Who | Institutional Profile

Institution	<u>Domain & Royal Museum of Mariemont</u>
Location	Morlanwelz, Belgium
Short Description	The Domain & Royal Museum of Mariemont is an important European 'lieu de mémoire' boasting a rich history which dates back to the mid-16th century. Classified as an exceptional heritage site of Wallonia in 2003, Mariemont has two levels of heritage importance: the domain itself, related to the major events, cultural trends and personalities of European history of the last 500 years; and the museum collections of world heritage artefacts, initiated by a visionary businessman and philanthropist connected to the European industrial revolution, including rare works of the level only found in top world museums. At the heart of the domain lie the ruins of a Neoclassical princely castle built atop the foundations of previous governing residencies, soon to be accessible as an archaeological garden. The Museum is today the property of the French Community of Belgium and its sole research institution.
Ownership	Public
Size	95 FTEs	50,000 visitors a year

Approach to Digital	*Input by Kathleen Louw* Our museum's essential IT needs (computer hardware, basic operational software, maintenance, training, helpdesk) are met by the IT department of our tutelage organisation, the French Community of Belgium (Fédération-Wallonie Bruxelles or FWB), an administration overseeing a network of schools, universities, cultural centres, sports centres, research centres, justice houses and our museum, in the entire Francophone Belgium. One FTE in our museum is an IT specialist, who acts in liaison with the FWB and assists with daily IT issues. Our operational budget is also almost entirely dependent on this authority. The Museum's 7 conservators, several administrators, mediation and IT staff had developed, starting 2004, a working group 'numérisation'. They lobbied for investment in objects digitalisation, internet site development, collections management tools, innovative communication. The group existed off and on, depending on successive leadership's support, the digital initiatives undertaken, or not, and the hopes for budgets raised, or dashed. Indeed, past museum leadership tended to be in favour of more digital as long as it did not cost anything. This made it difficult for the group members to stay motivated. None of them had time to look for funding. With this rather unfocused digital approach, the museum experimented in a haphazard way and according to various opportunities presented: digital mapping, interactive videos, VR, basic tour applications, 3D scanning, tactile tables, as part of collections management, cultural mediation or temporary exhibitions. As of today, the museum does not have a digital strategy, nor a specific digital innovation budget, nor an innovation space, nor a defined link with the long-term strategy, priorities

and values of the Institution, which are just now to be discussed internally, starting from an institutional SWOT analysis. This is what the DOORS pilot project hoped to advance a little.

Digital priorities in the institution today manifest in these forms: conservators, when developing the annual temporary exhibitions, are expected to dedicate some exhibition budget to the inclusion of interactive digital tools inside the exhibition, but a target budget or percentage is not defined; camera equipment is purchased for 3D exhibition filming, but there is no discussion as to whether this will generate the most optimal digital products, experience and for whom; a new website is being developed by the FWB IT department since 2021, which should include CRM capabilities for automated features currently performed manually, but there has been no exercise of defining the institutional values and priorities which will anchor the website content and the request for an independent CRM than that of the FWB is causing delays.

The fears of the digital vary greatly within the institution: some conservators and image specialists (audiovisual, photography) are open and interested in the power of digital technologies. Our communication staff is not up to date on the latest audience segmentation techniques or social media language developments. Our administrative and logistical staff tend to still work using archaic document management methodologies; some are reluctant to introduce new digital platforms, scared that this represents a multiplication of interfaces to deal with. Our cultural mediation department, after expressing fears about the invasive and overpowering nature of the digital vis à vis objects, is now more ready to envision trilingual labels made easier with digital solutions, and the presence of sound and image inside the permanent collections.

The museum is well aware of the need, and challenge, to advance equally and in tandem the internal digital maturity and sophistication of the digital experience offered to visitors.

The immediate expectations after the completion of the DOORS pilot are: an approved benchmark annual budget for digital innovation and development expenses not covered by the IT department of our tutelage organisation; the future hire of an in-house junior digitally-savvy and flexible specialist who can problem-solve, help raise the level of work processes in all departments (accounting to registrar to fundraising), and ably and technically engage external digital service providers; and the establishment of a physical innovation space or bubble within the office building.

The long-term dream is to launch coherent immersive stories – digital and physical – anchored in the 7 collections and powerfully recounting the 500 years of history of the Mariemont domain; to engage ecosystemic, national and worldwide audiences in an efficient digital manner; and to co-create at the museum and in the domain a setting of needed low and high tech for learning, sharing, contemplation and play.

What | Case

Project Title	Mariemont 3D: A New User Approach and Visitor Experience
Timeframe	January 2023 - July 2023

Concept & Approach	The project started from both a fact – several disks of objects' 3D scans sitting on a shelf since 2017 – and a long-known problem – little interest on the part of park visitors and youth to enter our museum (a space not for them?) or our exhibitions, often criticised as too static.
	A cross-department team imagined inventing a new creative and interactive experience prototype starting from our set of 20 3D scans of the museum's most emblematic objects, to attract new audiences to the permanent collections displays.

Promotion of Portes du Passe application, Mariemont

The visitor downloads on a smartphone an easy application at the museum ticketing desk and is invited to search for three objects, discovering along the way via intermediary objects, the Table arts of Imperial China, Funerary rituals of Ancient Egypt and the Power of Greek Gods. Upon reaching the searched object, a sound and image device is activated to reveal, in a 3-minute segment (including 3D imagery), the real story of this object, all the way to its arrival in the museum. The entire experience, in all three collections, lasts approximately 45 minutes and is a significant improvement in the interactivity of the museum collections. The experience includes feedback questions on the experience.

In order to follow the DOORS teachings, which advocated the importance of audience analysis, we included in our pilot project such a component: design thinking focus groups with a sample of representatives from our museum ecosystem (including park visitors and Friends of Mariemont) aimed at generating proposals for changes at the museum and domain, based on their needs; and a quantitative analysis of 'non-audiences', those not participating in cultural offers, taking the case of Mariemont domain audience. Thanks to a collaboration with the FWB's Observatory of Cultural Policies, we will be able to once and for all assess the numbers of Mariemont domain visitors, and better grasp their demographics, and their needs.

The focus groups with 30 representatives of the museum ecosystem developed 12 propositions for the museum, ranging from mobility to communication to autonomisation of audiences, to ecological management of the green spaces.

Ecosystem sessions, Mariemont

Wordcloud - What makes me come to Mariemont, Mariemont

| | Finally, because our institution is large, complex, dependant on FWB, and has been playing with digital technologies without a long-term vision for a while, we added a basic, forward-thinking exercise of institutional reflexion on how to develop a sound long term institutional digital strategy in the future, with business architecture analysis, brainstorming on Mariemont digital storytelling ideas for the future, and setting benchmark digital budget and staffing figures.

The first brainstorming with the museum conservators on digital storytelling for the 7 collection resulted in tangible and creative ideas, with suggestions on possible coherent linking narratives, or starting points (notably the place/weight to give to the founder of the museum, 19th century collector Raoul Warocqué). This is to be built on with later successive discussions integrated into the major collections revamping effort (starting next year thanks to the 3 m EUR donation). |
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| **Benefits & Impact** | **Short-term impact**

• 15 internal staff engaged, out of 70 (not counting our 25 guards), from the three poles of the institution (research, public, logistics)
• 6 external digital service providers engaged ([Hovertone](), [Metamorphosis Consulting]())
• 5 Brussels authority (FWB) experts mobilised for advice, analysis, support, who now see Mariemont in a very favourable light, as welcoming innovation and digital technologies, and who helped solve a blocked particular situation vis à vis the new CRM to come with our new website.
• One new 3D experience prototype developed: 'Portes du Passé: Les Objets révèlent leur histoire' ('Doors of the Past: Objects reveal their Stories'), engaging 3 out of 7 Museum collections.
• 7 central Belgium museums were invited on July 5 to test the application prototype and comment on it.
• The project leads to a future quantitative study of non-audiences, i.e. Mariemont domain audiences who do not enter the museum.
• Dozens of visitor responses to the survey included in the application Portes du Passé, with elements informing the museum on visitor's digital expectations.
• A final report centralising the museum past digital initiatives and presenting the DOORS project – and recommendations for a future digital strategy. The idea is that this report is a future reference source and log book for the continuation of the digital transition strategy.

Long-term impact

• Realisation that the museum communication has not been working for our proximity audiences, since the ecosystem audiences say they are aware of programming and cultural initiatives designed by the museum after the facts, or not at all. This will lead to revised methods of communication, hopefully using digital technologies, applications etc.
• Appreciation of and future recourse to design thinking methodologies and the collective intelligence of transversal teams when developing a new project, not used at Mariemont before
• Improved relations with ecosystem audiences
• Improved knowledge on who are our audiences, for more targeted communication and programming
• Greater readiness to establish the desired permanent citizen committee and an efficient digital communication method to reach them
• Understanding of the need to integrate digital technologies AS PART OF collections scenography revamping
• Increased acceptance of videos in the collections. Independently but during this project, Mariemont installed a video and sound installation of Ukrainian artists, on the looting of the Kherson regional museum.
• Less fear of the digital on the part of the cultural mediation team (responsible for guiding and labels)
• Understanding of the 4 pillars of our strategy: data, resources, users, collaborators; of the need to build business capabilities, and of the necessary shift to Mode 2 of working (exponential, light, cooperative, value creation, trial/error, small teams) |

Limits & Drawbacks	• Language barriers Francophone Belgium does not evolve well in Anglophone networks. This has resulted in the unwillingness (or discouragement) on the part Mariemont staff, except for myself, to take part in the numerous webinars offered by DOORS or engage with fellow DOORS projects directly. • Time availability The DOORS project has regularly been singled out for taking too much of people's time, because in essence it was a project added to their already heavy workload. This is the problem with EU projects in general within institutions. The relatively short period of Stage 2 likely has something to do with this. There was a sense DOORS imposed too much (deliverables, deadlines) on the institution. Therefore at this time, the idea of dedicating staff time (a % of monthly hours) to innovation is not something the leadership endorses as feasible. • Institutional resistance to a dedicated digital budget Our 2024 budget does not foresee the finalisation of the prototype nor a small margin for other digital improvements, unless unspent resources appear at a later stage of the year. Reducing standard expenses to prioritise a new digital budget line did not seem possible. I The new website in development and the digital included in temporary exhibitions has been referred to as evidence that Mariemont does invest in the digital annually, although such investments have no figures attached/committed. • Difficulty imagining what a prototype would look like until we see it, therefore difficulty calibrating the press release communication (not overdoing it or making it too short). • Our DSP's ultimate inability to implement the full digital prototype as envisioned in the design thinking sessions, due to time and budget limitations on their end, and our inability to foresee this. The application development, scannable imagery and the extent of content development (across three collections) took too much DSP development time (while its lead was Covid-absent for a month). The regrettable aspect of this is that the element of the prototype supposed to attract audiences from the park (through creative window animation), was dropped, and so the objective of attracting park visitors to the museum was missed. • The complexity of working with applications: issues of compatibility with various smartphones and playstores, the time needed for validation of applications. • Continuing the momentum In Mariemont's case there is the 3 m EUR donation for collections revamping which will cover digital technologies, but this will not start till 2025 at earliest and no % budget set. There is a fear of losing the momentum and motivation of the team until then, to keep fighting for innovation, new ideas, unless this grant is publicly announced soon, and the planning and research work can start. Furthermore, there needs to be a digital champion in the institution, to keep that agenda going.
Future Prospects	The project sparked other digital improvements in the museum, such as the evident understanding of and willingness to employ digital labelling to accommodate trilingual objects descriptions. Our photographer was trained in photogrammetry as part of this project and will start designing new exclusive imagery using 3D objects, for communication support such as posters, announcements, teasers etc. Cultural mediation staff enrolled in new training on how to co-programme with proximity audiences. Mariemont has recently been designated the beneficiary of a private 3 m EUR donation destined to be invested in the restaging of its collections. Digital technologies can therefore be invested in as part of this grant, which is great news. And digital storytelling brainstorming started under DOORS will continue and lead to concrete implementations. Thanks to DOORS, Mariemont knows the importance of incorporating digital technologies as part of this scenography renewal, and not after.

	In parallel to the expected visitor experience improvements, Mariemont will need to focus on the digital for its internal functioning and processes. This is heavy work and requires an inhouse motivated digital champion.
Key Take-Aways	- Wondering if we chose the right focus to spend our grant on. Some staff (not involved in the project) question the development of an app for use in the collections. And from the feedback from ecosystem audiences, gained later in the project, it is clear that investing in better communication methods with the ecosystem would have been a very useful pilot project too…. This is the next development to tackle! - Not waiting "to be institutionally ready" to start taking on digital technologies. Once in a project, and despite time and other constraints, concepts do become clearer, interest sparks, allies appear, situations unlock, colleagues involved outdo themselves, change happens, even seamlessly. - The importance of staying connected to a network and building a pool of interesting potential digital service providers. We will miss the regular webinar offerings and patient attention of DOORS. It is important to stay connected on a regular basis to other museums' digital developments and to be inspired by other museums' work, by connecting to a network. Either NEMO or in our case, France-based CLIC, which provide news, webinars, museum visits, all in French. And finding one expert person as reference for advice when needed. - Working with digital service providers who know your museum, language, culture, and setting clear deliverable parameters - Having one innovation-minded 'champion' on your team with the energy to keep the digital momentum going, for visitors and staff alike - Investing in agile methodology training - Focusing on 'business capabilities': the institutional capacity to reach objectives via a combination of staff, processes and technologies - Balancing the high tech and low tech needs. From our ecosystem consultations, Mariemont observed the significance of needs for lowtech, calm, zen, space to reconnect with one's self. We also know that Generation Z does not want to pay for/invest financially in digital experiences. Therefore a future challenge, and interesting topic, may be the quest for subtle, calming, non-invasive, yet attractive digital technologies in the museum spaces. This happens to correspond well with the desires of the conservators to not let the digital overpower the objects. Achieving this delicate balance in a sustainable form, in the collections spaces and in other public spaces of the museum, and in the domain, will be an interesting exercise, to be conceived holistically. Already, realising that we need not replicate exactly what others do and can aim our own solutions is a powerful perspective. In hindsight, and in an ideal world, Mariemont would have loved a one-year DOORS project (perhaps phase 1-2 combined) including the possibility of hosting a DOORS digital advocate inhouse for personalised support.
Involved Parties	- Hovertone (app and digital content design and installation) - Metamorphosis Consulting (collective intelligence sessions with ecosystem) - Oliver Schneider, Innovation & Transversal, FWB, Belgium (digital strategy advice) - Kellyn Salles, 3Dscans, FWB, Belgium (participant in design thinking sessions) - Eric Trillet, Business architecture, FWB, Belgium (mapping Mariemont architecture of skills and IT gaps) - Christophe Malfroid, Innovation, FWB, Belgium (innovation advice) Our cross-department core team of 12 committed staff members of the Mariemont Museum