The integral approach of Monumentenwacht Vlaanderen: a model for implementing participatory preventive conservation for historic interiors

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Abstract
Monumentenwacht in Flanders stimulates, informs, and supports its members in the care of their heritage sites. In particular, the organization advocates the integral approach for the conservation of historic interiors and on-site collections outside the museum context using a toolbox of methodologies and relying on the caretaker’s crucial role in preventive conservation and housekeeping. After 13 years of interior assessments, this successful model for implementing preventive conservation faces some huge challenges, such as the issue of redundant religious heritage, and has to make painful strategic choices. Some good is expected from MAKSin, a report database that facilitates value and risk based prioritization enabling conservation strategies to focus more sharply on those parts most valued and most at risk.

Keywords
Historic interiors, preventive conservation, housekeeping, participation, risk assessment, condition assessment

Mission
The mission of Monumentenwacht Vlaanderen, a non-profit organization in the Flemish region of Belgium, is to empower, stimulate, inform and support its members in the care and preservation of their heritage sites (Stulens and Verpoest 2006). Inspired by the Venice Charter (1964), the focus of this independent advisory body is on preventive conservation and maintenance as the optimum strategies for the long-term conservation of cultural heritage. The main aim is to support local caretakers and thereby, in the long term, to reduce significant losses of heritage and expense for all stake holders. The core activity is the carrying out of regular condition and risk assessments. Other support services to its members include on-site advice, publications, helpdesk assistance, workshops and demonstrations.
Monumentenwacht is not a governmental organization but a group of six private non-profit organizations. A regional coordinating umbrella organization was founded in 1991 after the Dutch model (founded in 1973). By the end of 1992, five organizations had been founded in the different provinces, connected to each other and to the provincial authorities. All first-line contacts with members and on-site activities are handled by the provincial organizations. Members are owners, caretakers and managers of heritage sites of which approximately 60% are listed and 40% non-listed. Provincialy organized commissions with a diverse range of stakeholders assess the heritage significance before a non-listed site can be accepted as a member. Members pay a modest annual subscription fee. Only site visits are charged for (per hour) but these fees are substantially under the real cost.

Public financial support and private response

Approximately 10% of the income is generated through subscription. The rest is provided by subsidies from both the five provinces and the Flemish government. The reasoning behind this heavy subsidizing is twofold. Firstly, charging full cost services would heighten the threshold for membership and therefore hinder the long-term mission. A second reason is the close integration with government policies on heritage conservation. Considering the long-term effect of public investment in heritage conservation, the authorities emphasize local and preventive care to ensure the longevity of cultural heritage. Through promoting preventive conservation and maintenance, public financial support (in particular, huge budgets for major restoration works) is expected to be significantly reduced. Members use the Monumentenwacht reports when applying for grants (46% of the awarded grants are based on these reports) and the government stipulates that all subsidised owners become and remain members to guarantee the sustainability of the investments [Fig. 1]. The Monumentenwacht initiative has proven to be successful and has stimulated a large private response. In 2009, the organization counted approximately 5,600 sites belonging to 3,100 members: the vast majority being private owners (47%), churches (40%) and local authorities (11%).

![Budget for restoration and maintenance grants](image)

**Fig. 1:** The Flemish government distinguishes budgets for ‘maintenance premiums’ and for ‘restoration premiums’. Maintenance and preventive conservation budgets seem to increase at the expense of restorations costs. (© Monumentenwacht Vlaanderen)
Relationship with the established actors

Monumentenwacht has made serious efforts to prove to architects, contractors and conservator-restorers that it is not a competitor. In fact, practice reveals that the organization generates work for these actors. The recommendations and advice comprise many references to specialist profiles and have stimulated the emergence of a genuine ‘maintenance market’, usually of smaller contractors specialized in the maintenance and housekeeping of historic buildings and their contents. Traditionally, managers and owners have much difficulty finding a contractor who is ready, willing and able to carry out these rather modest works. Monumentenwacht also cooperates with the social employment initiatives that provide services such as teams for the housekeeping of church interiors. In addition, specialists call upon Monumentenwacht’s assessments as a supplementary or preparatory step in their own projects. The range of services offered and the approach are simply not available elsewhere in the Flemish heritage field.

Integral and interdisciplinary approach

The Monumentenwacht approach is integral and interdisciplinary as it covers different heritage disciplines. The organization prescribes a holistic approach towards the conservation of heritage sites as ensembles of different types: sites, buildings, ships, movable contents, surroundings and underground structures. The staff consists mainly of architectural assessors who inspect buildings from attic to cellar, inside and outside, with special attention to areas that are less accessible and sensitive to decay (e.g., gutters and roofs). Their methodology draws largely on the Dutch experience. A Flemish innovation from 1997 is the addition of a team of interior assessors. This integral approach towards the built heritage and its interior is once again supported by government policy that includes fixtures, fittings and movable cultural objects in its definition of monuments, both for legal protection as well as for conservation grants. A team of maritime heritage assessors was added in 2007 and in 2009, services were developed for archaeological sites and landscapes.

Team of interior assessors

The team of interior assessors is interdisciplinary and consists of art historians with a degree in conservation in various disciplines (paintings, stone, textile, furniture, paper, etc.). They usually operate in multidisciplinary and generalist teams of two. An advisor for historic interiors at the umbrella organization is mainly dedicated to supporting them and also evaluating and enhancing the quality of their assessments. Tailor-made training is organized regularly and supported by a digital learning platform. Methodologies, guidelines and tools to assist the assessment process, and information on conservation materials and strategies are centrally managed. Quality and consistency of the team’s work are assessed by visitations of the inspections, peer reading of the reports, organizing exchanges between provinces and calibration sessions (all assessors inspect the same interior then advice and reports are compared).

Integral and integrated assessments of the interiors

As a rule, an interior inspection follows an architectural (or a ship) assessment as conservation risks for the interiors are often related to defects of the building envelope and structure. The target for the frequency of architectural inspections is every two or three years; five years is considered feasible for interiors. At a member’s request, an interior team inspects the inside of the structure concerned (school, house, castle, church, site, ship, etc.), the fixed elements (from floor to ceiling) and the movable contents (paintings, sculptures, textiles, metals, archives, books, miscellaneous) as well as any decorative elements or works of art outdoors.

The methodology of the interior assessment can be described as a toolbox approach [Fig. 2]:

- condition and damage assessment. During these visual surveys, the condition is briefly recorded, digitally photographed and rated on a sliding qualitative and verbal scale. The first inspection aims
for concise completeness as it forms a baseline. Particular attention is spent on damage and changes in condition;

- preventive conservation assessment. The assessment of the extent and level of in-house care and housekeeping of the interior is usually carried out through observations and interviews;

- environmental monitoring. The exposure to light, pests and climate conditions is usually measured and quantified, although, out of necessity, this is limited in time and so rather indicative;

- risk assessment. The concise assessment of future conservation risks is gaining importance in the approach: the identification and assessment of potential detrimental effects of light, pollutants and dust, physical forces, theft and vandalism, incorrect relative humidity and temperature, pests, water, fire and dissociation and neglect. Monumentenwacht adopted the principles of Collection Risk Management as developed by ICC-CCI and ICCROM [1].

- All methodologies complement each other and contribute to the understanding of the entire chain of the cause and effect of damage [Fig. 3]. Nevertheless, the integration of their outcomes is not at all straightforward and their respective usefulness in effective conservation planning is questioned further in this paper.

*Fig. 2: The interior assessment combines a visual condition and damage assessment, a preventive conservation assessment, some environmental monitoring and a concise risk assessment. (© Monumentenwacht Vlaanderen)*
Appreciated interventions

The interior assessments usually entail intense communication with local custodians, caretakers and managers. Much appreciated are the interventions carried out by the teams, fully equipped with conservation, access and safety material. Sometimes ‘test interventions’ are carried out to determine the most appropriate treatment and materials; e.g., cleaning tests. Another type of intervention is the ‘opportunity intervention’. Since the teams often inspect places and objects that are barely or not accessible for local caretakers, a minor intervention such as removing debris and dirt can make a big difference [Fig. 4]. Occasionally, the teams carry out an ‘emergency intervention’ to prevent further damage [Fig. 5]. So-called ‘example interventions’, such as on-site training, participatory workshops and demonstrations of housekeeping and preventive conservation strategies, are usually perceived as the most effective way to implement recommendations [Fig. 6].
Fig. 4: Some interiors assessors are trained in industrial rope climbing techniques to access barely accessible zones such as altar crowns. (© Monumentenwacht Vlaams-Brabant)

Fig. 5: Typical examples of ‘emergency interventions’ are the temporary fixing of flaking paint, the dismantling of unstable elements, or localised pest treatment (© Monumentenwacht Provincie Antwerpen).

Fig. 6: Recurring example interventions are, for example, the polishing of metals and wood (© Monumentenwacht Vlaanderen)
Interiors and objects in context and in use

Conservation is rarely the immediate task of Monumentenwacht members, and is rarely supported by professional staff or structural budgets. Few sites are registered as museums, or have conservation policy documents or are guided by standards or benchmarks for collection care. In this context, best museum practices are often inapplicable even though objects often are of ‘museum importance’. In most sites, the interiors and contents are in use, thereby contributing to its heritage significance, and the integrity of the ensemble is frequently high. This underlines specific aspects of conservation strategies. Preserving the significance of the ensemble is the main goal and sometimes dominates over the preservation of its parts. Significant local use and traditional care are valorised and merged with preventive conservation strategies to the greatest extent possible. This is not always straightforward, especially in churches where appreciation of signs of age, deterioration or material authenticity is sometimes low [Fig. 7].

Fig. 7: Merging conservation strategies with in-house care is not always straightforward. For instance, advice for conserving historic floors often means discouraging traditional invasive and/or popular commercial treatments that aim to make them ‘as new’. (© Monumentenwacht Provincie Antwerpen)

Redundant religious heritage

Although religious organisations constitute only 40% of members, the vast majority of the interior assessments are carried out in religious sites. There are multiple reasons for this, ranging from private owners’ lack of familiarity with these services, to provincial heritage policies emphasizing the importance of religious heritage and favouring those members most usually in need of support. The conservation of
this heritage is a major challenge in Flanders: it is prolific and becoming redundant in a rapidly secularizing society. Sensitive re-use of buildings is a challenging but already explored theme: far more problematic is the preservation of the interiors with their fixtures, fittings and movable objects (some town churches contain thousands). The number of volunteer caretakers is decreasing dramatically, as are other resources. The situation of textiles appears particularly distressing. Many fell out of use after the second Vatican Council, precipitating a loss of understanding and appreciation, and consequently fell prey to major deterioration (Figure 8). Monumentenwacht cooperated in a regional research project to assess the significance and state of these collections. It organises on-site training, developed fact sheets with clear handling and work instructions, participates in regionally organised workshops, and devotes a publication to the care of religious textiles. In spite of the fact that these efforts are probably a drop in the ocean, Monumentenwacht plays a prominent role as an indicator of future challenges and major risks in heritage conservation.

Figure 8: A challenge for the conservation of historic church interiors in Flanders: redundant religious textiles in garbage bags on the attic (© Monumentenwacht Vlaams-Brabant)

Lack of capacity
When returning on subsequent inspections, the assessors sometimes find the situation unchanged or changed for the worse. A lack of resources and sometimes interest by owners or local decision-makers is hard to overcome. Keeping local caretakers engaged requires many social skills and great patience and is simply not always successful. Finding and keeping skilled interior assessors is a challenge in itself. They have to be willing and able to shift skill sets:

- specialisation and hands-on practice to generalist assessments;
• intellectual ambitions to social aspirations;
• the safe, professional environment of a museum to challenging communication with amateurs in the world outside;
• ‘ideal’ standards and best practices to feasible minimum strategies;
• an in-depth relation with one single artwork to the superficial acquaintance with thousands of objects.

The number of members has increased to the extent that the demand largely exceeds the capacity of the interiors team of ten. From the heritage professional’s point of view, carrying out 30 interior assessments a year per assessor is praiseworthy enough, but from the point of view of the organization, it barely suffices. Interior assessments take much more time than the architectural assessments; a site easily contains hundreds to thousands of separate elements, comprising a huge range of materials and techniques. Furthermore, the process is more dependent on time-consuming communication with in-house caretakers and local communities. Increasing time devoted to consultation and in-depth follow-up has been found to significantly improve the effectiveness and sustainability of the assessors’ recommendations – and their job satisfaction.

Monumentenwacht faces a huge dilemma: should it enhance productivity and speed to support more members or consolidate and expand in-depth support of some (usually the most cooperative) members? Since 2007, the twins of quantity/quality and productivity/effectiveness of the interior assessments have been closely examined by the organisation. The consideration has focused mainly on the impact of the time-consuming assessment reports.

Sledgehammer blow reports

The assessment reports are meant to be crucial documents in the member’s conservation and maintenance planning. However, the list of recommendations is often overwhelming: a long list of conservation activities to be carried out by specialists; a much longer list of cyclic housekeeping activities and of strategies devised to prevent, detect, block or mitigate probable detrimental effects. Reality strikes: not enough local resources (funding, staff, etc) to deal with them all at once. Members sometimes feel discouraged by these ‘sledgehammer blow’ reports. When the main goal is to prevent future deterioration and heritage loss, the crucial question should be: what is most worrying and what to do first? Currently, this crucial and legitimate question is not always answered adequately due to the assessment methodology (Meul 2007). Condition assessments provide information on an interior’s current condition, but not so much on future risks. As the actual condition of an object is not always immediately related to the degree of urgency of response, condition assessments do not allow clear prioritising of conservation strategies, nor the environmental data. How exactly worrying are the quantified data of revealed agents of deterioration? And what is most urgent: installation of UV-screens on windows, climate control, or pest management? Effective conservation planning needs a reasoned and reasonable ranking of priorities and therefore it should be based increasingly on risk assessment in the toolbox approach. From the perspective of preventive conservation, the urgency of a strategy should be based on the notion of risk of loss of heritage (not only on the actual condition). Risk assessment is characterized by this predictive approach: assessing probable damage in the future by identifying and assessing causes of damage and the potential for deterioration.

MAKSin and risk and value based priority ranking

Monumentenwacht has recently introduced a priority ranking of recommended conservation strategies based on a simple (and simplifying) decision-making matrix with four parameters using qualitative, verbal scales of magnitude:
• the effect of consequential damage from current defects (from the condition survey) and of the agents of deterioration (from the risk assessment);

• a health and safety indicator: to what extent people (inhabitants and users) are at risk when actions are deferred;

• the frequency of incidents or speed of the expected decay: is it stable or not? How fast or how often will further loss occur? Although the rated conditions are not a parameter in the matrix, comparing condition assessment data over the course of time can provide this third parameter. The repeated assessments are invaluable in monitoring the speed of change;

• the heritage significance of the affected element. What is its relative importance to the significance of the whole ensemble? In the past, this was only occasionally and then vaguely incorporated in the condition scores, causing ambiguity. Currently, Monumentenwacht aims to make this value assessment explicit by introducing a sliding scale of relative importance as a priority parameter. This implies consultation with local caretakers and incorporating the point of view of many stakeholders.

In 2007, Monumentenwacht started building a database (MAKSin) to facilitate the recording, management and reporting of the assessment information with these main goals in mind:

• to apply consistently the risk and value based decision-making matrix for sharper priority ranking

• to make the assessment data of all 5600 member buildings consistent and (re)searchable for a better indication of large scale conservation risks and challenges;

• to integrate data of the architectural/structural assessments, thus reinforcing the integral monitoring of sites;

• to achieve methodological improvement by merging procedures and outcomes of condition and damage surveys, environmental monitoring and risk assessment;

• to reduce time required for recording and reporting by assessors, thus freeing time to support more members and/or to contribute more time to workshops and follow-up;

• to diversify input (recording) and output (reporting) so that tailor-made and diversified reporting is possible which should avoid the sledgehammer blow effect.

Conclusion

Internationally, the model of the Monumentenwacht organisations is being considered as a feasible strategy for implementing preventive conservation for immovable heritage [2]. Monumentenwacht Vlaanderen advocates in particular the integral approach for the conservation of historic interiors and on-site collections outside the museum context, using a toolbox of methodologies and relying on local caretakers’ participation in preventive conservation and housekeeping. There is a need for wider discussion on the challenges faced in this specific field of interiors in use, in particular for (redundant) religious heritage places. The same applies for the strategic choice between intensifying advice and follow-up for a few cooperative members or extending the quantity of support to more. Some good is expected from MAKSin, a report database that facilitates value and risk based prioritization, enabling conservation strategies to focus more sharply on those parts most valued and most at risk.

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Endnotes:

[2] Similar organizations emerged in Europe and the UNESCO chair in Preventive Conservation was allocated to the partnership Catholic University of Louvain (RLICC), The University of Cuenca and Monumentenwacht Vlaanderen.

References:


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