



Good practice: giving the past a future by involving younger generations

A sound collaboration between Suriname and the Netherlands

This article focuses on a good practice developed during a long-term collaboration between Suriname and the Netherlands, surrounding the sustainable conservation and use of “sounding heritage” (in Dutch, *klinkend erfgoed*). Sounding heritage refers here to historical objects that produce sound, such as pipe organs, carillons, ringing bells and tower clocks. These can be used to play and make music and to mark the time. Suriname was a colony of the Netherlands until 1975, during which time churches and other buildings were constructed that house many elements of this sounding heritage. This project is in its final stages and has been carried out within the Shared Cultural Heritage programme of the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE). One practice that has been particularly successful is the focus on the role of young people in the sustainable conservation and use of Suriname’s sounding heritage.



Rudi van Straten conducts research of the Bätz organ in the Maarten Lutherkerk, together with Nancy Goede, organist of this church (photo: Stephen Fokké).



During the demonstration of the “Orgelkids organ” at the RK Choir School in Paramaribo (photo: Stephen Fokké).

The starting point was 2004, when the director of the Stichting Gebouwd Erfgoed Suriname (Surinamese Built Heritage Foundation or SGES), Stephen Fokké, contacted the RCE to request advice regarding the restoration of the historical clock and bell of the tower of the Ministry of Finances building, in Paramaribo. This led to an inventory project, whereby Rudi van Straten, the RCE’s specialist on sounding heritage, travelled to Suriname in 2014 to map and evaluate the state of conservation of the city’s sounding heritage. This was done together with the SGES and other stakeholders, and resulted in an [extended publication](#). After this successful collaboration, the Surinamese and Dutch partners decided to set up together a long-term plan for the conservation of Paramaribo’s sounding heritage.

Developing a locally embedded trajectory

The starting point of this project was the development of a six-year plan. An understanding of the local context (its needs, interests, possibilities and limitations) was essential in this process, and it was made possible by the fact that the Surinamese and Dutch partners worked closely together from the start. Suriname is a country where financial means for heritage conservation are limited, and it has a very young population. Many of the objects of sounding heritage in Paramaribo are located in churches. In the Netherlands, (Catholic and Protestant) church attendance has for long been in decline and churches are increasingly [losing their function as spaces of worship](#). Contrastingly, in Suriname, a very diverse country in [terms of religion](#), there is a [large Christian community](#) and church attendance is high, including of young people. The decision to focus on

the role of young people in the development of the conservation plan stemmed from an understanding of the local context in which this heritage is embedded.



Raphael Snijders, a Surinamese organist, learns how to measure organ pipes. He joined the project in 2016 as a volunteer, interested in learning more about pipe organ documentation (photo: Stephen Fokké).

Involving multiple stakeholders in multiple (interconnected) strategies

The conservation plan had one main goal: to establish the basis for the sustainable and long-term conservation and use of Suriname's sounding heritage through local capacity building. It was divided into multiple stages that focused on different elements: training and capacity building in conservation techniques; management and monitoring the state of repair of the historical objects; responsible use of the historical objects; creation of a local support base and of educational programmes.

Many stakeholders were involved in this project, including churches (such as the Evangelisch Lutherse Kerk Suriname and the Rooms Katholieke Kerk), governmental departments (such as the Directoraat Onderwijs en Cultuur), education institutions (including music schools and other schools and universities), and from the heritage sector (besides the RCE and the SGES, the Monumentencommissie and the Dutch Platform Klinkend Erfgoed). At the start of the project, the Dutch and Surinamese partners decided that the [Vereniging Klinkend Erfgoed Suriname](#) (Foundation for Sounding Heritage Suriname) should be created

to coordinate the connections between stakeholders and partners, and to ensure that the goals and strategies set out in the plan would be carried out and maintained in the long-term. The foundation was officially established last year.

Engaging and involving younger generations

This heritage conservation plan had at its core the participation of local young people in all of its phases. To ensure their participation, a twofold strategy was carried out. On the one hand, a capacity building programme in heritage conservation techniques was developed, to ensure the transfer of knowledge and skills necessary for the long-term conservation of sounding heritage in Suriname. On the other hand, it was important to raise young people's awareness for and stimulate their interest in this heritage, to ensure that it would remain socially relevant. These two strategies were interconnected and ran parallel to each other.

Regarding conservation, it was necessary to find young craftsmen/women that would be interested in and available to be trained and to learn specific techniques of working with metal and wooden objects. The Surinamese partners had the essential task of identifying young people to become involved in this stage of the project. Some of the apprentices involved came from the carpentry school in Paramaribo, since its students are required to carry out internships to gain experience. The Dutch partners, Rudi van Straten and professionals from the company [Pels & Van Leeuwen](#), travelled several times to Suriname to transfer their knowledge of conservation techniques to young local people. Alongside conservation, it was also necessary to identify stakeholders and volunteers who would be able to manage these objects and monitor their state of conservation in the long-term.



A workshop during which the Orgelkids organ was introduced at the Maarten Lutherkerk in Paramaribo, in February 2020 (photo: Ernst Terborg).

Regarding the second strategy, many different initiatives were carried out to create or widen the support base for sounding heritage amongst younger generations. Connections were made with existing music institutions (such as the Conservatorium), now enabling students to learn and practice using these instruments. The partners also invited young people to use these instruments of sounding heritage, in ways and forms that are relevant to them. This involved playing the musical instruments themselves, but also producing content to share on social media. YouTube is a particularly popular channel used by young people in Suriname to share their interests and experiences with others. This bottom-up approach – allowing young people to choose how they engage with this heritage – proved very successful.

Other initiatives were set up, such as the creation of an “organ and clock day” and “open days” for schools to visit churches and other buildings, for young people to learn about the history of these objects. The [Orgelkids organ](#) (a type of miniature organ) was demonstrated at the RK Choir School and students took turns in learning how to play it (see photo above). Rudi van Straten gave a lecture to the students of Cultural History at the Anton de Kom University about sounding heritage, and several tours at different sites where he shared information about the history of the objects and the buildings. During visits, the students were also encouraged to try out the instruments. This strategy to involve young people in this type of heritage has allowed for it to become or remain (socially) relevant for and valued by a larger group of



Rafael van Ommeren carries out restoration work on parts of the organ in the Maarten Lutherkerk in Paramaribo (photo: Peter van Rumpt, organ restorer).

people in the present. This in turn has ensured that these objects will continue being taken care of in the future. In other words, the involvement of young people in the conservation and the use of these historical objects means that the sustainable preservation of this heritage is possible, and that it remains embedded and valued in its local context today.

Reciprocal learning practices

The Dutch partners contributed with their experience of developing large-scale and long-term heritage conservation plans, and their knowledge of the conservation and maintenance skills specific to sounding heritage. Many of these instruments are of Dutch origin and the Netherlands contains many other such examples, meaning that a lot of expertise about them is to be found there. The Surinamese partners were essential for the appropriate imbedding of this plan in the local context. Their knowledge of local needs, interests, possibilities and limitations, and their professional networks, were essential for carrying out the plan in practice. It was the Surinamese partners’ knowledge of the local context that led to the decision to involve young people in the conservation plan, which ended up being a great success within this project. The Dutch partners learnt a lot from their Surinamese counterparts about engaging broad and especially young audiences in heritage conservation projects.



During one of the excursions about sounding heritage in Paramaribo, in the Maarten Lutherkerk in 2015 (photo: Rudi van Straten).

Translating this approach into other contexts

The particular intangible character of sounding heritage is unique in that it can continue being used today for playing contemporary music and marking time. Thus translating the approach developed throughout this project into the conservation of other forms of (tangible) heritage – such as historical buildings or archaeological sites – might be more challenging. Nonetheless, this approach has

the potential to be translatable into other geographical contexts, such as the Netherlands. Although there are many elements of sounding heritage in the country, young people are often not involved in their use nor in their maintenance. Rudi van Straten has therefore been encouraging his Dutch colleagues to apply a similar approach there, in order to prevent much of this heritage to become obsolete.



“Orgelkids organ” at the RK Choir School is demonstrated and students take turns in playing it (photo: Stephen Fokké).

Questions?

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