Small countries joining forces
A mixed crowd sits down in a spacious modernist hall, part of the futuristic seventies’ style conference venue, to attend the General Conference of the second edition of a new Dutch tradition. It is part of the General Conference 2019, the Keynote: *Large Impact by Joining Forces* co-organised by EXARC, DEMHIST and the national committees of ICOM Netherlands and ICOM Japan. Once Luc Eekhout, chair of ICOM Netherlands, had welcomed everyone, the moderator Leontine Meijer, Director of the State Ethnological Collections of Saxony and member of the ICOM Executive Board, was introduced. Meijer hopes to address issues, create a broad understanding of different opinions and to inspire museums. The goal of this session is to unlock the debate and most importantly to discuss and reflect on the main subject: Hubs. The line-up was perfect: an all-female set of speakers covered the topic of hubs from a broad variety of perspectives. The first two speakers, Kris Schiermeier and Miyuki Yamaguchi, looked at shared Japanese and Dutch heritage and discuss whether century-old hubs ‘avant la lettre’ such as Deshima and Leiden can serve as a source of inspiration. They were followed by Joy Hendry, who discussed the concept of a hub through an anthropological lens, and concluded by Gail Lord’s considerations on museums as hubs.

Amidst all these extraordinary women there was one key-role for a man: Luis Mendo. His sketches which are part of this article were drawn during the session. They reflect the key-issues that were brought up and help to connect stories, questions and thoughts.
Kris Schiermeier is the director of the Japanmuseum SieboldHuis in Leiden, The Netherlands. The SieboldHuis, literally House of Siebold, functions as a gateway for Japanese and Dutch exchange.

Thirty years ago, when she was working in ‘The Dutch village’ or Oranda Mura, Schiermeier became very impressed with Japan. Holland Village is a theme park in Japan featured in the talk of Joy Hendry. However, Schiermeier delved into the story of Philipp Franz von Siebold, the most famous ‘Dutchman’ in Japan who, unfortunately for the Dutch, was actually German.

Whilst Siebold is not famous in the Netherlands, he can be considered a household name in Japan, as he is part of the high school curriculum. After Japan had expelled Portugal and Spain for converting people to Christianity, the Dutch were allowed to continue their trade relations with Japan, as trade was their only intention. This philosophy of economic efficiency also had a darker side, as none of the visitors were allowed to start a family or bring their family to Japan. Nonetheless, a partial exemption from that rule was made for Siebold. The exclusive trade relation between Japan and the Netherlands, alongside the social conventions, form the background narrative of Siebold’s story.

In 1823 Siebold arrived in Japan and introduced himself enigmatically as ‘the Dutchman from the mountains’. He, like other foreigners, was located at Deshima in the bay of Nagasaki. He worked as a doctor and introduced Western medicine,
founded a school Narutaki-juku and taught all kinds of surgical techniques. In the Netherlands he is remembered for a collection he assembled at the request of King William I, which resulted in over 25,000 samples of local flora, fauna and objects.

But there is more to Siebold’s story than science, there is also a romance with a young Japanese girl with whom he had a daughter, O-Ine, who became the first female doctor in Japan. Unfortunately, he was not able to be part of this family for long as he was banned from Japan after six years because of a ‘map incident’. Maps were considered political material and were not allowed to foreigners. Unfortunately for Siebold, his collection and maps were discovered. Leaving Japan also meant he had to leave his wife and child behind, but in the meantime, his collection had already spread across the world.

Nowadays the international Siebold collection can be considered shared heritage. All the objects were either gifts or purchased by Siebold, there is no current discontent on the part of any party regarding the collection or possible issues of repatriation. This should offer fertile ground to join forces and make an impact. According to Schiermeier, the museum initiates partnerships, invigorates communities locally and links the museum to the future, while respecting traditions. Moreover, the museum has partnerships with other museums all over the world with whom they share responsibility for the Siebold collection. On a governmental level, the SieboldHuis is also invested in a twin city agreement between Leiden and Nagasaki, thereby expanding this relation beyond the walls of the museum.

On a local level, the SieboldHuis works together with local artists, students, the Japanese community, sports clubs, local shops, Japanese and Dutch companies and of course other museums. The annual highlight is the Japanese market on the doorstep of the museum, where all of these accumulate.

So, can we consider the SieboldHuis a hub? It definitely plays a role in the exchange between Japan and the Netherlands, which is not based solely on its history. Moreover, it actively represents Japan in the Netherlands by involving partners, relating to other stories and creating connections. Simply said, it functions as a hub.
After looking at Japan from the Dutch perspective, the roles were reversed as we discussed Dejima: a Dutch island in Japan. The next speaker was Miyuki Yamaguchi, curator of the Dejima Restoration Office of Nagasaki City Hall. She elaborated on the history of Dejima, and its historical and contemporary role as a hub. By taking the concept of connections as a central narrative, Dejima becomes connected to different countries and cultures, not limited to one version of history but implemented in a much broader sense.

Dejima is located in Kyushu, or Hizen as it was called in the Edo period/17-19th century, in Nagasaki, western Japan. It was constructed as a gateway in 1636 by local merchants who wanted to continue trade with the West, whilst simultaneously banning Christian influences. Dejima was originally meant for the Portuguese, until they were banned from Japan in 1639. Dejima was populated again in 1641 when the Dutch trading post was moved from Hirado (where it had been located since 1609) to Dejima. The trading post remained there until 1859, when Japan re-opened to the world and the trading post was replaced by a consulate.

From Dejima, trade goods such as raw silk, cotton, wool, leather, sugar, wood, rare animals and glass were brought into Japan. The main export products were silver, copper, ceramics, lacquerware and camphor. These products formed part of larger trading routes to India, Malacca, Batavia in Indonesia and the African Cape.
A closer look at Dejima reveals a fan shape of what was originally an island, but later reclaimed land was added, connecting it to the main land. The island had houses for the wide variety of people who lived and worked there, one of whom was doctor Siebold who treated patients here and even had special permission to teach Western medicine to Japanese doctors. In addition there were warehouses for trade goods, gardens and barns for food, and a gate through which everything had to pass through on its way to the mainland. This gate must have been very significant as it symbolized an inconvenient lifestyle, where most inhabitants were not allowed outside of the fifteen thousand square meters of Dejima without special permission.

In the early 20th century, the area around Dejima was reclaimed from the sea, and Dejima became a part of the mainland of Nagasaki. Over time, the factory buildings disappeared and the physical leftovers of history were lost, until 1996, when a full-scale renovation project started. So far the bridge and sixteen buildings have been reconstructed in accordance to traditional construction methods. Yamaguchi explains that when you excavate Dejima, you obtain a lot of information about construction in the Edo period, as well as products from Japan and the Far East that were imported and exported. This shared history of Europe and Japan becomes evident through the artifacts that remained in Dejima.

Apart from the buildings and the bridge, the wall that surrounded the island in the Edo period has also been restored. It shows the original shape of the island, and the distance it originally had from the mainland. Dejima is still affected by the tides of the sea and over the long term there is an aspiration to make it an island again.

Nowadays, over five hundred thousand people visit Dejima every year. The facility of Dejima is utilized by Nagasaki City and citizen’s associations in variety ways. For example, by a range of festivals showcasing different cultures. Nagasaki City regards Dejima as an important historic site inherited from the past and, especially because of its history and restoration work, important to pass on to the future. In that sense, Dejima almost transcends time itself, as a gateway of cultural exchange and trade.
Next up was Joy Hendry who discussed, from an anthropological viewpoint, the projection of Dutchness in Japan through the lens of two Dutch theme parks, Oranda Mura and Haus ten Bosu. As another layer is added to our conception of hubs and connection, it becomes evident that cultural exchange is a layered and interconnected process.

Joy Hendry is Professor Emerita at the Europe Japan Research Centre at Oxford Brookes University and has played a very significant role in the academic discourse surrounding Japanese culture over the past decade. This Scottish scholar uses Oranda Mura, or the Dutch village, and Haus ten Bosu (named for the Queen’s palace Huis ten Bosch) as case studies to put the concept of cultural display in a more global perspective. Can places like this be considered as early hubs of intercultural communication?

Hendry’s fascination with Oranda Mura started with a study on cultural display in which theme parks played an important role. Holland Village opened near Nagasaki in 1983, the first of several other ‘international villages’, such as a Danish park, several German parks and Canadian World. “Why this hype?” she asks rhetorically. In 1983 Tokyo Disneyland opened, which according to Hendry, should be perceived not just as a Disneyland in Japan but also as a representation of the United States for Japanese to visit. Theme parks such as Oranda Mura and Haus ten Bosu are simultaneously described as theme parks and as foreign country villages.
Theme parks like this are perceived as international villages, places to learn about and explore the curiosities of other cultures.

Oranda Mura and Haus ten Bos are much more than slightly tacky open-air museums. They have museums, reproductions of Dutch buildings, historical ships, tulips that grow all year, boats, canals, bicycles, hotels, 2nd homes built in a 17th, 18th or 19th century style and an enormous underground tunnel system that holds all the pipes and sewage needed to regulate this. During its heyday in the 90’s, Haus ten Bos used to exhibit Dutch skills such as cheese making, parades with Friesian horses and Dutch people wandering around to add to the sense of authenticity. It also included a world bazaar, performances of international dancing, ‘western style’ fortune telling by a computer, and educational facilities about tourism and weddings. More recently, a robotic theme has been introduced, and a separate bio-park that teaches about the recycling of water.

What makes Oranda Mura or any of these international representations in Japan so interesting is the overall positive cultural representation of the Dutch rather than their verisimilitude. Yamaguchi explains that the Japanese perceive Dutch culture as cute, kawaii. This cultural imprint might almost completely separate from historical reality. Nonetheless, what the people want to see has nothing to do with learning about history and everything to do with fantasy. “Maybe it’s a personal thing,” suggests Yamaguchi, as both the Netherlands and Japan are considered small countries and so perceive each other as similar, which forges a bond that creates interest from both sides in reconstructing the present. These are places where Japanese people can enjoy their short holidays and experience foreign cultures, while Dutch people can become fascinated with Japanese culture. However, are places like Oranda Mura and Haus ten Bos hubs? As our last speaker Gail Lord demonstrated, you cannot function as a hub in isolation, to be a hub you need cultural exchange and alliances.
Keynote speaker, Gail Dexter Lord, Co-president of Lord Cultural Resources, discussed the meaning of hubs in contemporary society and the role of museums as hubs. She briefly reflected on the previous speakers and how their talks had illuminated the history that they depicted and each other. These stories became, as they progressed, entangled within their context and finally connected through narratives such as place in Oranda Mura or time in Dejima. Hubs are part of both the past and the present, new and old, trade and war, formed by inclusion and exclusion using both hard borders and soft power. This seamless network sounds like something that can only develop organically, luckily Lord has some thoughts on that.

When talking about museums and hubs, many come forward and say “my museum is a hub”. However, according to Lord, museums cannot really be hubs in isolation, as a hub is something that is co-constituted by different places and organisations. More often it is the case that museums that we perceive as hubs are actually what Lord calls ‘an island’, a place of apartness that functions simultaneously as both a gateway for creativity and as a defence against malevolent influences. Such gated environments are often driven by hard powers such as colonial conquest, and indeed reminds one of museums of the past. Nowadays museums are more likely to be driven by soft power, a subtle force that is more fluent and interwoven in society.

This however does not mean that museums should not be conscious of their impact. Even more so, museums should strongly consider the most impactful way to be organised and in what form. Any type of network; island, district, cluster or hub,
experiences both decline and rebirth and can, according to Lord, transform back and forth into each form. A hub is obviously the most impactful form, as it becomes a place for both cultural and creative commons where new knowledge is created, resulting in human progress and its complementary holy grail: social capital. But that does not mean it is also the most successful form for every situation.

Districts can be considered as an urban happenstance; something that was created for practical reasons within an urban environment. For example, the Museumplein in Amsterdam, was created for the convenience of tourists. Meanwhile these museums do not share resources or governance, all have different goals and thus do not enlarge each other’s impact.

Slightly more connected to their surroundings are clusters, which are a bit more intentional than the afore mentioned districts. These can be found in cities and suburbs and are often connected through a shared sense of cultural agency. They can revolve around historic buildings, a site, a museum or a library, and as new cultural sites are added the clusters become places for the local community. Such as the Year Buena Gardens in San Francisco. This started as a redevelopment district with many different institutions such as a museum, an historical society, housing cooperation or a convention centre. These cultural groups represent a great variety of roles, whilst all having their own director. They do not however intentionally share resources.

This is the main difference that defines hubs. Hubs intentionally share governance, they carry a strong narrative that is meant to make an impact by connecting (to) their surrounding environment(s). This implies that a hub cannot solely be formed by cultural institutions, but must also include societal institutions such as housing or universities. Meanwhile, this diversity of organisations has to make sense from an ideological viewpoint. “It has to have a big story”. This metanarrative, the big story, legitimates the connectivity.

The last element of the keynote session was a workshop in which an international group of museum professionals discussed the role of hubs in their own museum practice. The collective undertaking of a hub might spring from crisis such as the need to improve safety in an area. Hubs however, only become relevant when they make impact, when they instigate positive change.

Everyone agrees that a good starting point is to look beyond the limits of a museum and step outside its walls. However, that does not imply that future partnerships should be on the basis of only vicinity, nor a museum’s collection, if it is about sharing a big story. It requires an ideal or a metanarrative that turns all heads in the same direction. That being said, every hub also needs a certain level of stability. This is often an excellent role for a museum or a city that, as a carrier of identity, can offer a sense of belonging. Nonetheless, being outside museum walls in order to connect, implies something much more compromising. As a museum you have to be involved, have to relate to your surroundings both non-museum and museum on a more equal basis in order to grow together. Lord underscored the need to understand that it is mostly museums in the West that have rooted collections which are part of a collective identity. Museums in the Global South and East have more difficulty fabricating these kinds of environments. We should get museums help other museums to make an impact, co-operating through long term international loans and also exchanging knowledge and ideas.
The importance of connection was without doubt the most prevalent lesson of the 2019 keynote speech, and museums can find these in many different ways. For example, by studying their own history and reviving it through new connections like Dejima, or by taking a closer look at the present and connecting more fluent conceptions of contemporary culture like Oranda Mura in new foreign environments. Maybe it can be done by an (inter)national alliance through a museum collection as with the Siebold house. Nevertheless, the importance of connecting with your physical environment as a hub, district or cluster, as Gail Lord explained, is self-evident. Meaningful connections can be found through time, place and subject and there is no doubt that any type of museum can become more relevant and meaningful through hubs.

If you would like further information or to receive copies of any of the presentations, contact details of the speakers, moderator and illustrator can be found below.

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All stories are connected