

Association of Former UNESCO Staff Members (AFUS)
Memory & Future Club

Rediscovering UNESCO's heritage :
Reconstruction of the original Press Room
Thursday 5 September 2019

Summary prepared by Neda Ferrier

In attendance: Maissa Acheuk Youcef, Zahir Aziz, Marilu Blanco-Borra, Nadine Boddaert, Jens Boel, Jean-Pierre Boyer, Christine Bruyère, Joan Cahill, Elie Chabert, Alison Clayson, Aurelia Dausse, Guislaine de Coulomme, Eunice den Hoedt, Nina Dhumal, Julie Durant, Meran Ewkevu, Joanne Furlan, Patrick Gallaud, Marijke Griffioen, Malcolm Hadley, Karl Hochgesand, Mara Kamerling, Ron Kievits, Erik Kleijn, Karin Kok, Georges Kutukdjian, Coryn Lang, Marie-France Lena, France Marquet, Pilar Morel-Vasquez, Spencer Matheson, Bryce Neuman, Mai Thy Nguyen, Georges Papagiannis, Aaron Peck, Karima Pires, Sonia Ramzi, Jacques Rao, Terry Roberts Martinez, Alejandro Rojas Aldana, Frédérique Schaeffer, Sophie Simmelink, Joie Springer, Marlies Spronk, Sylvia van Schaik, Stein Van Oosteren, Petra van den Born, Zlof Vlasta, Wolfgang Vollmann, David Vougaz, Hans Wesseling, Catherine Wintrich.

*Dutch architect Gerrit Thomas Rietveld designed UNESCO's Press Room in 1958. This spectacular work of habitable art was dismantled in the 1980s, but a few of its original furniture were salvaged and kept in the collections of the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency. Today, this landmark historical design is being reconstructed in view of its possible presentation in a museum in the Netherlands. At the invitation of the Memory & Future Club, its story was told by **Santje Pander**, Post-Master Trainee at the University of Amsterdam specializing in the conservation and restoration of historic interiors, **Dorian Meijnen**, from the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency, **Jacques Duflos de Saint Amand**, architect, UNESCO Headquarters Buildings Management Section, and **Eng Sengsavang**, UNESCO Archives.*

*A number of experts and officials from The Netherlands were present, with special mention to **Sylvia van Schaik**, Curator of modern art at the Dutch Agency of Cultural Heritage, **Ron Kievits**, Head of restoration at the Dutch Agency of Cultural Heritage, **Jan Hovers**, Director of the Zaans Museum in Zaandam, **Marijke Griffioen**, from Forbo Flooring, the company that produced the original linoleum for the Press Room, and H. E. **Ambassador Hans Carel Wesseling**, Permanent Delegate of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to UNESCO.*

Eng Sengsavang sets the context of this discussion by recalling that the reference service at UNESCO, which receives about 300 visitors a year, welcomed in 2018 Santje Pander for research on the UNESCO Press Room. It is believed that the Press Room had been dismantled at an uncertain date in the 1980s. UNESCO Archives hold about 145 boxes of archival materials on the construction of the building, which were made available to Santje.

During her second visit, Santje asked to visit the original site of the Press Room. At that point, its exact location had not been pinpointed either by Santje or by Eng. By chance, a former staff member, Eduardo Barrios, who used to work in the Information department, was giving an oral history interview that day and at Eng's request showed her to the former Press Room in the basement, a place she knew only as a kind of passageway.

Behind a plain back door, there was a concrete, dark antechamber. Santje started to analyze the room, its shape, walls and floor. A few pieces of evidence confirmed that it was actually the correct location of the Press Room. However, she could not find what she was looking for: the original flooring was not there. As Santje will expand further on this ongoing research process on missing elements of UNESCO's historical building, the present discussion will hopefully help to invite contributions from active or former staff members who would know of this room and still hold documents or photographs that would illustrate its existence.

Santje Pander explains that the UNESCO Press Room was originally designed by Gerrit Thomas Rietveld, a famous designer in the Netherlands. In the photo taken on its inauguration in 1958, one can see four desks. This is what her research started with, and she made it the subject of her Master's thesis. When the Press Room was dismantled in the 1980s, the furniture were salvaged and sent to the Agency of Cultural Heritage in the Netherlands, together with chairs, cabinets and other interior elements. The desks in particular were an important part of the design of Rietveld as they were covered with linoleum, in continuation of the patterns on the floor. Unfortunately, the floor was not saved and as the Agency plans to exhibit a reconstitution of the room, the linoleum, which has such an important interaction with the furniture, will also have to be reconstructed.

Thanks to a 4D Research Award granted by the University of Amsterdam for her thesis, it was possible for Santje to pursue digital research on the reconstruction of the linoleum in collaboration with the University 4D Research Lab, in 2018. For this purpose, she came back to UNESCO to do some archival research. There were unfortunately few pictures and documentary evidence left, but while searching the location, she was able to identify pieces of the original wall cover still hanging, as well as traces of the original burlap at the back of the linoleum imprinted on the concrete floor.

The Press Room was specifically designed for UNESCO's building, together with artworks by Karel Appel, as a donation of the Netherlands. Gerrit Thomas Rietveld was already a renowned architect, particularly for his contribution to the *De Stijl* movement. He was not entirely happy with the location given to him: the room was 12x20,5 m large, weirdly shaped with obstructive columns and was destined to house a number of people working

simultaneously on different tasks. In a lecture in 1958, he described it as “a room that was more of a random leftover in the basement of the connecting hall between the Conference building and the administration. There were irregularly placed columns to support the higher levels. These were fairly obstructive for the positioning of the tables, desks, phones and translation machines, etc. To make such an interior look like a pleasant workplace, other than good form and placement of installations some kind of juggling with colors was needed.”

Rietveld therefore created a coherent ensemble, as can be seen from photos published in 1958 by *Linoleum News*, a magazine of the Dutch linoleum factory that produced the floor for the Press Room. The photos show what gave the room its remarkable unity was not only the use of colors, but also the materials used, including ‘Suwide’ wall coverings. This material was available on the market during the post-war period, and Rietveld used it on the walls as well as on chairs that are still in possession of the Dutch Agency of Cultural Heritage. Traces of this wall covering were found in situ at UNESCO.

The other material used was linoleum. This floor covering is made from solidified linseed oil (linoxyn), resins, gum, wood flour, chalk and pigments for the color, on a burlap backing. Although it had been produced since the second half of the 19th century, new bright colors had become available at the time that Rietveld used it to design large color planes throughout the room. In an architectural drawing, he wrote: “floors and tables are covered with linoleum in two colors of gray with yellow, red, blue and green triangles. This create a very colorful effect because the center planes on the tables and floor form a unity, with the line accentuating the systematical placement of the tables.” In a magazine published in 1957, it is also described how Rietveld used linoleum to create a grid on the floor: “In this special room that would be used intensively, it was necessary to place the furniture according to a strict scheme. The module was also used to determine the size and shape of the colored planes that were needed for the required contrast. It was necessary, clear and convincing to let this size and color system continue under and on the tables.”

So Rietveld divided the floor plan in squares of 241,5 cm and again in geometrically shaped planes under and on the tables. The same measurements were also used to place the tables. Looking at the room from above on the floor plan, one can see the continuity of the pattern. Although the floor was not saved in the 1980s, we can still determine its exact colors from the remaining furniture. Six of the seven colors used are still on the tables stored at the Dutch Agency of Cultural Heritage. However, the colors are degraded by intensive use over time. Therefore, cleaned areas show that the furniture linoleum has been slightly discolored.

By looking into the factory archives of the original producer, which nowadays still produces linoleum under the name of Forbo Flooring, it was possible to retrace the colors used

originally. Samples derived from productions dating back to 1958, never used and stored in the dark, show different shades of grey, marble imitations and monochromes colors that placed next to each other form a color harmony.

Forbo Flooring can still produce specific colors for certain projects. Although they use a slightly different recipe, very similar color can still be recreated using different color pigments. These slight differences in composition have almost no effect on the material. However there are differences in the coating, which is important when looking at historic interiors: modern linoleum has a much harder, glossier finish as it is made to be more resistant to wear and tear, as compared to historic bee wax coated, much softer, less textured samples.

There are different options to work from for the reconstruction of the Press Room. The period selected is important, as the material would not have looked the same at different times: should we use the exact calm color balance selected in 1958 by Rietveld and available in archival samples, or the colors still visible on the furniture, slightly degraded by use, in unity with the floor, even if the latter could turn out to be more damaged and degraded than furniture? These choices were used to feed the 3D models and simulations produced in the 4D lab, to help compare them more effectively.

This project is ongoing, suitable methods for cleaning the linoleum desks are still being researched, archival research continues. As available photographs were hand-colored, some color placements remain uncertain and original architectural drawings are still missing.

Jacques Duflos de Saint Amand, architecte de la section des bâtiments à l'UNESCO, évoque l'architecture du bâtiment et l'utilisation de matériaux tels que le linoleum, présent en 1958 et réutilisé lors de la rénovation du plan Belmont entre 2001 et 2009. Celui-ci a des qualités très intéressantes, notamment son homogénéité, son élasticité et surtout ses propriétés bactéricides qui en font un matériaux idéal pour les lieux de grand passage. Les concepteurs du bâtiment, le Français Bernard Zehruss, l'Américain Marcel Breuer, et l'Italien Pier Luigi Nervi, que l'on voit sur une photo au 7^e étage sur ce qui était à l'époque une terrasse ouverte transformée depuis en cafétéria, comptaient parmi les architectes les plus connus de l'époque. Ils étaient épaulés par un Comité international constitué de Lucio Costa (Brésil, qui a conçu le plan directeur de Brasilia), Walter Gropius (Etats-Unis, fondateur du Bauhaus), Le Corbusier (France), Sven Markelius (Suède) et Ernesto Nathan Rogers (Italie), avec la collaboration de Eero Saarinen (Finlande) – lequel a incidemment conçu les fauteuils de la salle IX.

Le bâtiment de l'UNESCO est emblématique de l'architecture moderniste et en décline les concepts fondamentaux, déjà énoncés par Le Corbusier en 1927: les pilotis au rez-de-chaussée qui suppriment les murs porteurs, permettant une grande liberté et assurant la continuité avec l'extérieur, les toitures-terrasses qui suppriment les toitures pentues, les plans libres grâce aux poteaux porteurs, les fenêtres en bandeau qui courent sur toute la façade, laquelle n'est plus qu'une sorte de peau qui peut être entièrement vitrée. Lors de la rénovation en 2009, on a essayé de retrouver cet effet de vitrage continu de haut en bas, même si l'installation de la climatisation a occulté une partie des fenêtres. Enfin, le mouvement moderniste préconise la liberté des bâtiments par rapport à leur environnement : ceux-ci ne sont plus alignés sur la rue, mais détachés des contraintes d'alignement. Ils peuvent ainsi avoir une forme propre définie par leur fonction ou leur structure. Pour conclure, L'utilisation des matériaux est un élément important de l'architecture du bâtiment: la forme des poteaux n'est pas commandée par des critères esthétiques, mais adaptée aux contraintes physiques, de façon à en réduire la quantité de béton, les planchers sont très minces : partout il y a un souci d'économie des matériaux.

Dorian Meijnen is a curator currently doing research on the history of the Press Room interior for the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands, a governmental agencies for the safeguarding of Dutch art collections that does not maintain physical exhibition spaces but is tasked in ensuring that collections are available and largely visible for the public. Objects are loaned to museums but also to institutions such as embassies or public buildings. Collections include objects for display and others that can be used, such as furniture. To make sure that they are exhibited and kept as they should, a lot of research is needed, and the work on the UNESCO Press Room is part of these ongoing tasks.

As was previously said, this interior was dismantled in the 1980s and brought back to the Netherlands in 1984. It is a sizeable room, which makes it is not easy to exhibit. Its main characteristic is its unity: all objects belong together and are related to one another and to the flooring and wall covers. They were quite damaged, and some have been restored in the recent past years. However, without the walls and the floor, these large objects loose much of their interest. This is what makes the reconstitution difficult: it is more than an interior, a total work of art. To be able to present it to the public, extensive work is still needed.

The goal of the recent research carried out on these objects aims mainly at improving their "loanability" and presentation. Ideally, we would like to attempt a reconstruction as a whole in a museum or other location. A virtual reconstruction and visual analysis are being worked at with this aim in mind. As a starting point, we had the existing furniture, design drawings found in archives, 75 letters between UNESCO, Rietveld and the Dutch ministry, a model catalogue, and photographs including one showing Rietveld with Luther Evans, the Director-

General at the moment and the Dutch Minister of arts, education and science. An additional 30 photographs were recently found in the UNESCO Archives, a valuable addition to this research material.

A number of interesting details found in these archives will help to reconstruct every centimeter of this interior to make sure we will be able to exhibit it sometime soon. It is also important to reconstruct the design process that started in 1956. This process is important to determine why certain choices were made, and by whom. Now we have a clear vision of Rietveld choices and UNESCO's demands. One of the most interesting information was construed from the financial struggle that went on through the process. The Dutch Government had assigned 15 000 guilders for this work but within a few month, Rietveld needed 40 000 fl to complete his design. He did not want to compromise the quality of his work with these financial constraints, so he went to UNESCO and negotiated. The Organization agreed to fund architectural elements such as lighting, acoustical ceilings, mirrors and panels under the general costs of the building. The Dutch Government sponsored the furniture for a total amount of 18 000 fl, not far from the initial allocation considered. It was left with the uncomfortable task to raise sponsoring from private donors. Eventually, the linoleum floor was donated by the factory which became since Forbo Flooring, and the wall covering was sponsored by another company that no longer exists.

Rietveld did have to make some design changes because of these budget constraints. Instead of his original chair designs, he reused model chairs made for the 1958 Brussels World Expo. Interestingly, the original design has been released in 2014 by a Dutch design company and sold under the name of Press Room Chair !

Knowing the design process is really important to help make choices for reconstruction. It reveals small details such as this clock that ended up on a wall to hide a hole drilled accidentally from behind by a worker. These details leave the reconstruction with two possibilities: either redoing the room as Rietveld wanted it to be (and leave out the clock), or keep it as it appears on the photographs at the opening, and tell the story behind it.

There were lots of exchanges between Rietveld and UNESCO during the preparation process, however, some of the Organization's requests came quite late. For instance, selector plates on the tables to plug in headphones and equipments were requested in May 1958, when the furniture had already been delivered to Paris in April ! Rietveld had to send one of his workmen to carve holes in the finished tables for these selector plates. These are even now a problem, because none of them came back to the Netherlands with the tables, which were left with the gaps. On one of the tables, the gap was covered with linoleum when it was restored for an exhibition in 1988. We therefore have two choices : either exhibit the tables as

Rietveld had originally meant them to be, or reproduce the plates through 3D printing to add them on.

Another detail concerns the lighting. This is an important feature as Rietveld original design contains a detailed map indicating the exact position of each fluorescent tube. They were used to distract the eye from an irregularity in the construction of the room and make it look perfectly rectangular when it was not. All these details make this interior very special.

Until now, only parts of the room have been exhibited, this is why it is so important to reconstitute this interior in its unity. Happily, the Zaans Museum is currently considering the possibility of a full reconstruction. All the research done can now come to fruition. The Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency is entering an interesting new phase of research to determine if this large exhibit will follow a traditional no-touch museum type presentation or if visitors will be allowed to walk through the room on the floor and use the furniture. A publication is also under way. All this work would greatly benefit from any additional testimonies and information that could be provided by UNESCO former staff members who may have worked in this room. Even the smallest detail can help make reconstruction as accurate as possible.

Exchanges with the audience

Ambassador Hans Carel Wesseling finds this Press Room remarkably attractive and cannot help but wonder why it was dismantled? He had never associated Rietveld design with linoleum, and it certainly takes all the talent of this great architect to turn what is generally considered as a common material into such beautiful art. He thanks the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency representatives for coming to this event. Their presence shows how central culture is to UNESCO. Stepping into its building is like entering a museum. Works of art donated by the Netherlands, such as the Karel Appel painting, are a tribute to multilateralism. Is there a way to preserve and remember Rietveld important input to the building ?

Jacques Duflos de Saint Amand rappelle que l'ensemble du bâtiment des conférences a été remanié dans les années 1980, une mezzanine avait été alors construite dans la salle I. C'est à cette époque qu'a été installé le standard téléphonique à l'emplacement de l'ancienne salle de presse. Il est probable que ces modifications ont malheureusement entraîné la destruction de cet espace.

Dorian Meijnen suggest that a video of the 3D modeling of the Press Room would help bring it back, at least digitally.

Santje Pander thinks that there should be some signaling on the original entrance of this room, where a piece of the original Suwide is still hanging. This would help raise awareness.

France Marquet, South Asia foundation, asks how the decision to dismantle the Press Room was taken, and if there would be any trace of it?

Eng Sengsavang believes it is hard to say whether it was a simple technical decision or if there was more to it. It may have been discussed by the Headquarters Committee or the Governing bodies of UNESCO and would in this case be documented in the Archives. This would be a good track to follow up on.

Georges Kutukdjian thanks the speakers, from whom he learned a lot, including the bactericide virtues of Linoleum ! He thanks wholeheartedly the visitors from the Netherlands and H.E. Ambassador Wesseling for their supportive presence throughout this event. AFUS will take up this challenge by contacting former officials who may still hold photographs of the press Room.

Georges Papagiannis, Chief of Media Services and supervisor of what would be today the Press Room, reflects on the intersection of people and spaces and what they do for us. In some kind of dungeon, there was an effort to create a place that would inspire people who were actually responsible for telling UNESCO's story. By walking into this space, they would feel invigorated and embrace the highest aspiration of an Organization that seeks to inspire people to change the world. Nowadays, we are cutting corners and thinking that we are beyond what it means to be in spaces that change our spirit, give us a different sense of purpose and energize us in ways that help us fulfill the legacy of those who came before in this Organization. He thanks the panel, the people who came from the Netherlands and the Former staff association for bringing the past back into the future, and help reflect on it.

Christine Bruyère est entrée à l'UNESCO en 1970 et en est partie en 2003: elle ne connaissait pas cette salle. Pendant des années, elle est passée à côté sans se douter de son existence ! L'UNESCO devrait offrir un tour exhaustif des bâtiments à tous les nouveaux fonctionnaires pour leur en faire découvrir les beautés.

If you have any information, document or photograph concerning UNESCO's original Press Room, please contact Eng Sengsavang, UNESCO Archives (e.sengsavang@unesco.org) and Santje Pander, University of Amsterdam (santjepander1@gmail.com).

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