

Association of Former UNESCO Staff Members  
(AFUS)

Memory and Future Club



## Rediscovering Our Hidden Heritage

### *In search of UNESCO's original Press Room*

In the Spring of 2018, a Dutch researcher completing a Master's in cultural heritage conservation, Santje Pander, visited the UNESCO Archives, bringing with her an unsolved mystery. When UNESCO's headquarters building was inaugurated in 1958, hidden within its concrete walls was an architectural gem: the UNESCO Press Room. **Gerrit Rietveld** (1888-1964), a Dutch designer and architect closely linked with the *de Stijl* modern art movement, designed both the structure and interior of this original Press Room. What made the Press Room so captivating both visually and conceptually was, in large part, how the multicolored geometry of the linoleum floor, which covered the entire room, was contiguous with the tables; and how Rietveld's use of an industrial, low-cost material such as linoleum created an unexpectedly stunning work of habitable art.

Thursday

5 September 2019

1 – 2 pm

Room IX



## In search of UNESCO's Original Press Room

I was aware of none of these facts before Santje arrived on a mission to search for information about the Press Room at the UNESCO Archives. It is believed that the original Press Room was dismantled in the early 1980s. Thanks to an employee of the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency, some original pieces of furniture were salvaged and brought to the Netherlands for safekeeping. However, the ultimate fate of the original linoleum floor, which was so central to the concept and harmony of the room, remains unknown to this day. Santje is currently building a 3D digital model of the original room, while conservators of the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency hope eventually to build a permanent physical reconstruction of the room.

I helped Santje access UNESCO archival materials on the construction of the headquarters, a collection that consists of over 100 boxes of blueprints, photographs, and correspondence materials. We investigated the site of the former room, now converted into regular offices, and searched for photographs amongst the documents, especially color photographs. Here, the mystery deepens: we could find no color photographs of the original Press Room in the archives; in fact, no color photographs of the room are known to exist anywhere. Existent images are black and white photos that have been hand-colored. This lack is both lamentable and intriguing, given that the precise colors of the linoleum chosen by Rietveld were integral to the design of the room.

As a follow-up to the 60th anniversary of UNESCO's headquarters building (November 2018), and at the invitation of the Memory & Future Club of the Association of Former UNESCO Staff (AFUS), **Santje Pander**, along with **Dorian Meijnen** of the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands and UNESCO architect **Jacques Duflos de Saint Amand**, will present the story of the former UNESCO Press Room. It is a story that reveals how a single room in UNESCO's original design reflects the modernism and vision of the institution itself, while also speaking to the vicissitudes of its history. As well as delving into topics such as the material aspects of linoleum and the art historical context of the Press Room, the presentation will be an appeal to former UNESCO staff and to the public for photographs or information that may yet further illuminate this fascinating aspect of UNESCO's history.

**Eng Sensavang**  
UNESCO Archives



## Santje Pander

graduated in 2018 in Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage at the University of Amsterdam (UvA), where she currently specializes in restoration of historic Interiors, with a specific interest in post-war architecture and interiors. Her Master thesis research was on the 1958 UNESCO Press Room designed by Gerrit Rietveld. She presented this research at the symposium 'Interieuresembles op de kaart' by the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands. In the spring of 2018, she was granted the 4D Research Award from the UvA. This made it possible to continue digital reconstruction research of the UNESCO Press Room in collaboration with the 4D Research Lab.



## Jacques Duflos de Saint Amand,

is an architect and the head of the Space Planning Unit at the UNESCO Headquarters Buildings management Section. He manages spaces and controls architectural aspects of renovation projects for the 135,000 m<sup>2</sup> of UNESCO Headquarters in both its sites in the seventh and fifteenth arrondissements of Paris. In the 1990s, he worked as a project manager on the Antilles rectorate in Fort-de-France, on housing for the Ministry of the Interior in Paris, on the premises of the National Institute for Research in Science and technologies for the environment and agriculture (Irstea) in Clermont-Ferrand and on the Palais des sports de Beauvais.



## Eng Sengsavang

is Reference Archivist at UNESCO since October 2017. A graduate of the iSchool (School of Library, Archival and Information Studies) at the University of British Columbia (Vancouver, Canada), she has previously worked as Information and Knowledge Management Assistant at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Brussels and collaborated in the InterPARES Trust (ITrust) an interdisciplinary research partnership of over fifty universities and organizations aimed at exploring issues of trust and trustworthiness of records and data in online environments.



**Dorian Meijnen** holds a Master's Degree in 'Museums and Collections' from the University of Leiden (NL), with a particular focus on the role of interiors in museum collections. She did research on the history of the Press Room interior designed in 1958 for UNESCO by Dutch designer and architect Gerrit Rietveld for the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands, which kept in its collection most of the furniture of the Press Room after it was dismantled in Paris. Dorian reconstructed the historical design process and is working on a possible reconstruction of this interior in a museum.

The **Memory & Future Club** of the Association of Former UNESCO staff strives to collect and transmit testimonies of former officials and confront them with current issues in international cooperation. Building on their shared memory, members of this group meet informally with colleagues in charge to exchange freely and find through past experience a better path for the future.