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### *Building & Relocating A National Museum*

*Jan van Tol, Entomology, National Museum of Natural History, Leiden*

Apart from your birth, moving your home is the most traumatic experience in your life. Five years ago, the National Museum of Natural History | Naturalis (Museum Naturalis for short) moved from the centre of the city of Leiden to a semi-industrialized area or bioscience park near Leiden's central railway station. For most curators even the idea of moving their collection is more traumatic than actually moving their home. In this paper I will discuss why and how Museum moved from an early 20th century building where the status of a curator could easily be measured from the size of their office space of 50 square meters, to a state-of-the-art 21st century museum (see picture above) where curators got rooms the size of two cubicles. I will also describe how the political climate was positive to investing approximately 60 million Euro in a new museum, how the museum's profile changed from a scientific institution to a market-oriented organisation, how we organised the preparations and the actual removal, and how we slowly got accustomed to our new home. For many of us it was a traumatic experience indeed, but it appeared to be possible for zoology curators to start a new life among 260,000 visitors per year, and half of their colleagues specialised in public relations, human resource management or electronic games rather than bats, wasps or corals.



The 21st century museum

#### **Historical notes**

Museum Naturalis, or Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie as it was called for more than 175 years, at Leiden, The Netherlands was established in 1820. It has been a research institute rather than a museum at least since the late 1800's. No visitors were invited nor accepted for more than hundred years. The museum focussed on zoology for most of that time, but merged with the National Museum of Geology and Mineralogy in 1986. The museum has no botanical branch; the National Herbarium of the Netherlands is a supra-university institute up to now. The museum now is a quasi-privitized organisation, receiving around 85% of the income from the government, viz. the directorate of cultural heritage.

The Dutch government selected the museum as the organisation for the so-called *National Natural History Presentation* in 1985. This decision started the period with a culture shift from a scientific institution to a more public-oriented museum.

#### **The 1985-1998 period**

The museum building was in the Raamsteeg, in the very centre of the city of Leiden since 1820. It was

designed by the director Fredericus Anna Jentink. It clearly showed that curators of natural history collections were important. The museum clearly showed in routing that an expert hand had been involved. It was also built to the state of knowledge of that time in fire prevention. Especially the collection building was also an interesting piece of construction, and we have had many groups of interested architects as visitors.

The task of developing a natural history presentation forced us to find place for extension to house the museum galleries in the immediate vicinity of the building. This appeared to be far from simple. The original plan of the Raamsteeg building from around 1910 included galleries for exhibitions, but they had never been built in a period of economical constraints. The reserved area is a park now, and also not very large, and appeared not suitable for the more visionary plans of the 1980's. A special opportunity seemed to come with the availability of the Pesthuis ("plague house") near the railway station of Leiden, which was offered for the symbolic price of one Dutch guilder. The latest use of the building had been the national army museum, and the building had been completely renovated when it was offered. It was supposed to be large enough for the public galleries. The condition of the building was, however, not appropriate for the display of valuable specimens, since climate control was difficult to install in the old monument. The director of that time, a systematic entomologist himself, hesitated clearly in which direction the museum should develop. The government, on the other side, was much more determined. They insisted that the museum had to build for public galleries, but the museum had to tell where and how.

Only when an interim director with an extensive network of personal connections in the government was appointed in 1990, decisions were made quickly. In just two years time, it was decided that a complete new museum would be built near the Pesthuis in an area that was being developed as a so-called bioscience park. Not only the galleries, but also the collections and offices would have to move to the new premises. In the end, the Pesthuis building would only be used as entrance building. The allocated budget rose from 2 million Euro in the 1980's to 40 million Euro around 1992.

After this hectic period, Wim G. van der Weiden was appointed as new director in 1994. Van der Weiden had been involved in building the museum of education in The Hague before, and he succeeded in obtaining a further 20 million Euro to a total budget of 60 million Euro in 1995. This sum included not only the building, but the preparation of the expositions, and costs of removal of collections and offices. The actual building started in 1996, and the museum was officially opened 7 April 1998.

### **A new building**

I have been involved myself for more than two years as a project manager of one of the new galleries. As one of the curators in entomology moving the collections was also one of my duties.

One of the curators of invertebrates, Jaap van der Land, had produced an impressive brief for the architect. Looking back, from that point on developments were difficult to follow for everyone who was not directly

involved in decision making. This was, among other things, due to the extremely complicated decision making structure. The government acted as principal, funds were provided by a private company from which the museum had to lease the building, the museum was involved as a user of the first 30 years, and also the architect is a major player in developing a new museum building. As a result, space for offices,



20 floors of purpose-built collections' storage

collections, archives and storage appeared to be much smaller than we actually needed. Also, details of the building were changed in such a way that it became less suitable for use by the scientific departments. It may be true that a smaller elevator is more affordable, if you cannot transport the crocodiles of your collection in the smaller one, collection management gets overcomplicated. We also found that floors were so uneven, so that placing cabinets and other storage furniture appeared to be very troublesome.

But also many things changed positively. Firstly, of course, the museum got its impressive galleries for exhibitions. Climate control of the collection building improved very significantly. While we had many problems with the control of humidity and temperature in the Raamsteeg building, the new building is designed for climate control with minimum use of energy. Also, an advanced security system prevents uninvited visitors to enter. The collection tower of 20 floors has no windows, the walls are made of 60 cm concrete, with insulation outside and a characteristic cover of steel. Temperature is controlled mainly by heating or cooling the space between concrete and insulation. There is no water in the collection rooms, making damage by water very unlikely. There are two compartments per floor with a humidity control system, which also controls the flow of fresh air. The system actually works well, and the entrance to the collection rooms certainly has a high-tech image.



The view from inside the building

### Relocating the collection

The collection itself was fully moved by a professional company. An international bid procedure was needed, since it was one of the largest removal operations in the Netherlands for years. A Dutch company, UTS Voerman, showed an impressive selection of innovations, e.g. for moving birds and mammals, which resulted in the lowest quote as well. Preparations for the removal were organised by curators and technicians, assisted by temporary staff. Preparations included: reorganizing the collections, preparing specimens for removal (e.g. fixing abdomens of large insects with insect pins), numbering cabinets or

larger objects and indicate their position in groundplan of the new building. The preparations started around two years before the actual operation of removal started.

The removal of the collection started more than six months after finishing the building activities. There was a good reason for that. It is frequently claimed that concrete is dry after three months or less. However, some curators learned from experiences in other museum buildings just before we moved about severe



Specimens prepared for removal

problems with mould in collections placed in rooms immediately after building activities. With these data the director decided to start the removal only six months after completion of building. The removal itself took more than one year. The speed was relatively low since the new collection tower is suboptimal from a logistic point of view. As I have indicated before, the new building is actually too small for the collection. Non-essential parts of the collections are still housed in the Raamsteeg building.

### Conclusions

Five years ago the museum opened for the public. The success of the exhibitions is such that the museum is now widely known in The Netherlands to the general public, but much better known to journalists colleagues in other research institutes than before. It is also true, that the number of hours actually spent by curators on research and related collection management is perhaps 50% of twenty years ago. We did not lose many positions. Although I do consider the number of curators and technical simply insufficient, one has to compare this with other developments. The other large zoological museum in the Netherlands, in Amsterdam, had its staff reduced to perhaps half the size of twenty years. Most universities stopped maintaining their zoological collections, so one may also draw the conclusion that starting a new life in a new building has saved our position. Museum Naturalis is now more complete than it was 25 years ago, where collection management and organisation of exhibitions are both considered as features of a healthy natural history museum.