about women in the VOC (Dutch East India Company). She has included this song in her musical show with which she is touring the Dutch theatres in 2014/15.

This enables people who might normally not visit the Netherlands National Archive, to get in touch with our documents and our exhibition. We have received several visitors who were motivated to come to the exhibition in The Hague by Ricky Koole's tour.

The stories in the exhibition were all generated from the collection in the National Archive. And where we opted for these 11 stories, the choice might equally have been 11 different stories, or 48 or 500 or thousands of other stories.

When one immerses oneself in the archives, it feels as if one is making a journey of discovery. A course to discover something is set out, but when you are on the quest, you find things you did not know existed and that these were the things you were actually seeking.

We have translated this idea. In the middle of the exhibition is a data visualization installation in which the collection of the National Archives is depicted as a map of the world. The image is based on the database that contains information about all the archives and their use.

The continents represent the five main elements of the collection.

The countries in these continents are a further subdivision within the main elements. The cities represent the archives.

Visitors can explore this world in different ways:

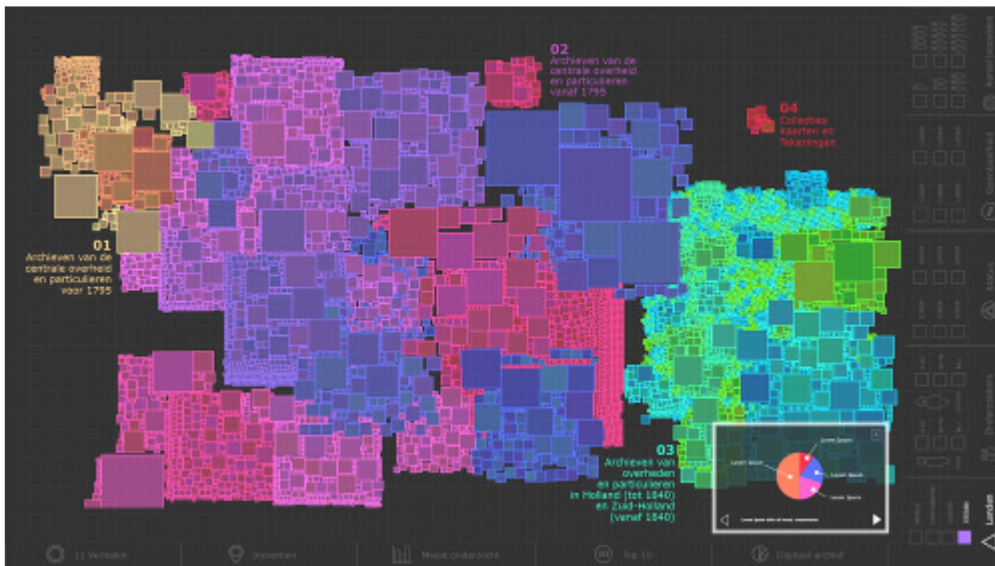
Touch the cities to see which archives are part of the collection.

The subjects shown at the edge of the screen are links to further information about the collection and how it is being used. For example: you can see which parts of the collection are frequently visited by women and which by men, and from which age. You can also see which parts are public or restricted.

At the foot of the screen you can select the stories from the exhibition: the journeys we have made in making the exhibition. Which countries we have been to and which cities we have visited to acquire specific archive documents. These documents pop up in the journey and can be enlarged on a giant touch screen. The original documents can be found in the showcases of the relevant story.

Another option to choose at the foot of the screen is to search for the favourite archival document of You have the option of the director, the specialist of the cartography collection, the director of the Rijksmuseum but also a well-known actor or writer.

The data visualisation therefore gives a view of the collection and also shows how other individuals use the collection: us, as exhibition curators, but also as visitors to the reading room, employees of the National Archive and prominent Dutch people.



The datavisualisation

4. Surprising visitors in more ways than one

Research has shown that a high percentage of those questioned had heard about the National Archive but the majority actually has no idea what type of institution it actually is and what the respondent might be doing there. The idea of the inaugural exhibition was to introduce ourselves properly for once and for all to a broad audience to make clear what the National Archive is about and all the ways people might use it. Many people may enter the archives for the first time and we wish that they would be pleased to come back, because they are pleasantly surprised by what they find, as regards contents but also in presentation and ambiance.

The probably dusty and hermetic image of an archive which potential visitors harbour had to be demolished to start with and be replaced with an atmosphere which invited a mood of discovery and accommodated the abundance of documents without being overwhelming or being a killjoy. Moreover, information had to be offered in a contemporary way.

In order to make a tighter link between the eleven stories and to put the emphasis on the relationship with the source, a partnership was desired with Jan Blokker, a renowned historian who is popular with the wider public. His assignment was to write an overarching story in which the importance of keeping archives would become obvious.

Jan Blokker turned it into a modern fairy-tale. It is a tale about a wise king who spends most of his days studying in his palace. One day a few scraps of paper are borne on the wind and nobody knows where exactly they came from or what they are. The king wants to know more about it and decrees that a competition should select the ten wisest people to send to that far and strange country. The travellers are only allowed to return when they are laden with stories and goods. After many years they come home, with stories and papers. As they each tell their tales to the king, and one by one display their treasures in the cabinets of the palace, it seems as though they are holding something back from the king. On the last day it is revealed: this far flung and strange country does not exist at all, the travellers went into the archives and there they explored the past. At first the king reacted angrily and disappointed, but then decided to open the cabinets to all his subjects and to give everybody the opportunity to acquaint themselves with that past.



The center of the Memory Palace

This story made by Jan Blokker, formed the basis for the design. The overall design of The Memory Palace was conceived by designer Todd van Hulzen in collaboration with Studio Louter. The concept Van Hulzen thought up was 'Out of the Box' and so he built a set from archive boxes. It is an allusion to the collection and the stories hidden in the archive boxes, which are now revealed to the public. It is also a pun on 'reconstructing' history with the help of archival documents as building blocks.

The Memory Palace has eleven cabinets where the stories are told. The central oval space of the castle – with a table right in the middle as a wink to King Arthur – features the archive collection itself, transposed into a data visualisation. Coloured lights lend an ambience to the otherwise darkened palace – after all, archival documents must not be exposed to too much light.



The Da Vinci of the North

The boxes give the visitor the impression that they are wandering around in the archives of the personages who are the centre of the stories. The boxes are built into walls, which also have showcases inserted into them or have objects attached in different ways. Every space has been given its own ambience. Sometimes it is the artist, sometimes the exhibition designer who made the background. And so the exhibition offers something for each visitor and everybody is most attracted to one room or another. The idea was that visitors would pass quickly through the spaces and only look at those rooms or stories which interested them or looked attractive. However, in reality it turns out that the majority of visitors look at all the stories.

To give the visitor some structure and guidance within the multitude of stories and artistic output, there is a number of fixed points which is the same in every story:

- Introductory text with a summary of the story and a text about the artist located directly next to the entrance
- A pedestal with a computer programme in which the exhibited documents are rendered legible, immediately next to the introductory text
- QR-code which reveals more information about the archives which had been researched for this story.
- The same type of showcases in which the original archive documents are displayed, where possible in combination with loans.

A voyage of discovery on a mini-tablet is offered to the education sector. This tour provides students in groups of two with additional information or explanation to several stories and helps them to study archival documents in more depth, pointing out important elements within a story and elucidating the artist's interpretation. At the end all the answers are fed back into a smart board and discussed within the group.

Some visitors' reactions:

I soon got a good impression but had no time for all the stories. I will definitely come back.

I find it hard to concentrate on reading the texts when there are many sound recordings being played. And sometimes the texts were hard to read because it was dark.

Exceptional! Very sound build-up, great atmosphere and full praise! I am looking forward to the next exhibition.

The wooden stools are not really comfortable to sit on for older visitors. I also need more explanation for using the touch screens.

I had not expected this to be such a varying and interactive exhibition. It should receive more publicity!

We enjoyed it very much and ran out of time.

It is a very interesting exhibition, something for everyone. Very good!



Have a look at the exhibition: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMMiMQCn_GM