



The Dutch National Leather and Shoe Museum in Waalwijk.

Shoe museum at the end of the road

A “change in attitude” among the local authorities in the Dutch city of Waalwijk has put the future of the Netherlands’ national leather and shoe museum under severe threat. At the end of 2016, former chief executive of the museum, Wim Blok, left after almost 30 years in the job. The museum closed for refurbishment in January 2017 with the promise of a full reopening in 2019 and of small, temporary exhibitions in Waalwijk in the meantime. All of these plans are now in serious peril; the museum may never open again and the shoes, bags, lasts, gloves and other items that make up its collection of exhibits could be sold.

Merger with SLEM

Something else that happened in recent years was that the Dutch Leather and Shoe Museum formally merged its corporate structure with that of international leather and footwear consulting, innovation and education centre SLEM. This development, which went ahead with the full approval of Waalwijk’s authorities at the time, takes us to the heart of the problem because the authorities announced on July 13 this

The Dutch Leather and Shoe Museum closed for refurbishment in January. Recent events have put its reopening, promised for 2019, in serious jeopardy.

year that they were withdrawing essential financial support. Council leaders said they would not fund SLEM’s education programme, which they claim is unprofitable, even if this led to bankruptcy. SLEM said a “new political direction” in Waalwijk led the municipality to say it wanted to give funding only on local initiatives, making the internationally focused SLEM an uneasy fit. As part of the July 13 announcement, politicians in the city said they wanted still to have a leather and footwear museum in the town, but that same evening all of the museum’s board of directors resigned in protest.

The problem for the museum has been that, as part of the same corporate structure, forcing the SLEM education business



Nicoline van Enter has set SLEM up under a new name, *The Footwearists*.

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to close was certain to put the museum's future under threat too. "The authorities want to go back to the former set-up and run the museum without SLEM," says Dutch Leather and Shoe Museum curator, Inge Specht. "But we are one foundation now following the merger, and the implications for the museum in all this are not clear. Financial pressures will continue and there is a huge chance the city will start to sell parts of our collection to raise money."

Suggested compromise falls on deaf ears

To avoid the threat to the museum, SLEM suggested trying to extricate itself from the existing structure without suffering any kind of insolvency event. It would then have been able to deliver its education programme on its own while still being available to advise and help those running the museum. SLEM, run by a well known figure in the world of footwear design and innovation, Nicoline van Enter, would continue its work under new auspices, relying on no public money, but instead on private investment and the money it makes from its own education and seminar programmes. "For us, that was a good plan," Ms Specht continues, "because it would have meant keeping the expertise on board while having less cost, but the city said it would still

Fears remain that the city authorities may begin selling off the museum's collection to make up financial shortfalls.

CREDIT: DUTCH LEATHER AND SHOE MUSEUM

have been too expensive. Nicoline will continue privately to deliver her education programme. For the museum, it's not clear what will happen. What is clear to me is that the authorities in Waalwijk do not realise what this institution could do for the city in the next decades."

New identity

More than 1,100 supporters signed a petition in mid-July to try to convince the city of Waalwijk to reconsider, but to no avail. SLEM's bankruptcy was confirmed at a court hearing in Breda on July 25. The next day, Nicoline van Enter announced that SLEM was no more and that she and her associates had restructured their work under a new company name, The Footwearists, which she describes as a group of professionals from the shoe and leather industry "who believe that footwear can and should improve the world". The Footwearists are taking over all of SLEM's international consulting and educational programmes "and expanding them even further".

Ms van Enter told *World Footwear* that it was still unclear from the Breda court hearing if the museum will, formally, be included in the bankruptcy; she explained that a lawyer appointed by the court as administrator, Hans Alberts, starts work in early August to try to bring some clarity. "There is ongoing insecurity and stress, especially for the museum staff," Ms van Enter said.

Penny wise, pound foolish

She has calculated that it could now cost the city of Waalwijk more than €600,000 to save the museum, a much steeper amount of money than it would have cost to go with SLEM's plan. For half that amount, she says the city could have completed the refurbishment of the museum and run it debt-free, allowing the SLEM education initiative to run separately but co-operating with the museum whenever appropriate. "It's a classic case of being penny wise and pound foolish," she says. 🗣️

