

Public Access

Visible and Visitable Storage: An Evolving Phenomenon

TEKSTI: JOHN GAYER

For several decades museums have been working to break a common perception of being too secretive about what they do. This, in turn, has generated diverse initiatives to be more transparent. For example, between 1988 and 2006 the Luce Foundation supported the creation of visible storage displays, three of which are in New York City and one in Washington, D.C. The New York Times, which reported on this way of making thousands of previously inaccessible objects accessible, addressed the topic in a humorous fashion by calling them walk-in closets (Bohlen, 2001). Other methods encompass distributing municipal art collections throughout city offices, digitising images for online viewing and offering tours of museum storage centres. Situating pop-up conservation studios in exhibition spaces also exposes visitors to what conservators do. Introducing window walls as a means of exposing conservation studios, launching YouTube channels, and producing television series represent additional ways of highlighting behind-the-scenes activities. The BBC-Open University collaboration, *Secrets of the Museum* (2020–), is a prime example of the latter. It chronicles the processes of acquisition, conservation, transporting artworks, curating, design and exhibition management at the Victoria & Albert Museum. As of 2022, three seasons of the series have already aired.

Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen is not a museum!

But with the opening of Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam in November 2021, a new standard has been set. The landmark building – designed by MVRDV architects in the shape of an oversize mirror-clad bowl – has been billed as the world's first storage facility granting public access to a museum's entire collection. While large windows allow visitors to peek into storage vaults, conservation studios, the packing area, transfer area and acclimation zone, the building also includes several presentation galleries. Here, I was able to view an exhibition that lays out the Depot's story and a new display system being tested. These spaces will also be used to demonstrate various tasks and host tutorials, such as one on the principles of collecting and collection care. Though one must take a tour to physically visit storage vaults and other workspaces, members of the public can make requests to view specific works in the privacy of one of two study rooms.

Touring the Depot verifies that the seven-story structure has been expertly divided between public areas – the ground floor and atrium that forms the building's central core – and work zones. Visitor access is, therefore, effe-



Foto: Jeroen van der Meer

Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen and Pipilotti Rist's external video installation *Wasting Life On You* (2021)

ctively controlled. The collection, which numbers 151,000 works, contains numerous objects of note. It, for example, holds one of three existing versions of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Tower of Babel* (c. 1568) and distinguished exemplars of modern design. The latter includes Futuro (1968), Matti Suuronen's prefabricated, portable ski chalet, and Frank O. Gehry's playful Vitra Wiggle Side Chair (1972). The thing is, don't expect to see them on



Middle school students visiting Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen.

your visit. The Depot's prime purpose is to highlight the collection, not specific works. Warnings posted on the Depot's webpage and at its entrance proclaim: 'The Depot is not a museum.'

For visitors unfamiliar with the variety that characterises museum collections, viewing must be a fragmented experience. Unlike survey exhibitions, which tend to be chronologically ordered, the collection is organised according to the objects' size, material makeup and environmental needs. For this reason, The Depot supports five storage climates. Moreover, viewing windows only provide good views of the objects that are closest to them. While spotting items such as Ettore Sottsass' Carlton bookcase, Wieki Somers Bathboat and pieces of Aino Aalto glassware afford satisfaction, one expects to see more. Most of the vaults' contents are hidden by row upon row of object-filled shelves or movable screens. Visitor-activated time-controlled lighting also helps to limit viewing.

An app, digital displays, and the richly illustrated Depot Boijmans van Beuningen publication (Coelen, et al., 2021) supply a substantial amount of background information that works to compensate for the viewing deficit. The app, which was designed to prompt active viewing through an interactive experience, won the International Aca-

demy of Digital Arts and Sciences' Webby Award in the Apps and Software Art, Culture and Events 2022 category. At the same time, handouts and printed info panels are absent.

The atrium is defined by hard surfaces that tend to reflect sound. Clear glass panels accentuate the steel beam skeleton, floor, and walls, which have been realised in neutral pale greys. The glass encases the elevator shafts and, as railings along the space's terraces and stairs, provides safety. Moving from floor to floor via the labyrinthian zigzag of stairs – an element al-

Museum collection highlights: test stage in Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen.



Foto: Lutz Schöcher

uding to Giovanni Batista Piranesi's etchings – provides multiple perspectives of the cases' contents. Moreover, thirteen large glass display cases, suspended at different levels, hold curated selections of furniture, ceramics, decorative glass, office machines, light fixtures, paintings, and sculptures. They not only provide more to see, but also help to animate this tall and narrow space. Regardless, the atrium maintains a shopping mall-like character.

In one of the presentation galleries reconstructed versions of Lino Bo Bardi's so-called 'crystal' easels are under review. Originally introduced in the 1960s at Museo de arte de São Paulo (MASP), these unique free-standing glass supports expose both sides of paintings. Seeing works by Rembrandt van Rijn, Edvard Munch and Jean-Michel Basquiat in this context dramatically changes the artwork-viewer relationship.

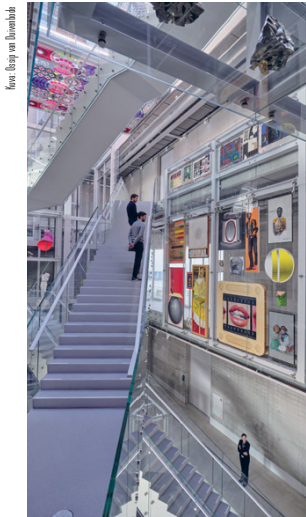
Among the few workspaces located away from the atrium are the second-floor conservation studios. They are situated along the building's northern perimeter to be able to access indirect natural light and can be reached via an auxiliary corridor. Unfortunately, this part of my visit dupli-

ated earlier experiences in museums where conservation studios have been put on show. The opportunity of seeing objects being treated in these spaces is a rare one.

Visible Collections: An Overview

In his introduction to Depot Boijmans van Beuningen, (Coelen et al., 2021), Museum Director Sjarel Ex cites the 17th century Wunderkammer and Sir John Soane's house museum, which was established in London in 1815, as inspiration. What distinguishes such forerunners is that everything in the collection was on display. This contrasts sharply with many of today's museums, which on average can only exhibit about seven percent of their holdings. Ex also cites the positive responses to the behind-the-scenes Saturday afternoon events that Museum Boijmans van Beuningen once hosted.

Atrium, Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen.



North American First Nations People's masks, Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver (1982).

Sandra Kisters, Head of Collections and Research, notes other influences in her chapter "The Collection Within Easy Reach: The Concept of an Open Depot." They include the Brooklyn Museum and New York's Metropolitan Museum – both Luce Foundation projects – and the Victoria & Albert Museum's Glass Gallery, and then clarifies that none of them are storehouses, but compact displays of objects. Another mention is The Hermitage's Staraya Derevnya Restoration and Storage Centre in St. Petersburg, which demonstrates an alternate approach. In her view, the objects are so nicely arranged in display cases or behind glass that the facility is more museum than storage centre. The final reference she makes is to Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen's Open Depot, a 1990 experimental presentation that offered a glimpse of the future. The exhibit, which was fitted with a desk, a computer and two immovable racks of paintings, allowed visitors to search these few artworks using the TINreg database. In doing so, this project echoes the museum's current digitisation project that is steadily increasing the number of works accessible online.

Some, though, see the Louvre as a prime example in the democratisation of art access. The former royal collec-

tion opened to the public in 1795 (Protas, 2019). Others point to the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology (MOA), as the phenomenon's originator (Bohlen, 2001). Opening in Vancouver in 1976, its mandate stipulated that the entire collection be publicly accessible. Since then, more than forty-five museums have instituted various forms of visible storage (Dawes, 2016).

Personally, I recall my 1982 MOA visit with fondness. Exploring its open storage areas was an adventure. Two snapshots of displays of First Nation People's masks provide an indication of the mounting materials in use at the time. The quality of the pegboards and metal wire supports suggests they may have been sourced from a local hardware store. Though display materials were likely upgraded in the intervening years, a 2004 renewal project initiated an extensive reconfiguration of mount-making options. Mounts had to provide greater protection against display drawer vibration, facilitate the movement of objects between storage, gallery and research areas and, since Vancouver is in an earthquake area, mitigate against tremors. Moreover, consultation with community members revealed that some of the mount materials or their placement nullified



Atrium, Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen.

the originating community's cultural values (Honarbakhsh et al., 2011). Over time, the original goal of the entire collection being publicly accessible has become impractical. Forty years after the museum opened, it stood at twenty percent (Dawes, 2016).

During the 1970s, museums were under pressure to provide greater access to their collections. But unlike the MOA, many responded by producing more exhibitions and subjecting greater parts of their collections to travel. This shift in the use of collections did not escape the attention of conservation scientist Nathan Stolow. In his view the traditional priorities of acquisition, conservation and interpretation were being disrupted by two factors. One was the push to decentralise and democratise collections, and the other was the redefinition of museums as educational institutions. He, therefore, recommended that conservation methods be adapted and improved to serve these new objectives. For this reason, exhibition conservators, a new category of specialists who concerned themselves with exhibition and travel related issues, were required. Moreover, other criteria, such as standards

for managing environmental factors, building surveys, condition reports and methods of handling and packing objects for travel, needed to be updated (Stolow, 1977). Today, conservation standards and procedures continue to be analysed and revised as may be necessary. Such information is also tailored and transmitted to visitors in reference to visible storage and the handling of collection objects.

But what do viewers think about increased public access? A literature review done in advance of a study of visitors' perceptions showed there is little consensus (Dawes, 2016). Though some see it as a legitimate means of increasing collection access, others say it fails to encourage viewer interaction and even confuses visitors. Surprisingly, Dawes also discovered that most of these opinions derive from museum professionals. Only a scant amount of research on visitors' perceptions exists. The results of Dawes' study revealed that, while many visitors were not familiar with visible storage before their museum visit, most affirmed it enhanced their experience. Although some were overwhelmed by the number of objects on display, many saw vi-

sible storage as being educational and thought it important that museums increase access to their collections. Dawes also quotes Proudlove, who in his 2001 Museum Practice paper "Giving visitors access to objects," states:

"It should not be assumed that museum audiences demand any particular type of access to collections. The needs of all current and potential users should be investigated before investing in facilities which may prove expensive to maintain."

These observations, results and comments suggest public access to collections is primarily driven by a top-down approach. Clearly, more research into the public's viewpoints needs to be done.

The Depot's Multi-Purpose Rationale

One significant difference between visible storage and Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen is that the latter is not a static presentation. For example, visitors will be able to get a sense of what happens when they see works being removed from or returned to the vaults, being packed for shipment, or take in a demonstration in one of its presentation galleries.

Now that the collection has been united above ground, the risk of flood damage has also been averted. This is because, for decades, the greatest share was stored in the museum's basement. Not only had a flood occurred in 1999, but the rising water table ensured that this became a regular, though unwelcome, occurrence. Especially vulnerable was the drawings and prints collection. Numbering more than 85,000 objects, its storage space was located at the deepest point – six metres below sea level. provided enlarge, mirror-clad structure screams 'vanity project', the facility was also desperately needed (Coelen et al. 2021). The fact that the number of conservation studios grew from one to four and all collec-

tion related activities have been concentrated in one building are additional benefits.

Certainly, carrying this project through from its start to its completion and managing its day-to-day operation must be a costly venture. Consider, too, that the collection had to be placed in temporary storage in May 2019 when Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen closed for renovations. That closure happened approximately two and a half years before the Depot opened. The latest estimate has pushed the museum's reopening to 2029. Though it is supported by the municipality of Rotterdam, which owns much of the collection, ticket sales and the proceeds from its shop, some of the Depot's space is shared with two foundations that collaborate with the museum. Whereas one foundation develops and executes social programs and the other focuses on art and culture initiatives, the three organisations work together on making Rotterdam a better city. Additional income is derived from its rental spaces. A customs warehouse provides short term rental facilities for artworks pending customs clearance and several corporations lease storage space for their art and design collections. The latter may also open their spaces to viewing on an occasional basis.

Sustainability forms another critical facet of this building and is being realised in multiple ways. For example, the Depot was designed to have a small footprint to minimise its intrusion into the Museumpark. Its shape then broadens to create a significantly larger rooftop grove populated by dozens of trees. Water for the trees and the operation of toilets is supplied by rainwater that is collected and stored in the basement. The design, which includes features such as top quality insulation, LED lighting, solar panels and a geothermal heat exchange system, enables it to be an energy-neutral facility ("Depot Boijmans...", 2022).

Discussion

The concept and methods of increasing public access to museum collections is an evolving phenomenon that can be adapted to various museum frameworks and budgets. While purpose-built buildings costing millions grab international attention, it can also be accomplished by offering the occasional storage facility tour, a means that is quite inexpensive. Such sessions can be an important tool for transmitting information that educates visitors and effectively substantiates conservation activities and collecting purposes within the broader spectrum of museum operations. These initiatives also present various degrees of access.

The blanket claim that the entire Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen collection is publicly accessible, for example, proposes no limitations. But that is not the case. Requests for public access to view, as promoted by the

Atrium, Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen, view from upper floor.



Depot, or even the use of collection objects, are normally subject to detailed reviews and negotiation between museum professionals. At the MOA, which has a history of collaborating with First Nations Communities and other originating groups, the focus is on balancing the objects' tangible and intangible aspects. To ensure the spiritual life of select objects, the intangible aspects have outweighed the tangible ones and they have been allowed to travel to be danced or exhibited at special events for this purpose (Honarbaksh et al, 2011). Though I contacted the Depot to inquire about limitations on such requests, I received no answer. No doubt, a significant number of objects, whether because of their size, technological needs or other issues would preclude study in the designated viewing spaces.

From my perspective, the idea of exposing conservation studios within window walls has never proved satisfying. Having visited several museums that have done this, seeing activity is a rare experience. Ordinary visitors must find these displays confusing, if not altogether disappointing. And if they are not inclined to download the app to take advantage of the QR code posted on each window – many, who expect a direct experience, see this option as intrusion and reject it – what have they gained from this circumstance.

Moreover, the idea that conservators face treating objects in a goldfish bowl-like situation is uncomfortable. Perhaps taking a hint from the pop-up conservation studio idea provides a better way of highlighting conservators' achievements. This could be realised through the creation of a multi-purpose space where the rotation of unique conservation-restoration projects would simultaneously highlight the collection's diverse holdings. Background details, delivered via info panels and an app, as well as progress updates and open question periods can produce a more meaningful degree of engagement.

▼▼
The building's role as a tourist attraction also sets it apart from other publicly accessible storage facilities.

The final point concerns sustainability. As the Depot is a new, purpose-designed facility, project information places the emphasis on the technologies considered of benefit to its design and location. Such features cannot necessarily be transferred to other climates, for example, nor are simpler strategies noted. Additional methods include finding ways to recycle display and storage materials and

– when the museum reopens – producing more collection-based exhibitions (Matassa, 2010). Keeping tabs on environmental parameters by keeping them flexible and in accordance with local seasonal fluctuations. In this way energy costs and risks of damage can be effectively reduced (Mecklenburg et al, 2004 and Mecklenburg, 2007).

Conclusion

Today, the movement to engage visitors through visible and/or visitable access to museum collections shows no signs of weakening. A sampling of other initiatives includes the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Cheongju, Korea (MMCA Press Release, 2019), Museum of Applied Arts and Science's Powerhouse Discovery Centre in Sydney, Australia ("Powerhouse Discovery..." 2021) and Centre Pompidou's Art Factory Conservation Centre in Massy, France ("A New Conservation..." n.d.). Perhaps the Victoria and Albert Museum's sister projects – the V&A East Storehouse and V&A East Museum – represent the most ambitious ventures ("Secrets of the Museum,"

2022 and V&A East, n.d.).

Although my self-guided tour provided several extraordinary experiences, in retrospect the overall impression fell short of what the Depot's promotional material promises. Admittedly, joining a tour or attending a special presentation may have tempered this response. The Depot, to its credit, does immerse the visitor in an experimental voyage of discovery. Its sparkling newness evokes a sense of excitement that is also conveyed by its personnel. They seem to be contending with learning what and how things will work.

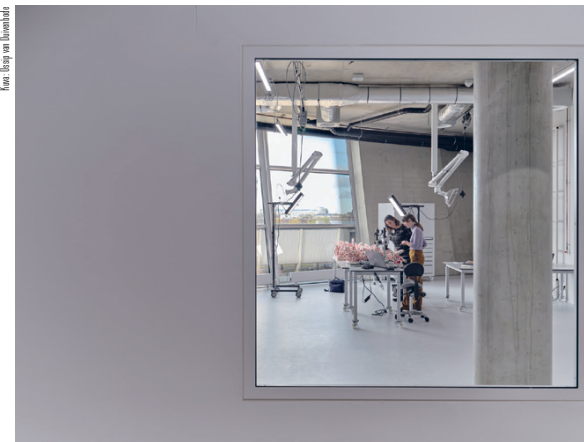
The building's role as a tourist attraction also sets it apart from other publicly accessible storage facilities. At the same time, its novel appearance – the dynamism conferred by its atypical shape, mirrored skin and the roof, which combines a tree-encircled restaurant with a panoramic view of the city – affiliates it with the Cube Houses, Central Station, Market Hall and Rotterdam's other iconic architectural landmarks. As the latest addition to the Museumpark and its vicinity, it broadens the scope and complements the community of cultural institutions that comprise Kunsthal Rotterdam, Kunsttintuut Melly, Het Nieuwe Instituut, and the newly renovated Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen when it opens in the future.

Acknowledgements

Appreciation is extended to Mari Lenck, Senior Conservator, HAM - Helsinki Art Museum, Elina Kallio, Curator, Helsinki City Museum, and Margaret Haupt, former Head of Conservation, Art Gallery of Ontario, for triggering interest in this topic.

Writer is an art conservator (retired), artist and writer whose research interests encompass artists' materials, techniques and studio practice, and the many contexts in which artworks are produced and exhibited.

Conservation studio in Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen.



References:

"A New Conservation and creation centre," Centre Pompidou, Paris, France, accessed 22 June 2022, <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/the-centre-pompidou/regional-action/a-new-conservation-and-creation-centre>

Bohlen, Celestine, "Museums as Walk-In Closets; Visible Storage Opens Treasures to the Public," *The New York Times*, May 8, 2001, Section E, p. 1, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/08/arts/museums-as-walk-in-closets-visible-storage-opens-treasures-to-the-public.html>

Coelen, Peter van der, Sjarel Ex, Sandra Kisters, Winy Maas et al., *Depot Boijmans van Beuningen*, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, 2021.

Dawes, Sena, "Looking Through Glass: Understanding Visitor Perceptions of Visible Storage Methods in Museums," Master of Arts Thesis, University of Washington, 2016, <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/depot-boijmans-van-beuningen-rotterdam/>, Design Build Network, 19 April 2022, <https://www.designbuild-network.com/projects/depot-boijmans-van-beuningen-rotterdam/>

Honarbaksh, Shabnam, Heidi Swierenga, and Mauray Toutloff, "When you don't cry over spilt milk: Collections access at the UBC Museum of Anthropology during the renewal project." AIC Objects Speciality Group Postprints, Vol. 18, 2011, pp. 67-82, <https://resources.culturalheritage.org/ogspostprints/v18/honarbaksh/>

Matassa, Freda, "Active Collections: Re-visiting Our Collection for More and Better Use" in *Encouraging Collections Mobility – A Way Forward for Museums in Europe*, Edited by S. Pettersson, M. Hagedorn Saupe, T. Jyrkkö & A. Weij, Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki, Finland, 2010, pp. 107-155, https://uk.icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Encouraging_Collections_Mobility_A4.pdf

Mecklenburg, Marion, Charles Tumosa and Alan Pride, "Preserving Legacy Buildings," HVAC Retrofit, A Supplement to ASHRAE Journal, June 2004, pp. S18-23, <https://repository.si.edu/bitstream/handle/10088/55952/Mecklenburg,%20Tumosa,%20Pride%20-%202004%20-%20Preserving%20Legacy%20Buildings.pdf>

Mecklenburg, Marion, "Micro Climates and Moisture Induced Damage to Paintings," in *Museum Microclimates, Contributions to the Copenhagen Conference 19 – 25 November 200*, Edited by T. Padfield and K. Borchersen, National Museum of Denmark, 2007, pp. 19-26, <https://www.conservationphysics.org/mm/musmic/musmic150.pdf>

"Powerhouse Discovery Centre to become bigger and better," NSW Government press release, 30 April 2021, <https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/powerhouse-discovery-centre-to-become-bigger-and-better>

Prottas, Nathaniel, "Where Does the History of Museum Education Begin?" *Journal of Museum Education*, Vol. 44, Issue 4, 2019, pp. 337-341, DOI: 10.1080/10598650.2019.1677020

Proudlove, C, "Giving visitors access to objects" in Dawes, Sena, "Looking Through Glass: Understanding Visitor Perceptions of Visible Storage Methods in Museums," Master of Arts Thesis, University of Washington, 2016, <https://digital.lib.washington.edu>

"Secrets of the Museum Series 5: Episode 3 Victoria & Albert Museum BBC Documentary," 12 April 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRzU3Vu0o-g>

Stolow, Nathan, "Conservation Policy and the Exhibition of Museum Collections," *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, JAIC 1977, volume 16, number 2, pp. 12-20, https://cool.culturalheritage.org/jaic/articles/jaic16-02-002_appx.html

V&A East, accessed 22 June 2022, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/va-east>

POHJOISMAISEN KONSERVAATTORILIITON SUOMEN OSASTO ry
NORDISKA KONSERVATORFÖRBUNDET FINLAND rf
NORDIC ASSOCIATION OF CONSERVATORS FINNISH SECTION ra

TOIMINTAKERTOMUS 2021

Pohjoismaisen konservattoriliiton Suomen osasto ry (PKL) on Nordiska konservatorförbundetin (NKF) vuonna 1965 perustettu jäsenjärjestö. Pohjoismaiden osastojen välisenä yhteistyöelimenä toimii Liittoneuvosto, joka muodostuu kunkin maan puheenjohtajasta ja liittoneuvoston puheenjohtajasta. NKF:lla on Pohjoismaissa yhteensä noin 1200 jäsentä.

Konservattoriliitto toimii eri konservointialojen ja museualan yhdyssiteenä. Yhdistyksen tarkoituksena on seurata alan koulutusta, sekä edistää konservointityön kehitystä ja konservattoreiden ammattipätevyyttä. Yhdistys pyrkii osaltaan valvomaan ammattikunnan sosiaalisia etuja ja konservattori-nimikkeen käyttöä.

Konservattorin ammattinimikkeen suojauksen osalta voidaan todeta, että tutkintonimike "konservattori AMK" on opetusministeriön päätöksellä suojattu. Sen sijaan konservattorinimikkeen käyttöä tehtävänimikkeenä ei ole millään tavoin rajattu, eikä ole olemassa järjestelmää, joka estäisi asiantuntematonta henkilöä puuttumasta kulttuurihistoriallisesti merkittäviin kohteisiin. Tilanteen selkiyttämisen eurooppalaisella tasolla on myös European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organisations:n (E.C.C.O.) tärkeimpiä päämääriä. PKL on E.C.C.O:n täysjäsen.

JÄSENISTÖ

Yhdistyksellä oli vuoden 2021 lopulla yhteensä 279 jäsentä, joista 154 varsinaista jäsentä, 92 opiskelijajäsentä, 16 eläkeläisjäsentä, 3 kunniajäsentä, 5 yhteisökannattajajäsentä ja 9 liitännäisjäsentä. Uusia opiskelijajäseniä liittyi vuoden aikana yhdistykseen 9. Uusia varsinaisia jäseniä hyväksyttiin 5. Opiskelijajäsenistä 6 hyväksyttiin varsinaisiksi jäseniksi ja 1 varsinainen jäsen siirtyi eläkeläisjäseneksi. Yhdistyksestä erosi 2 jäsentä, joista molemmat varsinaisia jäseniä. Maksamattomien jäsenmaksujen vuoksi ei erotettu yhtään jäsentä.

Yhdistyksen hallitus piti vuonna 2021 kaksitoista kokousta, joista kahdeksan oli etäkokouksia (Teams), yksi sähköpostikokous ja kolme lähikokouksia. Hallituksen puheenjohtajana toimi **Nina Jolkkonen-Porander** ja varapuheenjohtajana **Polina Semenova**, hallituksen jäsenenä **Anni Tuominen**, **Satu Haapakoski**, **Katri Lahti**, **Johanna Lehtola**, **Sanna Niemi-Pynttari**, **Helena Salo** ja opiskelijajäsenenä **Sanna Sinervo**. Hallituksen kokouksissa puhetta johti hallituksen puheenjohtaja. Yhdistyksen hallituksen sihteerinä toimi **Saara-Maija Pesonen**, jäsenasiainsihteerinä **Karoliina Hämäläinen**, tiedottajana **Emilia Laaksovirta**, taloudenhoitajana ensin **Emmi Heinonen**, elokuusta alkaen **Kaisa Lepistö** (joka luopui kuitenkin tehtävästä henkilökohtaisista syistä) ja marraskuusta alkaen **Maria Engvist**.