

Hospitality as part of the museum's DNA

Interview with An Teysen, hospitality manager at MoMu, Antwerp

By Xinghan Lou



The interviewer did an internship in FARO and worked on the topic of hospitality. She interviewed both Dirk Yzewyn and Ingrid Van Wateghem from Visit Flanders in the field of tourism hospitality and An Teysen, the hospitality manager in MoMu, Antwerp. The interviews took place in April 2021.

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Introduction

After interviewing Dirk Yzewyn and Ingrid Van Wateghem (Visit Flanders) with the topic of hospitality in attractions and cultural heritage sites we are lucky we could have a talk with An Teysen on museum hospitality. Currently, MoMu is closed for renovation works, it is planned to reopen in the beginning of September 2021. Spatial improvements in this refurbishment aim creating an even more visitor-friendly environment than before. Except for the building itself, hospitality manager as a new position is also expected to push up the level of the museum's hospitality. Why MoMu decided to set in this position? What is the work routine of a hospitality manager in the museum? How can this new position interact with other staff as well as with visitors? The information shared by An Teysen gives answers to these questions and sheds a light on how the notion of hospitality is applied in MoMu.

A new profession in the museum

In the Netherlands, this role within a museum is already more integrated than in Belgium. In the Belgian museum scene however, this role is rather new. So far there are only a few hospitality managers (mostly with a different title but with the same responsibilities) known. An Teysen started this new work experience at Fashion Museum Antwerp (MoMu) in December 2020. Previously she worked for over 20 years in PR, communication, and events both in museums and other sectors. To Teysen, museum hospitality should be integrated in the entire museum. It should be part of the DNA.

"When you read the dictionary, it says hospitality is 'a friendly and welcoming behavior towards guests or customers. That's a start." To Teysen, museum hospitality is in the first place about visitors, details, and foresights. "Museums consider hospitality being a part of Public Services and Public Programs, departments or team, which is of course a good start, but it's way too limited to me, and to us". The museum hospitality goes way beyond setting up interesting exhibitions/workshops/lectures/programs for special audiences. Actually, hospitality is something overarching. It implies to be considered in every department and every process. For instance: from customer focus of the staff to the architecture of the building, whether the building is well conceived. "Of course, if you work with an existing building, you can tweak it here and there a little bit, but if you build a new addition to a museum, it's

very important to consider this from the very beginning.”

In addition, the museum hospitality manager must be familiar with the museum operation. For instance, how to deal with a difficult situation at the welcoming desk or in an exhibition space? How do you interact with your visitors? How to communicate a difficult message? How do you welcome visitors with mobility or other impairments? When you are deaf, when you have low vision, when you have autism spectrum disorder, are all texts understood by the visitor? Hospitality also implies protocol. "What if His Majesty The King or Her Majesty The Queen comes to visit? What if you have an ambassador or a minister? So, you really need to know who is who, you really have to have a clear view on the network of the museum".

Motivation of developing a hospitality function in MoMu

The interview also reviewed about why MoMu decided to develop a hospitality manager. This new role in MoMu is within the Administration department where the business manager (zakelijk leider), the assistant to the director and the administrative assistants are part of. As a hospitality manager, Teysen assists the team meeting both of the Administration team and of the Public Programmes team. Possibly one will think it's strange that a hospitality manager is put in this Administration department since it would have been better in the Public Programmes or Public Services department (Publiekswerking). However, it was a practical decision. "It's important to be able to work closely together with the director of the museum. In that way, you have a direct line to him/her and that you can align (or the vision is aligned)."

In the interview with Dirk Yzewyn and Ingrid Van Wateghem from Visit Flanders, we referred to the hospitality-related industries. The notion of hospitality in the public perspective mainly comes from the hotel and tourism industry, both of which focus on developing the host-guest relationship. Although museums have gradually moved away from the fixed mindset of emphasizing only collections and exhibitions, the courage is still needed to step further.

When being asked the reason of engaging a hospitality manager in MoMu, the director and chief curator Kaat Debo explained: "Hospitality is crucial and relates to all aspects of our museum working. It's not just limited to the front/welcoming desk. It's not only showing respect to your visitors, but also showing respect to your colleagues, to the work they do. Because it's what your team is creating. The exhibitions, the atmosphere, the cleanliness of the building. So, it's every person's responsibility, from the cleaning lady/man to the director and everybody in between, to welcome our visitors in the most perfect conditions."

How does MoMu fills in the notion of hospitality?

The Fashion Museum wants to inspire a large audience with a broad, renewing and each-time-different offer of exhibitions. As Teysen explained in a nutshell the museum vision: "We want to offer a unique museum experience with a very respectful welcoming in a comfortable environment, with clear information in a professional way. We want to offer a nice talk/drink/something to eat (we will have a MoMu Café when we reopen) and the MoMu team is an enthusiastic team which takes care of the visitors." In general, MoMu would like to welcome the visitor at their museum: "Rather welcoming visitors to our museum, we want to say to the visitor: **Welcome to YOUR museum!** We aim to be

inclusive in the broadest sense of the word offering stunning and interesting exhibitions, that's very important to us!"

The museum hospitality starts normally from the very beginning of the visitor's journey. MoMu noticed the importance that visitors find their way to the museum easily. When a person is reflecting-what are we going to do this weekend? A nice exhibition at MoMu is attractive but he/she is in a wheelchair, so is the museum accessible and how can this person go there? Then this visitor needs to find all the information he/she needs on the MoMu's website in an easy way, such as the opening dates/hours and nowadays the corona related measures. This journey starts at home, ends when the person is back home and when he/she shares the visit experience with friends or family.

The notion of hospitality is also applied when MoMu gets feedback from the visitors. Visitors can send the museum an email expressing "I had a nice visit" or "I had a not-so-nice visit because of ..." or leave a review on TripAdvisor/Google. The museum replies, and afterwards within the team they investigate what happened, how come this visitor had an unpleasant experience, how can MoMu improve so that it won't happen anymore? MoMu conducts an audience research every year.

The hospitality trajectory

Last December, MoMu started a **hospitality trajectory** (which is still going on). It leads museum staff to what is MoMu's vision on hospitality. In this trajectory, colleagues work together with a trainer. One person from every department (collection, exhibition, administration, communication, etc.) within the museum is a member of the core team. The team reflects on hospitality-related topics such as "What is hospitality in general?" "What is hospitality at the Fashion Museum?" "What are our core values and what is our hospitality vision?" Then the team writes a vision on hospitality for MoMu.

Not only the visitors, MoMu also considers all stakeholders in this hospitality trajectory. For example, the museum prefers to speak to suppliers in a kind way if they call to ask for an invoice, which has not been paid yet or with a question. Even the person in the back office needs to be kind and needs to what to say when answering the phone. Therefore it's not only the responsibility of the front desk.

After being explicit about the museum's vision on hospitality, the team goes a step further because they need to make it concrete. The team asks each department to give a few actions on what they could improve in their department. What concrete steps in each department can be taken? In addition, it needs to be actively supported by the director since it goes nowhere when the director isn't really involved. What's more? A budget is needed to organize this trajectory.

Spatial changes in the refurbishment

There are many spatial changes aiming at improving the level of hospitality although the refurbishment plan has been launched in MoMu before Teyssen joined as a hospitality manager. When doing a renovation, it is a perfect occasion to question everything. MoMu has moved the welcoming desk to another place in the entrance hall, mainly for the visitors but also for the colleagues. The previous welcoming desk was positioned very close to the entrance door, it was cold and windy both for visitors

and for the museum staff sitting behind the desk. A revolving door is added in the entrance, so it won't be windy inside the museum anymore. Other spatial changes except for the entrance are as follows:

- a second entrance is added to the museum that connects a café and a shop;
- a new acoustic ceiling;
- three exhibition rooms (MoMu had one and a half before);
- a new refurbished studio for workshops and for birthday parties for children;
- a first aid room where for example a parent can feed a child;
- no gender toilets, a family toilet and a toilet for people using a wheelchair.

External cooperation is included in this refurbishment work. MoMu invited Inter VZW, an organization specialized in accessibility for visitors with an impairment, to assess the museum location. Is it easily accessible for wheelchair? Is the exhibition space able to let a wheelchair move around? But it is also for the people who are deaf/blind or people with autism. Inter VZW gives guidelines on how the museum can improve accessibility.

Wayfinding system

Wayfinding is an important issue in the refurbishment work. As Teyssen said, "It is so important to have a really clear wayfinding for the visitors, also for ourselves." Several companies are specialized in signalization but not that many in wayfinding. The museum works with StudioMDA, they have been selected after a tender.

Wayfinding is much more than just putting signs. It's the combination of the psychology of a human being and the building/architecture/context. What MoMu does is mapping all rooms in the entire building. Starting from the exterior: MoMu is located in a busy street where there are trams/cars/bicycles/narrow pedestrians and trees. When visitors arrive in the street, a part of the museum facade is nearly invisible for the visitors from the street since it is full of trees. MoMu cannot put flags on the facade due to the regulation. Thus, it confuses people. The museum talked with City of Antwerp to find out the best possible solution. The museum is allowed to put an exterior sign of 60 centimeters illuminated, but for the rest, nothing can be illuminated. So, the museum started to think, when the visitor arrives in the street, is he/she going to see where he/she needs to enter? What does MoMu need to have on the front door? When the visitor enters, where is the welcoming desk? What does he/she need to know around the welcoming desk?

The museum needs to make all the signs on walls/floors/ceilings visible and recognizable for all visitor, e.g. signs need to be the same. And has to decide on pictograms and the languages. Who are your visitors/audience? There might be a different audience. Are they families/individuals/groups? Then the concern might be moved to the elevator. MoMu now has an elevator and stairs. But because of the special building, the museum actually merged two buildings back in the days, so the temporary exhibition is on the first floor when the visitor goes by the stairs, while he/she needs to push second floor when in the elevator. MoMu has managed to level this as a wayfinding improvement during the refurbishment. Without additional explanation whether the visitor takes the stairs or the elevator, staffs only need to introduce that "the temporary exhibition is on the first floor".

In general, nothing is unimportant when it refers to the interaction with visitors. When visitors arrive at the exhibition room with umbrellas, the guard of the exhibition room says "Sorry, you cannot enter the exhibition with your umbrella, you need to go down all the way to minus one." It might be a bit sad for the visitors in Teyssen's opinion. The museum needs to communicate in such an efficient way that visitors know what to do when they enter the building. "That is also wayfinding, being very clear of the do's and don'ts in the museum. It's very important to do this in a very positive way, even in a witty way. Not saying 'You are not allowed to do something', but saying gently like 'It would help our collection if you put your umbrella in the locker because it's safer for the fabric/dress/painting.' If you explain that to the visitor, I think it's much easier for them to understand why one has to put a backpack and umbrella in a locker" Teyssen says: **"Communication is key!"**

The process of decision and its difficulties

Making the museum hospitality relevant for every department is necessary but not easy says Teyssen: "Making it relevant so that colleagues take it into account in the process and if needed, contact the hospitality manager to exchange about specific topics is a challenge." Teyssen considers in a way the difficulty is normal, "It needs time. It still needs to grow since it sometimes demands a new way of reasoning. I feel the museum director plays a very important role in this." Giving the mandate to the hospitality manager so he/she can be involved in every department where visitors are key is an important sign to the team that hospitality should be part of the museum's DNA.

The decision on hospitality-related issues is not always made by the hospitality manager, neither always by any individual experienced staff. The priorities depend on different situations. Knowing the museum and the building inside and out is an advantage to the staff, but can also be a disadvantage because they're inside this place for so long. Teyssen explained: "we are often not critical enough or we don't often ask ourselves: 'Why are we doing this?' or 'We are doing this for so many years, but why have we been doing this for so many years?' Can we change it? Would it be better for the visitor if we would do it like this or that?"

"As I mentioned in the beginning, if you are in an existing building you are bound to limits and that also is part of decision-making. For example: Museums need to check if there are enough toilets on every floor. For MoMu, toilets are only at the minus 1, they couldn't be moved or changed. MoMu will neither have gender toilets" Teyssen said, "For some visitors it will be quite surprising and maybe even shocking, but we trust our audience and their open view. Hospitality is also thinking what perfume you smell at the toilet to the cleanliness. Related to this subject the team had a meeting with the cleaning company responsible for the museum building to discuss how many times the building and among that the toilets should be cleaned, at what times of the day, and what if MoMu has an event at night, etc.. So for me it's the entire scope of the level of detail."

Suggestions for developing museum hospitality and budget

For museums that not yet but would like to have a development on museum hospitality, one concise suggestion given by Teyssen was "Go for it!" Museum hospitality forms the basis. Visitors can see the most impressive exhibition but will forget all about it when it was a lousy/dreadful visit or when the

person encountered a not so nice welcome or if the toilets weren't clean.

Taking hospitality seriously can only reinforce the visitor's experience. It's an invitation to become a friend of the museum, it can be an invitation to spread the word because that's what we want as a museum. "We like our visitors to come back and bring friends and family. You can start with a baby step, you don't need to do the whole shabang at once." Especially giving these circumstances of pandemic and being closed for renovation works, it's not easy. But every baby step is a step. In a small museum, it could be a topic within the Public Programs/Public Services department, or it could be a topic on the agenda put by the director in staff meetings. There shouldn't be any difference in a big or small museum when thinking of the vision of hospitality. In practical ways, it will most likely be different. But to Teysen, the philosophy behind it can be the same for every museum.

When the museum decides on focusing more on hospitality, there should also be a budget for this topic: f.e. for the uniform of the welcoming staff, arranging the welcoming desk, staff trainings, hand sanitizers, gifts for special guests or VIP guests. Teysen is still exploring what should be in this budget. Now the budget is still on the Publics Programmes, with the overhead of the administration, "but if you create this role in your museum or this role is part of somebody else's function when the museum is still not big enough to have this as a main role, you still need to foresee the budget because you can do only very little without a budget".

Who can be a hospitality manager?

Teysen sees a museum hospitality manager as more of a senior role. The person needs to have experience and maturity. It helps in how to handle situations, how to remain calm and professional, how to judge the situation. The person needs to be solution-focused and have a certain calmness, to know the museum and the ways of working at the museum, but also its network. MoMu is in Antwerp, so for Teysen, it is important that she knows who the mayor is, who the governor is, who MoMu's partners are and who is sponsoring MoMu.

A hospitality manager needs to be aware or informed about nearly everything: why certain decisions have been taken and why some things go or won't go. It is important to inform the visitor and explain why some choices or measurements are made and it should be done in a warm and open communication.

Is a checklist for the museum hospitality helpful?

Having a hospitality checklist is a good idea, but for Teysen, it's not the same as a visitor questionnaire because the hospitality checklist for the museum needs to have specific topics which the colleagues at the museum need to consider. Teysen would consider them in different topics, e.g.: the building itself, the way of working in different departments. However, it could be a guideline for museums if they expect to be more professional on this topic or to add an extra level. **One-fits-all is a good start, museums can choose their priorities and topics, and start from there.** It is an ongoing process, because "you always need to stay on point and then you grow into it as a museum". The more it gets into the people/team (their daily ways of working), it will help. For example, MoMu has a weekly staff meeting with the entire team, staff can always add topics to that meeting, and request an

advance. Teysen mentioned that she has added hospitality as one of the topics in the team meeting.

Nevertheless, what are the priorities in the checklist is a difficult question to answer. To this question, Teysen would start from determining different fields/categories and keep some principles in mind: **"The main thing is always putting yourself in the shoes of the visitor, of a new visitor"** Where can he/she find the lockers/toilets, the way up or down to the exhibition room? Is everything clear? Is it easy for the visitor to ask a question?"

Beyond Covid-19

For us at MoMu it's a bit difficult to speak about this topic since we are/were closed during the pandemic. Being of service and being flexible is even more important than usual when MoMu reopens in September 2021. For example: changing ticket dates without costs, refunding tickets without discussion. "When we're open, offering a safe and relaxing visit respecting the measures, keeping all the information on the website and social media on point. Now when closed for renovation works, we are reachable by phone and we keep our website and social media active and up to date."

Hospitality is 'being of service', Teysen considered that "not everybody can do this or wants to do this". It doesn't mean the person who does this work needs to be submissive. It's going the extra mile with a smile even when you said the same lines already a hundred times that day. "Because when you're behind the welcoming desk, you often need to reply the same question over and over again, so during the day you will say plenty of times of 'Welcome, please leave your umbrella and your backpack at minus 1, you'll find free lockers there.' **You have to consider each time, it's a new visitor, a new opportunity to give the best of yourself and the museum, to make his/her visit as smooth/free/interesting/joyful as possible.**" When the museum has happy visitors, they will be the best ambassadors of the museum. **"It's not rocket science, just putting everything in perspective of the visitor, because they have chosen your museum to come to visit"**, said Teysen.

The staff at the welcome desk is often the first point of contact of the visitor and needs to provide a warm welcome and needs to be able to answer all questions. "When the pandemic is over, they will also be selling tickets at the counter again. We will have groups with a guide again. The guide has an important role because a guide is also an ambassador. The head of the guides at MoMu is also part of our hospitality trajectory." However, The colleagues of the welcoming desk have a significant role besides selling tickets when there's no pandemic. Even when people ask "I would like to go to the cathedral afterwards, how do I walk there?" When there is a long queue, with many people waiting at the welcoming desk, the reception staff needs to anticipate, and to know that people will be a bit nervous since they don't like queuing, so the staff should be extra friendly and comprehensive.

A "positive" example

After checking all her recent museum visits in her agenda, Teysen had not found a magical experience that could be shared as an interesting example of a very positive hospitality experience. She shared a quick pass experience at the V&A museum (London) as an explanation. There was a Dior exhibition which was sold out, and long queues of people were waiting to get in. When Teysen was waiting in

the queue, a guard from the museum came outside and asked who was having his ticket already paid for online or had an ICOM card. Since Teyszen was among one of them, the guard asked her to follow because the museum had another line for the ICOM card holders. In five minutes, Teyszen was inside the exhibition. It was a good experience, but the separate line should have been clear in the communication on site but was not.

Teyszen says: "These days we are happily surprised when we get a friendly welcome, or when people took the time to listen/act/walk along when we ask for 'where is the entrance' or 'where can I find this' or 'which room can I find this object'. Actually, this strikes me because **it should be normal that we have a high level of hospitality. It should be abnormal that people need to complain.**

Some reflections shared by An:

- Hospitality is public relations, is network, knowing who to address for what, both internal and external.
- Hospitality is not expecting an immediate return, it's a long-term investment. I know it sounds weird in a museum context, but in the end you're also generating sales. If you're a happy, open, interesting museum, more people will come, so more tickets will be sold or more items in your shop will be sold or more coffees will be drunk in your café.
- Hospitality is museum wide, not just the welcoming desk or frontline staff.
- Hospitality should be inclusive, everybody from everywhere.
- Hospitality is a smile and eye contact. You should always keep the eye contact with your visitor. It's respectful, it shows interest, it's the feeling of focusing on you. It's the connection.
- Hospitality is a building conceived or renovated with the visitors in mind.
- Hospitality is a clean and safe venue.
- Hospitality is clear wayfinding.
- Hospitality is genuine interest in the visitor. You need to seek actively this and monitor and respond to feedback.
- Hospitality is being accessible and approachable.
- Hospitality is connection. You need to connect with your audience.
- Hospitality is all about details.
- It demands dedication. Not everybody wants to do this job, for example wants to check if the toilets are clean, take up a paper in the entrance hall on the floor or help a visitor in any way. It's active listening, it's being empathic anticipating/forecasting, and in a warm and open communication
- Hospitality is like being the Chief Happiness Officer. You need to make everything possible for a wonderful experience for the visitor (and other stakeholders).